Urban regeneration in Porto.
Reflections on a fragmented sub-regional space, without institutional powers and “lost”
between central government and local authorities¹

Pedro Chamusca
Faculty of Arts and Humanities of
University of Porto (FLUP)
pedrochamusca@hotmail.com

Abstract:
Recent research on cities and urban systems has recognised the fundamental importance of analysing scalar articulations and networks and the relations established among actors and spaces at all levels. In this context, the principles associated with the regeneration of urban spaces,

¹ Uses, with changes, part of the paper that, under the title "Urban regeneration and new ways of governing the city: reflections on the Greater Porto," waits for publication in the Proceedings of the XXI Iberian Geography Colloquium
collaborative planning and governance emerge as crucial, related to strategic, systemic and integrated approaches to urban development, undertaken by public and/or private and/or other actors in a certain area.

In Portugal, and specifically in Porto, important urban regeneration projects are ongoing, but they still reflect an individualist view (each municipality for itself) and a top-down approach (the state decides, the others comply), showing a clear lack of cooperation and institutional articulation (governance is essentially rhetoric) in the context of virtually nonexistent metropolitan planning. This article aims to reflect on the ongoing urban projects in the municipalities of Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia within the framework of city-regions, governance and urban regeneration, taking into consideration information collected from projects and applications to national EU-funded programmes and from interviews with agents in charge of regeneration and revitalisation in these municipalities.

**Keywords:** city-region; collaborative planning; governance; public policies; urban regeneration

**Introduction**

In the mid-19th century, 30% of people lived in urban areas. Since then, the world population has rapidly expanded, to gradually slow down in the 1990s. The spatial concentration of people, however, continues to grow, and it is currently estimated that over half the world’s population lives in urban areas (UN, 2007). Estimates by the United Nations also highlight the growing importance of urban areas: by 2030, every region on the planet will have a higher proportion of urban population than rural, and by 2050, every region shall be predominantly urban, in terms of functional characteristics (UN-Habitat, 2008).

The attraction of cities results from the concentration of resources and opportunities, which means that they are regarded as the main hubs of economic and social development (Sassen, 2006), the driving force for spatially-based development. Indeed, cities accrue agents and resources, offering people the possibility for social and cultural participation and improvement. They promote forms of management and governance that
encourage greater economic dynamism, providing conditions that favour
investment and the production of wealth, and enable access to goods and
services, contributing to higher quality of life and well-being indices.

For these reasons, and also for the role they play in establishing
functional relations among territories (namely in promoting and configuring
poly-nuclear and poly-centric systems) and for concentrating problems of an
economic, social and environmental nature (Chamusca, 2009), political,
technical and scientific discourse has paid cities special attention.
Particularly, focus has been brought to the need to structure more efficient
urban policies, able to combine multidimensional interventions and promote
new (more integrated, collaborative and strategic) forms of planning and
management (Fernandes & Chamusca, 2009; Sassen, 2006).

In this context, there is a need for a new urban model, paying particular
attention to the distinctive details and forms of cities (particularly with
regard to their consolidated fabric) and concern with citizens’ new needs,
clearly bringing planning and the city closer once more. Thus, there is rising
interest in the diversity of identities, cultures and forms of expression in
cities (Hillier & Healey, 2008), questioning the technical or scientific
superiority of planning and its ability to respond to an ever more complex
and fragmented reality. Throughout Europe, a new attitude is gradually
developing allying learning with practice (Fernandes, 2010).

However, the doubts and uncertainties with which urban planning
continues to struggle, associated with the difficulty of anticipating the future
and making choices collides with the need to act and intervene in the
territory (Fernandes, 2010). Planning thus remains oriented towards the
present (Connell, 2009), driven by the need to juggle and consider individual
interests (Hall, 1992; Soja, 2009). It is incapable of promoting and
reconciling the short, medium and long term and developing integrated,
collective strategies, Likewise a growing inability on the part of public
authorities to govern cities is revealed, since they represent only one part of
the agents involved in the process of managing and transforming territories.
Urban regeneration and new ways to govern the city

Changes in the field of spatial planning and governance are also associated with the growing value of knowledge that some authors have related to the cultural turn in economic geography (Barnes, 2001; Fernandes, 2010). Thus, the city is seen as a collective resource (Healey, 2002) and its older fabric regarded as particularly valuable. This promotes a new localism (Amin & Thrift, 2002) full of opportunities, in which other activities in the urban and regional economies gain greater relevance.

These changes have led to the emergence and consolidation of concepts (some of which have become goals), such as governance, urban regeneration, and collaborative planning. Given that the State no longer represents the only (and often the most important) field of collective action, a new culture of participation surfaces, leading to the progressive transition from a traditional model, based on the conventional principles of “Government” or “Administration”, to a model of “Governance”, closely linked to rationales of collaborative planning. Here, importance is given to participatory processes, which are understood and accepted by a wide range of individuals who inhabit, use and visit these areas.

Collaborative planning, which integrates themes and intersects agents and scales on a restricted spatial basis, takes on a multiplicity of forms and encouraging the involvement of several types of agents, with a view to reconciling interests in the development of a collective future. The process of governance becomes guided by a rationale of networked compromise and linkage, where the State plays an increasingly more secondary role as mediator of the development process (Fernandes & Chamusca, 2009), thus favouring decentralisation and fostering hybrid and innovative solutions (Atkinson, 1998; Coaffee & Healey, 2003).

It is in this rationale of linkages and hybridism that the concept of regeneration is anchored and gains force. The appearance of new urban governance models and a culture of participation, as well as the consolidation of more strategic, collaborative planning principles, lead to new opportunities to “restore to life”, “reorganise”, “renew”, “enhance” and/or “improve” urban territories, especially the central areas of large cities. Consequently, the essence of intervention in the city centre shifts from
considering only the principles of urban renewal, in which coordinated intervention on a set of elements within the urban fabric (public areas, infrastructure, buildings) is favoured, towards a broader view of urban regeneration (or revitalisation), understood as an operation of renovation, guided by strategic objectives of urban development. Here, actions of a material nature follow an integrated design, and are actively combined with interventions of a social and economic nature.

However, the pressure and urgency to intervene has not taken into consideration the view of the territory as a spatial continuum, in which intervention should be integrated and qualified. While cities continued to expand within a discontinuous urban sprawl and at an unprecedented scale, several mechanisms and programmes have appeared, directed at intervention in urban centres. They mostly favour the development of integrated actions (centred on clearly delimited areas and within well-defined timeframes), capable of boosting participation and reconciling interests, and of responding more effectively to urban complexities (in accordance with what is intended as a new way to think and govern the city). They do however reveal a number of shortcomings in terms of governance and regional integration, particularly with regard to implementing a strategy for the so-called peripheral areas or outskirts.

**The Portuguese case: from commercial urbanism to urban regeneration**

In Portugal, incentives to regenerate urban space gained relevance with PROCOM and URBAN, achieved broader expression with POLIS, and intensified with the POLIS XXI City Policy (*Política de Cidades POLIS XXI*) and the founding of a number of Urban Regeneration Companies (*Sociedades de Reabilitação Urbana*) (see Chamusca, 2010a for a broader understanding of these developments).

POLIS XXI (decree nº 312/2007) was launched in 2007, following a succession of instruments to promote integrated initiatives incorporating governance, cooperation and participation principles. The programme promoted an integrated and inclusive approach to urban development,
translating the desire to “overcome the weaknesses of the national urban system” and “to transform cities into engines of development for the regions and the country” (POLIS XXI – presentation document, pp. 1). It encouraged the establishment of SRU – Sociedades de Reabilitação Urbana (Urban Regeneration Companies), state and/or municipal public capital companies in charge of urban regeneration in specific spatial contexts.

![Fi. 1 Population by municipality in the North of Portugal (2011)](image)

POLIS XXI aimed to broaden previous policies and to introduce important changes in the form and results of planning, particularly by linking with the principles of governance and promoting “new forms of governance, based on the broader participation of citizens, more committed involvement on the part of different urban actors – public, private and associative – and on flexible mechanisms of cooperation among cities, as well as among these and their surrounding spaces.” (POLIS XXI – Specific Regulations, pp. 1).

With regard to involvement, it is important to bear in mind that the rise of “participation” in urban policy is associated to hypothetical benefits in terms of the projects’ quality, efficiency and sustainability. Recently, however,
there has been growing criticism of its practical effects. In Portugal, research on urban regeneration has highlighted as its main features, the mobilisation of public and private agents and the diversity of partnership models. The results show that it is difficult to consolidate processes of participation and transformation in urban management models, as a culture of governance is still lacking (Breda et al, 2009a). Furthermore, current institutional practices and the existence of sectoral agendas restrict the development and temporal maturing of learning and innovation experiences in the models of participation and institutional relations (Breda et al, 2009b; Chamusca, 2010b).

Apart from clear changes in form and expected results, POLIS XXI also aimed to promote decentralised approaches, with local initiative projects seeking interconnect cities or different areas within a specific city, bolstering their human, institutional, cultural and economic capital. One of POLIS XXI’s lines of action involves urban regeneration.

Within the “Urban Regeneration Partnerships”, support mechanisms are defined for intervention in intra-urban spaces, giving emphasis to different components and the reconciliation of interests among the various urban actors. This instrument aspires to contribute to the development and implementation of new forms of urban governance by encouraging citizen participation, bolstering flexible, hybrid cooperation structures among urban agents and actors, and building shared views of the future, which can improve the performance of urban plans and projects and greater articulation among cities and their surrounding areas. This latter ambition is particularly relevant since it focuses on one of the main shortcomings of previous programmes.

**Reflections on regeneration in Greater Porto**

If the changes in spatial planning and governance work give urban regeneration plans better relevance, in Portugal and more specifically in its Northern region, this investment is particularly clear in two processes: the establishment of Urban Regeneration Companies (SRU); and the implementation of POLIS XXI, particularly through its “Urban Regeneration Partnerships”. The following sections will seek to reflect on these two
processes, in light of urban regeneration projects in Greater Porto, approved
in the first call for proposals in 2007 and which are currently underway.

**Urban Regeneration Companies (Sociedades de Reabilitação Urbana – SRU)**

The SRUs operate in the area of urban regeneration, arising from the need
to ensure rigorous management and intervention in the older urban centres.
They were established by the Decree-Law nº 104/2004, dated 7th May, and
are an important component in the strategy to regenerate rundown historic
centres, based on a legal regime of an exceptional nature applicable to
“critical areas of urban recovery and reconversion” (“áreas críticas de
recuperação e reconversão urbanística” – ACRRU). The SRUs’ goals
include not only urban renewal but also the need to create sustained
attractiveness, to enhance the restored areas at the social, cultural and
economic levels, and promote dynamic, coordinated initiatives with public
and private resources.

There are two SRUs in Greater Porto, Porto Vivo SRU and CidadeGaia
SRU EEM, established to manage the urban renewal process (prepare the
intervention strategy and act as mediator among owners, investors and civil
society). Initial analysis of how these two companies operate found that both
repositioned the centre as a focal attraction, not only for new residents but
also for those who already live there. This was driven by the need to fight
population drain from the city centre and problems of economic depression,
dismembering of the social fabric, physical degradation and insecurity
usually associated with it.

In the case of Porto, Porto Vivo is a state (60%) and municipal (40%)
public capital company, founded in 2004, aimed at managing the processes
of urban regeneration and revitalisation, identified in the 17th Constitutional
Government Programme as one of the three priority areas of intervention to
improve quality of life. Porto Vivo illustrates the complexity of spatial
intervention models, which also translates the complex structure of the
territory. Its unit of intervention is the city block, which was studied

---

3 Some of the considerations presented here resulted from interviews with two SRUs, Porto Vivo (with
Ms. Ana Paula Delgado) and CidadeGaia (with Mr. Defensor Castro), as part of PhD research.
according to specific goals that resulted in the production of Base Plans of Strategic Documents (Planos Base de Documentos Estratégicos – PBDE). These were presented publicly, subject to public debate (although participation was very low and almost always comprising only owners and tenants). Once approved, they gave rise to Strategic Documents (Documentos Estratégicos – DE), materialising the transfer of urban planning powers to the SRUs and initiating the negotiation of regeneration contracts.

At this stage, urban management and intervention models have multiplied. In some cases, all the owners enter the partnership and become involved in a project in which the SRU acts only as mediator; in others, intervention is conducted essentially with public investment, funds from IHRU and the Porto City Hall, or public funds associated to the Urban Regeneration Partnerships.5 There are other situations where equal distribution processes and joint renewal predominate, with exclusively private capital; there are also schemes based on co-responsibility principles and agreements, as well as situations involving parcelling and direct contracting.

CidadeGaia, in contrast to the Porto SRU, is a municipal business venture, exclusively with municipal capital. It was established in 2007, to spearhead “local development through the direct or indirect implementation of urban regeneration and renewal” (http://www.cidadegaia-sru.pt). It is currently responsible for ongoing large-scale planning projects in the city’s oldest area, but it does not execute contracting or other types of physical interventions. It acquires real estate and manages a set of urban renewal incentives, namely financial support (particularly the SOLARH programme), tax benefits (such as VAT and Municipal Property Tax), and municipal rates and licences (particularly with a reduction on the compensatory urban rate of 50% for urban allotment operations or with a similar impact to allotment within ACRRU).

Its strategy is identical to Porto Vivo’s, focusing on restoring housing, enhancing public space, bolstering commerce and economic business activities, as well as promoting tourism and leisure, with a view to revitalising the city centre as a space of sociability, residence and economic activity. However, in Gaia, the focus has mostly been on attracting private
investment and involvement in public-private partnerships for large-scale projects, such as the Hotel Taylor (private capital only), the Cais Cultural, the cable car, the cultimedia centre, several parking lots, and a few social housing buildings (with the participation of the IHRU - Instituto da Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana / Housing and Urban Regeneration Institute).

When looking at the results, it is clear that the SRUs have played a fundamental role in revitalising the historic centres of Porto and Gaia, mainly by acting as facilitators in the process of urban regeneration, and as promoters of cooperation among the public and private sectors. Urban interventions are thus shaped by processes of coordination and linkage among many actors, systems of negotiation, regulation and non-hierarchical administration, and by the capacity to build views of the future that are shared by both the public and private sectors. Recent research argues that this governance model maximises the effects of spatially-based development strategies, since it promotes the sharing of responsibility, so as to face problems more effectively in contexts of growing complexity and fragmentation, to which the traditional management and planning models, highly centred on central or local administrative structures, are unable to provide answers.

It should be noted though that the progressive introduction of governance principles in managing the city centre took place essentially in the legal domain (due to the complexity of property laws and regimes) and the heritage domain (due to the number of institutions involved and figures of law to protect highly valuable elements in an area classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site). There is a lack of attention to dimensions such as forging supra-municipal/metropolitan linkages and participation, despite recent efforts to involve institutions in urban projects developed under the PRUs, and an effort to create closer ties with the scientific and academic community, with the establishment of an Urban Management Office in the Porto municipality. However, civil society has not yet been fully integrated in the process as it has not yet identified the representative agents in the population.

In terms of supra-municipal cooperation, operational connections between the two municipalities do not exist, which creates a barrier to
developing concerted policies between the SRUs, and among these and the surrounding municipalities. Apart from the lack of a common strategy, there is also a process of disarticulation in Greater Porto (lack of coordination and information flows that could promote links among policies at regional level), which means many of the synergies built are lost, generating waste and redundancy of facilities and investments. In this context, the governance paradigm has not yet transposed interventions focused on small areas in the urban centres, towards linkages with actions at the metropolitan and regional scale.

**Urban Regeneration Partnerships**

Several urban projects have been developed in the last four years (2007-2011) under POLIS XXI, and particularly the Urban Regeneration Partnerships programme (in the Northern Region, 86 projects were approved, totalling 407 million euros in investment). These projects cover integrated regeneration and renovation operations aimed at critical neighbourhoods and peripheral zones, redevelopment of abandoned areas or with obsolete functions, and the enhancement of areas of excellence (historic centres, waterfronts, etc.). From the total investment, about 72 million euros are concentrated in Greater Porto, of which 57 million have been applied to interventions in the municipalities of Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia (representing 14% of the total investment in urban regeneration), whereas no projects were approved for the municipalities of Maia and Valongo.
Fig. 2 Urban Projects in Greater Porto (approved in 2007)
We analysed three of the selected applications from the first call for proposals in 2007: the action programme for the Morro da Sé (Cathedral district), targeting an area notorious for poor housing, social conditions and a lack of economic and cultural activities; the Vila D’Este urban project, aimed at “overcoming the problems and difficulties experienced in this area, with a view to improving the urban environment, spatial planning, and the economic and cultural development of this zone” (Regeneração e Requalificação Urbana - Urbanização de Vila D’Este – Fase 1); and the Gaia historic centre project, intended to promote Gaia as a modern urban area and bolster the centre’s recreational and tourist dimension, “anchored in the singular features of its landscape and historical heritage” (Requalificação do Centro Histórico de Vila Nova de Gaia - 1ª Fase).

The analysis of the projects was conducted from two perspectives, with a view to determining the extent to which the PRU urban projects were in fact real regeneration strategies for the urban centres (or if they merely serve to aid in funding urban renewal); and, on the other hand, to find out in what way these projects have become partnerships that promote participation, collaboration, and new forms of governance in the city centres.

Beginning with the topic of urban regeneration, the three projects have focused on the physical, socio-cultural and economic dimensions to varying
CHANGES IN THE CITY

degrees, giving greater relevance to the physical space, environmental improvement, and socio-cultural advancement. Operations with direct impact on economic revitalisation of the urban fabric are however fewer in number, and are more centred on creating services to provide support to entrepreneurship and investment, and on the recovery or construction of buildings to house certain activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programa de Acção para a Reabilitação Urbana do Morro da Sé - Ch. 1 (Cathedral District Urban Regeneration Action Programme – Ch. 1)</th>
<th>Physical and environmental dimension</th>
<th>Social and cultural dimension</th>
<th>Economic dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regeneração e Requalificação Urbana - Urbanização de Vila D'Este - Fase 1 (Urban Regeneration and Renewal – Vila D’Este Housing Estate – Phase I)</th>
<th>Physical and environmental dimension</th>
<th>Social and cultural dimension</th>
<th>Economic dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requalificação do Centro Histórico de Vila Nova de Gaia - 1ª Fase (Regeneration of the Vila Nova de Gaia Historic Centre – Phase I)</th>
<th>Physical and environmental dimension</th>
<th>Social and cultural dimension</th>
<th>Economic dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Number of actions/operations with direct impact on the different dimensions of urban regeneration

Furthermore, there is a clear effort to open the process of the action plans’ design to all the actors who may potentially be affected by the operations, an aspect that is particularly evident in the performance of the SRUs and in articulating the urban project with the existing masterplans.

In Porto, the Morro da Sé urban project conveys the desire to advance the principles of capacity-building of local agents, co-responsibility and partnership. This desire is expressed in efforts to approach the local populations that are directly affected by the project (despite low participation), in the development of a participatory model and an Urban Management Office, in the involvement of all the partners in the programme’s Administrative Unit, and in the structuring of a complex funding system, in which the ERDF represents only 45% of an investment that is also funded by private partners (33%) and the public sector (21%). It has been developed with the support of Porto Vivo, Porto City Hall, Associação Porto Digital (Digital Porto Association) and Fundação para o
Desenvolvimento da Zona Histórica do Porto (Foundation for the Development of the Porto Historic Zone).

In Gaia, the efforts for openness and prior discussion with local agents is also present, manifested in a strategy to establish linkages between the SRU and several residents’ associations in the case of Vila D’Este, and a process of negotiation among the SRU, owners and local associations (particularly those linked to Port wine and river activities), in the case of the historic centre.

Generally speaking, in terms of principles of co-responsibility and shared management of the urban process, despite all efforts, there is a clear concentration of “powers” in municipal companies, which comprise the majority of the partnerships involved in the process. There is also a lack of capital coming from private partnerships, even though in all likelihood, given the SRUs’ financial restrictions, private investments can lead to a review of strategies and often determine the type of action implemented.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the central areas of cities are essential to promoting competitive, inclusive cities and territories. To this end, urban regeneration is a fundamental strategic element, associated with a broad set of supports and incentives to integrated intervention, where articulating three core dimensions is essential – the physical, economic and social – through new models of administration based on the principles of governance.

There are important ongoing activities in Greater Porto, particularly those associated to the ON2 (Operacional do Norte) programme Urban Regeneration Partnerships and the two Urban Regeneration Companies. Although it is not yet possible to evaluate the effects of these processes, we can identify a number of features of the governance models adopted to deliver urban regeneration.

First, the commitment to pursuing urban regeneration is worth mentioning, confirming the historical tendency of the triumph of architecture over economic and social geography (Fernandes, 2010), an option with a
certain degree of risk, particularly the possibility that the entire process of urban renewal may become incipient.

Second, the need to attract private investment (even though public funds continue to be very significant) is gaining importance, often without public discussion and validation of a strategy. This may also indicate a course of action guided by the “privatisation of urban regeneration”, concentrated around the interests and influence of large economic actors, which do not always coincide with the goals of the city, civil society and other agents (McAreavey, 2009).

Despite the two previous aspects, it should be noted that urban projects are increasingly characterised by hybrid and complex processes and solutions, seeking to involve different public and private partners. Furthermore, efforts are made to link regeneration with initiatives to create and modernise facilities and infrastructure, as well as implement measures fostering social and cultural support that can lead to integrated, collective urban regeneration strategies.

A forth point highlights the lack of connections among different scales and disregard for supra-municipal planning strategies. In fact, at local level, the importance of elected authorities (City Hall) and their vision of the city centre is critical. At the supra-municipal level, however, the absence of regional (or inter-municipal) planning and the multiplicity of border conflicts mirror the shortcomings of the governance model, still poorly “territorialised” and excessively “theorised”.

Thus, the next few years will be crucial in determining the success of a city policy which aspires to make the Portuguese cities “well-planned and well-governed territories” and to “qualify and intensify the city’s integration in the surrounding region” (POLIS XXI – presentation document, pp. 2). To this end, the challenge facing the different instruments in city policy, the urban regeneration initiatives and the agents involved, is that they be capable of developing integrated (environment, society, economy, and governance) projects. Focus should not be centred only on developing a certain vision of the city centre, but rather on the fact that these projects are fundamental to the city-region, with linkages at the different scales and the blurring of borders as part of strategic urban planning that is common to the regional
space, ensuring the importance and specificity of the urban centres (especially the historic and classified ones), also as part of a broader system.

References


Breda-Vázquez, I., Conceição, P., & Móia, P. (2009b). How to learn with urban policy diversity and complexity: evaluation and knowledge sharing in urban policy. *Planning Theory & Practice*

Chamusca, Pedro (2009), *Polis XXI, Governança e Planeamento Urbano no Norte de Portugal: impactos do programa de Regeneração Urbana*, *Actas do VII Congresso da Geografia Portuguesa*


Chamusca, Pedro (2010b) *Governança e participação: entre a legitimação dos processos de gestão territorial e o agravar das divisões e da subordinação*. *Cadernos de Geografia*, n.º 2. FLUP, Porto


Hall, P. (1992), *Cities of Tomorrow*, Blackwell, 3ª Edição, New Jersey


UN (2007), *3rd resolution on the Situation of the World Population*, dedicated to the topic of Urbanization. ONU


Other documents consulted

Polis XXI – Presentation Document

Polis XXI – Specific Regulations

Programa de Acção para a Reabilitação Urbana do Morro da Sé - Ch. 1 (Cathedral District Urban Regeneration Action Programme – Ch. 1)
Regeneração e Requalificação Urbana - Urbanização de Vila D'Este - Fase I (Urban Regeneration and Renewal – Vila D’Este Housing Estate – Phase I)

Requalificação do Centro Histórico de Vila Nova de Gaia - 1ª Fase (Regeneration of the Vila Nova de Gaia Historic centre – Phase I)