

A Portuguese City Park as a Potential Intergenerational Contact Zone

This chapter focuses on a city park in Portugal and some of the factors that have influenced its design, redevelopment, and patterns of community use. The Intergenerational Contact Zone concept is used to explore the park's potential to provide residents with opportunities to meet, interact, and relate to one another without obstruction.

Introduction

Following the international and European agenda in the 1990's, Portugal started to make the first steps on intergenerational programming. The emigration process in the 1950's and 1970's took away many young people from Portugal and caused a reduction in the potential of fertility which intensely affected the Portuguese age pyramid. The Census (2011) shows that the aging process is not an inland phenomenon but is spread all across the country. The political agendas at the world-wide level (e.g., 2nd UN World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid, 2002, Age Friendly Cities), European level (Horizon, 2020; European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, 2012) and local level (City Council Gerontological Plan) drive us to create synergies that structure a more cohesive society for all ages (Henkin, 2004), rooted in values of intergenerational solidarity (Bostrum, 2000; Kuehne, 2003).

We observe that all these demographic, social and economic changes have led us to a growing interest in approaches that seek to increase intergenerational programming and relationships. In 2012, the boom of intergenerational programming happened in Europe, due to the large number of grants from the EU [European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations], as well as national funding from government or private sources, such as the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Since then intergenerational programming became very fashionable, reaching the point where almost every social community project is being called an " *intergenerational program* " of some sort.

The focus of this chapter is not on specific intergenerational program models or activities per se, but rather on the physical and social dimensions of the community settings in which intergenerational engagement occurs. We focus in on city parks, in particular the *Infante D. Pedro* City Park in Aveiro, Portugal, and draw upon the concept of intergenerational contact zones (ICZ) (Thang, 2015) to conduct a critical review of factors related to the design, redevelopment, and functioning of this park in terms of its capacity to provide meaning and opportunity for people of different generations to meet, interact, and relate to one another freely.

We also draw upon findings from an intergenerational research project that Vieira & Guerra (2012) conducted in the aforementioned park. This project, entitled, "Project = Space with Stories and Nature to Socialize" (P=LHNS), will serve as a starting point to the following discussion. Based on that study's data, a critical approach will directly underpin the ICZ framework.

City Parks as Intergenerational Contact Zones

Instead of using coordinates, people in general tend to use descriptive statements about their location; for example, " *I'm home* " or " *I'm at the park* ." However, those are not only locations; often people attach meaningful and descriptive semantics to those spaces through which they became places. A space can't be understood as a neutral setting, only when the social context is applied. For subsequent social interaction, experience and cultural meaning enplaced from the very start, animated and constituted by the people that inhabit that space helps it become a socially meaningful "place" (Thang & Kaplan, 2013).

Normally, city parks are public spaces without any restrictions on access based on individual characteristics. However, if we look carefully at the spaces and activity opportunities in city parks, we may spot some age-based deliberations. For example, the playgrounds are mostly occupied by children; the sport fields are typically directed to youth and the tea rooms tend to enroll older people. What does it mean to create a city park in a way that maximizes its potential to generate meaningful possibilities for intergenerational interaction and cooperation?



The Infante D. Pedro City Park

At the beginning of 2010, the Project P=LHNS (Vieira & Guerra, 2012) aimed to redevelop and re-energize the Infante D. Pedro City Park in a way that preserved its biodiversity and social resources and attracted and engaged a generationally diverse body of park users. P=LHNS priorities were twofold: (1) to demonstrate and reinforce the intergenerational practices within the city park redevelopment campaign; (2) to gather together citizens around a common achievement that turned the city park into a place with rich stories, nature, and pro-social, community relationship-building socialization opportunities (Vieira & Guerra, 2012).

The city park was first opened in 1927. At its glorious times it was a meeting point and thus, a meaningful place for the entire community (Vieira & Guerra, 2012). Initially the city park appeared to foster community engagement and promote contact between different generations. A variety of activities happened in that space, from sporting events to dating, and meeting friends and family. During the 80's, the lack of maintenance of the park began to lead to degradation, and consequently fewer and fewer visits from the community. At the same time, delinquency and vandalism episodes were found to be commonplace. The P=LHNS project thus aimed to restore the park with the concerns and insights of the community in mind.



Figure 1: Infante D. Pedro Park in Aveiro, Portugal.

The project applied a range of participatory data collection tools to get to know citizens' expectations, including the use of social networks (Facebook and a blog); social media (radio, local and national newspapers); emails and phone calls; meetings and structured site visits with potential partners (individual citizens and institutions), and informal park-related conversations with residents in surrounding communities. Vieira & Guerra (2012) note that a total of 17 institutions and 210 citizens participated in the park assessment effort, followed with nine meetings at the park and five guided tours through the park escorted by a biologist from the University of Aveiro. Sixteen more meetings happened around the city, with the active participation of the local University and the City Council.

Based on the evidence collected, this mixed, participatory site evaluation and redevelopment planning process contributed to mutual understanding, improved dialogue and a shared sense of community among 'citizens of all ages'. In that sense the contribution of a collaborative approach was essential in making listening to the insights and suggestions of all participants possible: including those affiliated with local non-profit organizations, city agencies and the city council, and the local university. It was also a way of giving individual users of the city park a sense of active participation in the project (Keast & Waterhouse, 2006; Pain, 2005; Vieira & Guerra, 2012).

With preliminary feedback in mind, the following initiatives were developed and implemented: an intergenerational walkway named "*Curios Park Ages*," an exhibition with old pictures and a movie of the Park, an interactive family tree activity, a flowers battle to remember the 84th anniversary of the Park, a monthly fairs series under the title of "*There is life in the park*," plays, workshops, traditional games, storytelling activities, and commemoration of national and international days, such as: Family's Day, Grandparents' Day and International Children's Day.

A continued project evaluation process took place. This included 28 in-depth interviews with people 60 years of age and older to better understand the participants' life stories and their memories as well as their park usage behaviors. Furthermore, all available park-related documents and data outputs (including images, videos, maps, news from tourism magazines between 1940 and 1980, and municipality's minutes) were content analysed to gain insight into how the park was perceived and used by the community. The results of this qualitative evaluation showed that the citizens considered it essential to improve the physical and environmental condition of the Park in order to breathe new life into it and reinforce its safety. Based on this evaluation the Sustainability Park was created. Following the success of the P=LHNS scheme, which intendedly embraced the aim of gathering together people from all generations, further refurbishments led to the development of two additional Parks which were all named collectively as the "Sustainability Park."

Towards ICZ for Infante D. Pedro City Park: Future prospects and challenges

The three most active ICZ areas within the refurbished Sustainability Park are: the *Recreational Zone*, *Walkways* and the *Tea Room*, a pre-existing building belonging to the old Park that became actively used again after the P= LHNS. These sites are heavily utilized, with people flowing freely into and out of these places. The following discussion will be focusing on these three sites.

These three park areas were selected as sites for an observation study conducted by internship students engaged in the course Sport's Support & Management at the Escola Secundária Jaime Magalhães Lima. The aim of this study was observing *in loco*, recording and evaluating the park's infrastructure and describing both positive and negative aspects regarding how those places were being used (e.g., times in the day for visits by people from different generations).

One of the questions considered by the study group was why there was limited intergenerational interaction in the sites even though originally conceived as ICZs of sorts. One line of interpretation was that there was not enough attention paid to the sociocultural dimension of these sites. Concerns about how these spaces served to meet individual needs seemed to overshadow considerations related to intergenerational interaction.

The challenge in ICZ development is how to inspire people to look outside of their own sphere and realize the various possibilities available to experience social contact. Specifically, in the case of the Sustainability Park, people did not always use the park's infrastructure, especially the recreational zone. Thus, creating the infrastructure is not enough to make a place become an ICZ, rather is only the first step. It appears to be the case that the physical space only provides for multigenerational presence; it is in the social space in which the intergenerational interactions occur. The physical space is bound to the social space; one doesn't exist without the other. In the words of Simmel, "*The reciprocal action interplay makes the space hitherto empty and nothing, anything for us, holds it as it makes it possible*" (Simmel, [1908]1992: 601).

The Recreational Zone

The recreational zone is situated on one of the edges of the Sustainability Park, and it contains a tennis court, a football field and a skate ground, fitness equipment stations and children equipment. This is a public space that might bring together three or four generations (children and younger people, adults and older people). It is a crucial physical facility for generating multigenerational contact, as people can freely move between the different grounds and there are not any fences. Importantly, there are no signs indicating restrictions for any age group and there are also visible pathways, namely the walkways that provide a relaxed exit from such potential interaction. Looking to the recreational zone's structure overall, it is clear the intentional focus was on creating a multigenerational site capable of accommodating a wide range of intergenerational activities.

Despite these positive aspects, the recreational zone was not fully successful as an ICZ. At this stage it is not completely apparent why this should be the case and further research should be conducted to better understand the underlying reasons. Perhaps, the key difference between the P=LHNS and the reconstruction of the Sustainability Park could be related to the extended closure and reconstruction period which made the park completely unfamiliar to the citizens. It might be a novel idea to revisit some of the activities initially developed by the P=LHNS as their report demonstrated a selection of events which achieved good public attendance. This might help to convert the recreational zone into a functional ICZ.



Figure 2: Recreational Park - *Parque dos Amores* (Lovers Park). Courtesy of Aveiro Municipality.



Figure 3: Recreational Park - Tennis ground, football ground and skate ground.

The Walkways

The walkways seem to be more used by the runners, instead of older people. The observation study showed that these walkways are not fully finished. There are no signals to show the way and it is easy for one to get lost. Also the lack of streetlights is noticeable. Along the walkways, it seems that the ground is not accommodating people with reduced mobility including older people and young children.



Figure 4: Building Walkways at Sustainability Park - A work in progress.

Probably it will be a good idea to distribute along the walkways some fitness activities stations, especially where you find tables and benches, so people can interact with each other more naturally. It looks like the walkways could facilitate a parallel co-existence as children, adults and older people could walk along the trails. Occasionally, intergenerational contact could happen, but these interactions are likely to be brief, non-committal and free-flowing.

The Tea Room

The Tea Room is another place that could be strategically developed to generate more intergenerational contact. After its renewal, the tea room serves as a practice space for the *Beiras'* orchestra and as a storage room for the park's grounds keeping tools. Although it lacks utility, people often said that it was very pleasant listening to music while they walked or played in the park. Transforming the tea room into a more attractive place, with the inclusion of facilities that accommodate a broader range of social activities (including those with an intergenerational component), would be a good strategy for making this section of the park a more functional ICZ.

Conclusion

If we look closely at the case of the *Infante D. Pedro* City Park and its reframing and re-development into the "Sustainability Park," and we take into account both the good and not-so-good decisions made to transform it into an intergenerational park, we can learn some lessons about intergenerational contact zones in large city parks.

- **Lesson #1: Do not take an ICZ space that works well for granted.** When the park opened (in 1927), it provided the community with a great public space, utilized by entire families and all generations. This treasured community asset was filled with recreational spaces and activities suitable for families, students, children and young people as well as older people. Over time, particularly during the fiscal challenges of the 1980's, the maintenance budget was cut, facilities deteriorated, and the park became less safe and less heavily utilized by the community. In effect, this unique and cherished park, which once was seen as a trusted and safe place for community congregation, lost its capacity to function as an effective ICZ for families and neighbors.
- **Lesson #2: [In (re-)designing, (re-)developing, and building public parks intended to function as age-inclusive sites] Utilize multiple methods for obtaining diverse community voices and support.** As Vieira & Guerra (2012) note, community residents and local organizations took note of the growing public and private interest and commitment to improving the park, and this contributed to their enthusiasm to participate in the planning process and advocate on behalf of efforts to restore the park as a community-wide gathering place.
- **Lesson #3: Mechanisms for community participation need to be kept in place even after the parks planning and (re-)development process is completed.** Through community interviews conducted after (re-)developing several areas of the *Infante D. Pedro* City Park and two additional adjacent parks, it was determined that there were some features of these parks (e.g., poor lighting and limited seating areas) that hindered some residents from frequenting these spaces. Seeking and heeding

this additional community feedback is vital for realizing the vision of local parks that sustainably function as local intergenerational engagement hubs.

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2 During that period a massive youth emigrated to France, Germany, UK, Swiss, Sweden, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and finally, Venezuela and Australia. That migration flux changed the Portuguese population pyramid radically.

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