

Social Creativity and Post-Rural Places: The Case of Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal

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Introduction

This article looks at a particularly successful example of arts-based social creativity in a rural setting: the case of Montemor-o-Novo, in Southern Portugal. It is argued that the analysis of its trajectory cannot be satisfactorily made with recourse solely to the usual interpretive categories from the conceptual and theoretical debates on creative cities and social innovation in urban settings: while essential to understanding the dynamics that have been taking place in Montemor-o-Novo, those categories need to be complemented with an understanding of the specific ways in which rurality and post-rurality have been mobilised in this particular context. In order to do this, the article begins by critically reviewing some of the insights from the literature on creativity, the arts and social change; on the role of the arts in place development; on public art and public spaces; and on socially creative milieux. This is followed by an account of the trajectory of Montemor-o-Novo as an example of arts-based social creativity. Finally, some conclusions are drawn on post-rurality as strategy for socially creative local development.

Social Creativity

Creativity, the Arts and Social Change

If we regard culture as “the creative element of our existence – expressions of who we are, where we come from, and where we wish to go” (Jeannotte and Stanley 2002: 136), the passage into post-modernity has certainly provided culture, and the arts in particular, with a much more central role both in people’s lives and in the lives of their communities. From the 1970s onwards, the certainties that characterised the grand visions of the world that underlay modernity have given way to doubt, inconstancy and ‘dreamlike fickleness’. The loss of the sense of the transcendent (Ruby 2002) is, in a way, overcome through the arts.

Yet, in different ways, the arts have also contributed to representing and even anticipating the future: “Some artists express in their work feelings or codes that forecast the future or that indicate symbolically that the present is no longer viable” (Smiers 2005: 9). It is this latter capacity that is most crucial in the context of the uncertainty that characterises post-modernity.

In this context, the aesthetisation of daily life (Smiers 2005; Ley 2003) has proceeded apace. Increasingly, the human body, the home, and the city have become targets *par excellence* of interventions driven more by the celebration of aesthetics than by the values of utility (Ley 2003). Identity is increasingly based on aesthetic references: “A well developed cultural identity includes the strong feeling that specific artistic expressions make us the people we want to be, and, at the same time, that other expressions disturb our lives, don’t belong to who we are, or make us feel less comfortable” (Smiers 2005: 121). Moreover, the arts have become increasingly ‘democratic’ over the past few decades, both in terms of consumption and in terms of production: on the one hand, by virtue of the widening of the very concept of art to include such forms of expression as industrial design, publicity and multimedia, or even more alternative ones like street art, turntablism and tattooing; on the other hand, through the effect of the information and telecommunication technologies in general, and the internet in particular, in enabling artistic production to reach an incomparably wider public.

At the same time, however, the central role that the arts have come to play in contemporary society seems to be largely a consequence of their specific ability to convey meaning across different languages and cultures. The recourse to metaphor makes it possible for them to transcend the obvious and communicate beyond the confines of everyday language (Smiers 2005).

As a consequence of their ever more central role in social life, the arts have also become an increasingly important instrument, as well as arena, of social conflict, whereby both dominance and resistance are expressed and asserted. Symbolic and virtual battlefields have to a certain extent replaced strikes and street demonstrations in expressing, often more vehemently, the tensions and conflicts that are present in every community or society. The socially creative strategies of

the present day¹ are often anchored in the multidimensional character of cultural and artistic forms of expression, which bring together communication, civic participation, critical engagement, the dialectics between the individual and the collective, and place regeneration, in addition to the creation of income and employment opportunities (Moulaert et al 2004: 231-232).

Art and Place Development

As a consequence of the processes of economic restructuring and social fragmentation brought on by globalization, many places in Europe and North America have been experiencing the withering away both of their traditional productive activities and of the previously prevalent norms, values and social practices, which together constituted their socioeconomic fabric. The threats and challenges introduced by these changes have, in many instances, been addressed through a strong commitment to cultural and artistic production.

Lying at the core of the creative activities, the role of the arts is not limited to providing an aesthetic dimension, to constituting a crucial component of education and to being one of the most profitable areas for investment. In many places, the arts have emerged as a veritable “sleight of hand” capable of turning degeneration into regeneration. In a quite concrete and less than metaphorical sense, David Ley has suggested that “the redemptive eye of the artist could turn junk into art”, while highlighting that “the calculating eye of others would turn art into commodity” (Ley 2003: 2542).

A lot has been written on the topic of creative cities and communities. The “technology, talent and tolerance” triad put forth by Richard Florida, in particular, has proven particularly inspirational of efforts and measures aimed at rendering people, firms, communities, cities and nations more creative. As highlighted by Patsy Healey (2004: 89), these approaches inherently entail an important qualitative change: “the emphasis on creativity, the creative ‘industries’ and the creativity of cultural life brings in another emphasis. This stresses the importance of creative endeavour as enriching human existence. It brings with it a focus on the value of aesthetic and spiritual qualities of urban life, as a challenge to the overemphasis on the materiality of life, which dominated the struggles of twentieth century politics and governance”.

Clearly, however, there are some dark sides to creative places. Powerful economic interests often hide behind the redemptive capacity of the arts (Ley 2003) and are rendered manifest not only in the growth of the creative industries, but also in the intense investments in the real estate sector that inevitably accompany processes of urban regeneration. These dynamics, though presented under a “arts and culture” cover, often have a very intense social exclusion dimension, as stressed by Moulaert et al (2004: 2344), “Maybe the term

1. Cf. CE/FP6 Coordination Action “KATARSIS - Growing Inequality and Social Innovation: Alternative Knowledge and Practice in Overcoming Social Exclusion in Europe”, 2006-2009.

beautification should be avoided in this context [of urban regeneration]: it has been burnt by its strong connotation of socially destructive gentrification, including the destruction of poor quarters, the dislocation of poor people, the polarization between chic and outskirt neighbourhoods”.

Still, it is not our contention here that the emergence and development of creative places inevitably leads to social exclusion. Social innovation in the field of local governance can make it possible to promote creativity alongside social inclusion and the empowerment of vulnerable actors, through governance models that are creative in themselves – ‘new policies’, ‘new projects’, ‘new practices’ and ‘new people’ (Healey 2004; Fontan et al 2005) – and which aim at fostering creativity. Healey (ibid: 97) has highlighted what seem to be some of the crucial aspects of these governance models: openness to the outside, cooperation, open and fluid networking, informative and inventive discourses, the encouragement of experimentation and risk-taking, and, especially, an emphasis on performance as opposed to conformance.

The theoretical debate and empirical research on local policies and the promotion of creativity has led to the conclusion that outsiders often play a very important role in bringing about innovation, insofar as they bring in elements from other cultures and, at the same time, pose a challenge to the routine and autarky of local communities by introducing the tensions associated with ‘alterity’. These tensions require that a fine balance be struck, however – as highlighted by Peter Hall (2000: 646), there is often a risk that the local communities become ‘fascinated’ and “embrace” the creative outsiders “too warmly”: “A creative city will therefore be a place where outsiders can enter and feel a certain state of ambiguity: they must neither be excluded from opportunity, nor must they be so warmly embraced that the creative drive is lost. They must then communicate – to at least part of the class that patronises them – their uncertainties, their sense that there is another way of perceiving the reality of the world. That seems to demand a social and spiritual schism in the mainstream society, wide enough to provide at least a modicum of patrons for the new product” (id, ibid).

Public Art and Public Space

A specific type of initiative that has often been successfully undertaken by local agents in the context of governance models that are both creative and conducive to social creativity consists of the association between public space and public art. The social and economic restructuring undergone by numerous cities over the past few decades has had some profound consequences in terms of how their public spaces have been reshaped and in terms of what role those spaces have come to play in the promotion of social interaction. Public spaces in many of these cities were originally linked to urban models that have gradually withered away: as retail commerce and leisure activities increasingly relocate to dedicated areas in the periphery, traditional public spaces have lost their status as ‘central reference points’ and instead became decadent and insecure areas. In turn, this had led to a proliferation of efforts aimed at ‘giving public space back to the local

communities’, thereby curbing social fragmentation and fostering proximity relations, i.e. countering the effects of the society of consumption and spectacle (Ruby 2003).

In the context of these initiatives, public art has come to play a very important mediating role: “[it] turns public spaces and the street into potential sites for forging and deepening relationships with other people through the mediation of the work of art. [...] This object becomes a fixed point of reference around which positions come to be defined – including in time (previously, there was nothing here; now, there is something). By doing so, it confronts us with the habits and routines that we follow in a given space” (Ruby 2002).

The relevance of artistic expression in public space is first and foremost a consequence of its ability as signifier to convey meaning that is strong enough to overcome previous dissonances, and to create new identity references that can generate a feeling of belonging. Recreating the local sense of community thus becomes a necessary, though probably not sufficient, condition for overcoming the threats brought on by social fragmentation.

Socially Creative Milieux

The concept of innovative milieu, introduced in 1978 by Gunnar Tornqvist, was essentially based on four main attributes: information; knowledge; competence; and creativity (Hall 2000). This concept was then amply developed and disseminated by Aydalot and the GREMI group from the 1980s onwards (Aydalot 1986).

However, the relationship between the concepts of innovative milieu, creative milieu, and socially creative milieu is not straightforward. According to Peter Hall (2000:646), “creative cities, creative urban milieux, are places of great social and intellectual turbulence: not comfortable places at all”. This seems a good starting point for defining what a socially creative milieu is. These are usually milieux characterized by uncertainty, which introduce threats and challenges while at the same time enabling the emergence of creative social responses. The responses triggered in this way are necessarily innovative – either because the previous responses are no longer adequate, or because they must address entirely new problems and challenges.

The notion of *plasticity*, which has been borrowed from physics, is helpful in understanding the properties of socially creative milieux: “Plasticity refers to the ability by certain components to be shaped and reshaped while maintaining their unity and coherence”.²

In this context, plasticity refers to the ability that some milieux have to be, at the same time, flexible enough and organised enough to undergo change without

2. Interview by Dominique Lambert to Radio France Internationale, on the topic of the book “Comment les Pattes Viennent au Serpent. Essai sur l’Étonnante Plasticité du Vivant”, by Dominique Lambert and René Rezsöházy, Editions Flammarion, 2004.

losing their cultural identity. Creative places seem to be characterised by three main features: *sociocultural diversity*, usually as a consequence of openness to the outside encouraging the creation of new ‘bridges’ and ‘traffic’; *tolerance*, in the sense of encouraging the risks inherent to innovation; and *democracy*, in the sense of enabling and encouraging citizens to participate in an active manner (André and Abreu 2006).

Arts-based social creativity in Montemor-o-Novo ³

Montemor-o-Novo is a municipality of about 18,500 inhabitants, around 8,300 of whom live in the city by the same name (2006 est.⁴). It is located in the Alentejo – a mostly rural region of Southern Portugal, in which the characteristics of land-holding and agriculture have traditionally led to the formation of a rural proletariat (as opposed to the predominance of small-holder agriculture, as is the case in other, mostly Northern, Portuguese regions). Like Alentejo more generally, Montemor-o-Novo has long witnessed substantial rural poverty and significant episodes of class struggle, particularly during the dictatorship period that lasted until 1974 – at which time those episodes were brutally repressed –, as well as massive rural-to-urban migration, especially to Lisbon. The turmoil that followed the revolution, with moves towards collectivising the land that were subsequently withdrawn, did little to improve the economic viability of the region, which remains to this day one of the poorest in both Portugal and the European Union. The general picture today is that of a region characterised by its lack of economic dynamism and extremely pronounced population ageing.

Within this context, Montemor-o-Novo has over the past three decades succeeded in engendering some singularly remarkable dynamics of local development, and to stand out as a centre of international renown for artistic production and activity – two processes that have been inextricably interwoven. This trajectory of Montemor-o-Novo as a particularly successful example of arts-based social creativity in a rural context is the focus of this section. The aim is to retrospectively identify the decisive features that made this trajectory possible, which, we would argue, essentially consist of a combination of favourable “initial” conditions and socially innovative strategies. In order to do this, we begin by presenting a summary description of both the trajectory of Montemor-o-Novo in the past few decades and its present as a flourishing socially creative community. This is followed by a discussion of the crucial factors behind this success story.

As mentioned above, the political-economic structure of Montemor-o-Novo up until the 1974 revolution was almost exclusively determined by its large-scale, market-oriented agricultural productive base. As elsewhere in Alentejo, the rural proletariat was subject to both harsh working and living conditions and to political repression. It is therefore of little surprise that so many decided to migrate:

3. This section draws extensively on André et al (2005) and André et al (forthcoming).

4. Data retrieved from the website of the Portuguese Official Statistics Institute: www.ine.pt.

throughout the 1960s, the rural parishes in this municipality lost half their population, and even the city of Montemor-o-Novo experienced a net population decrease of over 10%. In turn, the landed bourgeoisie, by managing to keep industrialisation at bay in keeping with its own interests, successfully ensured the reproduction of a *status quo* that, for all the repression and conflict, was both stable and highly privileged for them.

The combination of this particularly privileged situation and their geographical and relational proximity to the country's financial and political elite (Montemor-o-Novo is a mere 100km from Lisbon) possibly explain why, from an early stage, the rural elite exhibited an interest in high culture as a means to display and assert its power. The Montemor Club and the 'Pedrista' Society (also known as the Montemor Circle Society) thus became the venues where the local rich and powerful engaged in various cultural and recreational activities for the purposes of socialising and symbolically asserting their power. By contrast, the 'Carlista' Society, or Old Philharmonic Society of Montemor (which had actually been founded earlier, in 1862), proved more open to catering to the cultural needs and aspirations of the workers (particularly music), though any attempt at political mobilisation within its walls (or suspicion thereof) was immediately suppressed by the political police. Thus it was that, from an early stage, two cultural venues emerged as physical and symbolic poles representing Montemor-o-Novo's social structure and conflicts.

This close relationship between culture and the political-economic dynamics of Montemor-o-Novo was not lost as of the 1974 democratising revolution, which undermined the foundations of the structure of class domination in place until then by introducing a generalised movement towards the collectivisation of the land and the creation of numerous cooperatives of production. The Communist Party, which rose to power in the first local elections and has remained there ever since, though unable to prevent the receding of the short-lived cooperative and agrarian reform movements, quickly turned generalising the access to culture even at the expense of other basic needs into a key feature of its local agenda⁵. In these early days, this involved initiatives such as the creation of the Municipal Gallery and Library within the walls of the S. João de Deus Convent, or that of a dedicated cultural office within the structure of the City Hall.

The influence of the aforementioned municipal cultural office would be substantial. The fact that people from outside the municipality took up some of the jobs and responsibilities meant that new ideas and practices had found a channel through which to penetrate Montemor-o-Novo in a systematic basis, and that the municipality gradually became a part of broader cultural networks and circuits. It

5. During the period that followed the Revolution, the Communist Party, despite the orthodox and centralised character of its general political orientation, significantly sought to promote artistic creation and cultural diffusion through its presence in local governments. The so-called "intellectual sector", which at the time had considerable weight within the party structure, had a prominent role in encouraging these local initiatives, by challenging to a certain extent the more 'classist' views within the party that argued in favour of focussing more exclusively on labour issues and relations.

is especially worth noting that, largely due to the socially and politically engaged spirit with which culture and the arts had long been regarded, it was never the case that artistic and intellectual activities became an elitist ‘enclave’. Rather, the overriding intention was always to associate cultural activities with broader processes of pedagogy, community mobilisation and cohesion, and inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Several initiatives were launched in this spirit in the early 1980s, some of which have remained in place to the present day (e.g. the Children’s Workshop, which promotes the artistic education of children).

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the success of these latter initiatives, the vision of the City Hall’s cabinet and the additional financial inflows to the municipality as a result of support from the European Union (particularly through the Common Agricultural Policy, the European Fund for Regional Development, and the European Social Fund) made it possible for culture and the arts to become *the* strategic axis of local development and for further initiatives to be implemented. Gradual efforts were thus undertaken in order to build up networks and partnerships bringing together the City Hall, other public bodies such as schools and training centres within and outside the municipality, other private entities, and artistic creators and collectives. The aims of these efforts were to create appealing and facilitating conditions for artists and creators both to visit and to relocate to the municipality, and to turn the strategic vision for the development of the municipality into a sense of meaning and identity shared by the population as a whole.

Both objectives have by and large been achieved. Artists and creators have indeed been attracted by a combination of singularly appealing conditions: the City Hall’s facilitating stance; the characteristics of the place in terms of quietness, beauty of the surrounding landscape and proximity relations⁶; the relative short distance to Lisbon; and, after a while, the city’s (and the municipality’s) critical mass and reputation as a *locus* of artistic creation. At the same time, the local population has largely been won over to what might otherwise have been regarded as a process divorced from their daily needs and concerns, thanks to the constant preoccupation with preventing the formation of an artistic enclave by fostering the ties and avenues for collaboration between the ‘outsiders’ and the ‘locals’. These collaborations have arisen both of the artists’ own initiative and as a requirement from the City Hall in exchange for its support, and have included, among other things, arts workshops for children (in cooperation with local schools) and handicapped persons (in cooperation with local charities and associations), or local *premières* of new shows that are then taken outside the municipality and the country.

Montemor-o-Novo today is a place where very heterogeneous groups have come to share an identity anchored in a triangular relationship between community cohesion, cultural and artistic activities, and the rural landscape and traditions. It

6. For example, Rui Horta – internationally reputed choreographer and director of “O Espaço do Tempo” (see below, this section) – has explained in a recent interview that the decision to set up his arts and dance centre in Montemor-o-Novo was due to the fact that “artistic creation requires proximity, a space of one-to-one relationships” (Pisa-Papéis Lab1.1 2007).

is also a place where the *per capita* levels of enjoyment of, and participation in, cultural and artistic activities are especially hard to rival by any other place in the country. Three particular initiatives are especially telling in these two respects and worthy of individual mention: the Montemor-o-Novo Choreographic Centre - Space of Time (“O Espaço do Tempo”), the Convent Workshops (“Oficinas do Convento”), and the João Cidade Association and Socio-Therapeutic Community (Associação João Cidade).

The “Space of Time” Choreographic Centre⁷ was created in Montemor-o-Novo in 2000, in the wake of an invitation by the City Hall to Rui Horta – an internationally well-known choreographer who wished to move back to Portugal after having lived and created abroad for several years – to set up a centre for artistic creation within the walls of the 16th Century Saudação Convent, which was recuperated for that purpose. It evolved into a platform for artistic creation that not only houses Rui Horta’s dance company but also provides the conditions for all sorts of other artists and creators to take up “temporary artistic residences” in the Convent. At any given time, several of these artists and creators can be found there who have come from all over the world to spend a few weeks or months living and creating in Montemor-o-Novo. The relationship between the Centre and the local community serves as a complement to its participation in global artistic networks, as it is especially pro-active both in undertaking initiatives in collaboration with the local schools and associations and in organising shows and festivals attended by both locals and outsiders.

In turn, the Convent Workshops⁸ were set up in 1996 in the São Francisco Convent, which had also undergone previous restoration work, as a venue that included exhibition and multi-purpose rooms, a photography studio and residence spaces for artists. Since their inception, the Convent Workshops have proven particularly active in promoting artistic activity centred around Montemor-o-Novo’s sense of place. Examples of this include land-art interventions throughout the municipality and conferences with titles such as “Talks around the Land”, “Talks by the River” and “Talks around the Convents”.

Finally, the João Cidade Association was founded in 2002 with the aim of setting up and running a Socio-Therapeutic Community for mentally handicapped persons from both within and outside the municipality. The vision that inspires its members is that of a space in which those persons’ needs are met in a holistic manner, in a stimulating and peaceful rural environment and with the arts playing a central role. While the facilities themselves are currently under construction, this Association has been very active in organising a number of activities aimed at involving both the local residents and the artists who come from the outside with mentally handicapped people, including, for example, antiques fairs and recycling workshops.

The aforementioned entities are but three of the most prominent examples. Several others have engaged in the same sort of close relationship with the local

7. www.oespacodotempo.pt

8. www.oficinasdoconvento.com

community, with strategic support and guidance by the local authorities. So far, this strategy has proven successful in strengthening Montemor-o-Novo's sense of place and community, in drawing in population to the municipality and in reinvigorating the local economy⁹ – in sum, it has proven a successful local development strategy. It is therefore worth asking not only what the factors that rendered this trajectory possible were, but also to what extent can it be replicated elsewhere. It is clear that a few more or less fortuitous aspects have played a significant role: the combination of the particularly pleasant rural surroundings with the ease of access to Lisbon by highway, for example, or the inflow of EU financial support at a decisive moment in the implementation of the local development strategy.

Other factors have been paramount, however, that clearly served to set Montemor-o-Novo apart from both the surrounding municipalities and most of Portugal's other (largely depressed) rural areas. The *first* of these is the long-standing role played by culture and the arts as an arena for social participation and contestation in the municipality, which laid the foundations for their subsequent adoption as a strategic axis of local development. The *second* is the strong but democratic leadership exerted by the local authorities throughout the process, providing both support and a set of shared norms and guidelines to the various strategic agents within and outside the municipality. The *third* is the fact that the approach to culture as an engine of local development has been an integrated one in at least three respects: i) in the sense that the formation and consolidation of networks and partnerships has been a constant throughout; ii) in the sense that measures have systematically been taken to prevent the risk that the artists and other 'outsiders' became an enclave 'divorced' from the local community, and that culture merely played a 'spectacular' role as is the case in other, often less successful, arts-based development initiatives; and iii) in the sense that the artistic and 'high culture' dynamics that have been promoted have always maintained a close relationship with the broader 'anthropological' culture of Montemor-o-Novo, i.e. the practices and understandings of its population, largely organised around axes such as agricultural livelihoods and the rural landscape.

In addition to these three factors, it is worth mentioning that the collective appropriation of the historical-architectural heritage has also been a relevant feature in the successful trajectory of Montemor-o-Novo. The castle, the convents and other more recent facilities, such as traditional crafts workshops and agricultural facilities, have long been intensely used as venues of artistic creation and cultural initiatives. These dynamics are crucial not only to the artists and creators who have come from outside the municipality (who thereby find additional sources of inspiration in Montemor-o-Novo), but also to the local population (which in this way has come to appreciate and cherish more intensely

9. Indeed, direct and indirect effects have been felt in terms of income and employment generation. The indirect effects are partly a consequence of the opportunities for private enterprise that were opened up by the new social dynamics, of which the setting up of the "Fountain of Letters" bookshop (which specializes in books on culture and the arts and also organizes exhibitions, reading sessions and debates) provides an interesting illustration.

its collective heritage and shared memories).

The replicability of this local development strategy must not be understood simplistically as the possibility by any other place akin to Montemor-o-Novo to promote the same sort of initiatives, attract the same sort of external actors and engender the same sort of dynamics. That would clearly involve a fallacy of composition: after all, there are not that many international choreographers looking for places to relocate to, nor is it conceivable that dozens of municipalities in the Portuguese countryside will become nationally and internationally reputed centres of artistic creation. Yet, the generalisation proves more valid at a different level of abstraction, and confirms what has been highlighted in several other contexts: that broad-based local development partnerships and networks, under both strong and democratic leadership and guided by a shared sense of meaning and identity that is in turn anchored in the culture of the place, are more often than not successful.

Conclusion: Social Creativity and Post-Rural Places

The trajectory of Montemor-o-Novo provides an excellent illustration of a milieu characterised by social innovation (Bassand 1986; Hillier et al 2004; Moulaert et al 2005; Fontan et al 2005; André and Abreu 2006), in the sense of the active pursuit and achievement of: i) the *satisfaction of previously unmet needs*, e.g. as regards the access to cultural goods, or the upgrading of employment and the local economy; ii) *social inclusion*, as apparent in the initiatives aimed at particularly vulnerable groups, or, more generally, in the effect upon collective self-esteem; and iii) *empowerment*, through the broad-based participation of the local population in most initiatives, and by providing what might otherwise be yet another ‘depressed’ and ‘invisible’ rural area with nation-wide protagonism.

However, this trajectory cannot be properly understood solely on the basis of the debates on creative milieux and social innovation. The social creativity dynamics that have characterised this relatively small city and its surrounding villages over the past few decades transcends the usual conceptual and theoretical framework on these topics, which largely refers to, and is inspired by, urban settings.

In fact, what we find in Montemor-o-Novo is a strategy based on a three-pronged commitment to: i) the promotion of cultural and artistic creation and their diffusion; ii) the emphasis on social inclusion in association with intense civic participation; and iii) the valorization of rurality as an essential component of local identity and a crucial resource for community development. This trajectory towards post-modernity is therefore distinct from those of post-industrial cities – indeed, it may be more aptly characterised as a trajectory towards post-rurality. Thus, it is arguably useful to draw on the example of Montemor-o-Novo in order to try and identify some of the characteristic features of post-rural creative milieux. Here, too, sociocultural diversity, tolerance and participation (as discussed earlier on in this text) have played a fundamental role. However, there is in this case a further element, also related to the idea of plasticity, which seems to be of

paramount importance and therefore worthy of special attention: the reconstruction of collective identity. This latter process, which has probably been insufficiently addressed by the literature on creative cities, seems to have been the *sine qua non* condition that has made it possible for change to take place without leading to the fragmentation of the local community. Subject to an abrupt decline in agricultural production and the exodus of a large share of its population to the country's major cities, Montemor-o-Novo proved able to reconstruct its identity without copying the models and patterns that are typical of post-industrial cities.

The Almansor River, around which several land art interventions have been promoted in the context of the "Convent Workshops", and which was the overarching theme of the "Talks by the River", provides an interesting metaphoric illustration of the trajectory of Montemor-o-Novo:

The river's waters irrigated many hectares, their power ground many tons of grain. For long, the local people's scarce moments of leisure were spent on the river's shores, which provided a soothing, cool and green respite from the rest of the landscape. As agriculture withered away over the past few decades, flour was no longer ground in the water mills, and swimming pools replaced the Almansor for leisure purposes.

The landscape, which used to be anchored and organised around agricultural activity and the cycles of nature, lost its anchor. It became a space from another time, where culture (in its broader anthropological sense) receded and nature advanced. This process produced ruins: cultural artifacts (plantations, buildings, roads and railways, etc.) begin to crumble when they are not in use and when they do not serve a purpose.

Yet, in the words of Blaise Pascal, "rivers are moving paths that take us where we wish to go". The arts and the artists' interventions have succeeded in recreating the Almansor and its shores. They have brought the ruins back to life by infusing them with new meanings. By the water mill, the olive tree painted in red, surrounded by logs of every imaginable colour, is now photographed every day from one of the windows of the Castle; inside the Castle, the choreography that has been created there, and which is now being rehearsed, reproduces the flow of the Almansor as it runs against and around the boulders that line its shores.

The arts were brought into Montemor-o-Novo by the hand of outsiders, but have been appropriated by the local community in the sense that it has decisively contributed to providing a new meaning to rurality and a new sense of community life, in communion with nature's cycles and the seasonal changes in the colours of the landscape (Wojan et al 2007). The development of a new rural aesthetic (Hunter 2003) has in fact rendered viable a new vision for the future of this rural life-world – a vision that is not fatally driven by urban visions and models of development. And yet, sustaining and upholding this alternative vision is far from straightforward: idyllic discourses on the past, present and future of the rural world are usually unwise and unrealistic.

While the case of Montemor-o-Novo is certainly exciting and quite unanimously successful, a word of caution is in order. Gentrification is not an exclusive feature of major cities, and may very well occur in rural spaces as a consequence of cultural and artistic activities and their aesthetic lure. The *neo-rurals* are not necessarily people who heed the call of rurality and passively conform to it (Roy et al 2005). Instead, they can serve as powerful agents of change, transforming rural spaces in accordance with the urban culture that they carry with them, and turning those spaces into commodified signs and consumable symbolic places (Hopkins 1998). The risk that new problems and threats thus arise, which the autochthonous population is unable to address, and that new values and attitudes end up undermining the ties that bind the community together, is therefore inevitably there.

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