

HISTORY, CHANGES AND THE HERITAGE PROTECTION OF TRADITIONAL URBAN CENTRES IN ALENTEJO



In this paper we reflect on the importance of the built heritage in Portugal's inland regions, considering two particular case studies in the Alentejo region, Mértola, in the south, and Estremoz, to the north. We conclude that researching, valuing, and rehabilitating the historical centers of territories falling within the Low Density category may play a fundamental role within the context of policies against decline and desertification. With this aim, it is fundamental to consider the processes of creation and transformation of these built ensembles inside public policies and to pursue alternative models of governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The significant changes that southern Portugal's urban centres have gone through in recent decades have not, in the majority of cases, been thoroughly accompanied by studies documenting either these transformations or the realities prevailing prior to such major alterations. Such changes involved not only the abrupt detachment of historical centres from the surrounding urban areas, but also irrevocable shifts in perception as regards traditional housing and the living conditions it provided. Both represent a threat of disappearance for the built historical ensembles, in which abandonment advances. And yet, this built legacy might provide added value able to invert the region's cycle of decline, even at the territorial scale.

The primary economic activity of the region of Alentejo, in southern Portugal, stems from agriculture. The substantial changes that occurred in the agricultural production system in the mid-20th century led to a great decrease in labour needs, and, consequently, to rising unemployment in a society then highly dependent on rural labour. The resultant rural exodus led to deep changes in the Alentejo's social organisation and settlements, from small rural hamlets through to mid- and large consolidated cities. Ultimately, it meant transversal regional depopulation. In some cases, the system of small rural hamlets has decayed to the point of near extinction. Urban centres, and especially the historical centres, reached the lowest point in a process of decay that reaches back to even before the mid-20th century. For some time, inhabitants have been moving away from the historical quarters – often walled-in and difficult to access – to modern fashioned, well-connected neighbourhoods. This translated into a peripheral condition for the historical centre, left without any function inside the city's organic relations, and located inside cities that are themselves peripheral according to the national and even regional realities, often correspondingly overlooked by high-level policy-making.

Yet, this paper argues that this double peripheral condition of the Alentejo's historical centres can be a main factor for both their threat of collapse as well as their heritage conservation. The abandonment to which

historic quarters were subject has greatly influenced their state of conservation. Physical degradation implies a major threat of these buildings disappearing, making their survey and documentation correspondingly urgent. Of even more urgency is discussion about this legacy and its importance, today debated within the framework of the desertification/turistification binomial for urban centres. If preservation actions do not take place, the threat of this legacy disappearing shall become real. However, the same abandonment that caused conservation hazards is the main factor enabling conservation actions to be carried out according to strict values of authenticity. Deprived of inhabitants who might feel the urge to update the living conditions of their dwellings, the historical centres have been “frozen” in an immutability that allowed them to maintain their spatial and formal features today regarded as obsolete for contemporary living needs. There was no direct break with ancient traditions to impel alterations to buildings and thus, displays of continuity in local community living habits can still be clearly seen today. The value of authenticity has not yet been distorted by pseudo-historical interpretations of the traditional realities and that therefore reflects the opportunity to develop methodical studies and surveys for these secular ensembles.

However, converting heritage into added value needs more than studying and preservation. As the Vienna Memorandum states, today’s challenge for the historic urban landscape is to facilitate socio-economic changes and growth, while caring for the inherited townscape setting. Cultural tourism is currently one of the most popular options adopted by municipalities and policy-makers on heritage due largely to its potential to create jobs and retain the younger population. On the other hand, cultural tourism may lead to the threat of massification, which has often contributed to the loss of social, cultural and even environmental sustainability. Can public policies invert the cycle of decline and convert heritage into a strong asset for the structured development of the Alentejo’s territory?

Alentejan historical centres share certain characteristics regarding their built and landscape heritage. Almost all cases are confined by systems of defensive walls, or their remaining sections – mostly of medieval origin and modernised during the 17th century. The urban fabric of medieval origin reveal the regularity of layouts and planned axes as well as a regular set of plot dimensions, identified as features of a particular Portuguese medieval urbanism¹. These urban traits have been well studied for Évora² or Elvas³. Typologically speaking, those urban fabrics indiscriminately contain a large range of edifices, mixing governmental, religious, public and private places. Even regarding housing, there is almost invariably no spatial separation between classes, with common and erudite types appearing side by side⁴. This feature runs transversally throughout the country, noted even in the capital, Lisbon⁵. During the 20th century, with the evolution in notions of heritage and conservation, Alentejan historical centres were subject to different approaches in valorisation and tourism policies, resulting in a disparity of outcomes. One of the first cases to achieve prominence, and one of the most paradigmatic for the region, is Monsaraz⁶. In the 1960s, there was an attempt to buy the entire village

one house at a time by a non-local private citizen. Among other techniques to reach this goal, the most popular was intense bullying of local owners. This accelerated a process of abandonment that the village has never recovered from. Gentrification only increased with the multiplication of tourist accommodation and converted the village into a touristic attraction of empty white houses. Other cases have been far more successful in creating an identity while contributing to the level of social cohesion prevailing locally. In Castelo de Vide, preservation based on architectural research⁷ led to the valorisation of a long-overlooked Jewish heritage, attracting a specific segment of tourists searching for their Sephardic roots in the area. Its neighbour, Marvão has also deployed the tools of research to highlight its Roman and medieval heritage, as well as enhancing the value of the integrated urban and natural landscape⁸, in keeping with the Vienna Memorandum guidelines⁹. One of the most successful case studies, Mértola, has built its strategy on forty years of archaeological research, which translated into the project “Vila Museu”¹⁰ – a scientific, educational and exhibition plan spread across the village, that we will return to below.

2. THE ORIGINS AND HISTORIES OF TWO CASES FROM INLAND ALENTEJO

It is always a matter of perspective. Definitions of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula have always depended on where the centre of power laid. Alentejo means literally ‘*Além (do) Tejo*’, that is, the lands beyond the Tagus River. Arising from a northern standpoint, this view comes from the Christian *Reconquista*, which placed the region’s borders on the Tagus River (North), Guadiana River (East) and Caldeirão mountains (South). Beforehand, the same territory had been part of the Gharb Al-Andaluz, that is, the westernmost part of the Moorish domains of Al-Andaluz, during the Islamic Golden Age. As part of Southern Iberia, the region belongs to the Mediterranean world, and has participated in its connections and routes since Hellenic times. The southern plains opened up to Mediterranean influences and developed an early and long urban tradition affiliated with Classical Civilizations and Islamic urbanism¹¹. From then on, it would be the importance of the frontier between Portugal and Spain that was to determine the urban hierarchy, and directly influencing city morphologies and layouts. Despite the Atlantic shore that marks the Western border of the Alentejo, the territory reveals strong interior territorial features regarding the organization of its urban network. The frontier’s condition even determined the morphology of these cities as they became militarized in their essence, with constant defence requirements. Fortification lines, with fortresses, walls and bulwarks, succeeded each other over time, clearly marking the expansion zones of these cities. The Alentejo’s urban landscape is one of compact essence, where we can observe a clear difference between urban space and rural space. Compact urban forms derive from land features such as aridity and the lack of running water, that resulted in a large-plot culture-based agriculture – cereal – with long fallow periods¹². These farming needs of land forced the built settlements to densify in order to set free the maximum possible arable land. To this condition, there should be added the flat and level essence of the territory, which allows for compact urban

towns to take regular geometric forms. Without any rugged terrain to condition their urban shapes, settlements were able to gain rational, human-determined contours generated essentially by territorial route networks¹³.

Mértola (see figure 1) and Estremoz (see figure 2) are two settlements located within close distances of the border with Spain. Nevertheless, they both represent different territorial conditions, with Mértola in the region's hilly southern extreme and Estremoz on the northern plains. Their border locations ensure they share common urban features, such as their hill top locations and patterns of urban development conditioned by fortified walls. They otherwise differ in both size and longevity. The first settlements identified in Mértola date back to the Iron Age, a time when life in Iberia was most effervescent in the vicinity of its Mediterranean ports and their on-going metal trading¹⁴. Located at the furthest point of the Guadiana's navigability, Mértola expanded as a strategic port connecting with the Mediterranean sea routes', the Alentejo's land routes and the Iberian Pyrite Belt¹⁵, flourishing throughout the Roman and Islamic periods. Its shape adapts to the headland where it stands, between the Guadiana and a tributary river, with the town wall running parallel to the river along its longer side as do the main streets, only otherwise connected by minor transversal pathways (Fig. 3). The housing typologies inside the walled perimeter trace their roots back to the medieval period. The urban strata prior to 1200 only become visible through archaeological surveys¹⁶.



Fig. 1: Mértola overview. (Source: N/A).



Fig. 2: Estremoz overview. (Source: N/A).



Fig. 3: Mértola's complete ground floor housing plan. (Source: N/A).

Mértola's decline in importance began with 12th century *Reconquista* when the centres of power shifted northwards. The same period sees the *ex novo* foundation of Estremoz.¹⁷ Although small communities might have existed on the site where the city today stands, its formal establishment as a village occurs in 1258. The fortress-village construction followed the land occupation-policy of the first Portuguese kings: founding settlements to control strategic points in the newly conquered territory. The location of Estremoz marks the confluence of the ancient Lisbon-Mérida route with many of the structural routes through the Portuguese territory south of the Tagus River and represented a crucial point of defence of the capital Lisbon in case of invasion from Castile/Spain.¹⁸ Its urban design clearly reflects Portuguese medieval urban ideals as applied to empty ground: the occupation of hill top, a linear structural axis (*Rua Direita*) connecting the civil and religious centres of power, and a regular allotment design of pre-determined plot sizes.¹⁹ Due to its location, Estremoz developed with a predominantly military character – as opposed to Mértola's more significant commercial character – although later, after the boarder with Spain had stabilized and Estremoz's defensive purpose was emptied, the fact it was well located on commercial routes helped prolong some of the city's prominence for an additional period of time.



Fig. 4: Estremoz' ground floor housing plan inside Castel neighbourhood. (Source: N/A).

3. THE HERITAGE OF HISTORICAL CENTRES WITHIN A DOUBLE PERIPHERAL CONTEXT

For both towns, the sense of decline greatly increased in the second half of the 20th century. As with much of inland Portugal, the Alentejo suffered from massive rural exodus. Deep changes in agricultural working processes have led to a massive population outflux towards Lisbon's metropolitan area, emptying out rural hamlets. The network of rural occupation, formed by hamlets smaller than villages – known as *montes* – directly connected with farming labour²⁰, has greatly decayed. Inhabitants have therefore concentrated in urban settlements however small scaled they might be. The population density is very low, with averages of 100 inhab/km², and only rising to values of 200 inhab/km² in the main urban centres of Beja, Évora and Portalegre²¹. For consolidated urban centres, such as these cases studies, the rural exodus translated into two oscillations in the numbers of inhabitants. Firstly, in the late 1950's, there was an increase in the urban population as rural workers moved from smaller hamlets to medium-sized cities. There was demographic pressure on the existing housing stock and new neighbourhoods were built. However, this population drainage was a regional phenomenon, as medium-scale cities were unable to provide enough number of jobs in order to compensate for the loss in agriculture labour. City populations decreased, with the most significant migration movement favouring the highly industrialized areas on Lisbon's periphery.

For Mértola, this exodus meant a constant population outflow from the inner-wall historical centre (see figure 5). The village had re-expanded outside the walls since the early 16th century, after it had shrunk back to the walled perimeter in the previous two hundred years²². The new neighbourhoods of *Arrabalde*s were structured by the land and river routes that connected Mértola to the Algarve and Beja. At the end of the 19th century, the construction of a bridge over the *Oeiras* tributary to connect the roads to the Algarve and Beja, and the new profile of the latter, drew the inner-wall village away from the regional route-system²³. The historical centre, built upon its ability to connect river and land routes, lost its function when it became eccentric to the prevailing road network. It would become definitely marginalized after the construction of a bridge over the Guadiana in the 1960's, and the *Arrabalde da Vila* converted into the new centre. Trade and services move to *Arrabalde*, and wealthy homes followed suit. A major blow stoking population flight was the closure of Minas de São Domingos in the 1960's, bringing an end to the mining industry in Mértola's municipality. Since then, the number of inhabitants has fallen to less than one third (26,026 inhab. in 1960, 7,274 inhab. in 2011²⁴). The remaining population has much preferred to inhabit the easily accessible *Arrabalde*s rather than the old walled-in quarters.

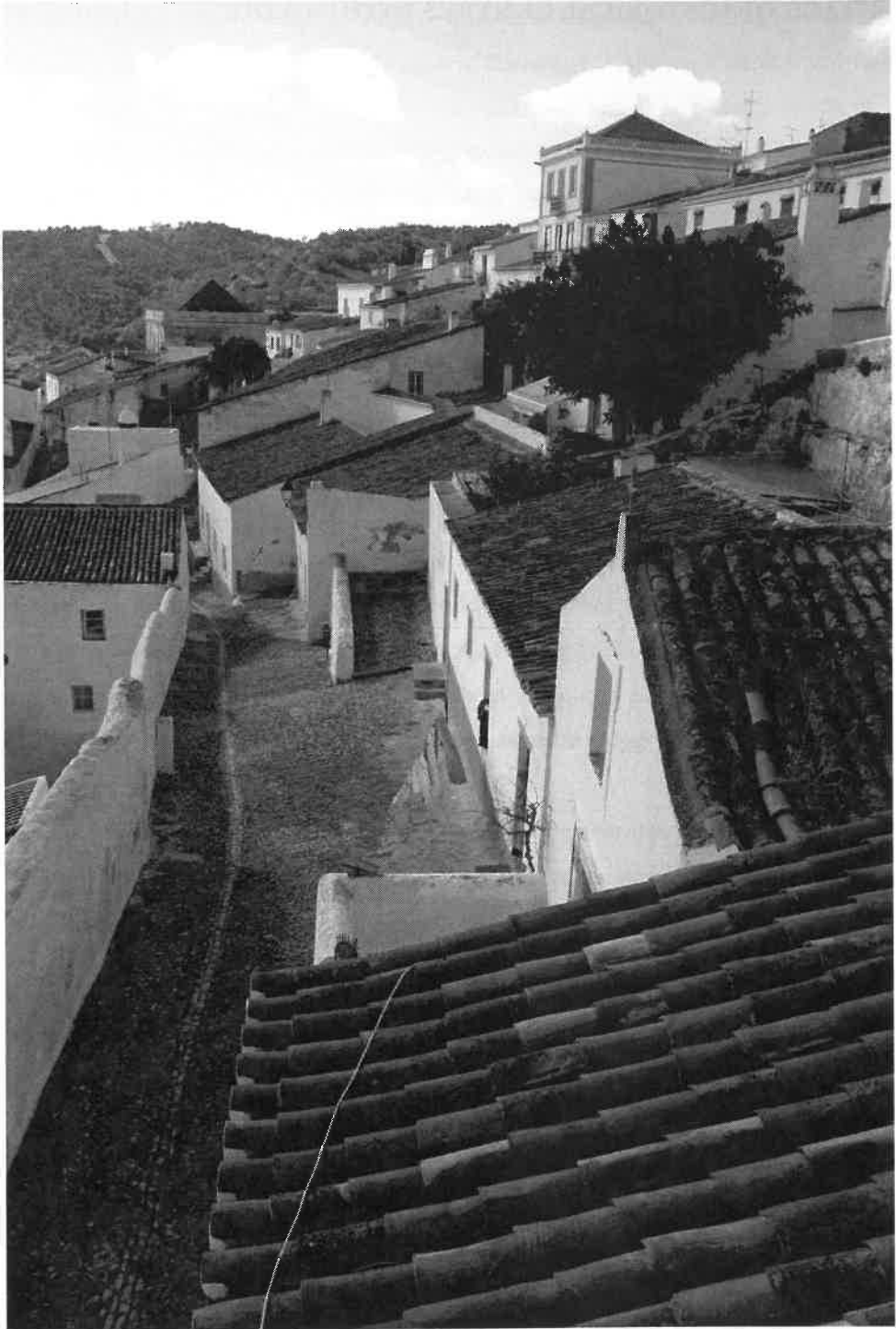


Fig. 5: Mértola's historic center. (Source: N/A).

For Estremoz, the expansion happened soon after its foundation. The original fortified neighbourhoods of *Castelo* (citadel) and habitational *Santiago* were soon crowded. From the 13th century onwards, the city began expanding organically down the hill, towards areas of fertile plain and alongside water streams²⁵. The plain also allowed large markets, promoting trade and crafts. When war returned, with the mid-17th century War of

Independence, Estremoz' strategic location made it the army's headquarters in the Alentejo. A new wall had to be erected, comprising an area almost seven times bigger than the original fortification. Gradually, the difficult to access hill tops were lagging behind the flat lands, and even the spheres of power, both governmental and religious, moved downwards in the 18th century.²⁶ During the 20th century, new neighbourhoods were built outside the lines of fortification. Firstly, single-family townhouses following the taste of an early-century merchant *bourgeoisie*, and from the 1960's onwards, residential complexes of multi-story buildings to accommodate new waves of urban population running away from rural satellite settlements. As in Mértola, the oldest quarters of historical centre, up on the hill tops, were left scarcely populated and favoured only by the poorest. The historical centres of both case studies thus reveal a double peripheral condition: they are marginal inside their towns, while the towns themselves are marginal regarding the national territorial level.

A vicious circle endures: old houses provide shabby living conditions, they remain uninhabited for longer periods and therefore degrade faster, becoming less and less prone to new tenants. The same logic applies to urban ensembles: the fewer the inhabitants, the fewer services and facilities an area gets, and the less able it becomes to hold onto its population. People are the key factor to the built environment and their absence the main thread to sustainable development, or indeed, any development at all. Why have they gone and how can they return?

The answer to the first question is well known. At the territorial level, both case studies have lost habitants due to economic factors. Their territory was not able to provide opportunities and sustain a considerable part of its population when the primary economic activity (agriculture) changed completely.²⁷ The context of a centralised policy-making country has also not helped in developing alternative economic activities or attracting investment in new fields for areas deemed as peripheral. At the local level, historic centres were perceived as the least suitable area for current lifestyle needs in now half-emptied settlements – transportation and mobility are often difficult, infrastructures old, shops and services scarce – and, since there was choice, people chose out. A similar detachment happened regarding traditional housing. The past half-century saw big changes in the perspective of which needs housing should meet. Traditional dwellings, often with layouts of 2 or 3 rooms, with very little room specialization, were deemed unfit for contemporary lifestyle needs. Many alterations are on-going, not only in the rearrangement of internal layouts, but also in the materials used. The shift from wooden beams to concrete slabs is one of the most commonly seen and most intrusive alterations, alongside recourse to plastic paint instead of limestone-based renders and mortars, or the usage of aluminium in place of wooden window and doorframes. The image sought is one that mimics the traditional, or an idealized view of the “traditional,” without incorporating either the right information at its base and without following its essential traits.

The answer to the second question, how to bring back inhabitants to historical centres, is the million dollar one. And this leads to another question; can the overlooked heritage of historical centres help them escape their peripheral condition?

There is, however, one tenuous silver lining in this set of circumstances. Depopulation meant empty buildings, and uninhabited buildings do not suffer conversion and transformation. The same occurs with houses rented to poor tenants, for low profit to the landlords: works are limited to conservation and minor repairs. This scenario allowed buildings to “freeze” in time, and today they show spatial and formal features very close to what they would have had half a century ago. There are even houses without proper internal bathroom installations, which, although dreadful for their occupants, does appropriately reflect the degree of immutability of these built ensembles. The silver lining lays in the opportunity to register, study and learn from what these well preserved housing and urban historical realities have to offer us today.

4. HERITAGE VALUE, POLICIES AND CULTURAL TOURISM

In recent times, cultural tourism has been simultaneously identified as both a factor of development and as a threat due to the overcrowding of the major, best-known heritage cities and monuments,²⁸ which has led to a loss of sustainability in terms of social, cultural and even environmental dimensions. However, in smaller scaled settlements, tourism is still chased with great deal of enthusiasm²⁹ and often seems to be the main reason driving public policies to incorporate heritage care among their priorities. In the case of the small historical settlements of Alentejo, such as Mértola or Estremoz, another feature is added to the factor of scale: their double peripheral condition and the subsequent depopulation that put employment promotion into a protagonist position within local policies. At this juncture, cultural and rural tourism industries are pointed out as unique opportunities to enhance local employability and, consequently, to anchor the young and productive population to particularly vulnerable rural areas.³⁰

In the case of Mértola, the first attempts to identify local heritage as a local development resource were not based on tourism but rather on archaeological activities, heritage-related education and scientific research, which supposed a wide variety of new employment niches that partially relieved massive depopulation from the late fifties through to the end of 20th Century. The framework project, *Mértola Vila Museu* (Mértola Museum Town), incorporated the whole historical area, as well as some points in the surrounding territory, into an integral heritage and museology strategy.³¹ This was firstly promoted by a local cultural and environmental association, (ADPM) which has lately given way for the creation of a research, cultural and social NGO (*Campo Arqueológico de Mértola*) that still today develops an intense field and produces academic

work. More recently, cultural tourism has gradually acquired a predominant position within local productive systems and, therefore, in the panorama of local policies. While it is not an emerging economic activity in the town, some key data, such as the number of visits, the variety in the birth places of tourists, the increase in available beds for overnight stays or even the opening of souvenirs and coffee shops and the creation of small tourism agencies, convey an idea about the way a small village with a traditional agrarian economy might turn itself into a tourist hotspot with a renewed, mostly tertiary sector, economy.³² This process has undeniably generated a collateral effect on the local population, as well as on heritage care policies. In that sense, public investment has focused on the refurbishment of public spaces and punctual archaeological interventions or architectural interventions in historic buildings. At the same time, major recent publicity campaigns have been developed to reinforce national and international tourism in the village, as well as in other rural settlements dispersed around the municipality, which have incorporated active tourism initiatives such as trekking, kayaking, birdwatching, or stargazing. Additionally, traditional activities such as fishing, hunting and artisan wine, bread, cheese or honey have been promoted by thematic fairs. On the other hand, the vernacular architecture has continued to suffer from a certain abandonment: while a few traditional houses have been refurbished as tourist apartments, the majority of the built heritage in the historical centre of Mértola is gradually getting depopulated, while new residential projects are planned and under development on the periphery.³³

In the case of Estremoz, tourism promotion has generally been less aggressive, even if the historic relevance of its ancient core and its territorial heritage have ensured the continuous presence of a cultural tourism industry. In fact, the national network of monument and historic hotels (originally named *pousadas* and now under private management) has been running in the castle located in the historic heart of the city ever since 1988, following a conversion project that first began in 1967, which conveys an idea of the relevance of Estremoz as a point of tourist interest ever since the last decades of the twentieth century. Nowadays, the tourism supply has expanded and diversified, with mid-range hotels, guesthouses and even camping sites. As for the promotion of cultural and architectural tourism, most museums and initiatives such as tours, itineraries or guided tours are promoted directly by the municipal council, which differentiates this case with that of Mértola considering the role of citizens and small local businesses within the development of tourism. Regarding the diversity of heritage assets that are valued for tourism promotion, military and religious heritage represent the main local attractions. In addition, there are specific actions to disseminate certain aspects of civil heritage, including some examples of vernacular architecture (see figure 6), as well as an explicit reference to the historic medieval neighbourhood of Santiago.³⁴ In addition to the options based on the recognised architectural heritage and the urban landscape of the historic centre, new museums with alternative options have been added, such as the School Museum, the Agricultural Museum, the Rural Museum, rooms dedicated to contemporary art or the House of Living Science. The heritage scattered throughout the territory also

emerges, on the one hand, through the promotion of Estremoz on the Alentejo winery route and, on the other, through the enhancement of two unique heritage features: the castle of Évoramonte (a village belonging to the municipality) and the set of marble quarries in the region, which extend to neighbouring towns and are now being disseminated and visited thanks to a partnership led by a research team³⁵.



Fig. 6: Estremoz' vernacular housing inside the Castle. (Source: N/A).

However, probably the initiative with the greatest impact in recent years on enhancing the cultural heritage of Estremoz has been the candidature and approval in December 2017 of the *Bonecos de Estremoz* for inclusion on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.³⁶ These figurative dolls are made out of clay and polychrome with different motifs using completely handcrafted techniques and represent an artistic expression linked to traditional knowledge. In this sense, World Heritage list applications have recently raised great interest among the municipalities of small and medium-sized towns in Alentejo, and they embody the more visible side of the Local, National and Regional Heritage Policies. Indeed, two cities in Alentejo are included in the World Heritage List (Évora since 1985 and Elvas since 2012), while three other candidatures currently belong to the indicative list: the Bulwarked Fortifications of the *Raia* (Border) – that includes Elvas and Marvão – the Cultural Landscape of Montado – a multifunctional agro-forestry-pastoral ecosystem – and, finally, Mértola, included in January 2017.³⁷ The city council is displaying great interest in this candidacy with the aim of raising the profile of Mértola in the world cultural and heritage scene, which could imply a substantial increase to tourist visits to a place that, due to its size and characteristics, has only very limited capacity.³⁸

Nevertheless, tourism-focused heritage dissemination must necessarily be accompanied by other kind of heritage policies, especially those that lead to the protection and preservation of authenticity. In fact, authenticity is one of the key factors required for the inclusion of cultural heritage assets onto the World Heritage List, by means of the identification of the Outstanding Universal Value. In any case, the assessment of the authenticity of heritage sites goes, in most cases, beyond the conservation and enhancement of great heritage assets, and is based on a good level of maintenance of traditional values and minor structures, especially vernacular architecture.

Delving deeper into this issue, the policies for preserving the authenticity of the Alentejo's traditional heritage take on a multi-level structure. First, the DGPC – the General Directorate for Cultural Heritage³⁹ identifies and establishes the national protection of individual heritage elements or heritage sites, especially historic urban sites. This body also deals with archaeological heritage and the establishment of cultural itineraries and thematic inventories, although there are only two in the case of the Alentejo region: The Cultural Itinerary of Historical Bridges and the Archaeological Itineraries of Alentejo and Algarve. Secondly, and given that Portugal's cultural and heritage competences are centralised, the regional administration (DRCAentejo) has few competences, and in terms of heritage policy they are reserved for protection⁴⁰. Its mission is, fundamentally, to articulate the services of the national leadership at the regional level. However, in terms of interaction with society, there are two particularly interesting initiatives: on the one hand, their support for cultural associativism and, on the other, for cultural patronage, which has an impact on the social appropriation of heritage and, therefore, on the maintenance of its authenticity. Thirdly, on a local level, the

cultural and heritage protection areas of the municipalities guarantee, through technical work and the preparation of protection plans, the safeguarding of traditional heritage and, more specifically, of vernacular architecture.



Fig. 7: Mértola's Vernacular house interior. (Source: N/A).

In the case of Mértola, the Plan for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historical Centre of Mértola⁴¹ was published in 1993. This instrument establishes the regulations for four areas that incorporate the heritage features protected by national cultural legislation: the Castle of Mértola, the Mosque-Mother Church, the historic urban fabric within the medieval wall and an access area, the annexed parking and vegetation area. This plan includes rules regarding the scope for modification of the buildings in the historic centre, with express mention of materials, construction techniques, composition of hollows, decoration of façades and other characteristics typical of traditional local architecture. The Municipal Master Plan, published in 1995, extends these guidelines to the rest of the historic centres of the municipal territory.^{42 43} As for Estremoz, and even though it does not have a Safeguard Plan in force, the First Revision of the Municipal Master Plan was approved in 2015, which includes an exhaustive inventory of architectural heritage assets, as well as with a high level of detail determining the different areas either with a historical character or with a cultural, architectural, archaeological, landscape or environmental value. Although vernacular architecture is not explicitly referenced in this document, the regulations for intervention and conservation in so-called "cultural" areas stipulate the approach to colours, materials, traditional building solutions and façade compositions and thereby indicating a certain interest in the conservation of traditional architectural elements.

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNANCE POLICIES FOR INLAND REGIONS

Irrespective of the regulations, the most important contribution to the active conservation stems from community appropriation or rejection of their own heritage. When there is no significant break in secular traditions, communities display a greater tendency to continuously make use of their structures, places and monuments.⁴⁴ Retaining their classic uses fosters conservation processes, undertaken naturally by the communities themselves. Moreover, this sense of historical continuity contributes to a community's own cultural identity, which then reflects in the understanding of its past, the appreciation of its values and boosting its self-esteem.⁴⁵ Furthermore, community identity and self-appreciation have traditionally led to a better enhancement of heritage diffusion politics, as well as the better valuation of the respective assets by outsiders.⁴⁶

The absence of any connection to the past endangers the cultural continuity of places, and that poses the greater risk to a site's identity. Over the past half century, the Alentejo's social and cultural demographic profile has experienced deep transformations, akin to civilizational changes, that deeply compromised the validity of ancient habits. The rejection of ancient models brought about the loss of usage and meaning for built structures in historic centres – fortifications, religious architecture, traditional houses – making them empty shells. Two major issues thus arise.

Firstly, the abandonment of said buildings leads to their physical and social deterioration. Historic areas face the stigma of poverty and exclusion. In fact, the identification of local communities with the historic urban fabric often carries certain difficulties deriving from a change in the meaning of their built heritage: old traditional houses are associated with poverty, precariousness and abandonment⁴⁷. Thus, it is essential for development to overcome that stigma through, but not exclusively, heritage-valorisation policies. In this sense, heritage policies should be oriented towards appreciating a community's values and structures, and reinforcing the cultural identity prevailing. Thanks to the implicit meaning of cultural heritage, deeply linked with a sense of common assets, cultural identity works as an outstanding governance tool, as a catalyst of the population's political involvement, particularly useful when dealing with citizen participation and governance⁴⁸. In fact, the deterioration experienced in historic centres also relates to the low rate of popular engagement in civic discussion, either due to absence or old age, when it should actually be increased.⁴⁹ As a good example of practice, we should mention the case of Mértola, where the Vila Museu project particularly focused on involving the local population (Fig. 8). In this sense, local development was one of the main aims, not only oriented to the promotion of tourism by means of the enhancement of cultural resources, but particularly in terms of transmission of scientific knowledge to the community, with training activities for all age groups and the creation of new employment niches related to cultural heritage, among other actions⁵⁰.



Fig. 8: Mértola's Historic centre resident (Florinda Santos Colaço). (Source: N/A).

Besides the importance of knowledge transmission, the valorisation of good cases of architectonic rehabilitation may also attract new occupants to the historic centres. Living in traditional buildings adapted to contemporary needs while retaining their cultural values can be appealing to new population segments. The second issue to be addressed is, therefore, complexity within the rehabilitation of traditional housing. The abovementioned differences between the old and new residential standards have led, among other effects, to a general tendency to rebuild former partitions, aggregating two or more fractions in order to get larger/smaller rooms in a different distribution of the domestic space. However, the redistribution of the irregular plots of vernacular architecture has been a recurrent resource throughout history, and has not prevented their

preservation. This fact reflects the sheer need to establish policies and planning instruments with a certain flexibility to permit and stimulate the integration of diverse historic spaces into the contemporary housing stock. In this sense, protection and rehabilitation strategies tailored to each case and incorporating the user's opinion into decision-making have proven the most effective approaches.⁵¹

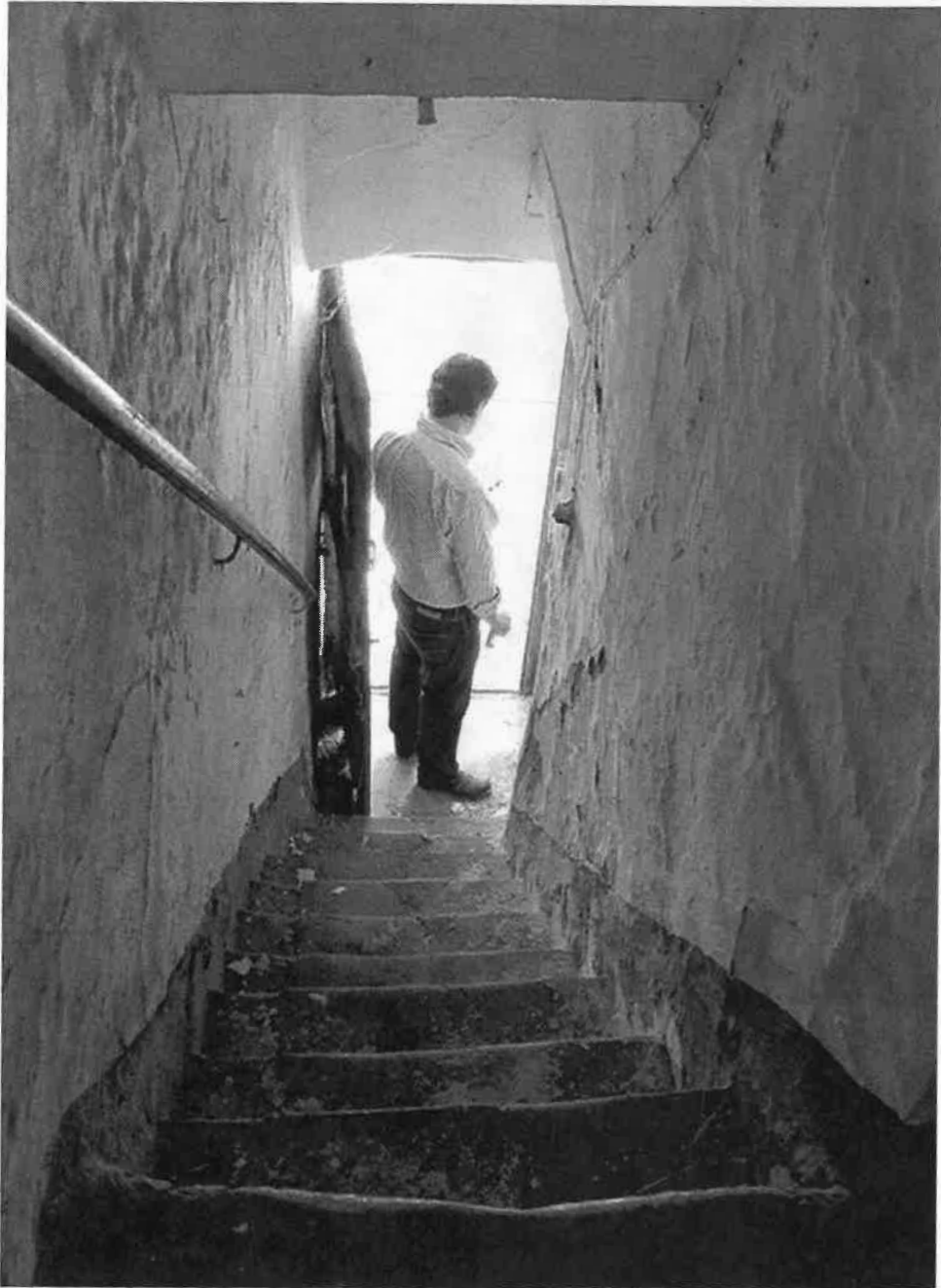


Fig. 9: Estremoz' Vernacular house interior with residente. (Source: N/A).

Furthermore, the risks deriving from an absence of structured information and proper knowledge of both the physical and the immaterial threats traditional housing today faces – difficulties in maintaining the original plot

structure or a loss of authenticity derived from *façadism* strategies – need avoiding. This aim is only attainable by empowering scientific knowledge as the core of heritage policies making. Once again, the key to differentiating a good rehabilitation project from a damaging approach lies in information and scientific knowledge, and the ability to transfer this knowledge through simple rules or guidelines from the regulatory/administrative entities to the general population.

As mentioned when describing vernacular architecture, historic centres may incorporate huge differences in terms of their respective needs, depending on factors such as size, population, cultural characterization, touristic attraction, accessibility, etc. Indeed, the application of generic policies disregarding territorial inequalities, for example the coastline/interior dichotomy, translates into a disparity of results. These reflect in touristic-related heritage policies including caps on local accommodation licenses, which return good and positive results in overcrowded monumental and coastal destinations but that generate pernicious effects in small inland destinations.

This issue strongly relates to the following point: the need to ensure policy coherence between local and central governments. This also brings us back to the concept of governance, in this case applied to the interrelationships between the different levels of administration, including European guidelines. Governance implies progressive administrative decentralization and regulatory government over an implementing approach able to allow alternative actors to emerge. Civic engagement, as referred to above, is fundamental to deploying participative and deliberative decision-making solutions. In this sense, the general determinations must include the scope for establishing policies of differentiation, based on studies adapted to the economic, social, cultural or architectural fabric at the regional and local levels and avoiding the risks arising from an excessively generalized approach.⁵²

6. CONCLUSION

The debate around the conservation and transformation of the historic urban landscape has, over recent years, concentrated on the problems stemming from the massification of cultural tourism (not only in terms of the criteria for rehabilitation of the built heritage but also the profound alterations caused to the social fabric), in particular, in territories with greater economic dynamism. However, the majority of low density areas in inland regions face a set of antagonistic problems interrelated with the lack of support for the rehabilitation of privately owned built heritage alongside the ageing and population desertification of central areas in these urban settlements.

The ongoing research has taken place in different towns across the interior of the Alentejo, such as Mértola or Estremoz, with significantly different characteristics (in terms of their geographic locations, historical processes of formation and the characteristics of their built environments) and demonstrated the importance attributed by the local institutions to the preservation of heritage from the perspective of local development. Structural threats on declining peripheral settlements cannot be solved exclusively through culture and heritage promotion, but these factors are key to sustaining progress. They are not only creators of financial income – as they seem from the tourism perspective – but also provide self-esteem to communities by rooting them in their history. Development based on cultural values, history and territorial features allows the continuity of century-old physical and cultural realities and gives proportional scale to plans of development.

The current touristic flows to interior areas is not of such dimension as to create risks of unsustainability. There is, therefore, the opportunity to reconcile heritage conservation and study with growth in tourism, if policies pursue that goal. In order to do so, two key factors need consideration. Firstly, policy-making entities understand territorial inequalities and adapt heritage and economic policies to local realities. Regulations should be adjusted to the architectonic and economic realities of the different regions; as such can only be done whenever local institutions become more autonomous from central government and able to create their own guidelines and politics. The ideal context should incorporate a national regulatory framework with distinguishing regional policies.

Secondly, heritage valorisation simply must stem from rigorous scientific research and following international recommendations on heritage, historic landscapes and encompassing civil society. Only thus can heritage become a factor of external attraction while simultaneously contributing to local development and social cohesion. Most of all, economic development should not depend strictly on tourism influxes. In line with heritage scientific research, the importance of knowledge creation and transference through educational activities can provide income while engaging local habitants, as seen in Mértola over the past decades. Even in the field of tourism, scientific research activities and knowledge-production on heritage attract more demanding types of tourists, helping to contain the risks of mass-tourism.

To archive the goals of sustainable growth and the fixation of populations in inland Alentejo, a greater diversification of economic activities is still needed. The major difficulty encountered by public policies for inland areas is the incapacity of cultural tourism development within an economically diverse context. Although the diversification of activities is a harder strategy to implement than the creation of unidirectional tourism services, this nevertheless allows for a greater variety of job positions. Scientific and research activities are some of the most important in generating quality jobs and enable the settlement of high qualified fringes of the population. The search for economic models that bring about population renewal in interior

settlements – although beyond the scope of this paper – is crucial both to preserving active communities in the region and to retaining the meaning of the built heritage landscape.

Finally, we should ask ourselves how the heritage assets of these historical centres might help them escape from the abovementioned double peripheral condition. On the one hand, historic centres carry in them the opportunities for local development and anchoring especially the younger population. Despite the risks of touristification, we must keep in mind that employability and access to services are two key aspects for retaining people. Desertification and abandonment are the biggest threats for historical centres, particularly for those in the Alentejo periphery. On the other hand, the process of identification implicit in the construction of the concept of cultural heritage also holds the ability to work the other way: this might help aggregating local communities. To meet this aim, governance and citizen participation emerge as essential tools for enhancing people's appropriation of assets. That is why heritage policies should be strongly oriented to the local population in addition to the external cultural tourism focused promotion.

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