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Atlas of the Food System. Challenges for a Sustainable transition of the Lisbon Region

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Food System: The Call for an Overlooked Urban Structure

We cannot survive without food, yet urban planning – not only in Portugal – overlooks the food system in its territorial visions and designs. From this apparent paradox arises the discussion by the book's four authors on the food system as a foundational pillar for the Lisbon Region's transition to a more sustainable future.

This topic is examined from the perspective of an European country, in a context of peace, despite global hunger statistics. Peter J. Larkham highlights this in one of the book's forewords, yet he also emphasises the importance of mapping as a tool for clearer communication and understanding of complex data. In this respect, the *Atlas of the Food System* makes a significant contribution – it is, after all, an atlas. Maps, diagrams, and a rich selection of photographs – just a fraction of the more than 8,000 images taken by the team between 2019 and 2021 – are among the book's strengths. These visuals aid readers unfamiliar with Lisbon and its region in understanding the landscape, while also offering new insights for those who think they know it well.

The *Atlas* draws on contributions from two research projects in which the authors, architects and researchers at DINÂMIA'CET, Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon, were either fully or partially involved: *MEMO – Evolution of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area Metabolism. Lessons towards a Sustainable Urban Future* and *SPLACH – Spatial Planning for Change*, both funded by Portuguese and European sources. In both cases, Teresa Marat-Mendes, the lead author, Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture and Urbanism at Iscte, with extensive research in urban metabolism, especially regarding the visual characterisation of water and green spaces, coordinated one of the teams involved.

Ambitious and comprehensive, the book is clearly structured, and at every stage concerned with guiding the reader through its entirety. Each of the *Atlas*'s four parts opens with a brief summary, and each chapter begins with an introduction. Although the content reflects a progression of subjects through which the authors develop their discussion, this sequence is non-chronological. However, time is often used as a key reference within sections, explaining the thematic organisation of the chapters.

The volume is introduced by two brief forewords. The first, by Peter J. Larkham (previously mentioned), addresses the fundamental research questions: 'what' (food), 'where' (the city), and 'how' (mapping). The second, by June Komisar and Joe Nasr, focuses on methodological aspects, emphasising the importance of studying urban evolution and arguing for the food system as an integral part of landscape design, positioned at the intersection of "Place-Based Design and Spatial Planning". The general introduction then presents the authors' perspective, addressing the depletion of resources in Anthropocene cities and the perplexing silence around food's role in architecture and urban design. This forms the basis of the authors' argument for the urgent need to view the food system as potential urban structure within a necessary transition "towards a more sustainable urbanism" (p. xi). The *Atlas*, they assert, is grounded in "the ambition to disclose the relationships between territory, urban form, and basic resources taking an evolutionary perspective", aiming "to examine both the morphological and socio-metabolic aspects of the territory" (p. xi).

The first part explores the emergence and development of spatial planning in Portugal, with a particular focus on the Lisbon Region and an emphasis on agriculture. It offers a new narrative about the metropolitan area, bringing agriculture to the forefront of urban discourse – an unusual role, given that agriculture typically defines the 'country' in the city-country divide. Nevertheless, Lisbon has long been seen as the heart of a region, its necessary hinterland, and this is why agriculture has never been entirely alien to some of the urban ideas and models proposed. However, sectoral policies and the understanding of planning as restricted to the management of urban activities justify the persistent separation of the various phases of

the food system and the challenge of conceptualising it as a truly urban component.

In the second and third parts, the authors take the reader through specific locations within the study area, offering a series of surveys that establish a tangible connection to the real landscape. Here, the *Atlas* finds its clearest expression. The second part revisits two historical surveys of Portuguese architecture (one from 1961 and the other from 2006) to highlight what they reveal about the food system, even though this was not their original focus. The comparison between the two underscores the cultural, social, and economic importance of the food system, revealing that in the 50 years separating the surveys, there was "a transition from a fundamentally agrarian socio-metabolism to an industrialized and modern one (...) assigning contrasting roles to food-related activities" (p.109).

Building on this framework, the authors conducted three contemporary surveys. They examined (1) the landscape objects and physical structures – both built and unbuilt – that represent the various phases of the food system in the 18 municipalities of the Lisbon Region (2019-2021), including production, processing, distribution, trade, consumption, and waste disposal; (2) the evolution of food production/foodstuffs, diets, eating habits, and traditions in the region: "What food do we produce and what food do we eat?" (p.167); and (3) the dominant morpho-typologies of urban agriculture practised in the 18 municipalities, based on an analysis of 315 vegetable gardens selected for their distinct forms, uses, and management practices.

The fourth and final part presents a case study of Vila Franca de Xira, which allows for an exploration of the proposed analytical process and illustrates how the food system can serve as a structuring element of the urban environment. The book concludes with the authors' call for "Food" to be recognised as "A Necessary Agenda Towards Our Common Future", supported by a set of "suggestions for a sustainable transition of the metropolitan food system and the spatial planning of its activities" (p.287).

While the book is focused on Lisbon, its broader potential provides an alternative approach to thinking about contemporary urban transformation, from which other cities can also benefit. It demonstrates the value of critically examining the past to learn lessons for the future. Ultimately, it reclaims the importance of one of the fundamental systems upon which our shared future depends – the food system. By questioning the meaning of progress, particularly when assessed outside the framework of capitalism, the book opens the door to more sustainable futures, where "we can have food businesses serving people, and not people serving food businesses" (p.305).

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