



## CONTRASTING THE BANALISATION OF TOURISM

Architectural, landscape and micro-urbanistic design of an accommodation facility in the Azores

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### ABSTRACT

Following the pandemic, tourism dynamics resumed in a compulsive form in response to the physical and social segregation during the covid-19 period. Mass forms of tourism, which stifle and alter local balances, often lead to trivialising outcomes. Following the analysis of these phenomena and the choice of a reference context, a project was drawn up on an urban, landscape and architectural scale as a hypothesis of an alternative model for tourist use. The intention is to see local specificities reworked in a contemporary key, with a view to the inclusion of the local population, with a space that is articulated between public and private, guaranteeing the permeability of the lot. Integration that also takes place from an ecosystem perspective, with agricultural and landscape techniques that attempt to integrate with the territorial dimension of the Azores, on the island of São Miguel.

**Keywords:** *trivialising tourism, landscape, micro-urbanism, architecture*

**Thematic cluster:** 3. Urban Dynamics. **Topic:** Tourism

## 1. Introduction

Compulsive' tourism, understood as a reaction to the physical and social segregation that occurred during the pandemic period, has consolidated and emphasised new scenarios for tourist resorts, which are subjected to increasing flows of visitors, often higher than the volumes recorded before 2020. In this context, strategies to contain the dynamics of homologation and trivialisation of the tourist offer, which are a direct consequence of mass tourism, must be evaluated. This must be done in a planning perspective that takes into account the specificities of places and that, with the articulation of the supply systems, is able to satisfy the strong segmentation of the tourist demand, integrating the forms of fruition with the protection and enhancement of the specificities of territorial resources. This can be pursued by paying new attention to the role played by public space, in order to prefigure new receptive spaces and new forms of tourist use, aimed at including the local population, taken both as the addressee of the new spaces generated and as the main beneficiary of the relations and opportunities for growth, linked to tourism development.

The initial assumption from which the study theme starts is that tourism is for many countries the driving economic sector of the current century: a real industry with a strong economic weight that modifies uses and modes of enjoyment of localities subject to tourist flows. (D'ERAMO, 2019) These massive presences of visitors generate problems for places and local communities, subjecting the heritage (material and immaterial) and local resources to risks arising from the forms of consumption, the anthropic pressure exerted, as well as the homologation of the system of tourist-accommodation offer. In this context, the hypothesis outlined is that tourism demand has become considerably segmented over the last few decades, while the supply systems have become progressively more standardised: the trivialisation of forms of tourist fruition is nothing other than the direct consequence of a banal, often monothematic supply, which leads to a serious loss of value in terms of both experience and perception of the place. While it is assumed that the opposite is also true: a varied tourist offer based on the enhancement of local specificities leads to the generation of multiple forms of enjoyment that positively qualify the location in question.

In order to have a tangible example with a view to limiting these phenomena and to avoid a generalised outcome (which could fall into a homologising perspective), the field is narrowed down by taking as a geographical reference the context of the Azores, a Portuguese Autonomous Region subjected to increasing tourist flows, especially after the liberalisation of low-cost air traffic as of 2014. With the objective of understanding the phenomenon on a local basis, we start from an evaluation of tourism dynamics throughout history, highlighting how, over the centuries (and unlike today), the location has mobilised specific niches of demand: from commercial tourism in colonial times, to nature tourism in the 19th century, passing through health/spa tourism in the 20th century, arriving at today's dynamics of tourism homologated to global market dynamics, characterised by trivialising and sometimes unsuccessful approaches. At the same time, an attempt is made to grasp local specificities, in terms of human settlement, landscape and in general the relationship and use of the land. Analyses and considerations preparatory to the drafting of an integrated project in the local context, generating economic and social value, which can contribute to the vitality and enhancement of the project site. This also through the integration of the structuring matrices of the landscape, understood as the outcome of interaction between the physical/spatial and social/anthropic dimensions.

## 2. Trivialising tourism

### 2.1. Historical overview of tourism dynamics

Tourism, as we know it today, is an invention of the 19th century, which then evolved to the boom of the 20th century, up to the massified dimension we experience today. The origins, however, have roots in earlier historical moments.

Historically, the dimension of travel was functional: discovery of new places and resource deposits, military campaigns, commercial purposes, diplomatic journeys, pilgrimages. The dimension of travel as a cognitive experience of the world and other cultures on a widespread scale originated towards the end of the 16th century, when young people of the nobility were prescribed and reserved the possibility of undertaking a journey for 'pleasure and education'. This type of journey over the next two centuries became increasingly popular in European aristocratic society and particularly in the 18th century when it became almost a duty to undertake it, it took on the name of Grand Tour. The importance of this type of experience was not only the cultural capital, but also the symbolic and relational capital that derived from it: the need for economic capital and social capital were important prerogatives to be able to undertake such a journey, the consequence was therefore the perception of a distinct person in the eyes of society.

The following century, the 19th century, was characterised by great progress in the field of transport with the implementation of railways and steam navigation, extending the possibility of travel to a much wider segment of the population, creating fertile ground for the birth of tourism as we conceive it today. It was at this stage that the first forms of tourist guidance came into being in the form of travellers' guides: compared to the Grand Tour manuals that described how to travel, in this case the where, how to get there and the cost involved were indicated, gradually removing from travel the value of discovering the unexpected.

After an initial phase in which tourism was born as a form of pursuit by the bourgeoisie against the Grand Tour practice of the nobility, this dynamic of pursuit and affirmation of one's own cultural capital over the other was extended to the comparison between the various bourgeoisie strata. Comparison that in turn made the leap to lower strata of the population with the introduction of the right to paid holidays, with the twentieth century emerging as the century of the massification of tourism. The phenomenon of the extension of tourism to the masses was in fact subject to great acceleration during the 20th century with the further evolution of transport: first in the 1950s and 1960s with the spread of the utilitarian car and then with the introduction of air travel as widespread transport, particularly in the 1990s with low-cost flights. More and more people found themselves with the possibility of travelling at affordable prices and with ever greater range of action. The dynamics of hit-and-run tourism became normalised to the exasperation of today, with masses of tourists from everywhere. (D'ERAMO, 2019)

### 2.2. Tourism massification leading to trivialising dynamics

In this globalised and standardised dimension, the tourist becomes more and more homogenised, both in terms of places visited and in terms of modes of enjoyment. Over time, the tourist has been increasingly subjected to being directed to 'where' to look, a sort of finger that must guide the gaze of those who, through lack of knowledge or confusion, do not know where to direct it.

This form of uncritical enjoyment of the places visited leads the tourist to a certain degree of passivity compared to the active travellers of the past. Rather than a search and curiosity for discovery, the prototype of the modern tourist waits for interesting things to happen to him, to be served to him on a silver platter. This generates an expectation for the tourist linked to the image he prefigures after seeing it represented before visiting the destination of interest, which defines a subjective (but at the same time homologated) vision of authenticity of a place or an experience.

This greatly influences the places themselves, which, also with a view to perceived economic advantage, pander to these modes of enjoyment, changing their uses and according to the external perception of the places, in a picturesque representation of what the tourist expects. Dynamics that extend to the point that some of these

destinations are transformed in their entirety to serve tourism. But can an entire city be appropriated by tourism? Nowadays we all witness cities with a purely tourist vocation, which are called, precisely, *tourist cities*. But what defines such a city? One of the numerical factors that we tend to take into account is precisely the number of tourists visiting the city. In particular, where the number of annual visitors exceeds the local population, we speak of a tourist city.

Looking at this data, one can see numerous examples of realities that have emerged as a function of tourism or that have exaggerated characteristics perceived as important for the growth of local tourism. One of the most well-established is Las Vegas: a city notoriously linked to gambling and nightlife, where almost all the inhabitants are linked to the gaming tourism market, as is the development of the city itself, as witnessed by the numerous hotels/casinos that often imitate architectural elements of historic tourist resorts. Other examples of localities that are 'touristised' with trivialising results are some of those certified as UNESCO heritage sites: with this type of global exposure, it happens that the dynamics of homologation with respect to the tourist's expectation prevail over the local specificities that guaranteed recognition in the first place (see: Lijiang, China). (D'ERAMO, 2019)

Moving down the scale, one of the most exaggerated examples can be identified in the town of Júzcar in Spain. This Andalusian town was the set of the Smurfs film, for which the typical white houses were momentarily painted blue during filming. The local citizens, seeing the resonance this event had, decided to take ownership of this new identity, leaving the new colour on the façades and becoming the 'Smurfs' village' on a permanent basis. This can be interpreted as a work of land art for its singularity or an added value for the business it generated, but if one looks at the statistics on the influx of tourists, the numbers speak for themselves: before the Smurfs, there were about 300 visits a year, while the first half of the following year saw more than 80,000 tourists visit this small village of 223 inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> An authentic tourist overwhelm, with an outsized ratio of fixed to temporary population, which begs the question: is this the model to be pursued?



Fig. 01 Júzcar 'Village of the Smurfs', Spain. Source: <https://www.pinterest.es>

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<sup>1</sup> Data from *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, <http://www.ine.es>

### 3. The context

#### 3.1. Azorean territory

Consisting of nine islands of volcanic origin, the Autonomous Region of the Azores has a total population of 236,413 (2021 census)<sup>2</sup>. It is an archipelago located in the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean, between Europe and North America, at a latitude ranging from 36°55' to 39°44' and a longitude between 25° and 31°. It is one of the island groups that, together with the Canary Islands, Madeira and Cape Verde, form *Macaronesia*. The distribution of the archipelago is very wide, with considerable distances between the islands, reaching a total extension in the North West - South East direction of about 600 km. The archipelago is divided into three subgroups of islands, depending on their proximity to each other: the Western group (Corvo and Flores), the Central group (Faial, Pico, São Jorge, Graciosa and Terceira) and the Eastern group (São Miguel and Santa Maria). (SILVA FIGUEREDO, 2019)

Geologically speaking, the location of the islands is very special, being at the triple junction point, where the margins of three tectonic plates intersect: North American, Eurasian and African. This particular condition amply justifies the volcanic origins that have led to the formation of a unique natural landscape, characterised by mountains, plateaus, craters and *fajãs*<sup>3</sup>; in general, corrugations of the terrain that have favoured the development of a great variety of ecosystems, some of which are characteristic and exclusively found on these islands. Lush vegetation made up of intense greens, which contrasts chromatically with the rocks, inorganic components that bear witness to volcanic activity with their black to red hues, as well as their chemical structure. Hostile environments to which the local population has had to adapt, with architectural and landscape solutions, which today represent a characteristic landmark, with the use of volcanic rocks as a characterising element. (CALDAS, 2000)

The man-made rural landscape of the Azores is configured as a network of closed fields, mainly quadrangular in shape, varying from irregular and elongated configurations to chequered patterns of regular squares. The declinations are manifold, as are the functions that walls perform: in addition to the purely formal division of legal value to define the boundary between properties, walls in this context also act as windbreaks against strong oceanic air currents, which is why they are often planted (especially in the case of informal rock piles lined up along the boundary) with dense reed thickets and/or shrubby plant species. Trying to classify and collate the types of walls present, we can find: *retaining walls* for terracing on slopes, *low walls* (around 1.2/1.5m high) for dividing properties, *high walls* (around 3m, in some cases up to 3.70m) for protection from the weather, as well as to limit visual intrusion from the outside, built mainly for orange cultivation, *planted walls* with the same function but more versatile in terms of biomass production. The one that is perhaps the most iconic and which takes on significant landscape value, both in terms of density and texture, is the type of walls associated with the cultivation of vines. Dense and continuous weave of medium-low walls (50/150 cm), which help the vine plant, which is cultivated at ground level, not to suffer from ocean winds. Evidence of this type of wall can be seen mainly on the island of Pico, where it is no coincidence that the highest levels of wine production have been recorded throughout the archipelago's history. Since 2004, the wine culture landscape of the island of Pico has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Data from *Serviço Regional de Estatística dos Açores*, <https://srea.azores.gov.pt/>

<sup>3</sup> Portuguese term for a portion of flat, small and generally arable land, originating from the seaward penetration of lava flows.

<sup>4</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1117/>



Fig. 02 Landscape of Ilha do Pico, UNESCO World Heritage Site. Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/>

### 3.2. Tourism in the Azores: the case of São Miguel

The first tourist dynamics, understood as the temporary movement of people outside their living and working contexts for recreational purposes, began to orbit the Azores in the 18th century. With the innovations introduced by the advent of the Industrial Revolution, particularly in terms of transport, the archipelago once again played an important role in oceanic routes, serving as a stopover for transatlantic navigation. In this context, relations with England and North America were strengthened, also in commercial terms with the consolidation of the whaling industry and the orange trade. Numerous travellers began to arrive: traders, sailors, naturalists, aristocrats, who produced diaries, narratives and general travel literature. It was this that extended the scale of the Azores' attractiveness, especially in the following century, with the praise of its potential as a naturalistic experience, for its plant and volcanic landscapes. In particular, the curative power and virtues of the thermal waters were praised at this stage, with the locality of Furnas, on the island of São Miguel, becoming an obligatory stop for travellers who wanted to experience the much-vaunted properties of the sulphurous waters of this place.

Nature and spa tourism were therefore the main reasons for travellers to visit these islands during the 19th century. This growing attractiveness revealed an inadequacy by the standards of the time in terms of accommodation facilities on the island of São Miguel, especially at the end of the century. This triggered a process of tourism promotion, with the *Sociedade Propagadora de Notícias Micaelenses* foundation, for the dissemination of news to encourage flows from mainland Portugal. The main showcase at this time of strong tourism promotion was the royal visit of D. Carlos and D. Amélia in 1901, for which there was a strong collective effort to build accommodation facilities, some of them temporary. After a period of stalemate in correspondence with the 1926 coup d'état, which brought little benefit in terms of tourism. The turning point in this respect came with the foundation of the Terra Nostra Society, formed by a group of local entrepreneurs, who built from the 1930s onwards: the tourist office and a guesthouse in Ponta Delgada, a hotel and later a casino in the spa town of Furnas, as well as the development of the adjacent park. (SERPA SILVA, 2020)

Despite the further development of shipping and the introduction of civil aviation, the increase in the flow of tourists was slow compared to continental destinations. However, the drive for tourist development continued to grow, with the construction of hotel facilities, which in some cases failed precisely because of the imbalance

between supply and demand. One of the most emblematic cases in this regard was the Hotel Monte Palace, a luxury tourist facility (opened in 1989 and closed in 1990) that has now been abandoned to the point of entering the category of ruins.

Coming to more recent times, the beginning of the 21st century is characterised by a consolidation of tourism dynamics. In particular, the Azores have opened up air traffic to low-cost companies since 2015, generating increasing tourist flows, with growth rates not previously seen. With this in mind, São Miguel is the island of the archipelago that receives the largest number of tourists, thanks to the presence of the international airport in Ponta Delgada.

## 4. Project: place-based accommodation

In terms of practical outcomes, a design proposal for an accommodation facility located on the island of S. Miguel, in Mosteiros (Ponta Delgada) is elaborated. Project aims:

- reading the specificities of the landscape, with the subsequent reworking of the theme of dry stone walls and pertinent walls that articulate rural and urban space
- integration into the urban mesh in the project design, by stitching up the existing fabric in the project
- articulation of space with attention to the public/private interface, generating a variety of usable and permeable spaces for the public
- educational/informative role of the structure, focused on environmental sustainability issues, with a focus on regenerative and adaptive agriculture with respect to climate change
- recovery of the health vocation of local tourism, with the construction of a wellness centre
- self-contained housing modules, proportionate to local dwellings, which can be adapted to more or less prolonged stay requirements, as well as to the urban context
- spaces for creativity, sociability and exchange of ideas, in a community perspective

The articulation of the project overlaps the landscape, urban and (temporary) housing dimensions, with the intention of establishing a strong relationship with local dynamics, in physical, relational and occupational terms.

### 4.1. Analysis of the territory

Mosteiros is a small urban centre located in the north-western part of the island of São Miguel. It constitutes a *freguesia* (parish) within the *Conselho Municipal de Ponta Delgada*, with a population of 1,021 (2021 census)<sup>5</sup>. The extension of the *freguesia* is 8.98 km<sup>2</sup>, bordering three other of these territorial units: Sete Cidades, Pilar da Bretanha and Ginetes.

Very interesting is its geomorphological conformation, which in Portuguese is called *fajã* and is defined as: low and flat terrain, resulting from the detachment of a slope or cliff or from lava flows penetrating into the sea. The place-name Mosteiros is derived from one of the natural elements that most characterise the oceanic landscape overlooked by this strip of land: the stacks, called *Ilhéus* in Portuguese. These are rocky masses formed before the lava flow, which emerge imposingly from the water, with a maximum height of up to 72 metres, representing an ideal landing and breeding place for the marine avifauna typical of these islands.



Fig. 03 Mosteiros. Source: Own elaboration

The peculiar orography generates a scenario in which the steepest part is the most vegetated, with a strip of woodland enclosing the lower part where the settlement is located. In this area, more suited to agricultural activities, one can see the typical closed field conformation, with stone walls and fenced borders that geometrialise the organisation of the rural space.

<sup>5</sup> Data from *Serviço Regional de Estatística dos Açores*, <https://srea.azores.gov.pt/>



As far as the built environment is concerned, it can be seen that the urban fabric is mainly linear, along the main routes. In this scheme, more consolidated, dense and informal areas can be seen in the two strips of land that enclose the harbour bay, testifying to the first forms of settlement. It is in one of these areas that the project takes place.



*Fig. 04 Mosteiros: tavola di analisi territoriale-paesaggistica. Fonte: Elaborazione propria*

## 4.2. Project Approach

The project required by the client for whom it was conceived, was to be an accommodation structure made up of housing modules designed for even extended stays. While buildings with activities integrated with the accommodation activity were to be included: a wellness centre, cultivated areas within the plot, a market for products and catering activities.



Fig. 05 Project area: framing. Source: Own elaboration

The structuring matrix of the compositional project stems from the desire to integrate the new intervention as an element of formal reconnection of the existing urban fabric. Given the presence of many pertinential walls that articulate the inhabited and pertinential space, it came natural to use walls that echo the theme that characterises the rural Azorean space. These walls are arranged in continuity with some of the pertinential walls of the neighbouring houses, regularised by an orthogonal pattern according to the cardinal points. The rigid scheme is interrupted in the central part by an axis in an east-west direction facing the Ocean, while the two extreme points that close the built part are rotated, breaking the perpendicularity.



Fig. 06 Structural matrix of the walls of the project. Source: Own elaboration

As far as the buildings are concerned, three larger blocks can be distinguished, two at the entrance (market and reception), while the central part is formed by high walls on which the residential units rest, generating spaces underneath designed for common uses, from everyday use to spaces for various types of activities. Thanks to the articulation of space in a fairly free and variable form in terms of materials and spatial solutions, with the presence of pools and green flowerbeds. This was designed with a view to limiting the built space on the ground, while accommodating the client's requests for accommodation, generating a space in which local inhabitants and temporary residents (tourists and other users of the facility) can coexist. Temporariness understood not only as short time spans such as a holiday, but also with the possibility of including in the structure users with longer lengths of stay: for example of the phenomenon of digital nomads can be taken into consideration, with these individuals that tend to stay longer than the classic tourist, as witnessed by the dynamics of these subjects especially following the pandemic period. In the project this is facilitated by an approach to the creation of accommodation and spaces that allow these types of use, which although temporary are closer to the dimension of living, rather than the 'disposable' use of conventional tourist facilities.



*Fig. 07 Public space underneath tourist residential units. Source: Own elaboration*

### 4.3. Green Space Management

The articulation of greenery is structured in the outer ring with respect to the built-up area, where the walls become lower, also acting as a retaining element to form terraces that regularise the slope. The use envisaged for these spaces in the outer ring is primarily as spaces for agricultural expression with soil regenerative techniques. This is done primarily from a demonstrative and symbolic perspective. This starts from the importance that the topic of soil and its management also has in the future with climate change, with an awareness that in these agricultural techniques is realised in the use of organic material to be integrated into the soil through prunings and plant waste, left to degrade naturally through the action of insects, bacteria and fungi. The project is based on three systems: the linear agroforestry system (following the principles of syntropic agriculture and permaculture), the informal forestry system and conventional local systems. The main objective of the project is to create a sustainable regenerative ecosystem based on poly-culture (as opposed to mono-cultural schemes), inclusive and respectful of the surrounding environment, as well as for those who use it as a form of education.



Fig. 08 Cultivated area in the project. Source: Own elaboration

#### 4.4. Buildings

The constructed area, as mentioned above, is divided into three main spaces:

- the upper part, where the market and reception are located, generating an entrance square in spatial relation with the surrounding built-up area, being the part of more public character.
- In the central part, there are three types of residences, which can be distinguished by their shape, number of floors and number of persons accommodated. The T1 type with a square base has two floors, a division between living and sleeping area and can accommodate a maximum of two persons. The T1 type with a rectangular base has an enclosed living space on one floor and can accommodate a maximum of two persons. The T2 type with a rectangular base has an enclosed living space on two levels and can accommodate up to four persons. The structural system is made of reinforced concrete with volcanic stone as inert material and is characterised by the specificity of having the walls belonging to the general plot governing the project as the load-bearing element. The roof is usable, with a pool positioned above the space generated by the voids.
- The lower part, which is in direct relation to the ocean, where a voluminous element made of volcanic rock can be seen emerging after the ecological buffer zone: the wellness centre.



Fig. 09 Ocean view of the wellness centre. Source: Own elaboration

#### 4.5. Elaborati generali di progetto

In order to give an overall view of the project, some of the design drawings that emerged from this work will be shown here, specifically the overall plans of the project are shown in order of increasing elevation, starting from the point of contact with the coast and ending at the point of contact with the existing urban area:



Fig. 10 Ground floor of wellness centre in context. Source: Own elaboration



Fig. 11 Ground floor plan showing the spaces underneath the residential units. Source: Own elaboration



Fig. 12 Upper floor plan showing height differences between types. Source: Own elaboration



Fig. 13 Plan of the roofs. Source: Own elaboration



Fig. 14 Ocean view of the wellness centre. Source: Own elaboration

## 5. Conclusions

Although perfectible and improvable, the design outcome is intended as an alternative proposal to the pre-constituted and homologated models used globally in the construction of accommodation facilities. The intention to include the local community in the operational phase is an attempt at further articulation to avoid the top-down effect, a limitation of the intrinsic conflict that the realisation of a new urban object brings with it. The relevance of the proposed integration of the agricultural dimension does not have an 'economic-productive' purpose, but is configured as an experiential educational space, with a symbolic value with respect to the importance of changing the paradigms of production and evolutionary models.

The utopian dimension that may transpire from these intentions is functional to a questioning approach to the reported issues, while the project outcomes are configured as possible answers from a poly-cultural perspective as an antithesis to the mono-cultural approach that often characterises the tourism sector.

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