

# Inventing a Common Home: An Experiment in the Ave Valley



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[...] there is no territory without an imagining of the territory. The territory may be expressed in statistical terms [...] but it cannot be reduced to the quantitative. As a project, the territory is semanticized. It is 'discoursable'. It bears a name. (Corboz 1983).

There cannot be a social spatial project without the imagining of landscape. There cannot be an imagining of landscape without there being a discussion about it. (Dehaene et al. 2014, p. 9).

## Introduction

'Territory: a Common Home' is the name of a research project aiming to trigger public awareness and debate on the territory of the Ave Valley (NW of Portugal) and to stimulate the collective invention of a shared imaginary of this region.

The Ave Valley is covered by an extensive diffuse settlement that finds its roots in ancient times (Sampaio 1892–98; Ribeiro 1945). In 1762, the whole region was already described as a 'continuous city' (Castro 1762, 48), and since then its occupation has been continuously and progressively intensified, always following the same pattern, even though the last decades of the 20th century witnessed a faster and sudden growth. Today, the region presents a complex and promiscuous organization that defies all canonical urban models and traditional dichotomies, being often pointed out as unintelligible and chaotic.

Here, spatial planning practices and urban design interventions seem to have little positive effects. This cannot be justified by the technical quality of the involved actors, nor by the characteristics of the urban structure in itself. We argue

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**Fig. 1** The diffuse urbanisation of Ave Valley. Photo of an area of V.N. Famalicão. *Photo* Nuno Travasso

that, to a great extent, it is due to a misapprehension of this territory's own logics (Portas 1986) that seems to persist despite decades of research.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, shared perceptions of what this territory is, and shared visions of what it should be, seem to be lacking. The need is for the creation of 'conceptions of place and territory' able to mobilize, guide and coordinate the interventions of the numerous actors involved in the urbanisation process. And if we want such imaginary of the territory to be widely shared and, in this way, to actively shape the urban space, then it must arise from a broad, open and continuous debate.

The aim of 'Territory: a Common Home' was to stimulate and participate in such collective process (Fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup>In Portugal, the Ave Valley has been the main case-study for a trans-disciplinary research on diffuse urbanisation that has been conducted since 1982, accompanying the international debate on this topic. After the first years seeking an extensive description of this territory's urban pattern, and the understanding of its physical, social and economic structure, its functioning logics, its history and growth (cf. Magalhães 1984; Marques 1985; Portas 1986; Domingues 1986; Sá 1986; among others), more recent research has shifted towards a closer and more detailed view, mainly in the field of urban morphology, analysing urbanisation processes, and proposing new ways of reading urban space (cf. Portas et al. 2003, 2011; Domingues 2009; Sucena 2010; Calix 2013; Labastida 2013).

## The Need for a New Imaginary of the ‘Continuous City’

Territory is a social and political artefact in constant mutation: a product of the continuous assemblage of collectively produced actions, discourses, debates, narratives and imageries that grant reality its meaning(s). ‘Reality’, as well as ‘space’, do not exist by themselves. ‘Space’ is a subjective mental construct resulting from the interpretation of the perceived physical domain that provides it meanings to which we can relate. This interpretation is dictated by socially constructed protocols, lifestyles, beliefs and prejudices. It is equally determined by the relation each of us establishes with it—through use, routine, sense of belonging, social interactions, memories, etc.—which is, to a great extent, influenced by the techno-social apparatus that mediate our experience—glasses, car, TV, mobile, GPS, etc.—as well as by visual, social and symbolic images of such space, to which we have been previously exposed. We do not inhabit physical matter in itself: we inhabit representations.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, to act upon space in order to make it more intelligible, implies not only intervening directly on the physical realm, but also working on the multiple factors that produce its meanings (Sievverts 1997; Petrin 2008).

In the Ave Valley region, representations are weak. There is no clear political identity of the region, no coincidence between the readings different actors make of the territory in which they live and operate, no shared goals or shared visions for its future.

Both in public and in academic forums, discourses on territory—its analysis, evaluation, interventions and regulation—are essentially guided by normative models (Choay 1980) which clearly oppose extensive urbanisation (Dehaene 2013). As a result, representations of the ‘diffuse city’ (Indovina 1990) seem to be absent, or based on negative identities of what this territory ‘is not’ (Domingues 2008).

Such weakness becomes clear in the daily procedures of the urbanisation process. The negotiation between different actors—and especially the guidance and coordination of the various development projects that public administration is expected to assure—becomes extremely difficult, as there is no common ground on which to base a discussion.<sup>3</sup> The only linkage between distinct actions of urban transformation is the one provided by generic national regulations and abstract quantitative municipal masterplans with limited adhesion to local contexts, both derived to a great extent from urban models alien to the diffuse urbanisation. The result is the proliferation of incoherences, discontinuities and disfunctionalities.

The ‘continuous city’ of the Ave Valley needs new representations: shared imageries and narratives able to reveal its own logics—how its components relate to each other, how they derive from the existing biophysical structures, from the

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<sup>2</sup>About the mechanisms of perception of space and meaning production, cf. Bollnow (1963), Lynch (1960), Lefebvre (1974), Certeau (1980), and Latour (2005), among others.

<sup>3</sup>This conclusion stands on an on-going Ph.D. research, by the author of this paper, based on systematic analysis of licensing processes of private urban developments in the municipality of V.N. Famalicão (Ave Valley region), complemented with interviews to some of the main stakeholders involved.

history of the area, from the ways of living and producing of its inhabitants—and to offer new meanings to this territory, making it more intelligible (Sieverts 1997).

According to Patsy Healey, the need is for the creation of new “conceptions of place which have the power to mobilise, co-ordinate and inspire” the actions of the various actors (2002, 17). Such ‘conceptions of place’ cannot be based on quantitative analysis. They are products of imagination, they offer interpretations—which are never neutral—and, at the same time, they develop visions of desired futures. In this way, they frame a ‘project’ that will guide future actions, fostering a new shared culture of intervention, which is not founded on models alien to this territory; on the contrary, it derives from the territory itself.

## A Collective Construct

In order to actively shape urban space, new imaginaries of the territory must be widely shared by its inhabitants and by all the actors involved in the urbanisation process, so that they can steer the different urban interventions and give them coherence and legitimacy. In this sense, such representations cannot be either the result of technical decisions nor imposed by political power: they must arise from a broad debate involving all willing citizens and institutions. The aim is not the construction of any kind of single fixed identity, which would always be too narrow, oppressive and incapable of evolving. On the contrary, the goal is to develop representations open to multiple possible interpretations, that foster “a shared practice of noticing place qualities” (Healey 2002, p. 19)—a rich imaginary, able to support the relationship inhabitants have with their territory and cultivate their sense of belonging, as well as becoming a tool for mediation and argumentative reasoning among different actors.

This collective construct becomes even more relevant in a moment when modern planning tradition—based on the principles of predictability and common good—has shown itself to be incapable of adapting to the uncertainty of urbanisation processes and to the diversity and complexity of legit views, needs, and interests present in contemporary society. In this way, public authorities are now losing both the ability and the authority to decide and design by themselves how future urban space should be. They are also losing the means to directly transform physical space on a broad scale, due to the gradual reduction of the welfare state.

Today, the daily shaping of the territory is increasingly seen as a collective action. New collaborative planning practices emerge, seeking to involve multiple actors in the decision-making processes. These are always spaces of conflict and discussion. However, they cannot be seen as a mere bargaining between the individual interests of a limited number of stakeholders; nor can they be expected to build general consensus between all the actors. As argued by Chantall Mouffe (2000), a comprehensive consensus without exclusion is not possible—conflict will always be present in a pluralist society, it is a fundamental feature of ‘the political’, a positive force to be managed, not eliminated.

Therefore, the aim is to establish a broad, inclusive and meaningful debate where citizens and institutions actively engage in a discussion about their territories—

about their mutual problems, the things they share, their views on what is common to them and on their ways of being together—seeking to reach compromises or limited and contingent consensus.

But, who are ‘they’?, what are the issues at stake?, in what terms and with what legitimacy can they be discussed? Today, these are very difficult questions.

In order for a serious debate to be possible, first it is necessary to compose a common arena (Latour 2005), which implies the establishment of a shared language, ‘matters of concern’ to be discussed, and a legit assembly. To a certain extent, this common arena can be assembled by the means of a long, continuous and open dialogue, where no decision is at stake, and where actors freely explore the complexity of the matters and exchange their distinct views in order to discover new shared readings (Mäntysalo et al. 2011). The goal is not to reach any conclusion, but to create the conditions for the discussions that will follow.<sup>4</sup>

During such a continuous interaction between actors, ‘exchange languages’ are created by sedimentation, enabling the communication between people with different backgrounds and different ‘cultures of meaning and value’ (Mäntysalo et al. 2011). Also, this dialogue allows the main issues to emerge, setting a minimum agreement on what are the issues that must be collectively discussed and under what frames of reference. Finally, creating a public debate on these matters will gather around it a group of actors—the ones who claim to have interests on the issues at stake, the ones who feel they deserve to have a say on them, the ones who feel they belong to that territory and are willing to participate. And if this dialogue is open, inclusive and transparent enough, held in various forums and able to summon different citizens and institutions, one can expect it to slowly stabilize a group of actors (even if maintaining it always open to new arrivals is essential) that will gain a certain political identity and recognized legitimacy.

The collective construction of the territorial representations is the construction of the territory itself as a political object and as a common domain. It is also the construction of the collective gathered around the matters under discussion, composed by those who find in the imaginary of their territory a shared platform for negotiating their own identity, interests, goals and representation. The collective imagining of a territory is the invention of a ‘common home’.

## The Project ‘Territory: A Common Home’

The aim of the project ‘Territory: a Common Home’ was to participate and encourage such collective construction process.

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<sup>4</sup>Mäntysalo et al. (2011, 264) insist in the difference between the notion of ‘dialogue’—as a means to explore complex issues and collectively discover new views—and the notion of ‘discussion’—in which different views are defended, aiming to reach a decision.



**Fig. 2** The exhibition ‘Territory: a Common Home’. Photo of the central room where the two parallel analyses and the synthesis map were displayed. *Photo Alexandre Delmar*

This project resulted from a partnership between the municipality of V.N. Famalicão—located in the Ave Valley region—and the research group Territory Dynamics and Morphologies of the Centre for Studies in Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Porto<sup>5</sup>; and it had as a central element the design of an exhibition that was held in Casa do Território, destined to the broad public. The main goal was to make the ‘continuous city’ of the Ave Valley public (Dehaene et al. 2014): to draw public attention to it, to explore its own logics, to stimulate the creation of shared imaginaries around it, to compose it as a political object and to promote a broad debate on this territory (Fig. 2).

### *Describing the ‘Continuous City’*

The exhibition<sup>6</sup> started with an introductory section presenting the project’s main ideas and goals, and displaying a possible representation of Famalicão’s landscape: a cloud of photos, concepts and links, highlighting the hypertextual nature of both the production and the perception of this territory (Corboz 2000; Kolb 2008). Right from the beginning, it was clear that no single, unitary or neutral image was possible.

<sup>5</sup>The project was coordinated by Álvaro Domingues and Nuno Travasso.

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed and comprehensive presentation of this exhibition, see Domingues and Travasso (2015).

The next section proposed an analytical reading of this territory. First, it presented the ‘continuous city’ as a legit urban model, with its own history, heritage, logics and values. Following, two parallel analyses were displayed.

The first one was focused on urban morphology, seeking to disclose the logics underlying the complex ensemble of structures, typologies and forms that compose this landscape, by dissecting an area of the territory and presenting it in six different thematic layers.

The second analysis aimed to illustrate the complex network of procedures, regulations, actions, scales of reference, actors, conflicts, etc., that drive the daily shaping of the territory. This was done through four boxes where four ‘stories of the territory’ were told. These ‘stories’ explored, spatialized and framed some matters directly linked to debates that had recently drawn public attention, mobilizing opposite interests and opinions. In this way, the territory was composed and presented as a political object.

At the end of the room, a  $6 \times 2$  m map proposed a synthesis of the two analysis by overlapping a representation of the morphological structures of this territory, and an extensive spatialized and quantified representation of some of the processes taking place on that same territory: one very small step towards a more intelligible reading of the Ave Valley without denying any of its complexity.

Finally, the ‘territory postcards’—with one image and one text each—offered fifty additional points-of-view on this territory for the visitors to choose and take home with them. Besides emphasizing, once again, that no single closed narrative is possible, they attempted to counter the most common views on the Ave Valley’s landscape, that consider it as chaotic, anonymous, or simply non-existent.<sup>7</sup> By presenting this landscape through postcards, we tried to bring it to the aesthetic domain—as proposed by Sieverts (1997)—and to foster a more subjective and affective relation between citizens and their territory.

### *Feeding a Continuous Dialogue*

The intention of the presented analysis was not to set any complete or closed narrative, but to offer new views and feed a collective debate on this territory. The third and last section of the exhibition was dedicated to this collective construction process.

It was a space of production: here everyone was invited to sit down, talk, discuss, write, draw, paint, cut, paste, map, represent what this territory is to themselves and what they think it ought to be. The contributions were then attached to the free panels surrounding the room that thus gradually became an extension of

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<sup>7</sup>During one of the actions conducted in a local school as part of this research project, a student exclaimed “Are you going to talk about landscape? We don’t have such a thing here.” In fact, landscapes are repeatedly presented as something only related to extraordinary places.





**Fig. 3** Critical mapping workshop. Workshop with a group of civil servants of the spatial planning division of the Municipality of V.N. Famalicão. *Photo Alexandre Delmar*

the exhibition where different views and projects for the ‘continuous city’ were displayed—an ‘open work’ (Eco 1962), just like the territory itself.

A number of initiatives sought to further stimulate the process by calling and involving a broader public in the dialogue. Once a month, the cycle ‘Walks and Talks’ offered a thematic guided tour through the territory—one for each of the four ‘stories of the territory’—followed by a debate with major local stakeholders on that same matter. Discussion and critical mapping workshops were also held with different groups of municipal civil servants, students, local associations and residents. Here, each participant’s daily practices, perceptions, memories and claims were mapped as a trigger to discuss and represent the values, conflicts, needs and expectations present in the territory.<sup>8</sup>

The final action of the project was a public conference bringing together a number of leading national authors from different fields—architects, urban planners, geographers, an economist, a historian, a lawyer, politicians, photographers, and a writer<sup>9</sup>—for a day of intense discussion around three main questions: how to

<sup>8</sup>This description corresponds mainly to the workshops held with residents. Both the procedures and intentions of the workshops differed slightly depending on the groups, even if all of them had as a final goal the production of a critical representation of the territory of Famalicão.

<sup>9</sup>Debates and presentations by: José Pacheco Pereira, Gonçalo M. Tavares, Álvaro Domingues, João Ferrão, António Figueiredo, Francisca Magalhães, Eduardo Brito, Pablo Gallego Picard, Teresa Calix, Marta Labastida, Helena Amaro and Nuno Travasso.



represent this ‘continuous city’; how to plan and regulate it; how it might be imagined and invented.

The project did not stop here. All the results of these initiatives were recorded and will now be published, returning them to the people who produced them, as a way of feeding and further stimulating the dialogue. This publication will be the first issue of a new periodical to be published by the municipality, whose mission will be to register the different moments of this continuous collective construction. And the next cycle has already begun: Casa do Território’s new exhibitions are following a similar structure, maintaining the thematic guided tours and the final conference.

Hence the project continues. But now it is no longer a project of an external research centre: it is definitely a project of the municipality and its citizens, and it will continue to be so (Fig. 3).

## **One More Step for the Collective Invention of a ‘Common Home’**

The project ‘Territory: a Common Home’ was able to attract great public attention and numerous participants. It gathered a broad and diverse number of actors, mixing residents, academics, practitioners, artists, policy makers, local associations, developers and other stakeholders in an open and exploratory dialogue on this territory; a dialogue that was not predetermined by any specific agenda, project or schedule which could create false expectations or impel actors to only defend their own interests. It was a free dialogue aiming to bring a small contribution to the creation of new views on the Ave Valley and more understanding and trusting relationship between different actors, that could support the search for more adequate and operative governance and planning practices.

It was only one more small step. Not the beginning or the end of anything. It was only one more action amongst many other actions that compose this incessant dialogue. Its main aim was to keep the dialogue going, and to stimulate and to symbolise this continuous and collective process of inventing a ‘common home’.

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