

## **To Shuffle and to Give Again: Construction and Destruction of a Critical Area of Porto**

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Sónia Alves and Flávio Nunes

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# **‘To Shuffle and to Give Again’: Construction and Destruction of a Critical Area of Porto**

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*Abstract: This paper aims to contribute to the debate about the causes and consequences of urban decay and urban deprivation in some parts of developed cities. ‘To shuffle and to give again’ is a well-known expression that can also be used to describe some urban development strategies applied to these important areas. Specifically the urban regeneration process that has been conducted on a social housing district (São João de Deus – SJD) located on the outskirts of Porto, in northern Portugal. The public policies that have been, over the past decades, attempting to deal with this problematic neighbourhood, have also acted as a driving force, creating population movements across Porto. Thus, forcing residential mobility is seen as a part of the solution. This approach is criticized because it does not promote citizens’ participation in the process; in fact, it deals with people as if they were easily-moved pieces in an urban game, forgetting that this kind of policy militates against the development of social networks. This has a negative influence on the social inclusion of these families. Furthermore, the evaluation of this urban regeneration process reveals a sequence of contradictory strategies, as a consequence of political changes in the local authority. This erratic approach evolved from the application of a range of ideas, from revitalization measures to radical solutions such as demolition. In this paper, we evaluate the impact of these decisions, not only on the demolished neighbourhood but also on those areas of the city that were used to receive SJD’s citizens, questioning whether or not this decision does not amplify the trends of urban segregation within the Porto city.*

**Keywords:** Urban Regeneration, Social Housing, Socio-spatial Exclusion, Residential Mobility, Urban Policies, Porto, Portugal

## **Urban Deprivation and Urban Regeneration Initiatives**

**A**LTHOUGH POVERTY AND social exclusion are not restricted or confined to some problematic urban areas, the way these problems are combined with other deprivations in those contexts creates specific dynamics that increases and reinforces contrast, symbolic distance and variation in quality of life within the city, which justifies a growing academic and political interest in understanding the dynamics of those areas and how they should be faced.

In a urban context past analysis have been observing that poverty and socio-spatial disadvantage in general tend to occupy specific spaces in the city, often marginal, where scarcity of resources and low value of the land favors the spatial concentration of various forms of social exclusion (Ordóñez e Alvarado, 1991: 53). But despite sharing vulnerability factors those areas are not homogeneous, in fact they exhibit very different locations in the urban structure and also very different conditions from the standpoint of continuity or discontinuity in the face of surroundings, as well as their own social and spatial composition.

From the standpoint of its location and relation to urban surroundings, Ordóñez e Alvarado (1991) identify three different areas of concentration of poverty: the marginal areas of illegal origin or self-construction; the planned neighborhoods of social housing located in poor suburban habitat, and downtown historic districts showing signs of severe deterioration (Table 1).

**Table 1: A Typology of Urban Areas ‘at Risk’**

Categories of spaces of poverty	Key features
The neighbourhoods of illegal origin or self-construction	These neighborhoods of spontaneous dwellings were produced outside the law in areas with poor conditions of health and hygiene (hilly or steep slope areas, for example).
The planned neighborhoods of social housing located in poor suburban habitat	These neighborhoods were developed in the normal procedures of conventional urbanism, and reveal unequal conditions with regard to its inhabitant's opportunities.
Derelict Historic City Areas	Historic downtown areas inhabited mostly by population occupying dwellings of low rents. The process of physical, functional and symbolic degeneration of these areas, explains the economic and social characteristics of their current residents (very different from those who lived there in prior periods).
Source: Adapted from Ordóñez and Alvarado (1991) and Blanco (2005)	

The specific characteristics of these spaces tend to generate different responses from the State depending on their urban characteristics, quality of housing and symbolic value. Thus, while the central historic districts have been giving rise to the development of strategies of economic and urban restructuring -renewal that has increased the supply of tourism and commercial activity, and has been attracting segments of medium and high population-, the neighborhoods of illegal origin and the segments of a poorer quality of social housing have sometimes been raising demolition strategies.

These demolition strategies often arise in response to an emergency planning, messy, sloppy and not engaged with the use of public space and the needs and characteristics of the residents (Gómez, 2006), very frequent in some planned public housing neighborhoods marked by a degraded and hostile landscape near some obscured parts of the city (such as brownfield sites, harmful or unhealthy, electrical substations, storage areas, rail or road infrastructures). In turn, the condition of illegal neighborhoods, created without any prior planning, which tend to show poor housing and urban development, are often considered insurmountable (for requalification), raising, most of the time, demolition decisions (Blanco, 2005).

Considering that the impacts arising from the demolition of these residential neighborhoods, of illegal or planned origin, have not always been sufficiently evaluated and considered in the planning of new interventions; this paper tries to be a contribution to this debate, describ-

ing major impacts observed in the different stages of implementation of some urban restructuring strategies for a critical district of Porto (São João de Deus).

The paper is structured as follows:

The first part begins by describing the different phases of structuring and densification of the neighborhood, identifying the main factors that contributed to its social and urban decline.

The second part describes the main features of the public initiatives that since the 90's have tried to solve the amalgam of problems in the neighborhood. In the 90's, one initiative against poverty and social exclusion that promoted measures to combat the deterioration of the housing and management services, the physical decay and increasing amounts of litter and rubbish in open spaces, and the problems of antisocial behavior (crime, disorderly behavior, vandalism, drugs, ...); and, one decade after, an initiative of urban restructuring which would be responsible for the demolition of eighty percent of the total housing built in the neighborhood (562 housing units) with the transfer of the households to other districts of council housing estates

In the third part, the main social impacts arising from the decision of demolishing the neighborhood and the relocation of population to other districts are systematized, particularly those observed at the level of a partial breakdown of social cohesion and the emergence of unanticipated problems, such as the educational problems due to the manner and timing by which children were transferred to other neighborhoods and schools near the new areas.

The assessment of social impacts of these initiatives is made from the subjective perception of people most directly affected by the development of these initiatives. Selection of the interviewed population followed the diversification criteria in order to ensure diversity of profiles and thereby to identify different positions taken by the population towards the impacts of these measures on their quality of life.

This article focuses mainly on the analysis of the impacts felt by the population in terms of their social networks, questioning whether these changes promoted networks of relationship more supportive of the social inclusion of the families and of the social territorial cohesion.

### **Neighborhood of São João de Deus(SJD): the Genesis of a Critical Urban Area in Porto**

In the city of Porto under the framework of the “Plano de Melhoramentos” (1956), implemented between 1956 and 1966, were constructed around new 6,000 social housing units, trying to combat the extensive housing problem in central Porto (overcrowding, illegality and lack of suitable housing conditions). It was anticipated that this plan would lead to the resettlement of about 20% of the population living in areas of poor housing in central Porto, to large housing estates built at a peripheral location, where the process of urbanization and the creation of infrastructures and civic amenities was ongoing. The logic of ‘deportation’ and segregation of the poor population to peripheral areas is recognized by official documents and it is reflected in the fact that only two in a total of 13 neighborhoods built in the city of Porto under the influence of this Plan had a central location (CMP, 2001)

The neighborhood of SJD, located on the outskirts of Porto, was the result of a series of construction phases promoted mostly by the local government. The different phases of its construction sought to address the housing needs of the neighborhood and of other parts of the city, namely those related to overcrowding and illegal housing (Table 2).

**Table 2: Main Construction Phases of SJD from the 40's Until 2002**

Construction stages	Year	Housing models
<i>1ª Phase – Single Family Housing</i>	1944	Two-story houses with small private areas. 144 single-family housing dwellings were constructed to re-house people living in back-to-back houses, built during the 19th century in the eastern and central parts of Porto.
<i>2ª Phase – Multifamily Housing</i>	1956	Constructions of high-rise residential building (buildings with 3 or more stories). 8 blocks of social housing were built to accommodate population living in back-to-back houses and Roma families who lived in a camp (in an open area).
<i>3ª Phase – Parish Houses</i>	60's	Two Story houses. The construction of 12 single-family housing were promoted by a church housing trust.
<i>4ª Phase – Multifamily Housing</i>	70's	Densification of the area with low income housing: 8 more new blocks of social housing were built.
<i>5ª Phase – Squatter Settlement</i>	80's	Improvised dwellings made from scrap materials (plywood, corrugated metal and sheets of plastic). As a result of their illegal status, the infrastructure and services were nonexistent or inadequate (namely sanitation and electricity). The area is composed of a young population, but heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, place of origin and lifestyle. The squatter settlement is the result of the splitting of the households of resident families (due to situations of over-occupancy of the dwellings and of family conflicts and also due to housing demand by people who had no roots in the neighborhood: migrants from rural areas and <i>retornados</i> (Portuguese people who were living in the former African colonies).

The process of densification of the neighborhood, showed a concern primarily focused on the quantitative side of the housing market (a greater preoccupation with the construction of housing blocks), while the qualitative side appeared to be less important, since the authorities had shown a lack of concern with the quality of life of residents and with the coordination and management of the area.

The increase of the spatial concentration of the poor and the unemployed in the area, without an adequate response in terms of public facilities and management, has led to a spiral of urban and social decline, that revealed greater proportions in the 1980's, when a squatter settlement was created and the local drug trafficking and drug use increased.

At the time, the 434 social houses were inhabited by 400 households and a population of about 1600 inhabitants, while the population living in tents would be rehoused only in the 90's in 12 housing blocks with 270 housing units constructed there for that purpose.

Although with different lifestyles and socio-economic activities, the population of the neighborhood share in common the same socio-economic problems associated with situations of unemployment (the unemployment rate was one of the highest of Porto, equivalent of 35.3%), and high dependence on the social protection systems of the state (i.e. the public sector responsible for meeting the basic needs of many residents: housing, benefits and income, ...).

In a context where only about 30% of the population were employed the social relationships of mutual help and solidarity were highly valued by the inhabitants, who considered very important the support provided by relatives and neighbors (in terms of food or occasional odd jobs).

Besides the high building density of the neighborhood, residents were disappointed with the way housing authorities conducted the re-housing process, noticing that it created a negative reputation for the neighborhood and its residents. The idea that some building blocks of social housing were created to re-house a population that violated the rules elsewhere in the city, made SJD neighbourhood became known by some derogatory names such as "neighborhood of the damned" or "the cursed". During the interviews, residents described several stories of 'postcode stigmatization', in situations of job search and contact with the habitants of other parts of the city.

### **The Public Initiatives Taken by the Public Authorities to the SJD**

The dimension and visibility of the social, economic and environmental problems of the neighborhood, strongly interconnected, gave it a political recognition in the last twenty years, when two different urban regeneration initiatives were launched for the area (Table 3).

The first initiative targeted reversing the multidimensional problems of the neighborhood was funded by the National Program Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (PLCP). From a methodological and ideological point of view, the core ideas of the program were: the promotion of partnerships, community participation and the support for local networks. The specific objectives of the Project were: the eradication of the illegal housing and the construction of new housing for the population resettlement; the developing of actions in the education and training areas and the creation of new equipments and services to support groups with higher levels of vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion (children, elderly, women, ...).

The process of resettlement of the population under this program -as they had inherent improvements in terms of living conditions- was evaluated by the residents as something very positive. However, the lack of management and control of the area which followed the implementation of the program were strongly criticized. The proliferation of the traffic and drug abuse in the area, were responsible for a growing influx of drug addicts into the neighborhood, and for the visible rapid degradation of the buildings and public space.

In the late 90's, the neighborhood had 718 housing dwellings that were distributed by 184 buildings (144 single-family social houses, 12 single-family homes owned by the Parish of Areosa and 28 multi-family residential blocks). The neighborhood was inhabited by a population mainly young and ethnically diverse: 48% of the total population was less than 24 years old and 34% of all households were Roma and 7% of African people.



**Table 3: SJD Urban Regeneration Initiatives**

<b>Programs</b>	<b>Organizational Structure</b>	<b>Territorial Scope / Period</b>	<b>Main Objectives of the Project</b>
National Program Against Poverty and Social Exclusion	Central Government, Porto City Council, Parish of Areosa	Neighborhood of São João de Deus. Two phases of project development: from 1990 to 1994 and from 1995 to 1999.	Intervention in housing, health, education, employment/vocational training, social action and community mobilization. Construction of 12 new multifamily housing blocks (with 270 new housing units for the resettlement of the population of the squatter settlement). Equipment and services were also created or improved for the youth, elderly and drug addicts.
URBAN II (2000-2006)	Central Government, Porto City Council (Foundation for the Social Development of Porto), European Union.	Contiguous area of 2 municipalities Porto and Gondomar (total area: 5.7 km <sup>2</sup> and population: 27,365 inhabitants). The S. João de Deus neighbourhood was defined as a priority area for intervention.	Five general objectives were defined for the Urban II Porto-Gondomar: rehabilitation of the urban environment and enhancement of public space; combat drug abuse; revitalization of the social environment; revitalize the economic environment; and enhance the social and educational levels and context of youth population (Deloitte, 2003).

The European Initiative Urban II, conducted between 2000 and 2006, would constitute a new funding opportunity to tackle the multiple and interrelated problems of the area.

The intervention strategy for the neighborhood, created from five predefined general objectives (see table 3), would be drawn and redrawn several times due to the change of the municipal representatives in 2002; and due to difficulties in its implementation.

The first strategy of a selective demolition of only a few housing blocks, would be replaced by a final decision of the demolition of 80% of the total houses of the neighborhood (562 housing units distributed by 28 housing blocks). All blocks of multi-family housing were demolished (Figure 1), remaining in the neighborhood only the 144 single-family houses built in the middle of last century (currently inhabited by a predominantly aged population) and the houses promoted by the parish of Areosa, called 'Heritage of the Poor'.

The demolition of almost the entire neighborhood was presented as a policy decision that stems from a diagnosis of the existence of poor quality and poor housing in the neighborhood, that requires high cost of renovating and maintenance, a discredited urban design that contributes to the physical isolation of the neighborhood and the problems of crime and antisocial behavior (crime, disorderly behavior, vandalism, drugs, ...).

This demolition would lead to the transfer of 430 households to other housing estates (Figure 2) and would also lead to 132 housing evictions. According to the local authorities, the housing evictions occurred in situations when the housing unit was being used for illicit purposes, such as second homes or illegal occupation of the household (e.g. due to trade or illegal sale of houses).

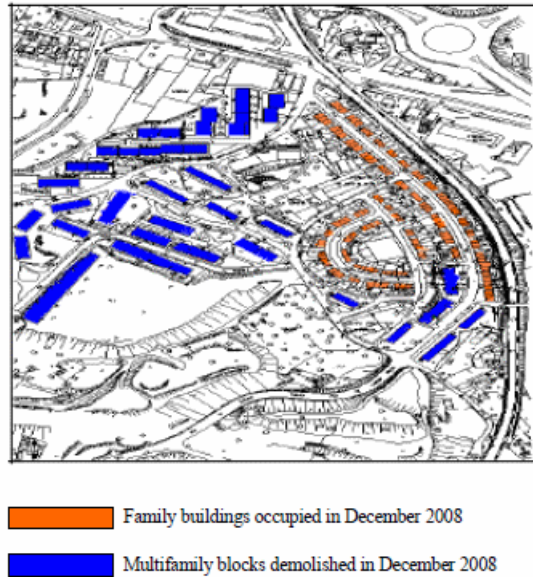


Figure 1: SJD Neighborhood in December 2008 (After the Demolition Process). Source: CMP (2008)

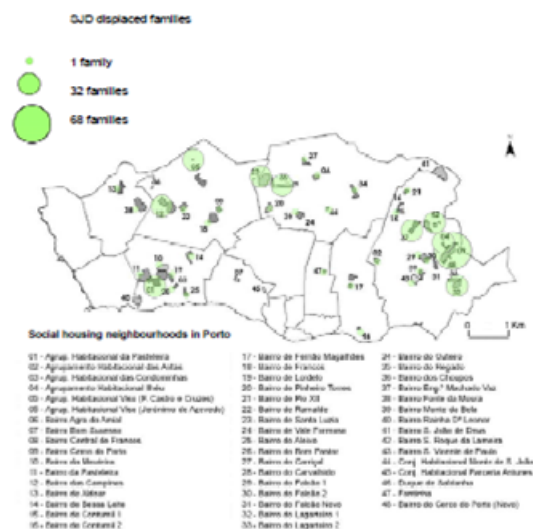


Figure 2: Resettlement Areas of the SJD Displaced Population. Source: Own Elaboration  
Based on Data from CMP (2008)

The relocations promoted a certain spatial dispersion of the families in the city. The majority (45% of all households) would be re-housed in the parish of Campanhã (where the SJD neighborhood was already located) that already concentrates the largest proportion of social housing estates and population with high levels of social and economic vulnerability in the city of Porto (Alves, 2008).

In 2002, the neighborhood of Cerco, that recorded already a high concentration of inhabitants, equivalent to about 3,100 people in 2001 (CMP 2001) and drug abuse (Alves, 2010) would be the main accommodation neighborhood for the relocated population of SJD (69 households).

## The Effects of Rehousing on Families and Community Relationships

In the previous section the resettlement model associated with the relocation of the residents of SJD (dispersed among some housing estates, but concentrated in some neighborhoods already characterized by a poor social and housing composition) was described. At this point we try to identify the main effects of this residential change on the living conditions of the displaced population.

An attempt has been made to explain the perception of the residents who remained in the neighborhood (in the single-family homes, the only ones that were not demolished). From the perspective of those inhabitants (most of whom lived there for some decades), the neighborhood improved in terms of calm and quietness, but became a “strange, empty and insecure place” where the habits of hospitality and identity references were lost.

The residents who remain in the neighborhood criticize the “urban emptiness” created by the demolition of 28 multi-family buildings and the non-occurrence of the rehabilitation of the rundown houses where they live, as it was proposed in the Draft Report of the Neighborhood Renewal.

Prior to the analysis of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the relocation (from the perspective of the population affected by it), it is worth noting:

- The assessment of gains and losses resulting from the residential change is made from a comparative perspective, taking into account the situation they lived in before and that they started to live in subsequently in the resettlement neighborhood (from the point of view of the quality of housing, ‘social status’ of the neighborhood, network access to equipments, services, social support networks, ...);
- The satisfaction of the relocated population was strongly conditioned by how the processes of rehousing were conducted. In this regard, it is important to note that they involved a large number of people (430 households). The respondents criticize the rehousing process: made in a short time, through the school year and through authoritarian methods of decision which did not allow the interaction and exchange of information between people and the housing officials.

The process of demolition of the neighborhood housing blocks was resisted by some of the resident population (particularly by those who lost the right to access to a house) and involved a strong police intervention. The conflict and disturbances were present throughout the process. The lack of interest of the public institutions to make an appropriate management of the needs and expectations of the residents was criticized by many public officials and local associations.

The fact that the resettlement process did not involve collaborative and monitoring methodologies, and occurred through the school year, would generate situations of absenteeism and school dropout by the young and situations of social isolation by the elderly and more vulnerable social groups in the new residential contexts.

The perception of the population interviewed is that the process of relocation would not contribute to the development of trust relationships between the populations relocated and institutions, or facilitate the integration of individuals in areas of arrival. The lack of social support (from staff mediators to the entrance of the residents in the new neighborhoods, particularly the most vulnerable ones, people and children), the stigma that the residents carried with them and the social conflicts already existent, between people and districts, would become obstacles to a better social integration of the people.

### ***The House and the Relocation***

With regard to housing conditions, there were detected distinct situations depending on the features and construction quality of the buildings: namely, there wasn’t a general improvement in the residential standing of these families

In terms of housing conditions, a significant number of relocated residents reported cases of loss of available space (some said they had to sell the furniture) and loss of comfort within the house. Some indicated the emergence of housing problems that did not exist before, such as electricity or humidity.

Other tenants relocated in neighborhoods built more recently, with identical conditions of space and quality of public space, expressed satisfaction with the conditions of the new house and neighborhood.

### ***Social Relationships and Resettlement***

While some respondents emphasized the stressful situations created by the “symbolic” and “emotional”, others preferred to stress the benefits that came from the residential change, such as finding a lower visibility of trafficking and drug use in the new residential areas. Perceptions varied greatly according to the district of resettlement, but also with the respondent’s own attitude towards these problems. With regard to an eventual dismantling of trafficking networks and drug use, respondents believe that they were only transferred and relocated between districts.

Another general perception is that the resettlement enhanced the dilution of ancient social networks, causing the weakening of important bonds of solidarity (of emotional and material support, eg help in caring for children or elderly), and led to further isolation of populations at home. The social uprooting was named as one the most negative aspects that led to the relocation, particularly for households consisting of few elements and more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion.

### **Conclusions**

The description of the process of urban consolidation of the SJD district, throughout its various stages, was able to illustrate how social housing (constructed, owned and managed by the State) may succeed in giving lower-income families a place to live. However, it can also lead to the creation of suburban ghettos, where deprived strata of the population can face not only economic but also other interrelated social and physical problems. The construction of social housing in areas with poor accessibility to basic facilities and lack of management (anti social behavior, lack of visible policing and young people’s services and facilities) can indeed produce the webs that tie people to poverty and social exclusion, through the creation of negative forms of socialization that contribute to the perpetuation of social and urban problems.

Policies to eradicate crime and the social and urban problems of the area showed opposing principles, objectives and strategies of action over the time.

A first round of policies developed in the 90’s, lead to the construction of 270 dwellings and several equipments to support local population and its associations. A second round of policies, developed only about a decade later, lead to the demolition of those new dwellings and about 80% of the total existing housing in the neighborhood.

The lack of coherence of the policies was also visible in the way they forced incongruous movements of people between residential areas in the city. Initially the neighborhood was used to concentrate people who mainly lived in the city center, later after the political decision of its demolition; the population was once again displaced to other residential areas of the city. The public officials moved poor people between areas without properly considering its roots and social support networks. Besides that, the fact that some of the resettlement neighborhoods already possess a derogatory stigma (due to its composition and social enviro-

onment) and constraints related to its morphology and location, raises doubts about the relevance and sustainability of these actions.

Having in mind that critical urban areas are characterized by the concentration and inter-relationship of multiple problems; problems that go beyond the field of housing, it is unrealistic to think that those problematic areas can be solved with purely physical measures (provision of bricks and mortar) or the spatial distribution of its households. Intervention strategies should involve a more integrated perspective of action, capable to act also at the level of the structural problems of truancy, unemployment, anti-social behavioral, crime, among other problems that require creative, diversified and sustained responses over time.

It has already been said that people are not things we can put into drawers (Guerra, 1994), a sentence that intends to criticize the standard solution of large blocks of public housing which ignores the particular needs and characteristics of the inhabitants. In fact, this case study demonstrates that people should be treated more like trees with roots that require special methods and precautions to be transplanted among areas (such as in choosing the time of year or the destination place).

Among the key lessons arising from this study, the following should be highlighted:

- Policies for urban deprived areas must have a cross-sectoral awareness in its design and implementation and must be sensitive to place and people.
- Policies for urban deprived areas must ensure an active involvement and participation of its recipients, so that officials can access to the knowledge resources of its inhabitants (their perception about the main problems and dynamics of the area, and the options to solve them), but also to ensure their co-responsibility in the projects and thus, their greater social relevance and sustainability over time.
- Resettlement should be seen as an action that requires a scope and content far broader than the mere fact of assigning houses. The more decisions are taken in a co-ordinate way the best resources can be targeted in a more efficient and effective way.
- The development of a more holistic and long-term vision for the deprived areas it is an essential step, as well as the development of strategies based on agreements emerged around the opportunities and limitations of transforming those areas. The nature of the challenges faced by the institutional cultures and practices are thus attitudinal, organizational and relational.

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#### *Sónia Alves*

Geographer, master in urban planning and PhD Student in sociology, waiting for the oral defence of the dissertation: *The Social, the Spatial and the Political in Poverty and in the Exclusion. Evaluation of urban regeneration initiatives in urban deprived areas in Oporto city.*

#### *Prof. Flávio Nunes*

All my research so far has to do with Human Geography as a main field of multidisciplinary knowledge for an integrated comprehension of territorial dynamics. In this context, I have been developing all my research activities in trying to understand recent dynamics of territorial organization, as well as discussing the best solutions for territorial planning methods, ultimately aiming at providing the best welfare standards. With this in mind, my research has been trying to build bridges between geographical analysis and policies and instruments of territorial planning. In the area of territorial planning, my interests have been mainly directed at municipal/urban planning, strategic and territorial planning and at European regional policy. In this field of study, I have been working as a consultant for territorial planning private companies (urban planning and strategic plans). Also, I have been teaching in the degree of Geography and Planning at the University of Minho (namely in the subjects of Planning Theories and Methodologies, Urban Planning Theories, and Regional Development), and I have been cooperating with international organizations trying to promote a more balanced development for the European Union.