

“URBAN ART GALLERY” OF LISBON



PARTICIPATION PUBLIC SPACE RENEWAL
YOUTH EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES COMMUNITIES
HERITAGE HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION

1. Context

The project was initially developed in the historical neighbourhood of Bairro Alto, within the Portuguese capital city of Lisbon, (524 282 inhabitants). Lisbon is a global city, exhibiting both the signs of cosmopolitanism and a strong culturally diverse identity, entangled amidst its European cultural life and the beats of other Portuguese-speaking countries. Albeit its vibrant cultural life, Lisbon is also marked by the existence of several social groups that are either at risk of poverty and social exclusion, or are estranged from mainstream and other indie cultural practices. All these trends converge into Bairro Alto, not only the night-life neighbourhood of Lisbon but above all the elected canvas of the communicational universe of the city and a place that is an open invitation to reflect

about the practices and the practitioners of urban art. “Urban Art Gallery” (or GAU, its acronym in Portuguese) initially emerged as curator for a set of street panels, opening calls for artists and writers to work on their visual transformation. From this initial task, still undergoing nowadays, a strategy was developed to enlarge the intervention to other neighbourhoods, not only safeguarding some of the best visual objects in visual records, but also by defining methods to identify and catalog the results of such a cultural expression in cities. The action of GAU has since then been enlarging its focus and concerns, developing projects focusing in animation and pedagogy, and addressing new creative answers to the promotion of social inclusion.

GAU emerged from the partnership with a private sector enterprise in the context of the urban regeneration process of the Bairro Alto that implied, among other actions, to remove the inscriptions made on the walls of its main streets and to designate proper authorized spaces for graffiti and street art expressions. The urban art gallery emerged, then, initially as a kind of curating structure responsible for these authorized panels set near Bairro Alto and the opening of calls for artists and writers for visual and artistic interventions. However, as the process progressed, it became visible that the cleansing of the walls was also an obliteration of the history and identity of Bairro Alto and that these inscriptions were, in many cases, speeches that were worth of a visual record.

GAU received new responsibilities that gave structure to an innovative strategy to deal with graffiti, street art, as well as vandal interventions that were seen as critical and central problems in the cultural heritage safeguarding policies. Until then, these inscriptions were all considered illegal and unauthorized forms of cultural expression, but by realizing them also as relevant for the identity and history of a neighbourhood this practice was out into question. Therefore a new policy emerged: first, the need to recognize these visual forms as part of a vigorous plastic universe, that contributes decisively to aesthetical fruition of the public space; secondly, the need to raise awareness among the community of practitioners of these visual forms to the importance of safeguarding tangible heritage and the respect for the ancient remnants of our culture; and finally, to give visibility and keep records of some of the best items of this universe, preserving them as relevant artefacts for the understanding of our present culture.

GAU INITIALLY EMERGED AS CURATOR FOR A SET OF STREET PANELS, OPENING CALLS FOR ARTISTS AND WRITERS TO WORK ON THEIR VISUAL TRANSFORMATION.

This new responsibilities attributed to GAU applied to the city, gave visibility and the legitimate space to the community of practitioners, mostly youngsters living in the peripheral margins of mainstream culture, ensuring the promotion of an intercultural and solidary city that receives, integrates and gives the conditions for cultural expression to the several communities that inhabit the city, and to the development of new policies and practices to cultural heritage safeguarding, as outlined in the strategic goals of the Lisbon City Council cultural policies.

2. Lisbon and culture

The vision that frames the cultural policies of Lisbon is an open, intercultural and cosmopolitan city, where an intense cultural life is built and rebuilt for the people that inhabit and visit the city. It is then assumed that culture is responsible for the ability to project the future by allowing the city to realize what we are and what we want to be, as well as who are the others, what moves them, and, above all by allowing the actors to realize how can they work together to improve the city they inhabit. Therefore culture emerges as a strategic and structuring factor both for the creation and preservation of identities and a catalyst for change and progress towards the future. Culture is then considered as a transversal dimension to several policies, evaluated by its mediator and qualitative capacities to maximize the results of several different forms of intervention in the city.

The strategy for graffiti and street art developed by GAU obeys some principles that are worth to set forth, namely, the promotion of the freedom of artistic expression in the public space, giving visibility and legitimacy to these communities, until then mostly relegated to the outskirts of illegality. Before GAU few were work opportunities open legally to writers and street artists, to perform freely and with

the proper time, without fear for police intervention. Nowadays, one can observe the rise of activities connected to urban art, giving structure to a growing community of practitioners, constantly renewed by new artists and writers, allowing different career paths, each day more distant from illegal practices of vandal nature. One can observe not only the growing diversity of social, cultural and academic backgrounds, but also the growing importance of street artists among an, until now prevailing, masculine community.

GAU also sets forth another guiding principle, that of the artistic citizenship, allowing and fostering projects in the urban art realm that enable any citizen to artistically express itself in the public sphere. It develops then projects that imply the participation of local communities convoking transversally all the city. One example was the development of an action to raise awareness of the practices of urban art: anyone was offered the possibility to experience a street artist performance, promoting the deconstruction of social prejudice that is still intrinsically associated with the practice of graffiti and street art and that condones them to the vandalism condition. The third principle guiding GAU's action sets forth the appropriation by all citizens, of their responsibility in the construction of the aesthetic identity of Lisbon, promoting the values of the democratic participation, social inclusion, the importance of intergenerational dialogue and the mitigation through culture of conflicts between different ethnic groups.

CULTURE EMERGES AS A STRATEGIC AND STRUCTURING FACTOR BOTH FOR THE CREATION AND PRESERVATION OF IDENTITIES AND A CATALYST FOR CHANGE AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE FUTURE. CULTURE IS THEN CONSIDERED AS A TRANSVERSAL DIMENSION TO SEVERAL POLICIES.

3. Aim, goals and implementation of the project

3.1. Aim and specific goals

The general aim of GAU is the promotion of artistic citizenship recognizing graffiti and street art as important expressions of contemporary culture, simultaneously raising awareness and preventing the emergence of vandal interventions, based on the intensive dialogue with the artistic community of graffiti and street art, and by a very diverse and vast offer of opportunities of production within the universe of these aesthetical practices. The strategic goals outlined by the city council are then:

- 1) To implement a proximity policy to the citizens by improving the relationship of the city with its inhabitants;
- 2) To promote an intercultural and solidary city that receives, integrates and gives the conditions for cultural expression to the several communities that inhabit the city;
- 3) To institutionalize and promote an intense cultural life by qualifying and consolidating institutions, agents and cultural projects;
- 4) To develop a structured policy of heritage safeguarding;
- 5) To promote Lisbon as a competitive city open to innovation;

These strategic goals framework the action of the city councils' central Department of Culture (DMC) that has two main areas of intervention –the Department of Cultural Action (DAC) and the department of Cultural Heritage (DPC). The action of the city council in the areas of culture is also made possible by the city councils' enterprise for cultural and urban animation (EGEAC).

As far as GAU is concerned, the following set of specific goals can be highlighted:

- 1) To reinforce and disseminate an heritage consciousness;
- 2) To raise awareness around the issues and problems of urban regeneration;
- 3) To promote heritage safeguarding;
- 4) To stimulate the respect for the multiple creative speeches existing in the city;
- 5) To stimulate research, knowledge and recognition of street art;
- 6) To deconstruct stereotypes and associated prejudices;
- 7) To stimulate the fruition of these forms of cultural expression;
- 8) The renewal of artistic intervention in the public space;
- 9) To promote the artistic citizenship;

10) To promote social inclusion:

3.2. Actions

The project of the Urban Art Gallery is integrated in the DPC and gives form to the strategic goals of enabling and giving visibility to the cultural expressions of inhabitant communities, but also that of heritage safeguarding, since the visual communication artefacts are evaluated as testimonies of the present relevant for future generations.

The project of GAU was outlined by a series of aims that organized and diversified intervention modes and were the basis for the creation of the urban art gallery. The central idea behind GAU was a platform conceived as an operational basis, simultaneously abstract in conceptualization and concrete in action, sufficiently flexible and open, to allow the emergence of 5 main areas of intervention connected to the artistic, heritage, social, economic, touristic and urban domains. Therefore, GAU adopted 6 axis of intervention:

- The artistic intervention area, that implied curatorial events and the support of curatorial approaches of urban art;
- The area dedicated to pedagogy and public awareness;
- The promotion and communication strategy;
- The catalog and inventory process, that implied the systematization of records of existing urban art artefacts, from the revolution of the 25th of April to present times;
- The research and publications area that contemplates the structuring of spaces and time for research, study, debate and reflection dedicated to this creative phenomenon in its multiplicity and the publication of results;
- The internationalization strategy that integrates GAU in multiple European networks of urban creativity and the exchange of artists.

A NEW POLICY EMERGED: FIRST, TO RECOGNIZE THESE VISUAL FORMS AS PART OF A VIGOROUS PLASTIC UNIVERSE, THAT CONTRIBUTES DECISIVELY TO AESTHETICAL FRUITION OF THE PUBLIC SPACE; SECONDLY, TO RAISE AWARENESS AMONG THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTITIONERS OF THESE VISUAL FORMS TO THE IMPORTANCE OF SAFEGUARDING TANGIBLE HERITAGE AND THE RESPECT FOR THE ANCIENT REMNANTS OF OUR CULTURE.

The main actions carried through were developed according to the previous outlined intervention areas. As far as the involvement of international artists in worksites developed in the cities concerned, one can highlight the CRONO project implemented between 2010 and 2011 (Os Gémeos, Blu, Sam3, Ericall Cane, Lucy McLauchlan, Boris Hoppek, Momo, Akay) and the project Underdogs promoted also by the national street artist Alexandre Farto aka Vhils, that brought to Lisbon a set of important international artists such as Insteresni Kazki, Cyricle, How & Nosm, Nunca and the street artist Pixel Pancho. GAU has also developed projects involving mostly national artists such as the project "Faces of the Blue Wall", in partnership with the Psychiatric Hospital of Lisbon, which consisted in an intervention on its walls.

Finally, one must highlight the project "Alive Nature" developed in partnership with the group Immochan and that crossed over the borders of the city council, reaching Setubal and Alfragide. The methodologies of intervention developed by GAU must also be highlighted, since they rest upon a collaborative model of relationship between the city council's department and community leaders, organizations and associations, where a co-management strategy of authorized street panels and areas has been evaluated as a success model for raising awareness to the importance of legal forms of expression of urban art.

It has also been promoted the intervention in critical neighbourhoods, as far as the social and economic conditions are concerned, that face severe drug related problems, high dropout school rates, interethnic conflicts, but also in high up standard neighbourhoods. In these territories, GAU acts with agents already present in the field and involving directly the community and local artists, mingling all with other national or international artists, aiming at reducing the proliferation of illegal

inscriptions and above all to promote inclusive life experiences that can overcome social barriers and generate plastic identities that reinforce the well-being and rooting on such territories.

GAU created its own media, GAU's magazine, a semester publication that is now on its 6th issue, having published an anthology over its 3 years of existence and, finally, an anthology of the work produced between 2012 and 2013, edited by ZEST, entitled "Street Art Lisbon". GAU has also developed a social media strategy on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/galeriadearteurbana>) and on the internet. In the area of pedagogy and public awareness, one can highlight the programme "recycle your gaze" that is one of the most transversal interventions of the gallery. The project involves an artistic intervention in the igloo-shaped glass recycle containers, that punctuate almost all the city, and where different authors of all ages and social backgrounds, have been brought together.



In the area of research and publications GAU has given support to the development of research and studies in the field of urban art to several researchers, and develops a database with the inventory of urban art records, to preserve and safeguard its memory and make them available for future research and knowledge production and sharing. Among the results, one can highlight around 350 interventions in the urban cloth that had as main outcomes:

- the diversification and amplification of the communities associated with urban art;
- rising numbers of buildings and walls given by the private sector for legal artistic interventions;
- growing interest of international artists to execute works in Lisbon;
- the exponential rise of sponsors and partners who work with GAU to develop urban art projects;
- the development of small enterprises connected to the field of urban art;
- the rise of numbers of researchers and students interested in these issues;

THE GAU GIVES FORM TO THE STRATEGIC GOALS OF ENABLING AND GIVING VISIBILITY TO THE CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF INHABITANT COMMUNITIES, BUT ALSO THAT OF HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING.

4. Impacts

4.1. Impact on the local government

The direct impact of GAU has been the awareness among public officials to the importance of urban art, both as heritage worth recording as well as a driver for urban regeneration processes. More recently has been approved a new law regulating the visual inscriptions and giving authority to city councils to allow or prohibit visual inscriptions. The best practices of GAU have been disseminating to other Portuguese city councils (Almada, Setúbal and Loures, among others) and to other cities around the globe, such as Quito (Equador) that created its own Urban Art Gallery, or Barcelona (Spain).

4.2. Impact on culture and its local workers

These impacts can be observed on the one side in the visual inscriptions themselves and on their techniques and aesthetics where an improvement can be established. It also can be observed on the amplification and diversification of life stories and career paths of practitioners of urban art.

4.3. Impact on the territory and on population

The promotion of artistic citizenship as well as the freedom to artistic expression in the public sphere has impacts on the quality of the democratic life of the city and in the dialogue between different social groups. Raising awareness to the debates and critical issues around urban art, allows the dissemination of safeguarding and respecting attitudes towards cultural heritage and other public goods, as well as the promotion of the artistic quality of urban art objects.

4.4. Cross-sectorial Impacts

One of the most important transversal impacts has been the international attention given to the city in news all over the world, disseminating of the values of tolerance and cosmopolitanism entangled.

GAU is strengthening its pedagogy and public awareness programmes, organizing more pedagogical activities, (thematic visits, workshops, conferences), aiming publics from primary school to elders. It will also focus its attention in critical neighbourhoods, being a partner in other projects thought to those territories, aiming at addressing the subjects of graffiti and street art inscriptions. GAU is also trying to reinforce internationalization, by deepening its connections to other entities addressing the same subjects and supporting the exchange between national and international artists.

5. Other Information

The City of Lisbon was a candidate to the first edition of the “International Award UCLG – Mexico City – Culture 21” (January-May 2014). The Jury of the Award elaborated its final report in June 2014 and requested that the UCLG Committee on Culture promotes this project as a good practice of the implementation of Agenda 21 for culture.

Text approved in September 2014.

Good practice published in October 2014.

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