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Quinta do Mocho – From High Risk Stigmatised social living area to a cultural tourism destination



Portugal, Lisbon, Sacavém



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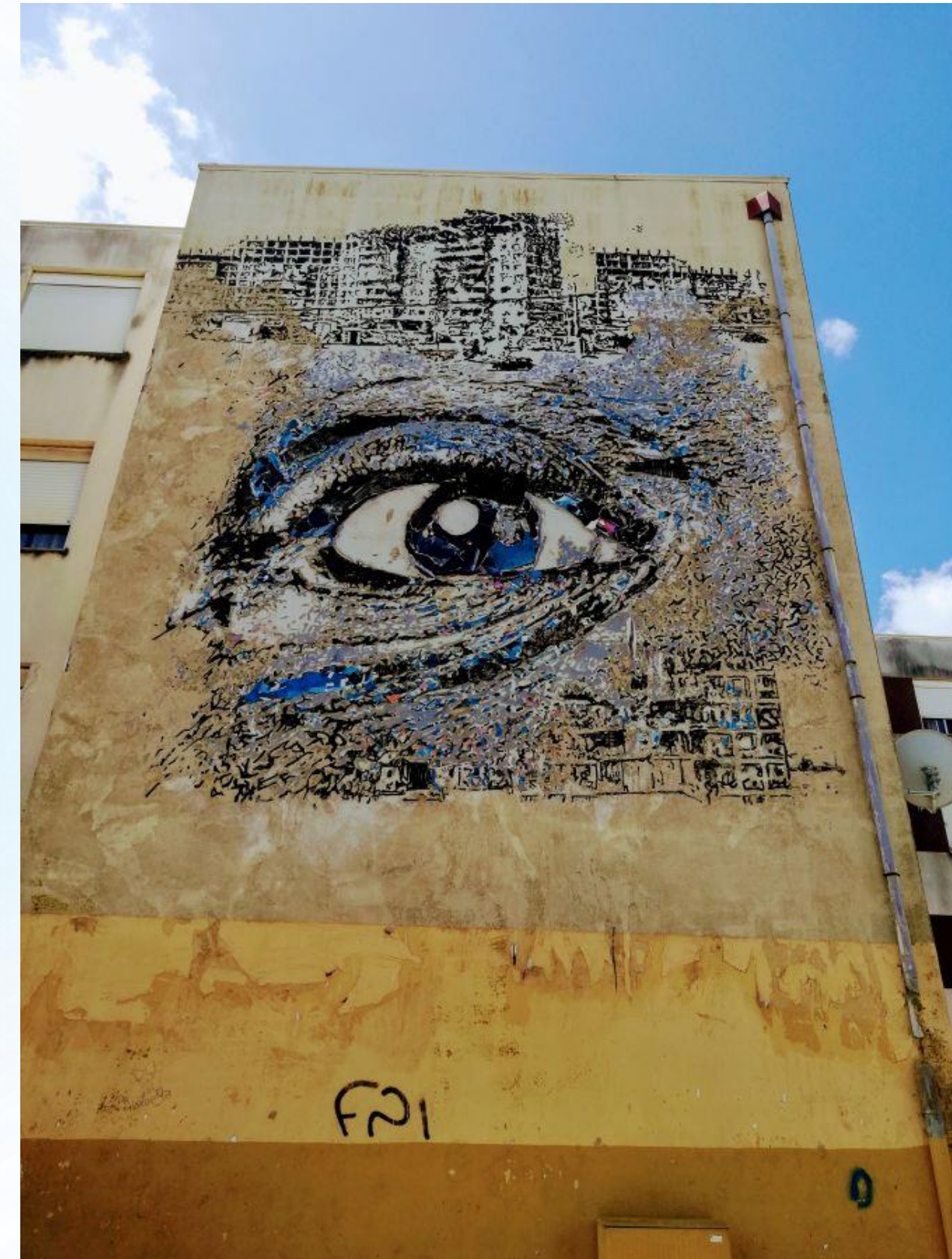
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Introduction

Once stigmatized for poverty, crime, and ethnic exclusion, the Quinta do Mocho neighborhood has transformed into a vibrant open-air urban art gallery. This change began in 2014, when the local government, supported by the EU-funded Communication for Integration project, launched a large-scale art festival to foster social cohesion and reshape public perception. The initiative, involving local and international artists, businesses, and social groups, aimed to integrate the immigrant community and improve residents' quality of life. As a result, the project also enabled the emergence of sustainable cultural tourism, turning the neighborhood into a living gallery that now attracts visitors while celebrating local identity and community resilience.

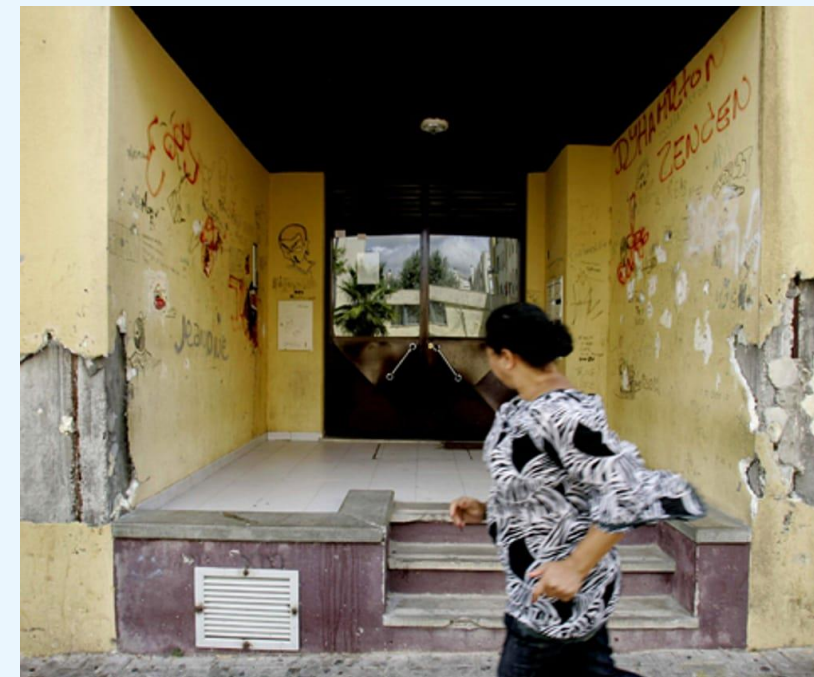


Context

Quinta do Mocho, once stigmatized as a high-crime area, has undergone a remarkable transformation into a vibrant open-air urban art gallery. Built between the 1970s and 1990s, Quinta do Mocho is an extensive social housing neighborhood with 93 buildings, housing over 680 families in the suburban town of Sacavém, within the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. For decades, it suffered from high levels of stigmatization and social exclusion.

“Just hearing the name of the neighborhood sparked apprehension in many and distrust in some. Like a dark cloud, a stigma hung over the neighborhood of Sacavém: crime, drugs, violence. Taxi drivers refused to enter the area, and residents would hide their address when applying for jobs.”

While Lisbon’s city center was experiencing the early waves of a tourism boom, drawing millions of visitors annually, Quinta do Mocho and similar neighborhoods remained largely excluded from this economic growth. The area’s reputation as a ghetto of immigrants from former Portuguese colonies, plagued by poverty, crime, and social exclusion, despite its rich cultural heritage, became a major barrier to inclusion and prevented the neighborhood from benefiting from the tourism boom, earning it the status of a 'no-go zone.



O Bairro e o Mundo

In 2014, the municipality of Loures, recognizing both the cultural richness and the social challenges of the neighborhood, launched the 'O Bairro e o Mundo' (The Neighborhood and the World). The initiative, an urban art festival, aimed to open the neighborhood to the wider community. Renowned Portuguese and international street artists were invited to create large-scale murals across the neighborhood's 93 buildings, transforming it into a massive open-air gallery, while local DJs provided entertainment.

The project was supported by 2,000 artists and residents, 25 NGOs, and 43 private companies. However, the goal was not only to create public art but also to rewrite the story of Quinta do Mocho, eradicate its social stigma, improve living conditions for its residents, and support the neighborhood's integration into the broader community.





Residents' inclusion

For that the metamorphosis of Quinta do Mocho was not merely an external intervention to increase attractiveness of the urban zone but a collaborative effort deeply involving its residents. Residents were involved in the project from the start. During the initial phases, residents collaborated with artists, providing insights and support. They helped shaping the themes of the

artworks and shared their personal stories with the artists to help them inspire the art while ensuring that the artworks resonated with the community's identity.



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Harsh Beginnings

While it sounds like an easy project the process has not gone all so smoothly.

The three-day event did not proceed entirely as planned– on the first day, men from a rival estate drove in and shot two boys in the middle of the street.

Fortunately, the artists involved decided to support continuation of the event and use their contacts to increase interest in the initiative, and the following year the festival attracted twice as many artists, and has continued to grow annually

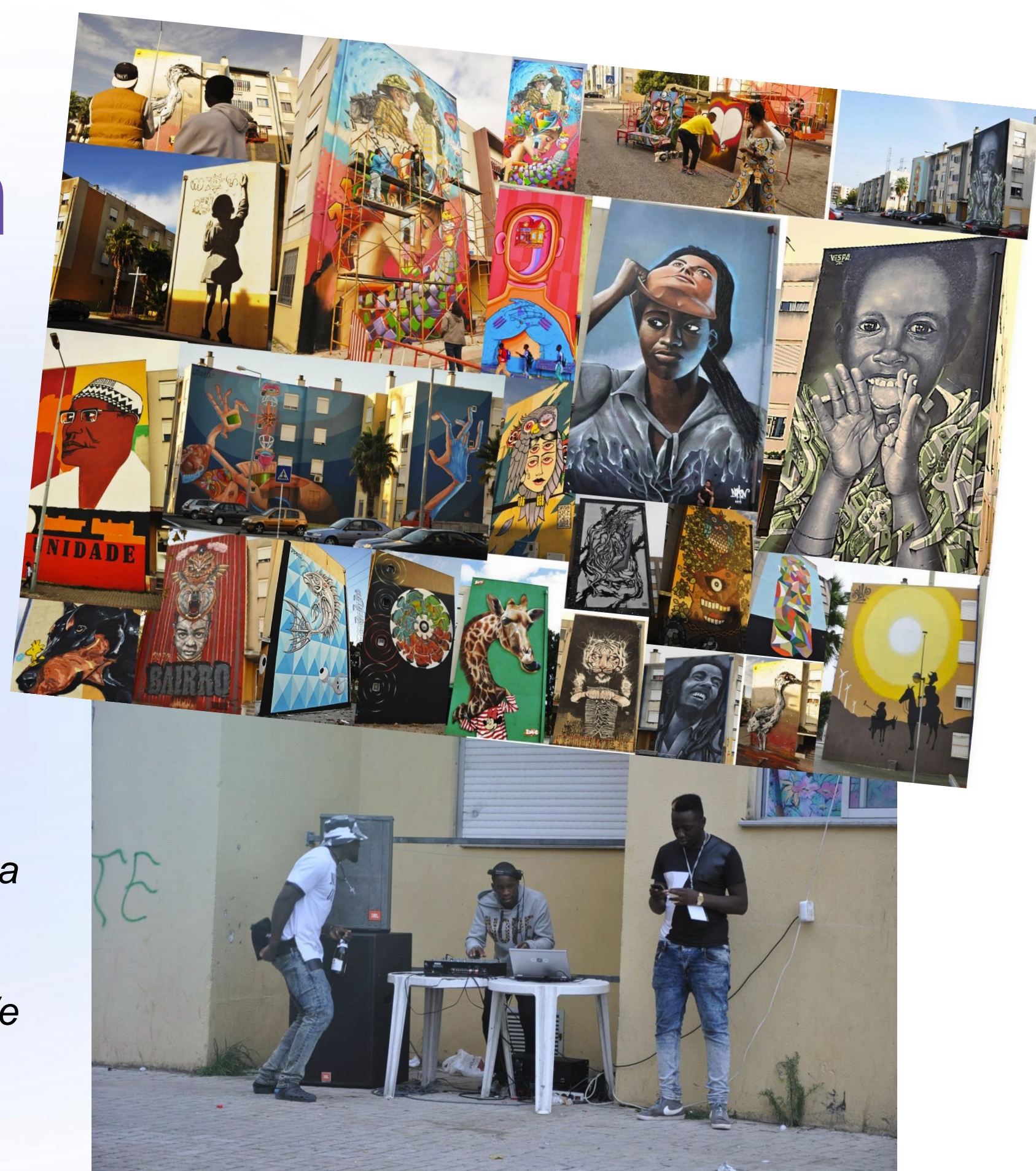


Mindset transformation

The neighborhood's visual transformation had a profound impact. The art and the inclusive process behind its creation became a catalyst for breaking the negative stigma, shifting both external and internal perceptions of the area and its community. It sparked interest among artists, tourists, and fostered pride among residents.

What was once infamous for all the wrong reasons has now become famous as the largest open-air art gallery in Europe. However, the transformation goes beyond the appeal of street art tourism.

It's changed outsiders' views of the area. We've gone from being a dangerous neighborhood to one that's an example for others. Before, our kids wouldn't get invited to birthday parties at school. Nowadays, all those kids want to be invited to the parties here. We have great parties – the best Afrobeat DJs in Portugal all live here,' says Kelly, a local community guide.



From stigma to pride

Over time, these murals became more than just art—they became symbols of identity, pride, and resistance against social exclusion. Local residents now lead guided tours, sharing the history of their neighborhood and the meaning behind the paintings. School groups, foreign dignitaries, and even the president of Portugal have visited to admire the artwork.

Demonstrating entrepreneurial spirit, locals formed the *Guias do Mocho* association ([Facebook page](#)), offering guided tours of the murals. This initiative not only creates employment opportunities but also fosters a strong sense of pride and ownership among residents. As a result, the area has begun attracting both national and international visitors—drawn not only by the urban art

but also by the unique experience of guided tours led by those who call the neighborhood home and inspired the murals.



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Beyond the Art and Tourism

The growing interest in the area has led to improvements in public services, particularly in public transportation, with bus operators finally incorporating the neighborhood into their routes. Cultural events have also started taking place, further integrating the area into Lisbon's artistic and tourism scene. While significant challenges remain—especially the extremely high unemployment rate within the community—Quinta do Mocho's successful inclusion in Lisbon's tourism landscape, despite being 30 minutes from the city, has brought notable social and economic benefits. The streets are now safer, and new businesses, including supermarkets and other facilities, have opened nearby. Guided tours, available through the *Guias do Mocho* Facebook page for €10 per person, provide an additional source of income for the neighborhood.

Beyond improved services, the influx of visitors has fostered a renewed sense of belonging. Through daily interactions with outsiders, tourists, and pedestrians, residents have regained something that was once lost within the community—self-esteem.



Art and unique culture

Quinta do Mocho offers tourists a unique and enriching experience, combining art, culture, and community engagement.

The benefits for visitors include:

1. Immersion in Europe's Largest Open-Air Street Art Gallery

With over 100 large-scale murals adorning its buildings, Quinta do Mocho stands as Europe's largest open-air street art gallery. Visitors can explore a diverse array of artworks created by both Portuguese and international artists, making it a must-visit destination for art enthusiasts.

2. Authentic Guided Tours by Local Residents

Tourists have the opportunity to join guided tours led by local residents, offering deep insights into the neighborhood's history, the stories behind each mural, and the community's cultural heritage. These tours foster genuine connections and provide a personal perspective on the area's transformation.



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Cultural events and social contribution

A visit to Quinta do Mocho offers a rich blend of artistic exploration, cultural enrichment, and meaningful community interaction, providing tourists with a unique and memorable experience.

3. Cultural Events and Culinary Experiences

The neighborhood frequently hosts cultural events, including music performances and festivals, allowing visitors to experience the vibrant local culture firsthand. Additionally, tourists can savor traditional African dishes, such as the Cape Verdean "cachupa," in local eateries, enhancing their cultural immersion.

4. Positive Social Impact and Community Support

By visiting Quinta do Mocho and participating in community-led tours, tourists contribute directly to the local economy and support ongoing social initiatives. This engagement promotes sustainable tourism and aids in the continued development and empowerment of the community.

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Sustaining the transformation

Although the project was initially led by the municipality, the long-term maintenance and promotion of the open-air gallery now rest largely in the hands of local residents. They organize guided tours and actively contribute to the preservation of the murals. Currently, Quinta do Mocho features 111 murals, with new ones added each year. Renowned artists such as Vhils, Bordalo II, and Odeith, along with collectives like 40 Anos 40 Murais, Colectivo Rua, and Projecto Matilha, have transformed more than 70 building façades with artistic interventions. The murals depict a diverse range of subjects, from historical figures like Amílcar Cabral and Bob Marley to portraits of local residents.

Today, Quinta do Mocho is widely recognized as one of the largest public art spaces in Europe. The neighborhood has gained visibility in major travel guides, including Lonely Planet, which describes it as:

"(...) one of the biggest outdoor street art galleries in the world! Be prepared for the 108 murals that they have! Duration: 3 hours."

The area's international reputation has also attracted urban artists from around the world, many of whom are on a waiting list to contribute.



From Curiosity Tourism to Meaningful Engagement



As international recognition grew, so did tourism. Initially, some residents were wary of what they perceived as "poverty safaris," where wealthy visitors came to observe life in an underprivileged area. However, over time, attitudes shifted. The wave of arrogant tourists has passed and visitors began coming primarily for the art, showing genuine interest in the neighborhood's story and its community rather than treating it as a spectacle.

Building on the momentum, locals are developing new community-based tourism initiatives. With four prominent African communities contributing to the neighborhood's cultural fabric, new tours highlight this rich heritage. Some currently available experiences include visits to locally owned African restaurants, offering an immersive cultural experience.

Beyond these community-led efforts, since October 2014, the C4i team in Loures has hosted 46 visits from enterprises and artists, including 28 guided tours and 18 media visits. The initiative has received extensive media coverage, with at least 80 news reports worldwide documenting the neighborhood's transformation. An evaluation of the project—based on empirical observation and extensive surveys—has demonstrated its significant role in fostering social cohesion and local development through cultural expression.

Community Involvement

From the start, local residents played a key role in shaping the project. They collaborated with artists, sharing personal stories and cultural heritage to inspire the murals, ensuring the artwork reflected their identity.

As the initiative grew, residents took ownership of the space by organizing guided tours through the Guias do Mocho association, providing both employment opportunities and a sense of pride. Today, they actively maintain the murals and welcome visitors, transforming the neighborhood into a cultural hub.

Beyond street art, the community is now developing new tourism experiences, including cultural tours highlighting the neighborhood's African heritage and local businesses, reinforcing inclusion and long-term sustainability.



Monitoring

The transformation of Quinta do Mocho into an open-air urban art gallery has been a multifaceted initiative, involving various evaluation metrics, feedback mechanisms, continuous improvement strategies, and diverse funding sources.

The effectiveness of the project has been assessed through several key indicators:

- **Social Cohesion:** The initiative aimed to foster social cohesion and local development through cultural expression, as evidenced by the involvement of residents in art projects and community activities.
- **Local Development:** The project's success in attracting tourism has contributed to local development, with the neighborhood becoming a significant attraction in the Lisbon region.
- **Tourism Growth:** The neighborhood's transformation into a public art gallery has attracted visitors, with over a hundred pieces of urban art becoming a main attraction.



Evaluation and Improvements

Continuous feedback has been integral to the project's evolution:

- **Community Engagement:** The project involved residents in the creation and maintenance of the art installations, fostering a sense of ownership and allowing for ongoing input.
- **Visitor Input:** The increasing number of visitors and media coverage provided external feedback, highlighting the project's impact and areas for potential improvement.

The project has embraced a **culture of continuous improvement**:

- The initiative's evolution from initial art installations to a recognized public art gallery demonstrates adaptive strategies responding to community engagement and external interest.
- The project's success has led to increased visibility and recognition, contributing to the community's cultural and social development

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Financing

The initiative has been supported through a combination of funding sources:

- **Municipal Funding:** The local government played a significant role in supporting the project, providing resources and infrastructure.
- **European Commission Support:** The project received funding from the Communication for Integration (C4i) initiative, co-funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals.
- **Private Sector and NGOs:** Collaborations with private companies and non-governmental organizations provided additional support, including funding and resources.



Summary budget details are not available, reflecting the collaborative and evolving nature of the project's funding landscape.

Overall, the success of Quinta do Mocho's transformation can be attributed to the collaborative approach and community engagement, a commitment to continuous improvement, and diversified funding strategies, all contributing to the project's sustainability and positive community impact.

Replicability and scalability

The replicability, as well as the scalability of the Quinta do Mocho project lies in its adaptable and community-driven approach. The initiative's success can be replicated in other neighborhoods with similar challenges, particularly those facing social exclusion, economic hardship, and stigma. Key factors that support replication include:

- **Community Involvement:** Engaging local residents from the start ensures ownership and a sense of pride in the project.
- **Art as a Catalyst:** Urban art can serve as a powerful tool for changing perceptions and attracting visitors, fostering local pride and cultural expression.
- **Collaboration:** The involvement of local governments, artists, businesses, and NGOs ensures broad support and resources.
- **Tourism Integration:** The project's integration into the tourism landscape offers sustainable economic benefits, enhancing both visibility and local development, while supporting relevant for integration and social cohesion cultural tourism.

By adapting these principles, other communities facing similar challenges could leverage art and collaboration to promote social inclusion and economic revitalization.



Key Conclusions & Takeaways

This initiative aimed to intervene in the collective environment of the neighborhood through art, thereby improving the sense of belonging among residents and promoting the rehabilitation of housing heritage and turning it into attractive touristic asset, which also bring tourists to the Lisbon outskirts.



The transformation of Quinta do Mocho is a powerful example of how urban art, collaboration of citizens, and public, private and social organisations and related to it tourism initiatives with involvement of local residents can contribute to revitalizing communities, changing public perceptions, and promoting socio-economic development through cultural tourism. It also shows how exposing tourists to different conditions can make tourists not only more empathic, understanding and overcome their perception bias against immigrants and poor communities, but also learn to be more respectful to the places and communities they visit.

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