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# CULTURE IN SUSTAINABILITY

Towards a Transdisciplinary Approach

[SoPHI]

CULTURE IN SUSTAINABILITY  
*TOWARDS A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH*

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## CULTURAL PROJECTS, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, AND SMALL CITY SUSTAINABILITY

### INTRODUCTION

Participation in arts and, more broadly, cultural activities is generally considered as valuable, personally and socially, with participation viewed as a vehicle that fosters creativity, confidence, and other “life-skills” in personal development (Robinson, 2001; Matarasso, 2000), provides venues and occasions for shared learning (Melville, 2013), increases civic engagement (Keaney, 2006), contributes to social cohesion among diverse residents (Jeannotte, 2003), and builds social ties that can contribute to local development and resiliency.

Cultural participation can be a powerful driver for individual and collective capacity to (individually and collectively) rethink values, norms, and behavioural conducts (Duxbury, 2013). For individuals, it can increase self-confidence and self-belief (Cowling, 2004; Harland et al., 2000) and raise competences of expression (Gould, 2005; Harland et al., 2000) and other norms of conduct of citizens in the public sphere. Socially, cultural activities can create spaces and platforms that can lead to increased levels of trust in society (Delaney and Keaney, 2006). Altogether, these effects can create a virtuous cycle in which “culturally engaged” citizens become more willing to participate in other types of civic activities and processes, and become more active and engaged citizens (Keaney, 2006; Delaney and Keaney, 2006; Robson, 2003; Jeannotte, 2003).

Contextualized by this research, this paper investigates the relevance of citizens’ engagement in cultural processes and the implications of this participation on local sustainability using Pamela, a medium-sized city in Portugal, as a case study. Compared to larger cities, research on small and medium-sized cities has highlighted how smaller cities have specificities, specializations, and cultural identities that may constitute opportunities for development (Lorentzen and van Heur, 2011; Bell and Jayne, 2006); tend to have greater transparency and accountability and a greater ability to promote participatory democracy and openness to civil society (Francisco, 2007); and may be more able to resist the forces of purely commercial gentrification through “promoting the multiple facets of the city, generating a strong sense of place, and taking advantage of scale to promote community involvement” (Garrett-Petts and Dubinsky, 2005: 2). These advantages are not, however, free of contradictions, since the specific conditions of small and medium-sized cities are also connected to a cultural conservatism and traditionalism that may lead to a crystalized self-image and ways of acting that may reflect a “small-mindedness and parochialism” (Hristova, 2015: 49).

Small and medium-sized cities are also affected by global and urban cross-cutting issues, including a number of issues around power relations, such as the

deepening of inequalities and political ungovernability (Harvey, 1989/2002), the potential for social emancipation through citizenship (Turner, 1993; Bellah et al., 1985), access to decision-making (Polese and Stren, 2000), and how these concepts are materialized in the governance of the city. The debate about alternative paths is increasing, as is interest in forms of democracy that deepen the active participation of citizens in decision-making, planning, and regulation of urban life (Saint-Martin, 2006; Ascher, 2006; Santos, 2003; Guerra, 2006; Booher, 2008; Borja, 2003). This research contributes to this debate though offering an example and assessment of cultural participation in a small city as a pathway to greater citizen participation in other civic matters.

This paper is based on an analysis of the cultural and political situation in Palmela, Portugal, in which broadly based community-engaged cultural activities provide the context and foundations for a vibrant civic life. The paper examines how the processes of these cultural activities and the International Festival of Street Arts (FIAR) in particular encourage positive relations between participation in culture and in local governance processes. It then considers how this participation contributes to the local sustainability of Palmela in terms of cultural and urban governance and the expansion of the local public sphere. The paper gives particular attention to this trajectory in the local context to understand its effects in the community, based on the descriptions and discourses of citizens, municipal staff and City Council members, and members of cultural associations. The paper presents the initial results of research in process<sup>1</sup>, based on fieldwork conducted in the city of Palmela. It outlines the theoretical frameworks informing this work, the research methodologies employed, and the city's political and cultural contexts. It then provides initial assessments and reflections on two research questions: Does participation in cultural activities influence participation in public life and in public policies? If so, how does that influence contribute to local sustainability?

#### CULTURE, PARTICIPATION, AND LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY

In the research literature, what is defined as participation is inconsistent and not always clear (Jancovich, 2015). Ranging from attendance at performance and exhibitions, to engaging in creative practice, to deliberative and aesthetic or symbolic types, participation in arts and culture can take multiple forms and lead to different results. Furthermore, looking at the issue of participation from a citizen participation perspective widens the scope of activities and roles considered.

Sherry Arnstein's widely cited Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) provides an institution-centric view of levels of participation, discussing eight types of participation, ranging from non-participation (therapy, manipulation), to tokenism (placation, consultation, informing), to citizen power (citizen control, delegated power, and partnership). A shortcoming of the model is its implicit view that "participation is something that needs to be fostered, rather than something that happens naturally whenever people come together" (Sani et al., 2015, p. 12). Wilcox's Ladder of Participation (1994) also provides an institution-centric view, but with people "ultimately being supported in their independent community

interests and initiatives” (Sani et al., 2015: 12). Simon (2010) also highlights the degree of audience independence in participatory projects.

From an institutional perspective, Jancovich (2015) argues that long-term participative approaches must be embedded in the management of an organization. Research literature suggests that “long-term commitment to participatory decision-making is essential to increase rates of participation and in order for arts organizations to embrace organizational change” (Jancovich, 2015: 20), and practice shows that transformation to long-term, participative deliberative practices requires “authentic commitment to work with people and give away power ... embedded over a number of years” (arts manager, quoted p. 23). In the current research study, participation is considered from a multi-dimensional perspective. The International Festival of Street Arts in Palmela incorporates different levels or types of participation within its planning and production phases – from reception through to hosting and decision-making.

In a review of public participation in cultural projects, Sani et al. (2015) identify the need to think about participation as activating agency and thus re-focus participation initiatives on building community capability and self-determination. From this perspective, participative processes should provide citizens resources to collectively “mak[e] change happen in their communities and becom[e] more capable in the process” (p. 72). Looking at participation through a capability development lens means that “participation is less focused on what people can do for institutions but rather what people [individuals, groups, and whole communities] can do for themselves through using institutional resources – a major, conscious move away from an institution-centric view” (pp. 71-72). This approach “challenges the notion of ‘participation’ as doing *for* or even *with*, but rather focuses on communities doing for themselves, with the help of a range of resources” (p. 72).

Participation is central to local sustainability, in its political and civic dimension, in two ways. On one hand, *public participation* represents the right to participate in the decision-making about public policies, strategic orientations and management projects of public services in cities (Santos, 2003; Guerra, 2006; Booher, 2008). On the other hand, public participation is also viewed as a core process to design and implement sustainable models of development (Ascher, 2006; Borja, 2003), acknowledging that values, rules, norms, agendas, and institutional culture form the foundation for introducing innovation in models of development (Murray et al., 2010). In this way, culture, in the broad constituent sense of “cultural traditions, beliefs, values, and fundamental convictions that constitute individual and collective identity” (Kangas and Sokka, 2015: 141) represents the social anatomy in which motivations and collective imaginaries set up the context for sustainability. It feeds sociability as a “the glue of similarity” by nurturing the sources of cohesion, commonality, and sense of identity (Kong, 2009: 3), bringing together individual and social dimensions.

Participation of citizens in culture has a significant role for local sustainability. Artistic processes and activities can address the complexity and symbolic dimensions of sustainable urban development, motivating public discussion on

collective issues and catalyzing action on alternative, more sustainable local development trajectories (Duxbury, 2013). Cultural participation expands civic urbanity (Landry, 2015), raises civic pride and collective memories, and provides a fundamental way to reconcile tensions and conflicting interests in cities. Art-led collective actions and *activist* interventions, an increasingly present phenomenon of social activism through the arts, further extend participation in cultural/artistic actions as platforms for pursuing the broader public good. Activism initiatives can have important impacts in reinvigorating and contributing to the life, identity, and social sustainability of neighbourhoods and other local spaces (Dragičević et al., 2015). Participatory, creative practices can contribute to “social inclusion, urban vibrancy and renewal, and the incremental development of meaningful places” (Hristova et al., 2015: 6). Participation in arts and culture can lead to an expansion of culture in the public sphere as a public good and a cultural right fundamental to urban development (Dragičević et al., 2015).

Such dynamic cycles are grounded in the local context and in the configuration of the place, which shape patterns of cultural participation. The “throwntogetherness” formed by elements of collective memory and place identity (Gilmore, 2013: 93) reveals “tacit and embodied knowledges,” “hidden practices and values,” and “vernacular” forms of engagement (p. 94). These specific aspects of each community shape the cultural dynamic and configure the positioning of culture as a fundamental dimension of sustainable local development. In this study, *sustainability* in local development focuses on the articulation of social, environmental, cultural, and economic components of local development and the crosscutting aspects of governance in this articulation.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last decade, the conceptualization of relations among culture, sustainability, and community development has been in an exploratory phase (Soini and Birkeland, 2014). The diversity of local situations in which these discussions have unfolded – in research literature and in policy and planning practices – has encouraged pursuits to better understand these connections as locally specific and inclusive (Duxbury and Jeannotte, 2011, 2012). Recent literature reinforces the position of culture in local sustainability both as a process-character where systems of values, power and economics flow (Anheier and Hoelscher, 2015), as well as with a more narrow focus on cultural activity as an artistic process that can “create new spaces for dialogue and enable new ways of thinking” and “catalyse shifts of societal consciousness, increasing both awareness and knowledge” (Kangas and Sokka, 2015: 151). In this study, *culture* is analysed both in the narrow sense, as the artistic dynamic of the cities, and in the broad sense, as the culture of values, norms and institutional culture that shape community and political agendas.

#### METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the initial results of research in process, which is based on fieldwork conducted in the city of Palmela. The methods applied – documentary research, interviews, and direct observation – were triangulated, analytically and

methodologically. Documentation was collected from the Internet portal of the City of Palmela (reports, plans, regulations), the Palmela Public Library (publications about cultural and public engagement projects and programming events) and through personal contacts (reports, plans, and internal documentation of the municipality). The lead author conducted eight semi-directive interviews (involving two politicians, three staff members of the City of Palmela, and three citizens and members of cultural organizations) and 16 exploratory interviews (involving four politicians, four staff members of the City of Palmela, and eight citizens and members of cultural organizations). During six visits to Palmela, the research also benefited from direct observation of public events (local government events such as participatory budget meetings and other public meetings as well as cultural events), with field notes and detailed information about the projects and their actors compiled during these visits.

### A CITY OF CULTURAL VITALITY AND COLLECTIVE PROJECTS<sup>3</sup>

Palmela is a medium-sized city in Portugal (63,000 residents) and is located near the national capital, Lisbon. In the Portuguese context, Palmela is an exemplar case of active engagement in urban government and cultural city life. It has a very dynamic cultural environment, with many activities organized by non-governmental organizations and the municipality. For more than a century, cultural associations in Palmela have encouraged many citizens to participate in the cultural arena, contributing to a public space where participation is welcome and nurtured. The municipality, particularly since the 1990s, has recognised the richness of this environment and has been supporting both the cultural dynamic and the engagement of citizens and civil society in urban governance processes.

The predisposition of the Palmela community to association, and its presence in the public space through arts and public participation in public life, has motivated the City government to undertake many participative initiatives in different public policy areas. The participatory budget of Palmela was the first to be implemented in Portugal. Thematic public seminars were organized in the 1990s dedicated to education, agriculture, social issues, and economic development, including the preparation of the first Palmela Forum in 2000, which promoted a wide discussion about the city and its development priorities. From those meetings, other initiatives were born and municipal councils were established, like the Local Council of Education and the Local Council for Social Action. The City has also nurtured the participation of children and youth, leading to the development of a Plan for Promoting Child and Youth Participation in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

Within this general context, the 1990s were particularly important for culture in the city, when significant steps were made for cultural policies, led by Mayor Carlos Sousa and Luis Guerreiro, the head of culture at the City. They informed themselves of the local-level participative methodologies of the time.<sup>5</sup> During this period, a network of cultural, educational, sports, and citizenship policies and projects were brought together under the umbrella of a participative public management approach. It was a vibrant period marked by many initiatives and

innovative projects that aimed to stimulate dialogue across sectors and stakeholders with most of them being highly participative.

The City developed three municipal support programs for music, theatre, and dance and, over time, territorially decentralized cultural programming, now run by three units, two in the urban areas and one in the rural area of Palmela. The introduction of cultural policies added more sophisticated and contemporary artistic languages to an already-rich cultural field. Local cultural activities advanced significantly through reinforced local cultural staff, new support for arts and cultural activities, and the creation of municipal artistic and cultural projects. The Municipal Program for Associations' Development was also launched during the 1990s, including not only financial support but also educational resources that allowed local associations to improve the capacity of their members and quality of their activities.<sup>6</sup>

The 2006 Forum "Culture Palmela 21" was an important moment for culture in the city. The Forum was an initiative of the City to promote public debate about the present and future of culture in Palmela and to collect contributions for a Strategic Plan for Culture, and saw the participation of more than 100 artists, craftspeople, representatives of associative groups of citizens, and residents. The high participation was a reflection of the participatory tradition in public meetings and also reinforced the creation of links and synergies between the various participants, highlighting the intersections of the cultural programming of Palmela.

Many projects have emerged from Palmela's associative traditions that combine cultural, social, educational, and recreational goals and even urban regeneration (e.g., Fantasiarte and I Participate, see footnotes 6 and 8). These activities, some more formal, some less, follow a movement that is not always continuous and linear, occurring in various artistic fields, and emerging from various sources. Local cultural organizations regularly produce events in partnership with the City that create dialogues among erudite, popular and contemporaneous artistic languages. The cultural agenda of Palmela also has a significant dimension that is not dependent on the City's strategy or funding, positioning the cultural agents in a more equitable status in joint initiatives and projects. These associations are thus more autonomous and some have old, strong relations with their associates, whom they easily mobilize.

Two such associations with a strong presence in the cultural dynamic of the village of Palmela<sup>7</sup> are Os Loureiros and Humanitária, philharmonic societies that originated in the Palmelense Philharmonic Society (founded in 1852). Almost every citizen of the village of Palmela belongs to one of these groups, following their own familiar tradition of membership. Each philharmonic society has its own facilities and preserves a strong but (mostly) respectful and healthy competition. They promote several artistic fields, ranging from music and singing to dance and theatre, and give shape to many artistic groups. Thousands of students receive their musical education in these societies and some of them follow an artistic career. (There are similar organizations with their own music schools and philharmonic bands in the other districts of Palmela.)

Theatre has also had a long-standing, significant presence in the village, becoming more active in the 1990s, with several companies, some of them professional and many of them with educational goals.<sup>8</sup> A diversified range of dance education and presentation opportunities is also available.<sup>9</sup> These many associations and artistic groups produce their own public events (locally, nationally, and internationally), and also interact with each other in the conception, organization, and performance of collective projects and events. This dynamic gains visibility in annual events, some locally important and others a reference point in the national and international cultural context, such as the International Festival of Cabeçudos e Gigantes ('Big Heads and Giants', a festival of giant puppets). Out of this collaborative milieu, the community generates a series of dynamic, participatory festivals and other events, combining local traditions with erudite and contemporary artistic languages.

It is in this context of a community that is simultaneously very active in both cultural and civic affairs that the International Festival of Street Arts (Festival Internacional de Artes de Rua – FIAR<sup>10</sup>), the most ambitious arts organization in Palmela, is able to succeed in catalyzing the engagement of a substantial proportion of the community. Palmela's most recognized event, FIAR is held in the public space of the historic centre of Palmela. It brings together the artistic community to present original events and shows from both inside and outside the community. The Festival, first held in 1999 is co-organized by FIAR in partnership with the Municipality of Palmela, the theatre company O Bando, several local societies, and the active involvement and participation of the community. Over the years, FIAR has been growing as a street arts centre, focusing on the development of arts in the public space.

FIAR brings together citizens, artists, associations, City Council, and municipal staff in two important moments: first, in the conception and organization of the event and, secondly, in a common experience that articulates their identity as an active community. In its planning, the festival involves several cultural associations and the residential community, setting up participative dialogue relations among the associations, between the associations and the City, and between these and the wider community. In terms of cultural programming, local associations (amateur and professional) participate in the creation of contemporary representations based on traditional customs, promoting the arts born in Palmela, and brings together the old (and ever rivals) philharmonic bands and young internationally-recognized artists raised in Palmela. In terms of the organization of the event, citizens participate by offering their houses and backyards for logistic support and for performances. In this way, the Festival becomes a cultural feast that spreads from the streets to the parties in the backyards of the residents of the historic centre.

By privileging a collaborative approach, FIAR establishes a network with local actors and agents to promote and encourage the public in appreciating more complex artistic languages. Its mission to introduce innovative artistic languages is centred on the participation of citizens in the festival-building processes and is carried with a contagious enthusiasm and perseverance. The organization contends

that amplifying participation in the cultural scene stimulates practices of participation more widely.

Furthermore, extensive local involvement in the festival has catalysed the development of other cultural organizations and contributed to capacity building in the artistic community. The Festival has brought in national and international cultural actors, bringing an array of enriching experiences to its audiences. These international actors have been fundamental to the incubation of new projects and associations, since the Festival has always included elements providing artistic education to the local artistic community.<sup>11</sup>

Analytical reflections on cultural participation and local sustainability

In Palmela, the artistic activities animated by local associations and collectives, over many decades, have allowed for and encouraged continuous resident engagement.<sup>12</sup> This associative dynamic forms the socio-cultural foundations of the community and contributes to maintaining a territory that cares for, nurtures, and invests in participation in public life.

This long tradition of community events – in which citizens attend, engage with, and organize cultural activities – has produced an unusual scene among Portuguese small cities, leading to Palmela becoming recognized as one of the most innovative cities in the Portuguese cultural context and, in the context of a young democracy, fostering ‘advanced’ citizenship values in terms of valuing participation in public life. As mentioned previously, in Portugal, public involvement is still in the process of being affirmed, being less frequent and generally with less intense initiatives, reflecting the strong effect of the dictatorship (until 1974) in constraining public dialogue and community interactions. But in Palmela, the presence of many cultural collectives and associations has mobilized many families to attend and to participate in the production of amateur and professional cultural activities for many decades. This means that the collectives and associations have kept alive a space of public life where the community gets together and interacts regularly.

Cultural participation has been the pathway to individual and collective empowerment, expanding the access of citizens to the public sphere and providing a fertile ground for culture itself, motivating dynamic cultural productions and regular public dialogues about local cultural (and other) development, with significant involvement of the community and local agents. The participatory cultural dynamic in Palmela is reflected both in the high levels of participation in “The Forum Culture” (2006) and in the way that FIAR has become a cultural feast that brings together the community of the village with the artistic community in a collective artistic experience.

More broadly, the public’s expectation for participation has fostered a local climate and ‘general culture’ that contributes to the quality of both democracy and cultural development, and forms a dynamic social platform. This local culture (broadly defined) is the glue that brings together the strong socio-cultural dynamic and widening pathways of participation, raising collective awareness and valorising both culture and the right to participate in public matters as fundamental aspects of the sustainability of this small city. In Palmela, residents’ long-standing high level of participation in culture influences the local system of values and puts

in motion codes of conduct for participation in the public arena, amplifying access and citizens' capabilities for participation in other urban policies and projects.

Different dimensions of local sustainability have been influenced within this context, including the *cultural dimension*, through, for example, building capacities and a permanent presence of citizens directly involved in creation and arts management; the *social dimension*, through nurturing an active, collaborative community with regular appropriation of the public space; and overall *governance*, through incorporating an array of levels of participation and democratic innovations within local governance processes. The remainder of this section outlines some preliminary observations and assessments in these three areas, noting that they are intertwined in practice.

### *Cultural dimension*

Local associations continuously feed an array of cultural activities into the local scene, and it is the widespread and long-running community engagement that fuels FIAR and other cultural activity, coupled with partnerships among organizations. Contemporary participatory practices in culture are driven by diverse partnerships that bring together the City, cultural organizations, and the community. FIAR, for example, regularly brings together a variety of partners into an area of on going collaboration, incorporating different levels of participation within planning, production, and reception phases. Municipal cultural staff members see themselves as animators, researchers, and mediators in the territory's communities, viewing artistic intervention as "imminently political and social" (P8, min. 3). Local cultural policies bring together both the broad and narrow senses of culture.

Within this context, widespread public participation in cultural activities is an important means to provide citizens with the skills and confidence to express themselves in public arenas – both cultural and political – and thus reduce inequalities of expression and participation in public life. The continuous participative planning, organization, and implementation processes serve to enlighten both the cultural and civic dimensions of the community. Over the years, citizens' capacities have grown, with intentional attention directed to building various capacities, including the development of skills in arts management. For example, FIAR has incubated new and pre-existing cultural projects developed by artists and groups of artists from the municipality. Some, such as Os Ausentes do Alentejo, a group of Cante Alentejano<sup>13</sup> singers, began as amateurs but with the mentoring and training efforts of FIAR's directors have become semi-professional and gained regional and national visibility. In other cases, the creators were already on a path of professionalization and FIAR pushed them forward into national and international networks and circuits of culture, such as the maestro and composer Jorge Salgueiro.

This approach reflects a long-term organizational commitment to the traditions of public associative activity and fostering citizen engagement in both cultural activities and in community life more generally. For example, the participation of the Association of Seniors from Palmela in the first editions of the Festival led to

the creation of the theatre group *As Avozinhas* (“The Grannies” in English) in 2009. This group contributes positively to the personal and interpersonal development of elderly citizens as well as to social and community development through active participation in new experiences of contemporary arts.

### *Social dimension*

Through partnerships and arrays of activities, the pathways of citizen participation in Palmela are enlarged, activating individual and collective agency while reinforcing the focus on what the community can do for itself with available resources (Sani et al., 2015). Many ties coexist within and among different networks. Being a small city, sometimes these ties are networks of influence in which dubious or awkward situations might happen, like overlapping positions in the City, in the political parties, and in non-governmental organizations. But this a consequence, and probably a lesser evil, of a community in which participation is high and quite common, either by attending and engaging in cultural activities, or by engaging in the organizational life of associations and collectivities, in which citizens develop their argumentative and dialogical skills.

Through FIAR, relations among citizens, members’ associations, and City Council and staff are strengthened and the public sphere is reinforced and potentially expanded through enhanced cross-sectorial dialogues. In creating spaces in which these relations are nurtured, FIAR raises the possibility of extending or transforming these partnerships into crucibles for social innovations, in what Dragičević et al. (2015) see as a path to expand the role of culture in the public sphere as a public good and a right.

### *Governance*

The long-running participatory practices in culture, grounded in a rich associative territory, set the stage for introducing participatory initiatives in different public policy areas. In general, as citizens’ skills and confidence to express themselves in public arenas grow (e.g., through cultural participation), raising their competences of expression and the norms of conduct in public life, the public sphere itself incrementally expands, becoming accessible to more and more people over time and reducing inequalities of expression and participation in public life. In Palmela, this process has created a virtuous cycle in which a wide array of citizens, many starting by participating in arts and cultural activities, have become more willing to participate in processes of public policies (cultural policies as well as policies in other areas). This rich democratic field has, in turn, provided fertile ground for the development of more participative models of urban management and governance.

In its politics and policies, the City of Palmela has acknowledged the associative movement as something very valuable that needs to be in the centre of cultural policies and that influences political life more generally. As one interviewee noted,

... when I arrived here I was a bit surprised with the gregarious level of these communities. This gregarious level manifested itself in what, in behaviour, it is not, I mean, in assembly situations, ... I found that people were simply, spontaneously, and quickly taking the initiative to speak and discuss

.... Over the years, I think I learned here, in relation to the municipality of Palmela, that this fact, this predisposition to be present, to say your opinion, to take sides in matters, I came to realize that maybe is related with the associative and community tradition ... (P1, parag. 2)

The strong associative movement..., which is alive and moves and is demanding, must have an answer, must be accompanied, must have our presence as a public responsibility... (P1, parag. 96)<sup>14</sup>

Since the 1990s, a participatory model of urban governance has taken root in Palmela, influenced by its “citizen traditions,” and an interactive participation takes place in public meetings and events. In these times of crisis for representative democracy, Palmela has expanded the possibilities for its citizens to participate in the decision-making, planning, and regulation of urban life and its sustainability. The local management of power is handled through a participative management approach in which dialogue and interaction about public policies take place through open forums (for example, the Palmela Forum of 2000 and ‘Culture Pamela 21’ in 2006, mentioned earlier), advisory councils (for example, the Local Council of Education and the Local Council for Social Action), and participative projects (for example, the municipal Participatory Budget, and the ‘I Participate’ programme and projects directed to children, described in footnote 6).

Public participation has also been integrated into the multiple community projects launched in the 1990s and the following decades. These projects have articulated different dimensions of local sustainability and established bridges between culture and education, environment, and economic development. For example, Fantasiarte, a project of education through the arts using the resources of Palmela’s artistic community, was launched in 1994 as a joint initiative of the departments of culture and education of the City and is still active today. Over the years, the project has been responsible for the incubation of associative initiatives and groups of theatre and, especially, for the preparation of citizens to become more active in their communities and even to become leaders. A second example is the urban regeneration program, Recovery and Dynamization of the Palmela Historical Centre (2009), which brought together organizations from multiple sectors (cultural, social, business, etc.) to focus on revitalization of the historic centre of the city in a sustainable manner.

Altogether, the participatory processes within cultural life, urban governance, and arts management seem to benefit each other, restoring and reinforcing the ties between the personal and community life. These ties become collective memories that carry huge potential to reinvent and augment the community’s rhythms and intense dynamics in public space. Cultural participation continually feeds a

collective memory of shared experiences, giving rise to a collective imaginary in which culture and engagement in community life become organic parts of Palmela's model and dynamics of development. This is certainly not a definite dynamic, but a cyclical one, susceptible to advances and withdrawals, which create a collective awareness of the relevance and power of collective action.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Palmela provides a case where four important elements come together: a long-term legacy of active, community-driven cultural participation; citizens' expectations for and valuing of participation and engagement in cultural and civic activities and processes; an openness of local institutions to cooperate and partner on initiatives; and a willingness of local organizations to develop diverse types of opportunities and expanding pathways for public participation. Outcomes of this dynamic include: individual and collective skill development and self-confidence to speak and act in public situations; valorisation and nurturing of shared public values and expectations of engaged participation; a cooperative social fabric, regularly renewed, rewoven, and extended; and the development of a shared imaginary and moments of collective memory linked to collective action. Together, these elements have created and fuelled participative dynamics and governance in the city, fostering articulations among different sectors and cooperation among diverse actors, expanding the local public sphere, and forming the overarching framework for community-engaged, locally resonant, and sustainable development trajectories.

Palmela's cultural and municipal organizations take advantage of its small scale to promote community involvement. The long-term participative approaches embedded in their governance configure a strong sense of place on the "throwntogetherness" of Palmela (Gilmore, 2013) and the "vernacular" forms of participation have inspired the introduction of democratic innovations, like participatory budgeting, in urban governance. As a moment of reflection on the ongoing research, this paper has examined how the public processes of participation in Palmela, crystallized in the FIAR festival, reflect positive relations between participation in culture and in governance processes. It considered how this participation contributes to the local sustainability of Palmela in terms of enhancing and propelling cultural and urban governance, articulating between different domains of society, and expanding the local public sphere. More broadly, it also aimed to inform thinking about the role of cultural activities in the context of local sustainability by exploring how public engagement/civic participation and cultural participation are linked.

From a research perspective, many challenges remain, for example, the difficulties of directly linking engaged cultural participation with the multidimensional aspects of local sustainability processes in a community, which are time-specific and simultaneously influenced by multiple factors and social impulses. The multiple definitions and aspects of participation in culture further complicate this endeavour. Moreover, while relations between cultural engagement

and other public participation are evident on a general scale, they are difficult to track more concretely within the “messiness” of everyday life, personal pathways, and community change. The research continues with particular attention to aspects related to sustainability, including the organizational challenges for collective cultural projects as FIAR and the articulation of agendas in order for such cultural initiatives to remain socially innovative and proactive, open to dialogue with the community, and linked to the longer-term sustainable development of the territory.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The research is part of ongoing doctoral research that focuses on the strengthening of social, civic, and political participation of citizens as one of the main challenges in the governance of cities today. It investigates how this issue has been addressed within small and medium-sized cities through comparative research between Portuguese and Canadian cities.
- <sup>2</sup> The sustainability dimension is informed by Polese and Stren (2000); Ahern (2002); European Council of Town Planners (2002); and Ferreira (2005).
- <sup>3</sup> This section has been developed from reviews of a wide array of local documents and the interviews conducted as part of the broader research project.
- <sup>4</sup> Two projects and a programme have been developed under this plan. The project “I Participate” brings practices of participation in decision-making into the educational context. The project “Local Power: I Know, I Participate” aims to promote dialogue among children and local elected politicians. The programme “Acting for the Rights: I Participate,” developed in partnership with UNICEF, aims to stimulate educational environments that are more inclusive, participative and respecting of children’s rights.
- <sup>5</sup> Participation in international networks has been important for the City, which has been open to embrace and introduce new paradigms. For example, Palmela is a member of networks such as Local Agenda 21, Educating Cities, the Child Friendly Cities Initiative, and Agenda 21 for Culture.
- <sup>6</sup> In 2015, the program was revised through a highly participative process, in which more than 100 members of cultural, sports and recreational associations and collectives participated.
- <sup>7</sup> The Palmela territory consists of five parts: three urban districts, including the villages of Palmela, Pinhal Novo, and Quinta do Anjo, and two big rural districts: Marateca and Poceirão.
- <sup>8</sup> Among them, the company O Bando, which specializes in street theatre as participation in community life, is one of the most recognized in the Portuguese cultural scene and one of the oldest cultural cooperatives. It started in 1974, just after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April Portuguese Revolution (when many joint initiatives were triggered) and has had a permanent residence in Palmela since 2000.
- <sup>9</sup> Dance activities are promoted by the City in its Municipal Program of Dance through support to DançArte, a dance company that has its permanent residence in Palmela, with whom the City co-organizes Dance Week, an important event in the dance panorama of the country.
- <sup>10</sup> *Fiar* translates to “spinning” in English.
- <sup>11</sup> In recent years, severe economic constraints resulting from the national economic crisis and austerity policies have forced many cuts in culture, and the continued realization of the Festival has become

uncertain. Since 2014 the FIAR association has had to drastically reduce its activity, suspending the Festival's regular edition. However, it still keeps the project alive with smaller initiatives in the public space, anticipating better days for financial support to give continuity to the collective work.

<sup>12</sup> This old and strong associative dynamic, which has been essentially built through cultural projects, ranging from over-100-year-old cultural collectives, to municipal programmes of theatre, music and dance, to education in the arts at all schools in Palmela, to collective projects that bring together old and new artistic languages through old and new associations, such as within FIAR.

<sup>13</sup> Cante Alentejano is a Portuguese music genre based on vocal music from the Alentejo region, which was designated UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2014.

<sup>14</sup> All quotes from interviews conducted in this research, translated from Portuguese by lead author.

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