

Small towns in a metropolitan context

Well-being narratives and quality of life imaginaries as promoters of local intervention

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Abstract

The article seeks to establish an interrelationship, still exploratory, between small Towns in a metropolitan context, their narratives and imaginaries associated, respectively, with perceptions of well-being and quality of life. It is assumed that small metropolitan towns benefit from the advantages offered by the metropolitan system, suggesting conditions of well-being and quality of life that position them advantageously as a choice for living. The study addresses interlinked small towns along the southern waterfront of the Tagus Estuary in the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Keywords

Small Towns, Well-being, Quality of Life, Narratives, Imaginaries, Lisbon Metropolitan Area

1 Introduction

This article emphasises an exploratory tone in addressing the role of small towns in the metropolis. As such, a review of the contemporary socio-cultural sphere is delved into here in terms of narratives and imaginaries which can be applied to the dimensions of well-being and quality of life in small metropolitan towns. As a case study, a riverside extension from Alcochete to Almada, Tagus Estuary, is proposed for the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, though it is not yet fully documented. Following the Introduction, the article is organised into three sections: Beyond Dichotomies (presenting our background and concepts), The Other Side (presenting our case study, methods, and materials), and One Step Forward, Sometimes Two Back, and the Next Ones (which includes a discussion and our future directions).

2 Beyond dichotomies

De Olde and Oosterlynk, referring to several authors, consider the paradox that “the urban-rural distinction is declared obsolete by various authors”, reflecting that “this conceptual pair still seems an indispensable category to understand the governance of urbanisation” (2022: 281).

One tends to locate small towns in rural areas, i.e., outside the metropolitan hinterland; thus, divide between rural and urban is underlined, which upholds rurality as an idealised way of life (de Olde and Oosterlynk, 2022) and possibly invokes nostalgic or picturesque imaginaries. The same happens with *suburbia*, as a social construct of *sprawl* (Fishman, 1987) or *cosmopolitan* (Sandercock, 1998) conceptualisations.

Metropolitan cores consist of urban systems, which are assembled and densified from the woven development of social and built fabrics throughout time (de Solà-Morales i Rubió, 1997; Dematteis, 1995; Font, 2021; Forman, 1995; Morgado, 2005). Some densities relate to the built or social environments, whereas others are more data-driven, such as through population or built footprints; “Densities, then, are contextual” (Keil, 2020: 1289).

In line with the landscape ecology approach, one could say that the metropolitan hinterland, or any given territory, is a *mosaic* (Forman, 1995) or a nuanced fabric of different parts that form the whole territory (Font et al., 1999; Morgado, 2012; Llop Torné et al., 2016).

The open-space system—as the provider of food, entertainment, and mobility, or as the first instrument of containing the urban sprawl—is seen as ever-more relevant in the context of climatic and humanitarian emergencies.

Three years ago, we recognised that a post-growth imaginary would offer much-needed direction in attempts to address worsening social and ecological problems in cities all over the world. (Savini et al., 2022a: xv)

From a perspective of increasing well-being and quality of life, Savini et al. (2022a) critically reposition urban debates in the face of present conjunctures. If the first perspective advocates for practices that would value actions which are not necessarily driven by the market economy nor necessarily by “greening” it, then a second perspective can undoubtedly point to the struggle arising from such options (Scanu et al., 2021).

2.1 Small Towns (with)in a metropolitan context

It can be said that the adjective ‘small’ may be redundant when the noun ‘town’ is used. However, it provides a distinction concerning a given surrounding. In such a view, small towns are *detachable* in a given territorial panorama, in a landscape. Demazière states that “Small towns are a slippery notion” (2022: 55).

While literature and policies consistently address *small- and medium-sized cities*, it is more difficult to find robust research on small towns. Marques da Costa (2017) highlights the subjective distinction between medium and intermedium; the first emphasises size, and the latter the role or hierarchical position within a system.

Such views result primarily from national and regional perspectives, mainly based on statistical–administrative and framework documents, usually from international organisations (e.g., EU, OECD, UN). From a national and regional perspective, metropolitan areas and large cities stand out in a statistical framework, pinpointed by smaller cities.

Therefore, the ESPON project TOWN, “a first major cross-national empirical project looking at towns across Europe” (Servillo et al., 2015: xiii), played a seminal role.

Defining a town is sought of to allow a “focus on places with a population between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants (for the most part)” (Servillo et al., 2015: 3), an endeavour which is supported by a three-tiered conceptual schema based on an ESPON 1.4.1 project (Öir et. al., 2006, cited by Servillo et al., 2015: 3): morphological perspective (urban settlement), administrative perspective (urban municipality), and functional perspective (socio-spatial system; functional inter-relations) (Idem, 2015: 3).

Conversely, Bański (2022) delves into a comprehensive review of the most relevant classifications and approaches surrounding the functional roles of small towns.

Small towns have specific social, economic and cultural features that distinguish them from medium-sized and large urban centres on the one hand, and rural areas on the other. They are a significant component in the settlement structures of regions that determine their polycentricity or monocentricity. (Bański, 2022: 6)

2.2 Narratives and Imaginaries

In the face of a mediatised world, which provides immersive experiences in networks of multiple realities, each person writes and plays the leading role in their own narrative. By narrating, they share imaginaries—idealised or creative constructions about particular places, events, and communities.

Presentation, representation, or exclusion before urban realities would be referred to by Sandercock in “The Power of History” (1998: 32), which exposed the conflict between an 'official' planning history and a contested one, inclusive of the so-described 'minorities' who tailored and inhabited American cities.

De Olde and Oosterlynck, and Beier discuss a divide between realities, questioning whether or not they are more symbolic and imaginary—thus, a social construct—than empirical realities, which are marked by heterogeneity, where labels rather than categories of the urban reside. De Olde and Oosterlynck apply the debate to Flanders (2022), whereas Beier's argument addresses a case in Morocco, surveying realities such as *slums*, and raising issues (or other dichotomies) such as the adjectives ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ (2022: 2–4). Is not a *charming little town in the countryside* a stereotype of more compelling and raw urban realities? Alternatively, *could small towns* also be «ordinary neighbourhoods» (Beier, 2022)?

However, identities multiply and express intersectional differences—geographical, cultural (also in the urban cultures), gendered, and racial. Therefore, it is not too surprising that the vital questions posed by Westwood and Williams (1997) arise yet again in a provisional epistemology of urban imaginaries (Lindner, Christoph and Meissner, 2019), addressing routes to possible urban futures (Savini, 2019; Savini et al., 2022b).

Therefore, to answer the question "why study urban imaginaries?" it is important to understand space as simultaneously material, conceptual, experienced, and practiced. Historically, this way of thinking about space is largely attributed to the so-called "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences. (Lindner, Christoph and Meissner, 2019: 1)

While narratives drive the expression of communities and their events in a particular place, over time (Morgado, forthcoming), imaginaries are called upon to be more operational in future transformation through urban planning and design.

One could claim that there is a conceptual continuity in the *post-growth* perspective, with the cultural schism from the modern unifying vision (Davoudi, 2022) that gave way to the sometimes divergent perspectives of postmodernity, as promoted by the authors of Critical Theory (Geuss, 2005).

Still, it seems that our collective is still stuck in a never-ending "Post" condition; here, the use of industrial cycles as a timeframe instead helps to advance the social-economic—and thus, the urban—shifts that have been imprinting different shades since the late 19th century.

2.3 Well-being and quality of life

In the same way that we may consider that the advent of agriculture enabled sedentarisation, planting the seed of the urban that today assumes global proportions, it may be said that hygienic concerns, with many other factors, provided the dawn of urbanism at the end of the 19th century.

However, our extended present reveals new levels that interrelate health and conceptions of the urban and its territories. The system of open spaces emerges as an immediate interface for action against threats—or opportunities—that mediate living spaces and their respective communities: the public realm (Madanipour, 2018).

Health has become a worldwide flagship with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though prior pandemics and public health crises have struck some areas of the globe. However, it has already enabled a wider span of health-related topics to be addressed in a preemptive way, originating from the more consistent address in the urban realm.

Under the United Nations remit, the WHO—the World Health Organisation—has played a vital role since it entered force in 1949, after preparations starting in 1946 (WHO, 1948). It is worth pointing out that its principles are up to date, even after almost seven decades; well-being is a cornerstone of health that is regarded worthy of being mentioned in the first bullet of its preamble.

WHO remains firmly committed to the principles set out in the preamble to the Constitution

- *Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. [...](WHO, 1948)*

A decade ago, *well-being* was a work-in-progress concept, inclusive of (1) quality of life (indicators: health status; work and life balance; social connections; civic engagement and governance; environmental quality; personal security; subjective well-being) and (2) material living conditions (indicators: income and wealth; jobs and earnings; housing; GDP). The interwoven links between human well-being and the sustainability of well-being over time (natural capital; economic capital; human capital; social capital) are made explicit in a diagram by Boarini (Fig. 3. OECD framework for measurement of well-being, European Regional Office for World Health Organization, 2012: 6).

In the cultural background, resources on psychopathology, such as anxiety, also contribute to different perceptions of well-being, most notably subjective well-being and its interconnection with quality of life (European Regional Office for World Health Organization, 2012: 8,9).

Although much has been written and debated because of COVID-19, the topic of Health and Cities is not new, as demonstrated by research groups and projects. The WHO Healthy Cities (WHO, n.d.) stands out as one of the main promoters of research and knowledge.

The recent crisis seems to have also opened the doors to the discussion on mental illness. However, in the field of research on cities, there is still some deficit of knowledge in this respect. If, on the one hand, overcoming the stigma associated with mental illness is positive, on the other hand relegating such a crucial health issue to some aspects related to anxiety or exhaustion is far from the full potential that design and – not only at the level of “urban green spaces” therapeutic gardens design – and addressing urban intervention can have (Cunha et al., 2021; Louro et al., 2021).

It is important to highlight that well-being and quality of life are cross-cutting topics that link health, and socio-economic aspects, including childhood health, education, and access to health care, which mature and well-fare societies offer (Guida and Carpentieri, 2021).

3 The *Other Side*

The metropolitan territory of Lisbon radiates from a protected and fertile locus—the Tagus Estuary. One of the most extensive in Europe, it has nuanced shapes, ranging from geomorphology to the land and customs of the people who found their roots there. Orlando Ribeiro (2021 First published in 1945) coined it the *Inland Sea*, referring to it as a Mediterranean world hidden from the Atlantic fronts that opened up to the Portuguese discoveries. Through its channel, the peoples who conquered these lands for their commercial interests came and went, building a constellation of riverside settlements. These peoples and their settlements specialised in uses and services to the city that is now the capital of a country.

To the north, on the Lisbon Peninsula (Municipalities are Amadora, Cascais, Lisboa, Loures, Mafra, Odivelas, Oeiras, Sintra, Vila Franca de Xira) —with its firm margins and efficient maritime port—a continuous and increasingly dense urbanisation front developed, in buildings, population, and services.

To the south, on the Setúbal Peninsula (Municipalities are Alcochete, Almada, Barreiro, Moita, Montijo, Palmela, Seixal, Sesimbra, Setúbal) —with extensive marshy, inter-tidal margins—settlements were constrained by the water in the cut of urbanisation. The access routes, through the un-silted channels, held a river crossing of comings and goings. On this riverfront, urbanisation is discontinuous and subsidiary to the centralities that came to be located in Lisbon first.

Because Lisbon was the predominant viewpoint, it became known as the *Other Side*, i.e., on the other side of the river. Maria Alfreda Cruz (1973) is still a primary reference for understanding the territorial development of the Peninsula de Setúbal, informing readers on the location and evolution of the linear sequence of urban nodes in the southern embankment (Morgado, 2005).

The two main bridges—April 25th bridge, built 1963, and Vasco da Gama, the occasion of Expo'98 —intensified a metropolisation based on individual transport, which the public transport network, operating in an integrated manner at metropolitan level, has only recently timidly managed to counteract (AML, 2018). These two moments opened the door to suburbanisation, adding large areas of housing without much functional diversity to Almada and later, through speculation, to Alcochete.

However, the mandatory existence of municipal master plans in all municipalities and the development of an embryonic metropolitan identity—more mature in the present day—brought about the possibility of financing public works in the 1990s. Infrastructures and public facilities laid the foundations for a tenuous network of school and health facilities and infrastructures (mainly motorways) and, with the emergence of the qualified public space in the current Parques das Nações (former exhibition precinct of Expo'98), a desire was launched—"we want the same in our municipality".

Public space—green, blue (or any other colour)—has become crucial in urban life. It has freed itself from obstacles, introduced soft and active mobilities into its programme, and integrated various functions that ensure its liveability and inclusive permanence in spaces. This condition is evident in the small riverside towns of the South Bank, today better served by surface metro and train services and cultural and environmental spaces of recognised interest. The waterfront, from East to West, led by riverside municipal-capital small towns Alcochete, Montijo, Moita, Barreiro, and Almada, has been extensively intervened through qualification and activation of the public realm (see Figures. 1 and 2). Albeit requiring deeper analyses, a general overview of the urban development and population over the last decade may also be seen (Table. 1)

Currently, most of the Lisbon metropolitan area municipalities are recognised nationally or internationally for their participation in international networks related to urban planning, and the design and innovative interventions in their space—from urban regeneration to climate emergency preparedness; from the containment of urban perimeters to participative experimentation.

3.1 Methods and Materials

So far, the present work has progressed based on literature review, review of urban policies and plans, interviews with the heads of municipal planning departments, data and spatial analysis, and field visits. Previous research on the Lisbon metropolitan area is a starting point, especially regarding available documentation, data, and learned techniques. The ESPON TOWN perspectives will be considered (Morphological (Urban settlement), Administrative (Urban municipality), and Functional (socio-spatial system, functional inter-relations) (Servillo et al., 2015: 3); however, they will be directed to the narratives of well-being and the imaginaries of quality of life.



Figure 1. Trafaria, traditional fishing boats, view over the channel of Tejo, Almada Municipality (a) Grain silos and cranes, Lisbon Port Authority (b) Oeiras and Lisbon. Source: Author, Study Trip, 5 May 2022.

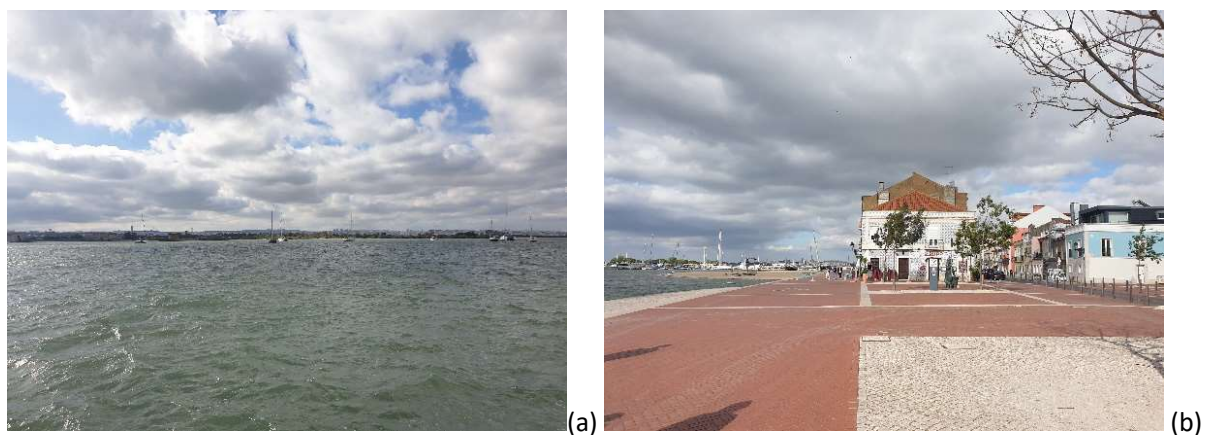
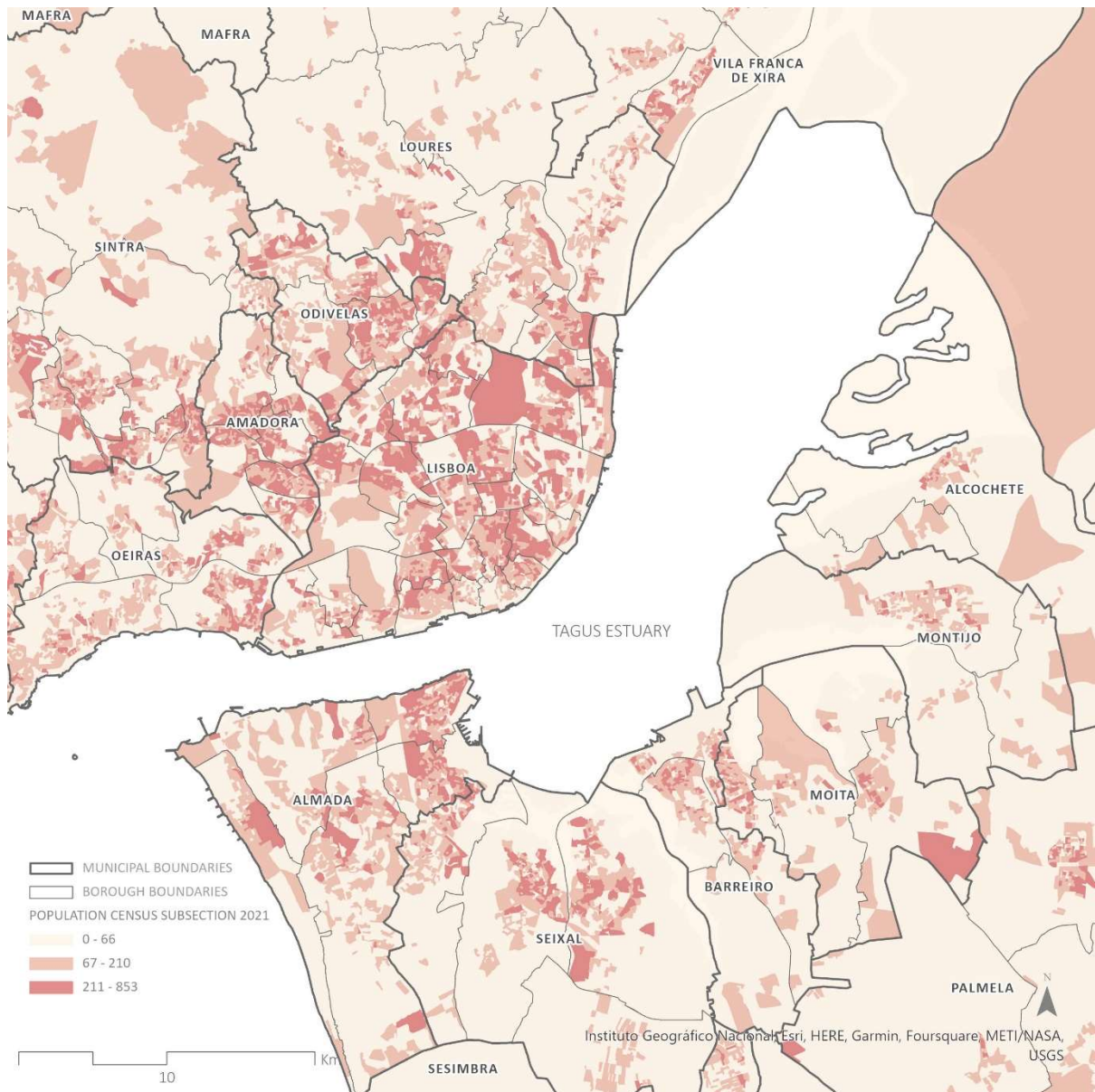
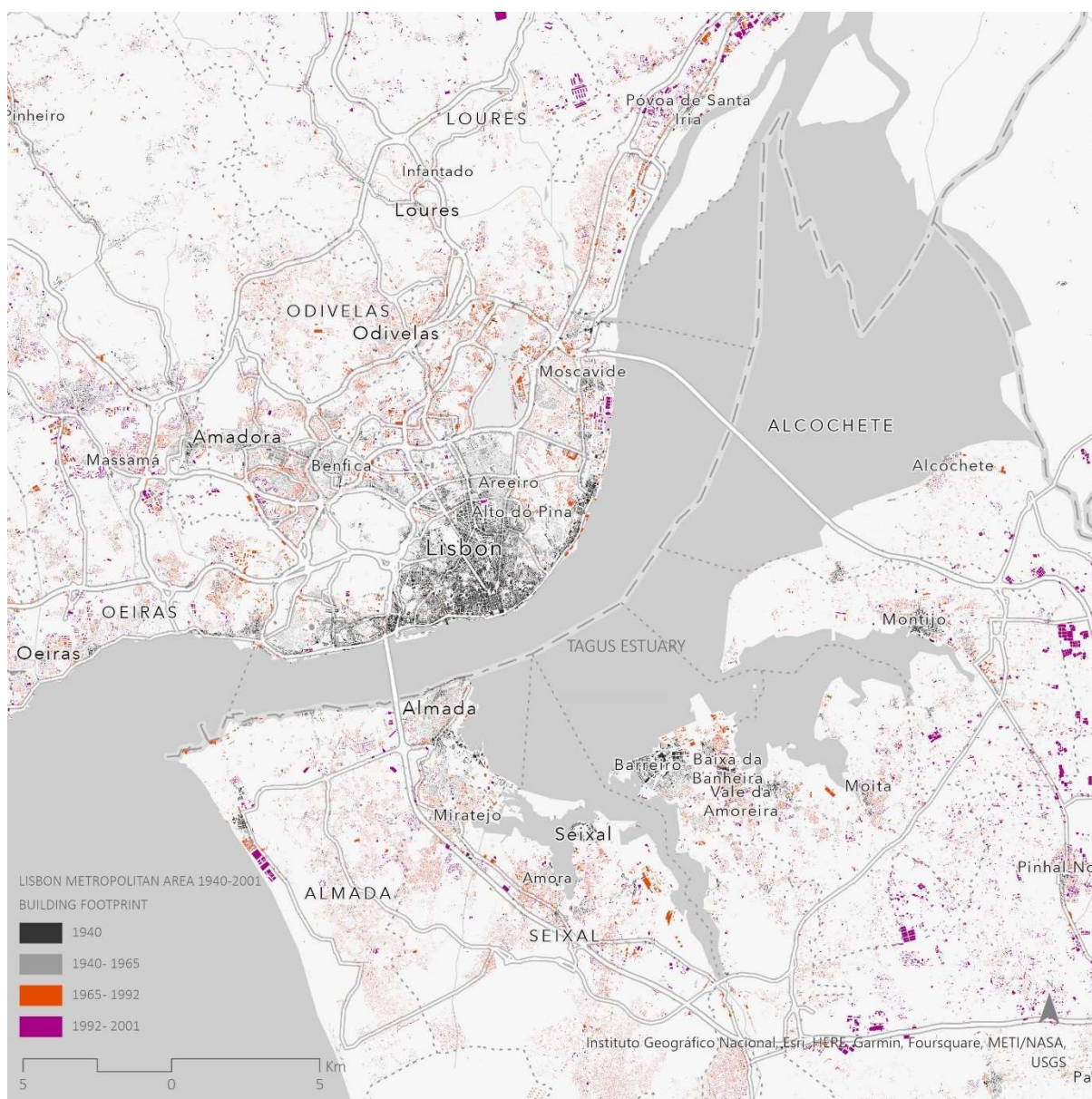


Figure 2. Seixal Bay, waterfront public space, Seixal Municipality (a) People surfing and sailing at the Seixal Bay (b) Seixal waterfront and square over the Estuary. Source: Author, Study Trip, 5 May 2022.



Map 1. Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Tagus Estuary and surrounding Municipalities), Municipal and Borough Boundaries and Population per Census Subsection 2021 Sources: Author adapted from: dados.gov.pt and Dados abertos/DGT, Basemap Human Geography (see Section 6.)



Map 2. Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Tagus Estuary and surrounding Municipalities), Buildings' footprints, 1940, 1940-1965, 1965-1992, 1992-2001. Sources: Author adapted from Morgado and Almeida (2022), Basemap, Details, Labels, Human Geography (see Section 6).

Table 1. Population, Households, Dwellings, Buildings Variation. Source: adapted from INE/Statistics Portugal, INE/Statistics Portugal, Preliminary data, Census 2021, available at <https://censos.ine.pt/>, consulted 30/08/2022)

Municipality	Population Variation 2011–2021	Inhabitants 2021	Households (private)* 2011–2021	Family Dwellings* 2011–2021	Buildings Variation* 2011–2021
	%	Nº	%	%	%
Lisbon Metropolitan Area	2,2	2 870 770	4,0	0,8	0,8
Alcochete	8,97	19 145	9,5	4,3	0,7
Almada	1,86	177 268	5,3	0,2	1,0
Barreiro	-0,51	78 359	3,6	0,1	-1,2
Moita	0,35	66 262	5,2	-0,2	-1,3
Montijo	8,72	55689	7,7	4,5	0,8

* Disaggregation in these indicators is to be considered in connection with other indicators and statistic sections

4 One step forward, sometimes two back, and the next ones

Over the past decade, while fittingly addressing the generalised condition of urbanisation, it is not uncommon to observe that some authors blur relevant geographical and cultural traits (Brenner and Keil, 2014; Brenner and Ghosh, 2022); often, researchers also blur these while seeking support for their claims. In this case, this study calls on a move toward European urbanisation—its metropolitan development.

4.1 Territory

Actual metropolitan territories result from a patchwork that ranges from rustic to urban and even hybrid settlements. These phenomena correlate with the cultural and geographic contexts of each metropolitan system. From this point of view, small towns are part of functional metropolitan systems and urbanisation. Hence, there is a gap to be explored regarding the role of small towns within the Metropolitan context.

Small towns can be part of metropolitan areas and contribute to their economic performance while others are located in peripheral rural areas and play a key role in territorial cohesion through the services they provide (Servillo et al., 2014). (Demazière, 2022: 52). However, this study calls on an approach adjusted to the types and levels of European urbanisation, specifically in the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Recent years have been fertile in studies and development of spatial planning practices in metropolitan areas, especially in European Union Member States. This condition has allowed an essential interaction between strategic dimensions (national and regional levels) and local interventions and actions in different urban planning and design spheres, involving a merging of actions and public participation.

Small towns convey narratives and imaginaries that allow for the perception of greater well-being and quality of life, which, combined with the advantages of integration in the metropolitan functional system, gives them an advantage when people are choosing a place to live.

4.2 Interfaces

One may observe that the growing availability of data (e.g., Eurostat) and the conceptual frameworks offered by the EU (e.g., through ESPON) have provided greater flexibility, especially in funding and policy implementation and for spatial planning at regional levels.

However, the sectoral and local levels require an efficient interface with the material reality, i.e., physical, functional, and dimensional realities. Large-capacity infrastructures, the articulation with elements of physical geography, and interventions in places all involve different capabilities.

This is the interface between strategies, programmes, and design, permitting the places where people live to be shaped, while meeting (or not meeting) their expectations.

This goal is than an interface, and it is often difficult to envisage from top-down; however, it is acknowledged and underpinned by local authorities who aim to making their projects happen for local communities.

While it is understandable that some simplification needs to occur to allow an interface between data collection and analysis which can be applied to numerous activities—related to the management of a territory—it might be that such a simplification, in some fields, tends to hold back the inherent diversity which territories hold. Might one need to go beyond Russels' *Theory of Types* (Cocchiarella, 2005)?

In the context of national policies and urban planning, the “Law on Spatial Planning and Urbanism” (DR, 2014) and related legislation provide for strategic, programmatic, and spatial planning in Portugal at the national and regional levels. The strategic dimensions are fundamental for the metropolitan (regional) level.

Strategic dimensions are interrelated between the metropolitan (regional) and municipal (local) levels. The threshold between metropolitan and local levels is vital to act robustly and sustainably.

4.3 What is next?

Portugal recently acquired the nickname 'new European California', as one of the interviewees described Portugal as having “welcoming people, good medical care, an inclusive mindset, above average security, great food, an exciting multicultural community” (transl. by the author; Santos, 2022). Young families, digital nomads, and retired couples, for example, are targeting the municipalities which are part of the Lisbon metropolitan area, particularly on its southern side.

The sense of well-being and attaining a certain quality of life seem to be critical factors in these choices. These can provide insight into the span of stakeholders, local authorities, and public participation.

Further research steps will seek clarification on the correlation between the following: (1) small metropolitan towns; (2) narratives which convey a sense of well-being (positive or towards an improvement); (3) quality of life as an urban planning and design choice—ignited by broader imaginaries and fuelled by the communities' expectations.

The point of view is the local level (municipal), while envisioning a territorial overview in urban planning and design. Are the qualifications of the public space, facilities, and amenities able to induce urban rehabilitation or regeneration in this local approach, as strongly marked by the characteristics of these riverside locations?

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- INE Instituto Nacional de Estatística/ Statistics Portugal, available at www.ine.pt, consulted 22/08/2022.
- Base map Human Geography, Base, Detail, Label, Vector Tile Service available at: <https://cdn.arcgis.com/sharing/rest/content/items/2afe5b807fa74006be6363fd243ffb30/resources/styles/root.json>

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