

A methodological instrument for urban design in small towns. An experience for the valorization of Belmonte, Portugal

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Keywords: urban values, landscape, methodological instrument, urban design and valorization

Topic: 3. Strategies, methodological proposals and designs

Abstract

With this paper it is intended to highlight the importance of defining a characterization methodology as an instrument for urban design in small towns, exalting the condition of knowing for the interpretation of urban values. This principle served as a basis for the approach to the Portuguese small town of Belmonte, following four research fronts: knowledge, identification and valorization, restructuring of the urban hierarchy, and rehabilitation of the public space and built environment.

For this purpose, a criterion for recording the elements was developed, allowing the construction of an interactive database - an essential tool to cross information and to interpret the conditions of interaction between the settlement and the landscape. Realizing the experimental nature of this methodological principle, it was possible to organize a proposal for an urban project, seeking to conceive new conditions for the population and the activities establishment in the urban environment of Belmonte.

1. Introduction

Through the report of the work developed by the *Centro de Estudos da Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto*¹ (CEFA-UP) Team in the Portuguese small town of Belmonte, it is intended to emphasize the importance of defining a methodological instrument for the recognition and selection of the local values, in order to sustain a conscious intervention and exalting the particular qualities of the agglomerate. The request posed by the Town Council to the CEFA-UP Team consisted in the definition of urban design instruments that would highlight the urban values of Belmonte, located in the central region of Portugal, on the border with Spain (Fig. 1).

The first concern of the Team was to understand the differentiating and unique existing elements, paying special attention to the necessary balance between them and their articulation, in order to reduce the possibilities of tension in the urban system. In addition to reading the integration of Belmonte in the enlarged territory, there was a need for recognition of the urban nucleus and registration of the characteristics of its building and its space of collective use (Fig. 2). This work of recognition, developed in the site, led to the identification and morphological analysis of the nucleus, evidencing the characterizing elements of urbanity in its various interrelationships. It seemed to the Team to be a crucial work for the establishment of intervention strategies that could accentuate values, correct dissonances, and fill in the absences that may come to light.

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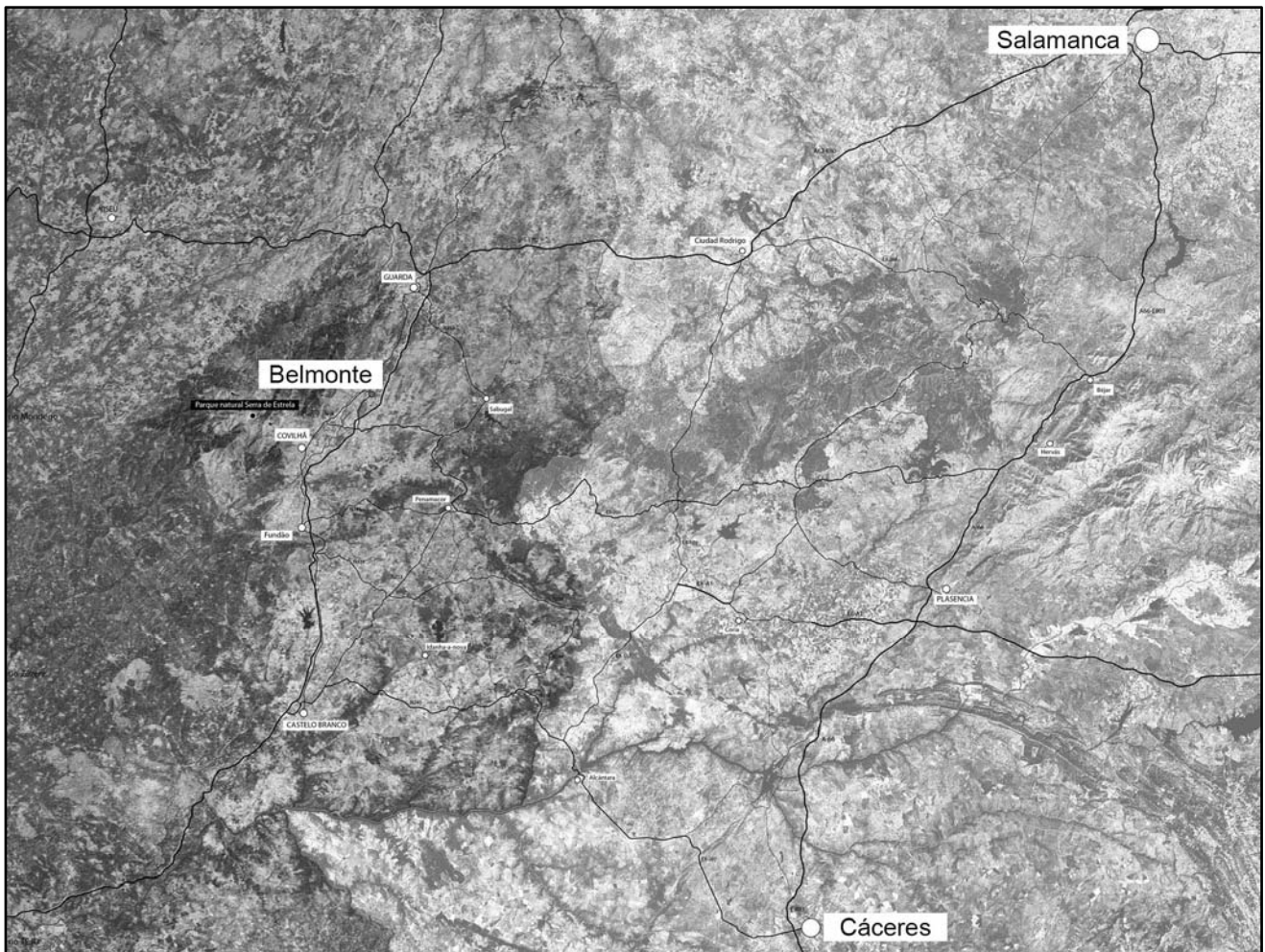


Fig. 1 – Territorial context – Source: photo of the authors



Fig. 2 – (Left) Aerial photograph of Belmonte, (Right) Orthophotomap of Belmonte – Source: (Left) portugalfotografiaaerea.blogspot.pt, (Right) photo of the authors

2. Principles of Identification

From the first approach to the site, the Team defined an Identification Grid. This preliminary tool proved to be crucial in the systematic enunciation of the first impressions aroused on the site, and that later resulted in the construction of the *Catalog of Urban, Cultural and Memory Values of Belmonte* – a base document that served as reference to organize the observation-registration process.

The study, from the Grid to the *Catalog*, was decisive in the possibility of knowing the case. The purpose of the study was to recognize and to highlight the local urban characteristics – considering physical, functional and experiential aspects -, in order to evaluate the potential of each identified element in the agglomerate, intending to promote revitalizing uses of the urban environment. During this observation-registration process, three categories of elements were defined, according to the physical, experiential, and the symbolic and memory dimensions.

In the physical dimension, the Team paid special attention to the attributes of the current and exceptional built heritage, the forms and materials, and the sets defined by them. In addition to the location of each built lot, the following information was recorded: the access situation, the current state of conservation and the functions its houses, the number of floors and the elements of composition (edges, socles, corners, cornices, spans and building materials used).

In the experiential dimension, the Team considered the collective use spaces, the toponymic signaling elements and the urban furniture, in order to elaborate a criterion to define the singularity and dissonance of those elements. The location of the administrative, social and cultural facilities was also identified, as well as commerce and services. The characterization of the experiential dimension elements led to the definition of a Classification Grid for the use of collective spaces and their importance in the Belmonte urban system. This Grid played an important role in the definition of a treatment program for the collective use spaces according to its specific type of use and its articulation with the landscape.

Fig. 3 – URCE – Source: photo of the authors

In the symbolic and the memory dimension, the Team studied the architectural elements with a relevant local impact, in order to recognize their role to the particularity of the urban environment, both by the symbolic character - as in the case of the Hebrew Synagogue -, and by the representation in the collective memory - as is the case of the Castle of Belmonte. This approach allowed to consider the interaction of Belmonte's determining factors, from local activities to social responses, considering the progressively stronger impact of tourism demand

on the urban structure - especially in the circulation spaces, commerce and services - and on the organization of traditional ways of life when faced with outside pressures.

For the systematic registration of the mentioned elements characterization sheets were defined, which generated two Registry Units: the *Unidade de Registo do Conjunto Edificado* (URCE)² (Fig. 3), and the *Unidade de Registo do Espaço Público* (UREP)³ (Fig. 4). These two Registration Units and their content were then organized into an Interactive Database – an essential tool which allowed the comparative study of the various elements registered according to the already defined values in the *Catalog*. In this way, the Team avoided the dismantling of the sectoral interventions that had been carried out in the process of valuing the urban environment of Belmonte.

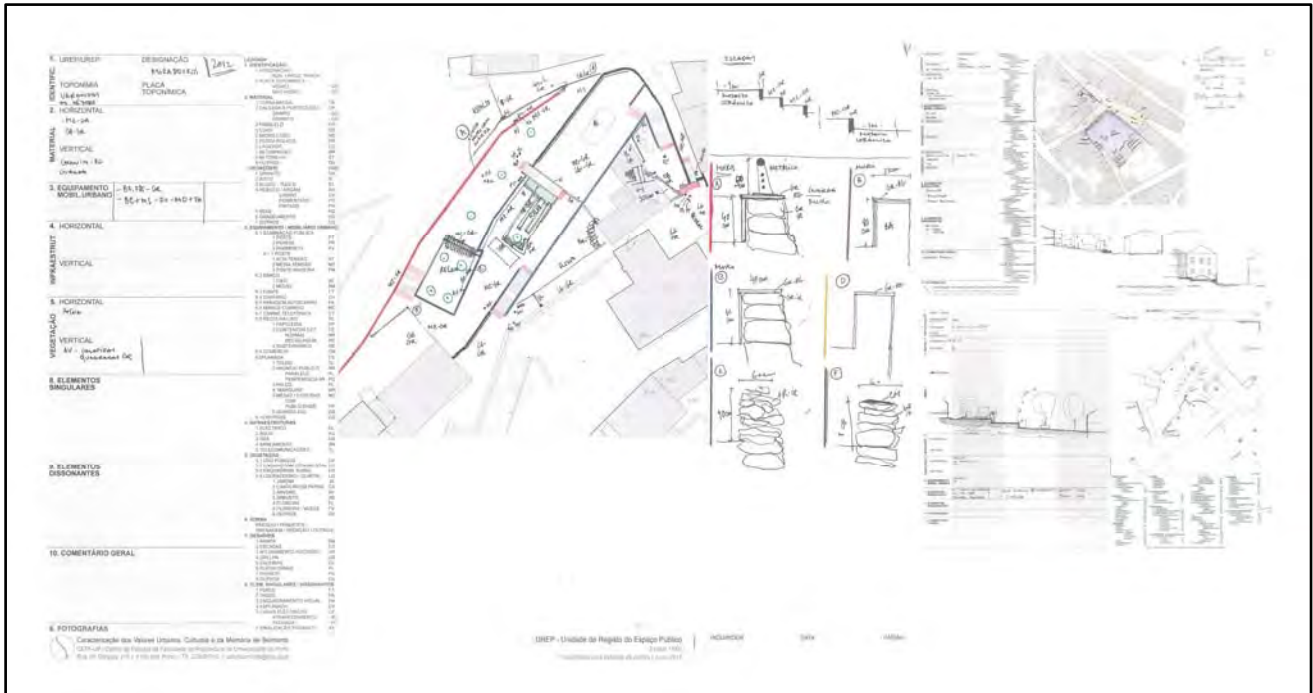


Fig. 4 – UREP – Source: photo of the authors

3. Principles of Valorization

From the need of knowledge to interpret the urban reality came the need to establish an Urban Development Program – resulting from the Team observation based on the *Catalog of Urban, Cultural and Memory Values of Belmonte* and on their disciplinary intentions. However, the definition of the essential values to be addressed had implied a preliminary study phase.

This study phase - which the Team called *Estudar para Conhecer Belmonte*⁴ - started with the identification and the characterization of articulation points between the agglomerate and the landscape, in order to support the idea that it is this relation that constitutes the particularities of Belmonte. On the one hand, because it promoted the historically determined relations of production - a determining factor for local specificity -, on the other hand, because the whole surrounding territory of the agglomerate constitutes the inhabitant's "backyard".

Thus, the landscape was identified as a determining value for urban development. According to this idea, the Team undertook a study of the panoramic points of view - or "viewpoints" - capable of articulating the various physical, experimental and symbolic and memory values identified. As a result, a scenic byway was defined (Fig. 5 and 6), allowing to relate the studied "viewpoints" according to a common thread, and to contain the entire agglomerate – on the west side, with a profile suited to the automobile circulation, and on the east side, to the pedestrian exclusive use.

² Registry Unit of the Built Set.

³ Registry Unit of the Public Space.

⁴ To Study to Know Belmonte.



Fig. 5 – Definition of the scenic byway – Source: photo of the authors

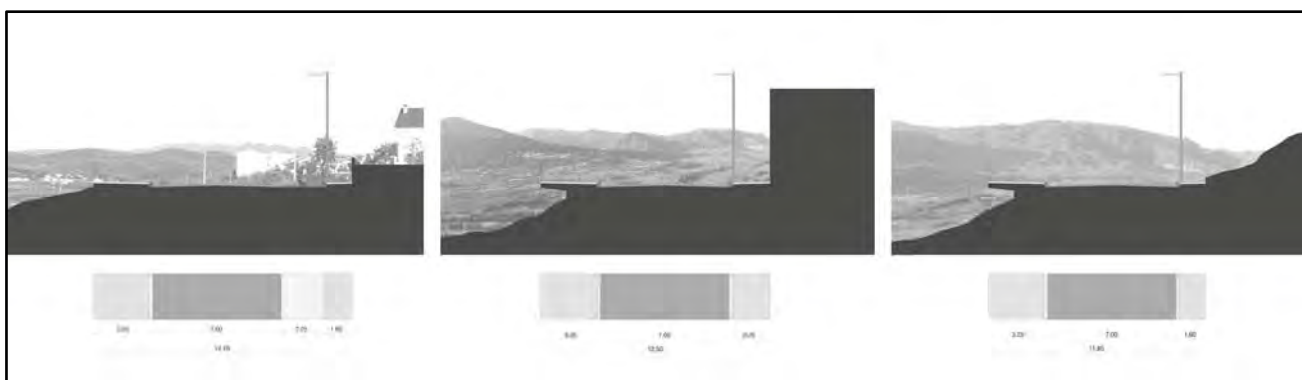


Fig. 6 – Urban insertion of the scenic byway – Source: photo of the authors

A second set of valorization elements was based on the definition of two “doors” of the agglomerate (Fig. 7) - one to the north (A), where it was intended to indicate the difference of treatment in the elements that characterize the urban environment, and one to the south (B), whose definition was based on the study of a significant area for the agglomerate, but without urban use at the moment. For the south “door”, seeking to integrate some of the existent cultural equipment, it was proposed the definition of a space of collective use with a cultural character - the *Praça da Cultura e das Artes*⁵ (Fig. 8). The proposal was based on the construction of an amphitheater, opened onto the landscape, which would function both for recreation and leisure and for the visitor’s reception. With the proposal was also intended the restructuring of the urban hierarchy, considering at the same time the resolution of the mechanical circulation.

Another considered dimension was the need to rehabilitate the collective use space occupation. In this sense, the Team proceeded to the definition of criteria that would allow to stabilize the occupation of the circulation spaces - which, because of difficulty in understanding the value they constitute as a system were indiscriminately occupied. Still, within the treatment of the collective use space, and in order to stabilize its occupation by external elements to the built, fixed elements were defined, whose location in support of existing activities in the building was studied case by case (Fig. 9).

For example, for the spaces commonly used for fairs and markets, an occupation criterion was established, and elements of urban furniture were designed, seeking to guarantee some formal unity, both in disposition logics and in the fixed elements (Fig. 10).

In order to achieve these Principles of Valorization and intending to give them a sense of unity, it was considered the need to define an *Área de Reabilitação Urbana* (ARU)⁶. The main objective was to concentrate social and urban intervention policies, in order to guarantee an integrated rehabilitation of the urban area that constitutes the central and most representative core of the agglomerate, exalting the already defined values.

Thus, the Team argued that delimitation of this ARU would allow the maintenance and integration of future rehabilitation actions, promoting the participation of private individuals, taking advantage of fiscal counterparts, and establishing a favorable situation for an integrated rehabilitation of Belmonte. This position was based on

⁵ Square of Culture and Arts.

⁶ Area of Urban Rehabilitation.

the understanding of heritage, environmental and symbolic values as factors of identity, differentiation and urban competitiveness, also as promoters of the environmental, cultural, social and economic sustainability of the urban environment.

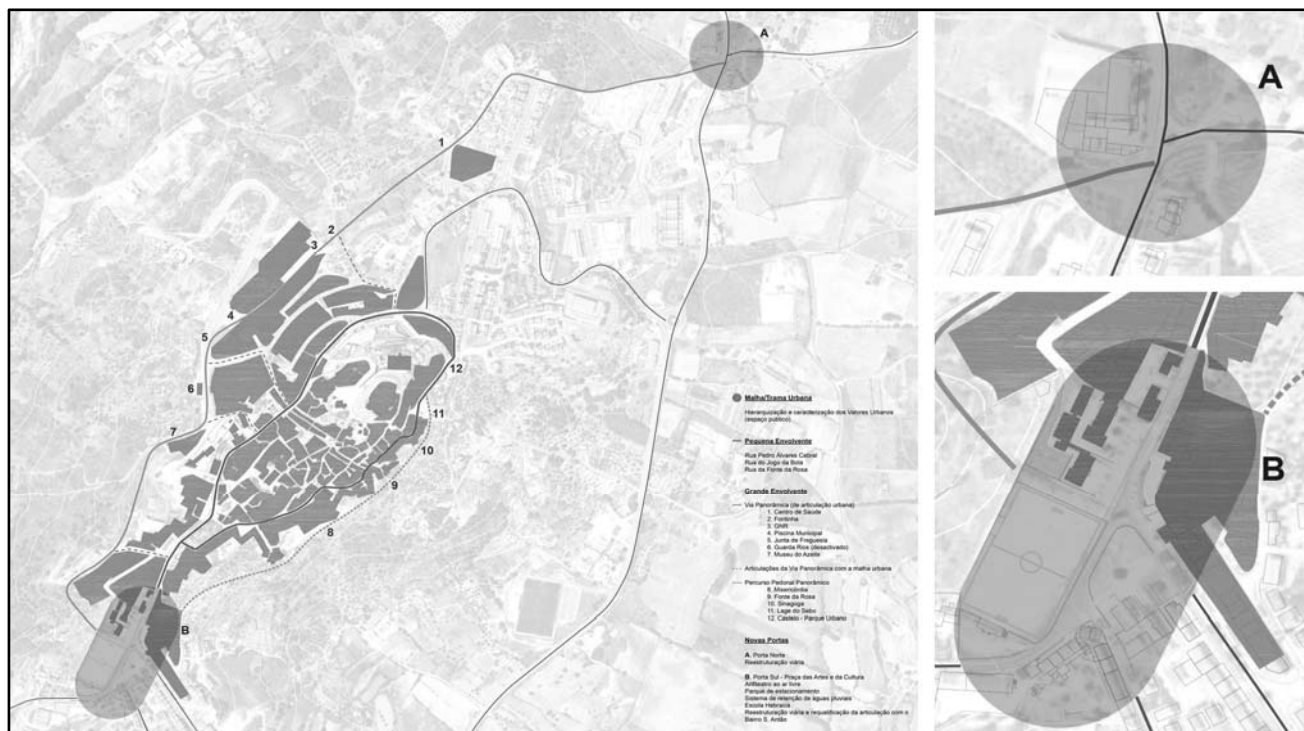


Fig. 7 – The new doors of Belmonte, Synthesis Plan – Source: photo of the authors

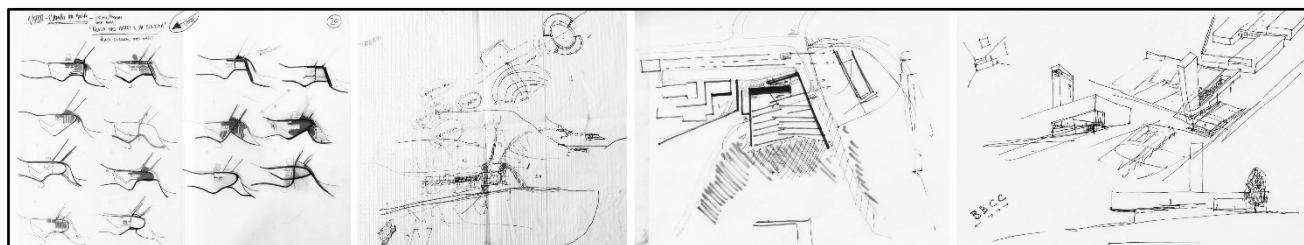


Fig. 8 – Praça da Cultura e das Artes – Source: photo of the authors



Fig. 9 – Proposal for the outdoor areas – Source: photo of the authors



Fig. 10 – Study and proposal for spaces used for fairs and markets – Source: photo of the authors

4. Principles of Intervention

With the definition of the Urban Development Program based on the three above-mentioned dimensions - articulation with the landscape, restructuring the urban hierarchy and rehabilitating the collective use space -, the Team found that it had reached the essential question concerning the valorization process of Belmonte: the importance of local characteristics and their relations, which together define the particular identity and value of the agglomerate.

At a first moment, strategic guidelines were drawn up to highlight the importance of Belmonte's excellence and particularity, which was reflected in the strengthening of the social role of local institutions and associations and the quality of collective use spaces. Thus, intervention measures on the cultural and service supply were increased, in particular by directing the search for the discovery of the proper values of the urban area and its relevant territory. An example of such measures would be the articulation of the existent Roman monuments with the *castrum*, nowadays referenced by the presence of a medieval castle - later transformed into a residential part of the Cabral family⁷.

In this sense, the Team sought to elaborate projects based on the Urban Development Program, which, considering the existence of the urban palimpsest, would exalt the local components of the topographic, built and human characteristics of the place and the previously identified values. The design was thus a process that allowed the combination of three elements: 1. the imagined form, that allows to put the technical knowledge to the service of the place; 2. the actual use, the conditions of the recipient of the intervention; 3. the final result, differentiator and exalter of the specificity that arises from that palimpsest.

Initially, a central core was delimited – an area with great population concentration, in which the five existing museums are located, as well as some of the most significant monumental buildings. For this central core, a hierarchy of the circulation space structure was defined, according to its importance for the agglomerate and its meaning as a determinant element of the specificity of Belmonte (Fig. 11). In order to support the identification of the different types of collective use space and the intentions of the project, an abacus of treatment was defined. This abacus allowed to clarify the various levels of the structure of the public space, including the identity of each type of space and its importance in the agglomerate.

The resulting design had four models: three standard profiles for the three types of identified circulation - significant, non-significant and pedestrian (Fig. 12) -; and a fourth model, which resulted in the individualized treatment of exceptional spaces – small inner spaces, or *patios*, resulting from an intensive parcellation of the lots, which both function as spaces of permanence as for access to the residences. These inner spaces are undoubtedly one of the fundamental particularities in the definition of the urban character of Belmonte, reason why the Team worked on a proper design for each of these places (Fig. 13).

⁷ To this important family belonged Pedro Álvares Cabral (1467-1520), the Portuguese navigator to whom the discovery of Brazil is attributed.

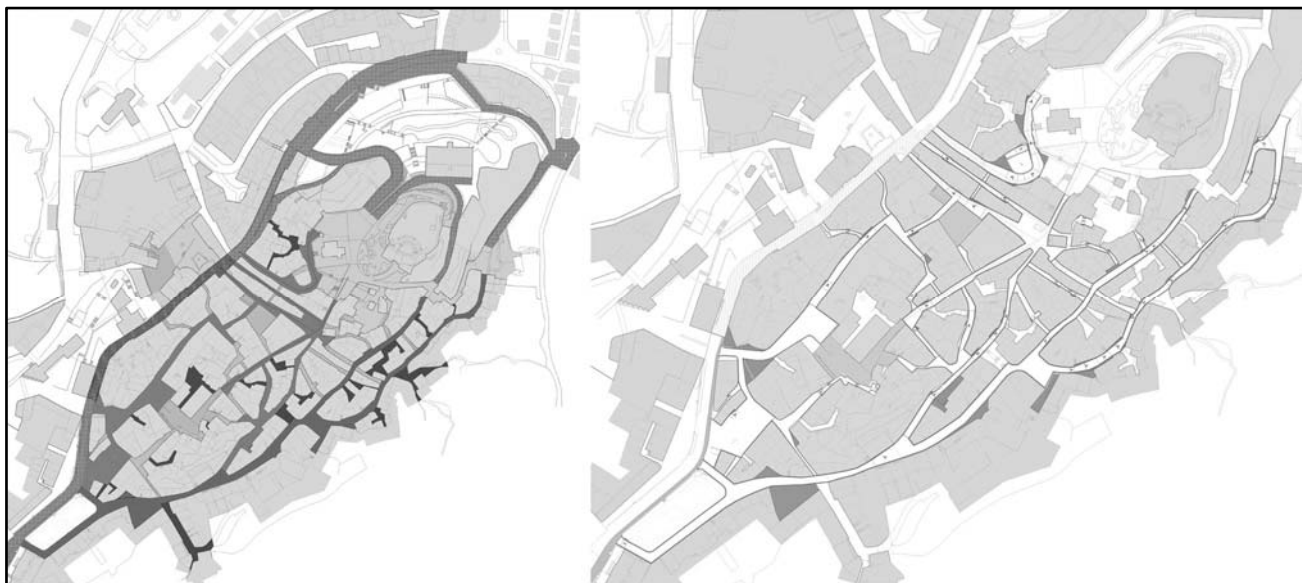


Fig. 11 – Definition of circulation space hierarchy – Source: photo of the authors

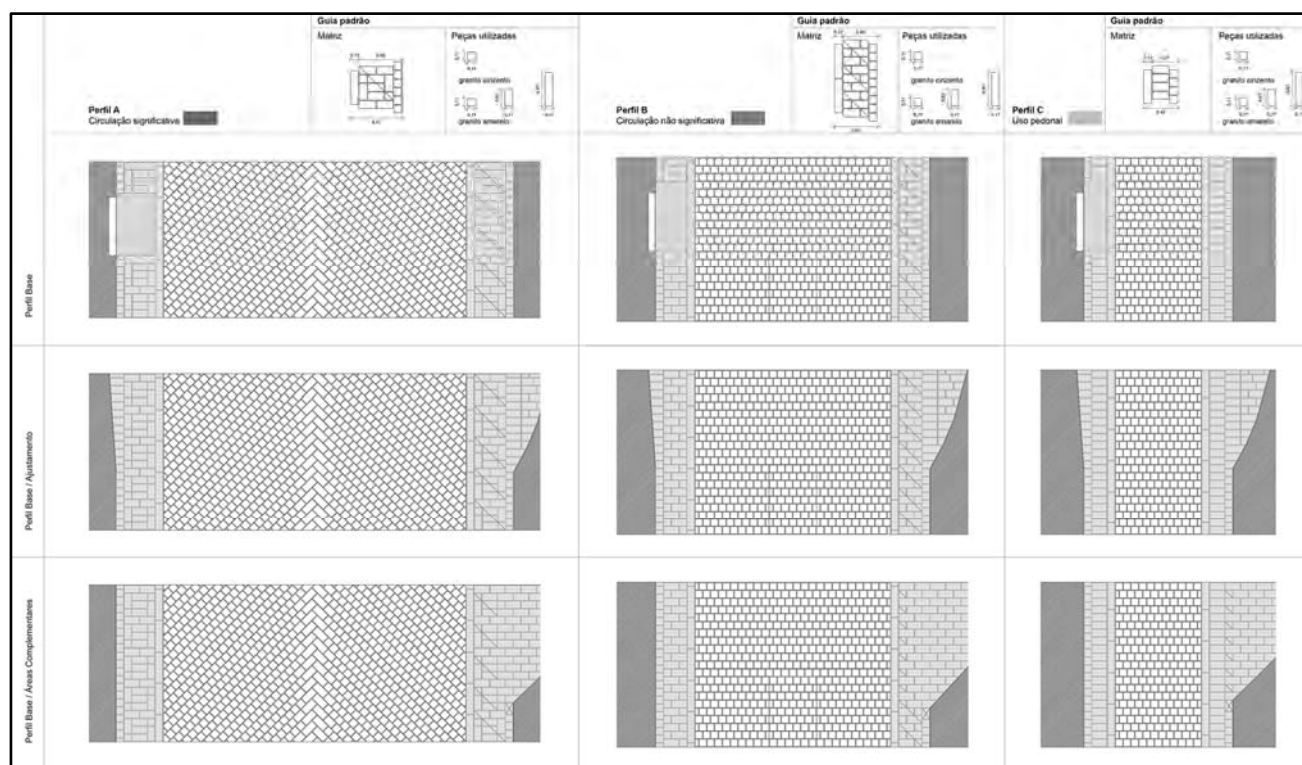


Fig. 12 – Abacus of treatment for collective use space – Source: photo of the authors



Fig. 13 – Proposal for an inner space – Source: photo of the authors

Conclusions

The CEFA-UP Team, at the request of the Belmonte Town Council, had the opportunity to develop an experimental methodology to know and intervene in the small town of Belmonte. Starting from the characterization and identification of the elements that constitute the agglomerate, the Team sought to interpret the urban hierarchy in order to value the urban environment. The methodology consisted of characterizing each element of the urban environment, that is, the buildings, the space of collective use and the experiences, in order to identify and to understand the urban hierarchy and how it responds to the new requests posed by the contemporary circumstance. It is thus possible, by crossing information from the various elements recognized, to interpret the conditions of interaction between the agglomerate and the landscape.

Following these methodological procedures, the Team was able to develop a proposal that would reorganize the urban system in a process of qualification of a new hierarchy - conditioned by the need to establish paths of enjoyment for the visitor, which exalt the own values of the agglomerate, while at the same time requalifying the spaces of being of an intimate character of the local inhabitants. The final result, which was intended to be presented with this text, was assumed by the Belmonte Town Council as an element of a policy of qualification of the urban environment.

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