

## IMAGINING, AND STRUGGLING IN, LISBON'S EAST SIDE

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At the northern edge of Baixa, Lisbon's historical downtown located by the river Tagus, two main avenues diverge, innervating Lisbon's urban, commercial and residential core: Avenida da Liberdade and Avenida Almirante Reis. On different sides of Sant'Ana hill, the first cuts slightly northwest, the latter almost perfectly to the north. Hardly could two avenues with such a similar position in the structure and hierarchy of the city's spatial fabric be more different – in width, in terms of the relations between open and built fabric, and in terms of the activities going on in the ground floors of their buildings. A classical, monumental avenue, dotted with banks and flagship luxury shops, the former; a compact avenue, bursting with life, small shops, minimarkets and traffic, the latter.

It was probably by looking at how different these avenues were that, some years ago, I started thinking about the existence of an “East Side” in Lisbon – a “marginalised centre”,<sup>1</sup> separated from the bourgeois centre by Sant'Ana hill. At first, when I tried to convince friends and colleagues that there were distinct urban vibes, dynamics and trajectories to this area of the city, no one would take me seriously. At best, they would start arguing about where the exact limit between East and West Sides would be, using the inevitable fuzziness of the boundary (is Sant'Ana hill east or west? And Estefânia neighbourhood?) to argue there was no such thing – as [Marco Allegra has discussed in this roundtable](#), borders and names do matter for urban identity.

Then, sometime around 2015 or 2016, a hostel opened, in a small street close to Intendente Square. It was called East Side,<sup>2</sup> probably to convey a certain sense of edgy urbanity in a street that may look quite sketchy to the European tourist, in an area that was long considered to be sketchy by locals too. And, in 2018, [East Side Radio](#) was born, part of a broader project of a group of young entrepreneurs to mix good food, good music and parties. The latter have been hosted close to Intendente (in former Anjos 70) or, more recently, in post-industrial Beato: in Arroz Studio, a temporary club and cultural space in a lot awaiting redevelopment, and in Hub Criativo do Beato, the building that is struggling to become the flagship initiative of innovative Lisbon.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, the East Side has not (yet?) become common sense – my friends still argue about its borders. And yet, though they did not come all the way to name it the East Side, the participants to this roundtable have come together to discuss what is specific about the trajectories of urban change in this part of the city,<sup>4</sup> and in the imaginaries thereof.

Are we, willingly or not, adding yet another layer – the fuzzy, contested idea of an East Side – to the multi-layered imaginaries in this part of Lisbon? An imaginary that may itself be part and parcel of the peculiar branding of this area of the city, as being attractive above all to young entrepreneurs, start-uppers and digital nomads that like

both the dense, lively urban fabric of Arroios, and, in Andrea Pavoni's words, the "luxury status" that has emerged in Marvila from "post-industrial decadence"?

And yet, as all the contributions to the first round of this roundtable have implicitly or explicitly shown, these imaginaries are everything but smooth. It may not be by chance that Avenida da Liberdade tends to host unitary protests (above all, the celebration of democracy on April 25), while Avenida Almirante Reis tends to host the most conflictual ones, including the May 1 parade, but also recent demonstrations, organised by a multiplicity of groups, in the name of the right to housing and of reclaiming public space.

In this sense, my response to Lavínia Pereira and João Felipe Brito, when they argue that "all the essays from the first round emphasised the overlapping and co-presence of multiple imaginaries, more than just their conflicting nature", would be to broaden the scale of my previous argument – that is, to stress the conflictual nature of any overlapping and coexisting imaginaries under capitalist urbanisation. Or, better, to turn the question upside down, as urban capitalism is nothing more and nothing less than the attempt to capture the overlapping and co-existing imaginaries of urban life.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly so, urban life is being framed by – one may even speculate *it is becoming confused with* – the very conflict emerging out of this attempt. There are places that are more powerfully "urban", fundamentally because their imaginaries are at the same time more desirable for the potential of their co-optation and more fiercely contested – Lisbon's East Side, after all, is one such place.

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<sup>1</sup> Much has been written on marginality in/of Southern European urban centres. See, for example, Vincenza Capursi, and Ornella Giambalvo, eds., *Al centro del margine. Standard di vita in un quartiere del centro storico di Palermo* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> It has now changed name to the Indy House – Rooms & Apartments.

<sup>3</sup> See João F. Brito, "Hub Criativo do Beato: Uma infraestrutura inacabada e ativada", *Blogue SHIFT*, October 12, 2022, <https://ambienteterritoriosociedade-ics.org/2022/10/12/hub-criativo-do-beato-uma-infraestrutura-inacabada-e-ativada/>.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Roberto Falanga and Mafalda Corrêa Nunes argue, in their contribution to the second round, that urban branding policies have been quite similar in Arroios and Marvila alike.

<sup>5</sup> The very ambivalence signalled by Ugo Rossi, *Cities in Global Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).