

Chapter 14

Aveiro: Civic Movements to Promote Smarter Decisions for the Future of the City

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Abstract Aveiro is the second largest city in the Centro Region of Portugal. In 2009, a major urban regeneration project named ‘The Sustainability Park’ (*Parque da Sustentabilidade*) was launched by the city council. Supported by the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF 2007–2013), the project involved 15 local and national partners, including the University of Aveiro and the Association of Small Businesses (commerce), and a budget of nearly 14 million euro, subdivided into 17 subprojects. This chapter presents the story of the project. As soon as the project became public, primarily through the media, citizens protested about the fact that they had not participated in the proposal’s design, nor had they been informed, to say the very least. This situation prompted a strong civic movement to call the City Council’s attention to the potential harmful impact of these projects on the local environment and on the daily lives of residents. This contribution describes how movements tried to engage in a series of talks with the politicians involved and bring tacit and codified knowledge to the process.

Keywords Urban regeneration • Public space • Design for sustainability

14.1 The Context

With approximately 55,000 inhabitants, Aveiro is the second largest city in the Centro Region of Portugal. As the capital of the Aveiro inter-municipal community subregion, a large number of administrative, cultural and health services are concentrated in this city. It is the home of the University of Aveiro, attracting thousands of students from across the country and standing out as a catalyst for local and regional development. Often described as the Venice of Portugal for its canals and boats, Aveiro is usually seen by tourists and local residents as a good place for walking and cycling because there are no hills.

In 2009, a major urban regeneration project named ‘The Sustainability Park’ (*Parque da Sustentabilidade*) was launched by the City Council. Supported by

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Fig. 14.1 Parque da sustentabilidade

the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF 2007–2013), the project involved 15 local and national partners, including the University of Aveiro and the Association of Small Businesses (commerce), and a budget of nearly 14 million euro, subdivided into 17 subprojects (Fig. 14.1).

The initiative came forth with the aim of designing and implementing a greenway that crossed a significant part of the city centre (199,106 m²). By doing so, a set of facilities would become more integrated, and an innovative environment for residents and tourists would be promoted under the umbrella of the sustainable development concept. In the project report's own words, it was intended to 'affirm the city as a place of innovation, competitiveness' through a spatial intervention that residents and visitors would view with renewed interest.

Overall, the project included the redevelopment of an entire green area surrounding several old neighbourhoods and the creation of a public space that allowed citizens to be in close contact with 'nature' and good environmental practices. From a conceptual viewpoint, the idea was to promote sustainability-oriented interventions based on the ample notion of 'Design for Sustainability' (Birkeland 2002). Two elements were thus considered of paramount importance in the project design. The first one was the motto: sustainability. This implied that the project envisaged more than the physical rehabilitation of a set of green areas. In fact, it also looked at how leisure facilities were built in an integrated manner in green areas, how their design and management could promote energy efficiency and finally how the greenway could be tied up with the surrounding environment. The second element was the partnership created for the proposal. As the University of Aveiro has a long tradition in working with environmental and natural resource issues, with particular focus on sustainability issues, their knowledge was considered particularly useful in contributing to a more effective and reasoned proposal for action, as required by the funding support mechanism.

The initiative also envisioned to be a good practice role model to be replicated not only in other areas of the city but by other City Councils as well. According to the project promoters, the motto and the method used (collaborative) were an added value 'to promote the quality of the city environment and the welfare of its citizens

and hence should be replicated in the future'. Bearing this in mind, the promoters proposed producing a good practice learning document called 'Aveiro 2020 – A Sustainable Strategy'.

14.2 The Problem

Such a complex initiative crossing an important and extensive area of the city centre soon engendered a set of problems. To begin with, the greenway concept comprised questionable spatial planning options. The construction of a pedestrian bridge over the city's central canal and the renovation of an old traditional garden, without a spatial planning framework and a clear understanding of the key issues to be addressed, are two examples of such debatable options. Secondly, no mechanisms for public scrutiny over the project design proposals were planned. Public participation was thus seen as a mere bureaucratic requirement. Finally, there were several operating difficulties in the notion of 'Design for Sustainability' – more than a new approach concerned with environmental, social and economic outcomes, such as energy efficiency, changing mobility patterns and improving social interaction, the project implementation actually emphasised a traditional urban approach with a 'green label'.

Despite being a project with a relevant theme – promoting sustainability in the context of urban regeneration – the Sustainability Park soon proved to have spatial planning proposals which were not coherent with the project's overarching objectives. At first sight, it seemed that the rhetoric used in the project's proposal was just an excuse to obtain the NSRF financial support, which demanded the combination of infrastructural interventions with the development of social capital, environmental protection and the promotion of networks and functional interlinkages. Accordingly, the complexity of the proposed exercise was largely neglected, as the project was basically understood to be an old-fashioned public space renovation and, as such, neither overcoming traditional policy 'silos' nor understanding the reasoning behind decision making in a cross-sectoral way.

The theoretical justification of the project proposals also lacked evidence. For example, the pedestrian bridge with high visual impact was justified by 'a long-felt need' that such a structure would allow a very large number of citizens who usually crossed the central canal to save considerable travel time. However, not only no research on pedestrian flows able to support the proposal was presented, but some empirical evidence (produced in the meantime by a group of spatial planners) actually contradicted the assumption. Another example is the proposed destruction of an old traditional neighbourhood garden in order to build, across the neighbourhood, a road to improve traffic flow. The argument presented by the City Council was the need to improve the design of the public space, enlarge the area of the garden and decrease the number of parking lots. Again, no studies to support the decision or to evaluate its consequences were presented.

As soon as the project became public, primarily through the media, citizens protested about the fact that they had not participated in the proposal's design, nor had they been informed, to say the very least. This situation prompted a strong civic movement to call the City Council's attention to the potential harmful impact of these projects on the local environment and the daily lives of residents. Despite their efforts, which included the submission of alternative solutions (especially regarding the two examples mentioned above), the civic movement's claims were successively ignored. From the point of view of the project coordination, there was no interest in justifying the solutions adopted and discussing possible alternatives, which would postpone the project's implementation.

One of the arguments presented by the civic movement was that all these conflicts could have been avoided if a different methodological approach had been adopted in the project's proposal design. One of the reasons behind the behaviour of the civic movement participants was the idea of preventing future policy decisions of this importance being made in such a centralised way. For example, although legislation does not include a public consultation procedure for this type of project, even if the own funding mechanism values and encourages this approach, the project could have included procedures for public participation and discussion with the community and, in this way, made people aware of the proposed solutions.

Another argument was the absence of a well-founded conceptual frame of reference common to all the involved actors, which could be used as a guide for citizens and other stakeholders to understand the project's scope. In fact, the development of such conceptual reference could be seen as a way to address the complexity of the new approach demanded by the financial support mechanisms and, at the same time, to seek synergies amongst the different stakeholders involved in the process. Being a project based on the motto of sustainability, with a strong emphasis on environmental issues, the participation of partners such as the University of Aveiro was seen as an added value in the process. In the civic movement's opinion, however, several examples of dubious interpretation of the concept could be found in the project's proposal, both in its social element (the lack of respect for history, identity and memory of old neighbourhoods and central canal) and environmental element (destruction of the existing tree structure in an ancient garden).

14.3 The Strategy

The ideas underlying the project's proposal ('Design for Sustainability') and the methodological principles of action (inter-institutional partnership) provided the ingredients to overcome the challenges linked to such a new approach demanded by the financial support mechanism. However, as soon as the project became public and was to be implemented, a huge debate began to take place in the local community. The emergence of the civic movement referred to above, *Amigosd' Avenida* (friends of the city avenue), was the community's driving force to counteract the problems



Fig. 14.2 Public meetings

detected in the project's proposal. It was joined shortly after by other civic movements in the city. One was the *Plataforma Cidades* (cities' platform) led by a well-known local architect, Pompílio Souto, who promoted a series of talks and discussions about the aims of the Sustainability Park. Another one was the *Comissão de Moradores do Alboi* (Alboi Residents Committee), which focused its attention on the Alboi neighbourhood proposal. Finally, the *Movimento Cívico Por Aveiro – Contra a Ponte Pedonal* (Against the Footbridge) dedicated its attention to the foot bridge over the central canal, which citizens found to be a negative environmental and social intervention. Established as informal and nonpartisan, without any level of institutionalisation, all these movements sought to give voice to citizens and create the conditions to improve not this process alone, but future decision-making processes as well (Fig. 14.2).

In unison, these movements tried to engage in a series of talks with the political power and bring tacit and codified knowledge to the process. Facing the City Council's several years of sustained opposition to explaining the project proposals and promoting a real public participation process (with the argument that there was no time or that the project proposal had already been shown in local newsletters and newspapers), the level of discussion increased, and each movement developed its own agenda.

The first civic movement, *Amigosd'Avenida*, with regular activity in the last 5 years, organised two lines of action from the beginning. On the one hand, the movement developed a set of digital platforms, including a mailing list with over

300 members, a collective blog (with over 120,000 visits, 200,000 page visits) and the Facebook Group ‘Aveiro 2020’ (with more than 2000 members after 3 years of activity), which mobilised many citizens to the cause. On the other hand, the movement organised local community discussions to complement the digital discussions and the arguments presented there. In one of the public events, and because the City Council refused to attend, the citizens documented the conclusions reached and took them to the Municipal Assembly to be read to all present. In addition, the movement promoted a petition that involved more than 400 signatories to apply for an extraordinary Municipal Assembly to present and discuss the project proposals. Despite the twenty interventions over the project, the citizens were not allowed to counteract or to have any kind of dialogue with the project’s technical leaders. As a result, none of the concerns of the citizens were taken into account, and the process moved forward without any changes.

Unlike *Amigosd’Avenida*, the *Plataforma Cidades* was not created as a result of the Sustainability Park project. With more than 10 years of existence, this movement organises monthly gatherings of researchers, businessmen, school teachers and members of civil society. However, as soon the protests began, this movement organised a public appeal to the city council and project partners, pointing out the strengths of the project, not questioning the quality and possible impacts of the proposals presented, but raising concerns about the financial viability of some proposals. The text was signed by two former ministers’ university professors. Oddly, the appeal had no effect at all.

As for the *Comissão de Moradores do Alboi*, this movement was exclusively composed of neighbourhood residents, especially the elderly. Focusing on the defence of the old garden and neighbourhood characteristics, this movement spurred a number of activities to protest and call for a change in the proposal. Examples include the development of a blog and a Facebook page (with 2500 friends) and several local protests in the public space. The impact of these activities in the community had such a visibility that Joaquim Pavão, a known film director and musician, decided to produce a short film called *Alboi um canto do mundo* (Alboi in the Corner of the World), which turned out to be a success in social media, with appearances on the radio and national TV and with more than 5000 visits in the Internet. In addition, an alternative proposal for the garden and the neighbourhood was presented to the city council, but despite the efforts, the decision to build a road in the middle of the garden remained.

Movimento Cívico Por Aveiro – Contra a Ponte Pedonal was the civic movement that mobilised the highest number of citizens (40) and more active protests. In just a couple of months, this movement collected more than 3500 signatures against the construction of the bridge and organised four public meetings with more than 500 people. Again, the use of virtual networks (Facebook page and mailing list) was a key issue to ensure the information spread and to increase the number of members. The movement also produced a technical and juridical document, with

the support of experts in spatial planning, appealing to the national government, regional authorities and courts. The protests had a huge impact in the local mass media and national TV. Once more, these activities had no impact on the City Council's decision to construct the bridge.

14.4 The Solution

The arguments described above and the citizens' social refutation of the project solutions and process exposed how the concept of 'Design for Sustainability' was not well understood by the project consortium. The relevance of the theme was clearly not enough to put into practice the challenges that a project of this nature and importance to the local community entail.

The lack of formal public participation mechanisms led the city civic movements to appeal to the national government, the financial support (regional administration) and the courts in order to solve conceptual and legal conflicts. This, in turn, increased the citizens' hostility towards the project and the alienation of political actors who had previously supported the project. In fact, public and semipublic (social networks) demonstrations of political actors were seen soon after, calling for an amendment of the proposals. In moments of political turmoil, the coalition members managing the City Council came into conflict and internal discussions conducted to a winning proposal from the opposition party to eliminate one of the most contested proposals – the design of a road crossing the garden of Alboi.

One aspect that deserves to be highlighted is that the increasing social contestation against the foot bridge, empowered by the legal and technical arguments presented in the courts (which claimed that the project was illegal because it was going against a previously approved formal urban plan), created a negative political context around the mayor and his political supporters.

This political instability had a strong impact in two different ways. Firstly, the project partners' relationship started to show signs of unsteadiness. For instance, some of the better known partners, such as the University of Aveiro and the *Associação para o Estudo e Defesa do Património Natural e Cultural da Região de Aveiro* (Association of Heritage), publicly expressed their disagreement with the whole process. Actually, this position clearly counteracts the idea of consensus and partnership that had prevailed from the beginning of the project and that was used by the City Council to support their argument for not looking at alternative solutions. Secondly, the company in charge of building the bridge over the central canal abandoned the process due to the process delays and legal doubts. After further unsuccessful attempts to contract another company, and in the face of financial problems due to the special nature of such intervention, the City Council decided to suspend the work on the grounds of 'seeking greater consensus'.

14.5 Lessons Learnt

The case presented in this section sought to show how the design and implementation of a project with important urban, social and environmental changes in a city gave rise to a strong reaction from the local community, challenging the mind-sets of politicians, stakeholders and citizens in general. The project, 'The Sustainability Park', had all the ingredients to become a good practice case to be replicated, not only in the future in other parts of the city of Aveiro but also in other cities, with the motto (sustainability), the partnership (collaborative environment with 15 institutions) and the challenges posed by the NSRF 2007–2013 (integrating sectoral and horizontal policies, emphasising functional relationships). However, a set of drawbacks clearly prevented the implementation of the project as foreseen by its promoters. They included the incapacity to manage the transition from a traditional approach (emphasis on the physical structure) to the new emerging needs (importance of intangible resources and a cross-sectoral policy perspective), the lack of a solid and common definition of the project aims based on the concept of 'Design for Sustainability' and accepted by all the consortium members and the scarce involvement of citizens from a very early stage of the process.

Many conclusions can be drawn from this case analysis. For the purposes of this chapter, three guidelines for public policy-making will be pointed out in a summarised way.

The first one is the importance of reinforcing cooperation arrangements between all the partners involved in the consortium, in order to promote a clear understanding of the project aims. To achieve this, it is essential that the project is codesigned by sharing objectives, understanding the nature of the challenges involved and the skills and experience necessary to embrace them. The development of a theoretical framework is essential to ensure a common understanding of the concepts and a solid support of the actions designed. In fact, this is a crucial step for what Morgan (2004) claimed as the transition from the power to decide and design policies to the power to transform or deliver those policies, which can only be achieved with the active cooperation of the local community.

The second one is the significance of using projects of this nature and dimension with a pedagogical purpose as well. This means that it is crucial to, firstly, engage and make citizens aware of the project design from the early stage (still in the diagnosis phase) and, secondly, to define the proposal in a joint manner (combining the efforts and solutions presented by the local community), not only because projects like this address collective challenges but also because they most likely involve behavioural changes (such as mobility patterns). Thirdly, the whole process is to be used to motivate citizens to participate in other similar processes and to discuss with them how to tackle the next challenges and the future investment priorities for local and regional development. In Portugal, the promotion of active dialogues between local governments and the local community is conventionally quite limited. Although local governments tend not to induce civic participation, the will of citizens to participate in such processes is also traditionally low. In the

‘Sustainability Park’ case, the fact that a lot was at stake, mainly for the residents, may partly explain the strong commitment of the local community. But this case also suggests that citizens do get involved in such processes when they have more access to information (expertise), when they have more knowledge about the problems at stake and possible solutions and when they notice that the community shares a common set of ideas and their points of view are taken into account.

The third guideline is the acknowledgement of social media as a tool to change policies and transform opinions into practical initiatives. The importance of technological innovative solutions to promote territorial governance is well documented (see *inter alia* Santinha and Castro 2010). Overall, the use of information and communication technologies supporting public participation can be part of a government’s policy of openness and transparency. In the particular case of the project discussed here, its role can be expanded to a different level: the capacity to promote citizens’ joint efforts to direct their community and encourage civic engagement (for further reading, see Mota and Santinha 2012; Mota 2014).

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