

# Engendering a creative milieu

## Arts and local development in Montemor (Alentejo)

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### 1. Places development and culture or the production of creative milieux

Culture as a competitive factor has often appeared in the local and regional strategies of development. Mainly associated to the tourism, the cultural heritage, both in its material and immaterial components, has been assuming a place of relevance in the last decades. Although tourism has a special visibility by its meaning in terms of people and capital influx, culture as a strategic economic resource does not end there, confining a diversified group of activities associated to the heritage reality or to its representation (performing arts, fine arts, audiovisual, multimedia, etc.) conventionally designated as cultural industries.

The biggest or the lowest richness and the more or less innovative character of the cultural life of a territory are today variables, which matters in the localisation of new investments, in particular to the more intellectual intensive activities, as well as to the mobility strategies of the high-qualified professionals.

Speaking about competitiveness, it is important to notice the first place given to culture in the domain of *territorial marketing*. The strategies of competition among cities, as seen in the search for the best positions in urban networks, have seldom resorted to cultural resources, either through the organisation of big cultural events such as world and universal exhibitions at global cities level, either through the promotion of the local dance school or museum at small urban centres level.

Another reason for culture being recognized as an economic fact has to do with its role in employment. That wide constellation of activities connected to the culture, which confines the “heritage industries” (tourism included) to audiovisual and multimedia, including visual and performing arts, press and books sector, has been showing, namely in Europe, of employment growing higher than the whole of the economy, being seen by that reason as a trustful opportunity to many territories facing serious unemployment problems. The important amount of employment generated among these activities, as well as what they represent as clusters of creativeness and innovation, justify, by its own, a relevant place in the field of regions and places competitiveness.

But the contributions of culture to the development of regions do not end with the reinforcement of competitiveness and with employment creation. In the values, attitudes and practices domain, culture shows up as one of the main axis of progress.

In first place, the role of culture as privileged vehicle of social and territorial cohesion must be enhanced. At the internal level, the concept of collective heritage leads to the valorisation of the common good and to a community sense besides the restricted familiar group. More, it is through culture that the codes are built, the symbolic languages in which the feelings of belonging to a group or a place are rooted. People feel member of a community with who they share a literature or an aesthetic. At the external level, culture promotes cohesion because it eases the communication, the establishment of bridges, based on common

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features that history has left. A diversified group of people sees itself in a common culture, as it is, for instance, the Mediterranean Sea. Such strong conflicts as the ones that have moved away Christian and Muslim seem to calm down in the edges of this sea, through the sharing of a common material and immaterial heritage.

However, if it is true that culture allows building bridges, it is also true that it comes, more and more, as the great label of diversity in a world becoming more and more globalised. It is through culture that the affirmation of the communities towards the exterior is expressed. This is more and more visible as we walk towards an economic and political integration. In the European Union, culture comes up as the counterbalance of the fusion – the title of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (2001) “Unity, Solidarity and Diversity for Europe – its people and its territory” is particularly illustrative of this idea.

The common good and collective heritage sense, referred in the last paragraphs, constitute the master keys of citizenship and of the deepening of the European democratic model. It is culture, with education, information and communication support, that promotes the essential critical consciousness and the intervention capacity to the effective participation of the citizens in society. It is on them that the social pro-active attitudes are rooted, progressively transforming the traditional social relationships, yet attached to hierarchy, authority and submission.

Finally we should ask the following: how to promote development through culture or more precisely how to construct a creative place? This is the crucial question we want to discuss in this paper.

We believe that the concept of plasticity presented by Dominique Lambert summarizes quite well the essential nature of creative milieux. They should be flexible enough and at the same time reasonably ordered to be reshaped without losing their identity.

« La plasticité désigne la capacité qu’ont certains composants à s’in-former (recevoir une forme) et à se dé-former, tout en gardant unité et cohérence. La plasticité est donc une condition nécessaire pour que la vie apparaisse, se maintienne et puisse évoluer. » (Interview to Dominique Lambert in Radio France Internationale, about the book *Comment les pattes viennent au serpent. Essai sur l’étonnante plasticité du vivant*, Dominique Lambert, René Rezsöhazy, Editions FLAMMARION, 2004)

In our opinion creative milieux have three main characteristics. They have diversity in the way they are multicultural. They are tolerant in the way they allow the risk to do anything new. They are democratic in the way citizens participation is encouraged.

## **2. Montemor-o-Novo: moving from resistance to fascism to culture as a local development municipal strategy**

Montemor-o-Novo (M-o-N) is a small town with a population of about 9,000 that lies in Alentejo, a rural region in the south of Portugal which is among the least developed in the European Union, is largely unpopulated and experiencing demographic loss. It does, however, benefit from the advantage, in relation to other urban agglomerates, of being located between Lisbon and Évora - connected by highway both to the first (about 60 miles

away) and the second (main town in the region, less than 20 miles distance), and of enjoying rather favourable access conditions.

The structure of property and model of accumulation of wealth that prevailed in M-o-N (as, besides, in most of Alentejo) up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century accounts for why local society has always been marked by a tradition of strong duality. The fact that large estates prevailed, comprising agricultural exploitations that seldom failed to stretch across thousands of hectares and target a market-oriented production, allowed for the simultaneous development, although opposed in its parts, of a bourgeois minority of powerful farmers and a rather poor rural proletariat.



Two faces of M-o-N before April 1974

Landholders and accumulating high levels of economic and cultural capital, the agrarian elite knew how to enforce its influence and keep a close relation with the country's financial and political power throughout the long fascist period. It was able, for instance, to avoid the industrialisation of the municipality, thus assuring an elevated state of workforce dependency and its subjection to both strenuous work conditions and very low wages. The inequalities in terms of accessing school and (high) culture served the purpose of grounding the status quo, that is, of reproducing the large differences between farmers and farmhands, which the landowning elite continually turned to its own advantage.

The deep social cleft that labelled this area and the intense exploitation its agricultural workers were subject to account, however, for the rise, amidst the local less privileged classes, of a strong left-wing political consciousness and an intense opposition to Salazar's regime, masterly portrayed by José Saramago (Nobel Literature Award, 1998) in his novel *Picked up from the Ground* [*Levantado do Chão*] (1980), the plot of which takes place in M-o-N municipality and specially in Lavre, a small rural settlement. The opposition manifested itself in a number of ways at the time, be it directly, through labour strikes and political manifestations (vigorously repressed by the police forces), or indirectly, via workers' movements and social initiatives. Culture had already taken on a relevant role by then, both as a way for the elite to assert itself, and for the agricultural workers, as a form of resistance. In opposition to the Montemor Club and 'the Pedrista' (aka Montemor Circle Society [*Sociedade Círculo Montemorense*]), which grouped landowners and other local influential

people in various recreational and cultural activities, stood 'the Carlista' (aka Old Montemor Philharmonic Society [Sociedade Antiga Filarmónica Montemorense]), where workers had a certain access to culture, namely through music. More often than not, the directors of the latter were pushed out by the political police on charges of alleged involvement in resistance movements.



Reading and multimedia room in Lavre, M-o-N

In truth, it was not until after 1974 that the situation in M-o-N changed. The Revolution brought, first of all, the agrarian reform, and, with it, a profound change in the power struggle between the various opposing classes. The usurpation of land by the working class and the creation of producers' cooperatives (25 collective farms in the municipality) represented a serious threat to the old agrarian elite. At a second, later stage, the Revolution led to the affirmation of the local power, and a new cycle of growth is reached in M-o-N, marked not only by a surge in democratic freedom, but also by better life conditions for the local populations and a more generalised access to infrastructures, equipments and public services, namely of education and culture.

It is also interesting to note how culture remained, during the revolutionary period and its immediate aftermath, an area of conflict and assertion of power between the different classes.

The old elite, protagonists of the reaction against the Revolution and resisting a new political, social and cultural order, developed a cultural association (founded prior to 1974) for the defence of the municipality's historical, archaeological and ethnographic heritage: the Group of Friends of Montemor-o-Novo [Grupo de Amigos de Montemor-o-Novo]. The municipality, on the other hand, headed to the present day by the Communist Party, dedicated special attention to the field of cultural activities, especially in its intersections with education, following a logic of democratisation and promotion of civic participation. This was not an easy option, especially taking into account that the communist local authority representatives' supporters frequently questioned the relevance and priority status of what it meant to invest in culture when the basic needs of the population (kindergartens, basic sanitation, health, etc.) were still lacking. The municipal authorities, however, insisted on a way to development through education and culture, which is partly to be understood in light of the local leaders' posture (who came from a schooled petite bourgeoisie.)

In order to make their leadership hold fast, local heads were able to count on support from the Communist Party, where the class of artists and intellectuals was at the time quite influential. The M-o-N Town Hall then committed itself to implementing a series of cultural equipments. A good example of these initiatives was the founding of the Municipal Gallery and Library which were set up in the São João de Deus Convent - restored for the purpose - within a proactive recreational framework. Another event that underscores the municipality's

concern was the creation of a cultural office and the subsequent hiring of qualified professionals.

The fact that it was outsiders who came to hold these jobs would be decisive for the successful cultural development strategy that M-o-N adopted from then on. The arrival of two young artists, that had had professional and personal experience in a broader urban context, allowed for the development of innovative recreation projects still in the early 80's, which would prove sustainable and have continued to the present day, as is the case of the Children's Workshop [Oficina da Criança], which mainly concerns pedagogic action in the field of the arts. Having maintained, since the late 70's, a very clear concern with cultural development, the municipality attained in the last decade an even more marked leadership in the area. Cultural projects multiplied and diversified as an outcome of the strategy undertaken by local authorities. Much due to the personal commitment of the current M-o-N Communist Mayor, culture began to be viewed as a strategic axis for local development. The lack of other opportunities for creating wealth and jobs, and above all, of other forms of stating itself externally, largely account for M-o-N's option. A rather similar initiative was introduced in the last decade in other Portuguese municipalities located in poor, underpopulated and sparsely industrialised regions of ageing population. The difference, however, lies in the fact that, in M-o-N, culture was not considered under its more classical aspect alone, but also as linked to artistic creation. In this context, the municipality has keenly supported initiatives by artists and cultural programmers, be it directly or mediating between the local agents and national authorities. In addition to logistic and financial support to the various cultural agents in the area, the municipal policy takes on a proactive character which is, for example, evident in the launching of partnerships together with private entities and in the creation of appealing conditions to external cultural creators.

Among the initiatives the municipality backed up in the last decade with the purpose of enforcing this local development strategy for and through culture stands the 'Convent Workshops', founded in 1996. Placed in the São Francisco Convent (municipal property) in the sequence of restoration works, the 'Convent Workshops' include ateliers, a photography studio, show rooms, and an artists' residence-space. In addition to artistic creation, which they welcome and try to advertise, the Convent Workshops have continued to promote events that insert conferences and artistic interventions in the surrounding area – 'Talks around the Land, 'Talks at the Pottery', 'Talks by the Convents' and 'Talks by the River' –, which underline a concern for reinforcing, using art, a sense of the place that is M-o-N. Further on we shall look into one of these initiatives in more detail.

The support given to the 'Montemor-o-Novo Choreographic Centre – The Space of Time' constitutes another example of the municipal will to assert M-o-N as a place of culture and artistic creation. Head of the Choreographic Centre is Rui Horta, renown Portuguese choreographer of vast international curriculum. Knowing that Rui Horta had returned to Portugal and was willing to start his own company but lacked an adequate space, the Mayor of M-o-N invited him to settle in M-o-N at the Soudação Convent (16<sup>th</sup> C.), located within the castle walls. Albeit central government property, it is the municipality that has ensured the building's recovery, with the aim of promoting an increasingly acknowledged cultural activity both in and outside Portugal.

Solid projects like the ones above cited have in turn served as a magnet or lure so that others - of private initiative, but always counting upon the permission and support of the municipality – might come forth. The 'Singer's Workshop' is such an example. It is, in likeness of the afore mentioned 'Children's Workshop', a recreation project with a strong training or pedagogical component, this time veered not towards the development of skills related to the plastic arts but those akin to singing. Two famous national singers - former

Lisbon residents with musical careers rooted in activism and responsible for revamping the popular song format in Portugal - were the mentors of this project.

Finally, still in the line of this last kind of project, we could point out the 'Letter Fountain'. Owned by two local-family women who had formerly resided in Lisbon, the 'Letter Fountain' is an innovative and daring bookshop that does not limit itself to a place for buying books, but is instead a cultural hub in a broader sense, featuring a small exhibition room and a bar, enjoying long opening hours, and holding reading sessions, book launches, exhibitions, talks, as well as other events.

### **3– Convent Workshops Association. A reflection on cultural practices: experiencing the territory**

One's first experience with a place is nearly always that of walking, travelling, strolling along. To look at the space surrounding us, awaiting discovery, and in which we are to inscribe our experiences is a way of weaving relations, working through the invisible threads of footsteps, grasping new things at each passing moment.

This experience translates an attitude, a willingness to see: something that renews itself and is part of the stuff Art is made of. We may call it an initial aesthetic experience - founder of creation, of new objects, of different readings of space, multiple appropriations.

From early on the cultural work at Montemor-o-Novo grew from this gaze upon inhabited space, its organization and physical traits. It was a quest for something essential, for a matrix of this chosen place.

The architecture and rural landscape that surround and traverse this area were points of departure, and a major topic of conversation in the streets. Here, at a square, young architects and a bunch of aspiring artists wander, developing ideas for long encounters, envisioning projects that might turn the sheer pleasure of these evenings into purpose.

**"The talks around the land"** held in 1996 were a first go at that attempt to learn more, to share or become aware of the place's value. The chosen themes started from the notion of earth as matter. So for three springtime Saturdays, at monthly intervals, the talks concerned what had been dug up – Archaeology -, what we can build with earth – Architecture -, and the forms of land that constitute Landscape – Agriculture and Sculpture.

On these quiet Saturdays, we followed our visitors' voices into archaeological sites in Mértola and Mexico, realising how certain land elevations can be signs of megalithic monuments, how container fragments found at an excavation site inside a dwelling can trace a dependency. Another day, we talked about Architecture, building techniques that use local materials, small towns bearing a scale appropriate for human life, the use of mud walls in contemporary architecture and the symbolic value of constructions. Finally, on the third day, the topics were on Landscape, Sculpture, Ecology, and Agriculture. On that morning we walked along the Almansor River stretch that lies between the Pintada and Ananil Mills, passing by the Santa Margarida Chapel. We crossed the river over dams, walked along fences and canals, discovering plants on the river bed and margins. We visited the Ananil Mill, where talks on the future acquisition of the place first started. There we talked about bathing, fishing, and the memory of a lost activity – grinding – that belongs to a time when the town lived facing its River, and the inhabitants lived from eating its fish. We talked about the Memory of Culture and Harmony and our collective responsibility towards this place's rehabilitation.



This way of approaching themes was pursued in other conferences in later years. I highlight the “**Talks around the river**” held in the scope of “**PROJECT: RIVER**”, the first edition of which was held in the spring of 2004 (the second planned for October 2005.) The resumed themes make up a series wherein connections between the rural and urban have been sought out and ideas have been developed that may contribute towards this land’s rehabilitation, either by seeking to improve the quality of land and community, or by exploring the countless bridges that are established with the exterior.

The Arts play a relevant role here: questioning the idea of place, they cross references from sociology, anthropology, geography or natural sciences, besides reflecting the history of art from within. Seeing, and granting sight, assume a major place in the works’ discourse. Hence the out or indoor interventions, like at the Mill or Municipal Swimming Pools - some of the spaces where the site-specific works of art were installed. These works triggered an energetic participation of citizens, a questioning of what it is to experience (the) place(s). (1)

The **III Symposium on Terra(cotta) Sculpture**, held in 2001, anticipated this reflection on the subject of place by elaborating on the ‘To inhabit’ theme. This concept was proposed at an international contest, which publicised the region’s characteristics and attempted to sensitise artists to building techniques used in traditional architecture such as mud walls, clay bricks, low-temperature ceramics and terracotta, with the aim of assisting them in making sculptures within the town’s public space. This challenge extended itself to approximately sixty projects, which were of an extremely diversified nature both in the uses they made of earth as a raw material and in their formal and conceptual solutions.

Six works were selected, along with their respective implantation sites. The taskforces were formed under the sculptors’ guidance, and skilled workers, proficient in traditional know-how, were hired: masons, tilers, and apprentices (young art students). About fifty people helped erect six sculptures during the month of August, 2001.



Sculpture by César Cornejo, Peru

Four of these works were entirely made at their implantation sites, which helped establish an excellent relationship with the local inhabitants. This triggered a series of dialogues that sensitised people to the rehabilitation and value of these building techniques, an integral part of the heritage with which the elders immediately identified themselves. Sculpture’s appropriation of these technologies contributed towards the heritage’s revaluation.

The importance of the initiative in terms of sensitising municipal technicians and local authority representatives to these practices must be underlined. However, the lack of sensibility of contemporary architects and engineers to traditional technologies, on top of

legal difficulties and the cost of (as well as the trouble in obtaining) specialized workers has hampered the reintroduction, adaptation and perfecting of these technologies. The setting of an example here would lie in the hands of the local authorities, who would have to bet on an alternative architecture for its buildings, thus taking full advantage of local architectural heritage, on top of scoring an environmental plus.

And because leadership in this space is also bound to chance, the time has come to refer the origin or reasons behind this journey. We have reached this point because ceramics and architecture were areas to which the people who developed this process were *sensitive to*.

In 1990 a survey of ceramic-related activity was carried out, leading to the discovery of a Tilery at the Encosta do Castelo [Castle hillside] which uncovered a rich capital in kilns, tools and clay brick remains, as well as helping find tilers, who assisted in piecing this activity's history together. (2)

The launch of the historical centre's restoration plan, alongside a concern with the rehabilitation of the Nossa Senhora da Saudação and São Francisco convents, and the need to value Popular Architecture – all tied in with the growing environmental and landscape-related concerns -, warranted the opening of this production unit in 1995, after the Town Hall had acquired the Tilery. In 1996 two associations were created to face this need: the Convent Workshops and MARCA, which would develop projects that would allow this activity to develop by introducing new forms and an artistic vein into the use of traditional materials.

Hybrid training in producing traditional ceramic materials for construction and sculpting was, from the get-go, a requirement that grew out of the planned cultural actions. The Symposiums, Artists' Residences and Experimental Workshops, accompanied by an investigation on the lands in the area, helped state this activity's potential as a development and innovation factor.

It is necessary for the success of this process that individual will and politics learn to make the best of the determination and joy a process of this nature engenders, and that they come up with the stimuli and management models that might turn conflict into strength and the ability to invest. This is something yet to be done, and essential if a fortunate experience is to attain a long-lasting future.

### **Actually engendering a creative milieux in M-o-N?**

David Ley's text on artists and aestheticisation in town<sup>1</sup> brings out two aspects which seem to shed light on what it is to build a creative place in M-o-N. The first concerns the 'redemptive' role of art and culture in a society where market and immediacy prevail over almost everything else. Cultural and artistic references, conversely, are largely charged with sentimental values and function within long time scales. The second aspect is tied with the authenticity of places. Ley argues that the creative character tends to develop in spaces where the degree of authenticity is greater. Historical 'density' or the rural environment are two all-important elements of this idea. They are both associated in M-o-N.

M-o-N is a good illustration of how culture adds value to places. On the one hand, the artist's work grants the place value because the starting point for his work is the territory's essence

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<sup>1</sup> Ley, David (2003) "Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 12, November, 2527–2544.



(the land, the river, the castle, etc.) On the other hand, the work of art is appropriated by the place, becomes a part of it by inscribing itself in its essence and thereafter inspiring anew.

Moving back to the question at the beginning of the paper, we believe we now hold the arguments to state that M-o-N is a creative environment:

It is **diverse**: different, and often contrary points of view permanently clash, revealing new ways of grasping the world and understanding the town's growth.

It is **tolerant**: the various cultural and artistic expressions – more conservative, more avant-garde, more popular – find their own space. It is also tolerant because in many cases the local agents (municipality, associations, etc.) step forwards without full knowledge of what lies ahead... but they take the leap, embrace the risk, nonetheless. One must add that this risk, namely in the case of civil society, is relatively diminished by the supporting role the municipality has played.

It is **democratic**: the participation of agents and actors, as well as dialogue and conciliation, have been priorities in this place.