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Artist-Run Spaces in Lisbon: Alternative Art Ecologies
and Urban Resistance in the Neoliberal City

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Student's signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Spina', written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a solid horizontal line.

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Abstract

This thesis explores artist-run spaces in Lisbon as urban cultural actors operating under conditions of neoliberal urbanization. While artistic initiatives are often positioned ambiguously, as both catalysts of gentrification and potential sites of resistance, this study focuses on their capacity to enact autonomy and open alternative imaginaries of urban life. The analysis examines how five Lisbon-based initiatives negotiate spatial precarity, financial insecurity, and institutional pressures while sustaining practices of self-organization, experimentation, and solidarity. Situating these practices within debates on neoliberal urban restructuring, cultural commodification, and the political role of art, the study argues that artist-run spaces constitute independent infrastructures that, through everyday grassroots work, resist full absorption of urban culture into market and policy logics. Although constrained by structural limitations and often operating within fragile conditions, their modest yet significant experiments in artistic and cultural autonomy help prefigure more inclusive and just forms of urban culture. Ultimately, the study positions artist-run spaces not only as sites of artistic production but also as agents of urban cultural commoning, fostering alternative relations and experiences in Lisbon's contested landscape.

Extended Summary

Questa tesi esplora il ruolo degli artist-run spaces a Lisbona e la loro posizione all'interno dei più ampi processi di trasformazione urbana neoliberale. Negli ultimi decenni, molte città hanno sempre più fatto affidamento sulla cultura e sulla creatività come strumenti di crescita economica, attrazione turistica e place branding. Sebbene artisti e iniziative culturali siano spesso presentati come motori di vitalità urbana, numerosi studi hanno dimostrato che essi occupano anche una posizione ambivalente all'interno di questi processi, poiché la loro presenza può contribuire alla gentrificazione e alla mercificazione della cultura urbana. In questo contesto, la ricerca analizza come gli artist-run spaces indipendenti e non profit operino in in questo contesto e se le loro pratiche possano sostenere immaginari urbani e culturali alternativi.

La ricerca si colloca all'interno dei dibattiti degli studi urbani, della geografia umana e della sociologia culturale. In particolare, dialoga con la letteratura sull'urbanizzazione neoliberale e sul paradigma della "creative city," che evidenzia la crescente integrazione della cultura nelle strategie di sviluppo urbano orientate al mercato. Allo stesso tempo, la tesi si basa su prospettive teoriche che sottolineano le dimensioni politiche e relazionali della pratica artistica. In questo quadro, gli artist-run spaces vengono interpretati come potenziali luoghi di commoning culturale urbano, in cui artisti e operatori culturali organizzano collettivamente la produzione artistica, condividono risorse e sviluppano forme di collaborazione che operano, almeno in parte, al di fuori delle logiche dominanti di mercato e delle istituzioni culturali tradizionali.

Dal punto di vista metodologico, lo studio adotta un approccio qualitativo basato principalmente su interviste semi-strutturate con fondatori e membri di cinque artist-run spaces situati in diversi quartieri di Lisbona. L'analisi si concentra su come questi spazi riescano a ottenere e mantenere luoghi fisici per le loro attività, su come organizzino le proprie strutture interne, sviluppino la programmazione artistica e costruiscano relazioni e collaborazioni all'interno del panorama culturale della città.

I risultati empirici mostrano che gli artist-run spaces operano in condizioni di significativa precarietà, caratterizzate da finanziamenti instabili, aumento dei costi degli affitti e supporto istituzionale limitato. Per sostenere le proprie attività, queste iniziative

fanno affidamento su forme di auto-organizzazione, governance collaborativa, investimenti personali e strategie di finanziamento su piccola scala. Nonostante tali vincoli, mantengono un impegno verso la sperimentazione, la libertà artistica e il sostegno a pratiche creative che spesso restano ai margini dei circuiti commerciali dell'arte.

Il significato di queste iniziative risiede meno nella loro capacità di produrre cambiamenti strutturali su larga scala e più nel modo in cui prefigurano le possibilità post-capitaliste all'interno dei vincoli capitalisti. L'indipendenza emerge non come una condizione stabile, ma come un processo costantemente negoziato, che combina autonomia strutturale e distanza normativa dalle narrazioni dominanti della città creativa, pur operando all'interno delle pressioni neoliberiste. Attraverso scelte curatoriali, modelli organizzativi e reti collaborative, gli spazi gestiti dagli artisti aprono piccole ma significative possibilità per immaginari culturali e urbani alternativi. Sebbene il loro impatto rimanga limitato e fragile, contribuiscono a sostenere il valore culturale al di là delle logiche di mercato dominanti, rielaborando sottilmente le dinamiche urbane e aprendo la strada a futuri più relazionali, inclusivi e immaginativi.

Preface

This thesis originates from my long-standing fascination with cities as complex, layered spaces shaped by human activity, social relations, culture, and power structures. As a sociologist, I have always approached the city relationally, paying attention to how space is lived, imagined, and produced through everyday practices, inequalities, and collective life. Alongside this interest in urban space, I have always been drawn to art, yet I have struggled with my own artistic practice and often restrained myself from fully engaging in it.

This work emerged from the convergence of two enduring interests and a productive tension between them. Instead of approaching art from within the field of artistic production itself, I decided to engage with it from an external, analytical position shaped by my training as a sociologist. Thus, I considered artistic practice not as an isolated aesthetic activity, but as a relational and spatial process – one that unfolds between people, within specific places, and through social interaction. It is from this perspective that the thesis investigates the intersection between urbanism and art and asks how artistic practices operate within the city as social and spatial phenomena.

A further motivation for choosing the specific topic stems from a long-standing sensitivity to the precarious conditions under which many artists live and work. I have always perceived artists as a particularly vulnerable social group, often navigating instability, uncertainty, and marginal positions within urban economies. This initially led me to ask how they experience the city: move through it, relate to it, and find or lose space within it. Over time, this question expanded into a broader reflection on the role of art and artists in contemporary urban life. While developing this line of inquiry, I encountered the concept of the “art-scape,” which articulated what I had been intuitively searching for: the idea that art, like landscape, is produced through spatial relations, human practices, and social experience. This concept reassured me that my inquiry was not only personal, but also theoretically grounded.

At the same time, my personal relationship with institutionalized art has become increasingly ambivalent. Visiting museums and major cultural institutions has often felt unsatisfactory, not only because of high ticket prices, but also because the works of contemporary art displayed there rarely challenge or resonate with me. This has

pushed me to question the growing commercialization of culture, where artistic production is increasingly treated as a product to be branded, marketed, and consumed. In this context, creativity is increasingly framed as the preserve of a small, socially and culturally privileged group, rather than as a shared human capacity. By contrast, I hold a strong belief that creativity belongs to everyone: it is an inherent human potential, not the property of a few “special” individuals who are still disproportionately white and male. This conviction also informs my critical view of capitalism and market-driven logics, which I believe have progressively deprived us, and perhaps me personally, of this sense of collective creativity, encouraging us to see art as something external to everyday life rather than as an integral part of it.

This thesis is therefore driven by a desire to understand whether alternatives to commercialized culture are possible, and how non-institutional, independent, and self-organized artistic practices might offer different ways of producing, sharing, and experiencing art in the city. Through the paper, I aim to contribute to a broader understanding of the city as a cultural and symbolic environment in which art plays an active role in shaping how spaces are perceived, used, and lived, and in which creativity can be reclaimed as a shared, social, and spatial practice.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who contributed to the development of this work. I am thankful to my supervisors – Professor Tania Rossetto, for overseeing the thesis, supporting its completion, and encouraging me along the way, and to Ana Estevens, whose expertise in geography of Lisbon and Portugal and whose thoughtful guidance significantly enriched the conceptual and analytical depth of this research. I would also like to extend my deepest appreciation to the artists who generously agreed to participate in interviews and share their experiences, reflections, and time. Without their openness and trust, this research would not have been possible.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, many cities worldwide have undergone profound urban transformations, prioritizing economic competitiveness, tourism, and real-estate speculation, and Lisbon is no exception. One of the central tensions in this transformation concerns the role of artists and cultural actors. While artistic and creative communities are often framed as forces of positive change, research has shown that they can also contribute to processes of gentrification and urban commodification (Shaw, 2013; Zukin, 1982). The concept of “marginal gentrifiers” captures this ambivalent position: artists often settle in undervalued areas due to affordable rent and spatial freedom, yet their presence reshapes both the built environment and the social dynamics of neighborhoods (Rose, 1984). In Lisbon, cultural-led urban regeneration has followed this pattern, leveraging cultural production to rebrand working-class and immigrant neighborhoods, often at the expense of long-term residents (Estevens et al., 2020; Esteves and Carmo, 2023). The growing importance of culture and creativity within municipal development policies reflects the broader neoliberal restructuring of the city, marked by place-branding strategies and the strategic commodification of culture (Guterres, 2019; Mendes, 2017; Silva et al., 2012). These dynamics have reshaped the conditions for cultural production by narrowing public support, intensifying competition, and embedding cultural activity more firmly within market-oriented urban development.

While municipal policy tends to frame culture as a broad economic and developmental resource, this study focuses on artistic production as a specific field within cultural production, characterized by distinct modes of value, labor, and organization. Rather than treating art primarily as an economic input within cultural policy frameworks, the research acknowledges its communicative capacities that enable new conditions for seeing, thinking, and relating. For this reason, artistic practice has long been associated with forms of critique, resistance, and articulation of alternative social and political imaginaries (André et al., 2017; Rancière, 2009). Thus, artist-run spaces – alongside independent cultural centers, squats, and informal studios – often emerge in response to the commercialization of urban space, seeking to preserve autonomous forms of artistic production and value-making and non-market-oriented sociality

(Chatterton, 2010; Novy and Colomb, 2013). In Lisbon, independent artists and artist-run initiatives have been central to alternative urban movements and the articulation of urban ideals and real utopias (Wright, 2010). Yet under roll-out neoliberalism, their position is increasingly ambivalent: rather than operating outside dominant urban dynamics, they are deeply entangled in the very conditions they seek to contest.

Against this backdrop of ambivalence, this study approaches artist-run spaces as situated urban cultural actors operating within the spatial and institutional conditions of the neoliberal city. Rather than treating them as either engines of gentrification or sites of external opposition, it examines how they negotiate spatial precarity, institutional exposure, and cultural independence from within these conditions. Drawing on assemblage thinking (Latour, 2005; McFarlane, 2011), Stewart's (2007) notion of ordinary affects, and Comunian's (2011) approach to understanding urban creativity, the research foregrounds processes over outcomes and practice over declared intent, while recognizing the interdependence of artists, policymakers, and local actors, as well as the importance of local networks and histories. Independence is thus explored as something enacted through everyday spatial, organizational, and curatorial practices, and resistance is conceptualized not as a unified oppositional stance but as a set of hybrid, situated practices that are lived, felt, and continually negotiated on the ground. In doing so, the study attends to the subtle and often contradictory ways in which artist-run spaces assert autonomy, mobilize aesthetic and operational strategies, and sustain cultural activity under conditions of structural constraint.

This perspective calls for an analytical focus attentive to both the material conditions under which artist-run spaces operate and the everyday practices through which independence is enacted and critical orientations are produced. Here, independence is understood as encompassing both the capacity to operate with a degree of autonomy and the normative effort to maintain distance from dominant cultural and urban narratives. To grasp how this composite form of independence is negotiated in practice, how dominant narratives are engaged and contested, and how modest yet meaningful transformations emerge from within constrained urban conditions, the study is structured around a set of interrelated research questions that move from conditions to practices and effects.

Main Research Question:

How do not-for-profit artist-run spaces in Lisbon maintain independence under conditions of neoliberal urbanization, and to what extent do their practices prefigure post-capitalist urban futures?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do artist-run spaces secure and maintain space in conditions of spatial precarity?

RQ2: What organizational, financial, and curatorial strategies sustain their operations under conditions of precarity?

RQ3: How do artist-run spaces negotiate critical distance from dominant cultural and urban narratives within creative-city logics?

RQ4: In what ways do their practices contribute to reconfiguring urban cultural life?

Overall, this research contributes to the literature on urban transformation in Lisbon by offering a grounded, practice-based account of how alternative cultural spaces persist and operate within intensified processes of gentrification and cultural commodification (Kwon, 2002). While previous studies have foregrounded tensions between hegemonic urban visions and resistance, this study moves beyond binary framings to conceptualize independence as an unstable and negotiated condition shaped by scarcity, institutional mediation, and market exposure, and explore critique that is outside explicitly political registers. It thus aims to shed light on how intrinsic motivation, artistic integrity, and collective commitment are maintained under pressure – factors that are crucial not only for resisting commercialization but also for the social sustainability of urban cultural production (Ivey, 2008, cited in Blessi et al., 2011). This perspective enables the analysis to capture both resilience and fragility of artist-run initiatives, understanding their transformative potential not as large-scale structural intervention but as the capacity to rework cultural value, social relations, and spatial practices from within existing urban conditions.

However, this study remains attentive to the limitations and internal contradictions inherent in focusing on artist-run spaces. By centering the perspective of cultural

producers, the analysis necessarily emphasizes a relatively privileged group, and it does not capture the full spectrum of impacts on broader urban populations. Such focus risks portraying artist-run spaces as isolated entities, constraining claims about their influence within wider urban dynamics. Nonetheless, rather than framing these initiatives as comprehensive alternatives or fully realized solutions, the study highlights how non-profit artistic production sustains cultural value, social connection, and collective imagination on local scale. In doing so, it demonstrates how socially just and non-market-oriented cultural practices can endure within the city's cultural ecology, contributing, albeit modestly and unevenly, to more inclusive and relational urban imaginaries, while ultimately providing a basis for reflection on how these practices might be scaled up or organized into a more consistent and cohesive cultural front.

2. Literature review

2.1. Neoliberal urbanization and gentrification

The transformations of capitalism in the late 1960s and 1970s, including the decline of manufacturing employment, the rise of the service sector, and the spread of consumerism tied to the culture industry, marked a turning point at which cities became centers of mass consumption and cultural hegemony. Neoliberalism emerged as a political-economic project aimed at restoring profitability and rolling back welfare state commitments. At its ideological core lies a belief in the primacy of competitive, deregulated markets as the most efficient mechanism for socioeconomic development. This vision is built on the ideal of individual entrepreneurialism and a deep distrust of collective institutions and forms of social solidarity (Peck et al., 2009).

Crucially, cities have not simply localized neoliberal restructuring but have actively contributed to its reproduction, mutation, and entrenchment. The commodification of both cultural production and real estate has made urban space a central laboratory for the design and implementation of neoliberal strategies. Local governments, often under fiscal pressure, adopted policies of deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures to attract investment and stimulate growth, translating abstract neoliberal principles into concrete spatial practices. Place-marketing campaigns, real estate speculation, and urban revitalization projects contributed to converting formerly

industrial, mixed-use neighborhoods into homogeneous, high-income zones oriented around consumption and leisure, remaking city space for market-oriented development, while imposing new forms of social control over marginalized populations (Mayer, 2013; Peck, 2005; Peck et al., 2009). Uneven spatial development is therefore not merely a consequence of neoliberalization; it is both a condition for its advance and a key outcome, reinforcing geographical disparities and social fragmentation (Harvey, 2006; Peck et al., 2009).

This neoliberal-urban shift reflects a broader economic reorientation from productive activities like manufacturing to unproductive but high-profit service sectors such as finance, tourism, and cultural consumption. As Zukin (1982) argues, under conditions of late capitalism urban transformation is driven by art and land, leading to commodification of both cultural production and real estate. Art, once the domain of philanthropists and public institutions, has as well become a commodity of mass consumption, private investment, and lifestyle branding, particularly among elite service-sector workers (Friedmann, 1984; Peck, 2005).

During the 1980s and 1990s, many Western cities began to recognize the symbolic and spatial potential of artists' practices within broader urban renewal efforts. What had previously been spontaneous and often precarious cultural presence in disinvested areas became selectively absorbed into redevelopment schemes and cultural planning frameworks (Smith, 1996; Zukin, 1995). Artists have taken a paradoxical role within neoliberal restructuring: as both victims and agents of gentrification. Possessing high cultural capital, artists often initiate the gentrification process but with economic capital too limited to complete it, they become forced to leave themselves. Their presence typically marks the "first wave" of urban transformation, laying the ground for subsequent waves of speculative investment, revitalization, and changes in neighborhood social composition. Rose (1984) conceptualized their role as "marginal gentrifiers" – cultural producers whose lifestyles and spatial preferences align with gentrification logics, although their economic means often fall short of driving full-scale neighborhood renovation. The blurring of cultural and market values laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of creativity as a policy objective (Currid, 2007; Ley, 2003).

2.2. Creative city: promise and critique

The “creative city” paradigm, first introduced by Landry ([2000] 2012), merged as an attempt to reconcile economic growth with social challenges faced by post-industrial cities. Landry emphasized the special qualities of artistic creativity as central to fostering cultural vitality, civic innovation, and inclusive urban development. Creativity was understood not solely as an attribute of artists but as a broader capacity for intelligent, inventive problem-solving resonating with the needs of the ideas-driven knowledge economy and applicable to all sectors of urban life.

Later, Richard Florida (2002) popularized this framework through his theory of the “creative class,” which reframed creativity primarily as an economic asset. Florida identified a demographic group of high-skilled professionals working in technology, finance, media, and other knowledge-based industries whose concentration in metropolitan areas was argued to drive economic growth, innovation, and urban revitalization. His emphasis on talent attraction, lifestyle amenities, and urban branding positioned culture as a tool for competition between cities in a globalized economy.

However, this economic reorientation of the creative city thesis attracted significant critique. Scholars such as Peck (2005), Catungal and Leslie (2009), and others have highlighted the gentrification-friendly and exclusionary consequences of creative city policies. Instead of fostering inclusive growth, these strategies often reinforce urban inequalities and social fragmentation by commodifying culture and privileging affluent, mobile professionals while displacing low-income residents. Shaw (2013) demonstrates that this dynamic is particularly acute in inner-city areas where competition for affordable housing intensifies: real estate speculation drives up property values, displacing more vulnerable populations, especially working-class families and racialized minorities, and thereby contributing to the revalorization of urban space.

As Evans (2009) notes, the increasing control over and the absorption of grassroots, informal cultural spaces into market-driven urban processes transforms these cultural commons into economic assets, undermining their original social functions. In this manner, artists’ studios and informal collectives were rebranded as “cultural quarters” and “creative clusters,” serving as experimental zones for new forms of governance

and market-led regeneration. A telling example can be found in NewcastleGateshead, where artists and small collectives informally occupied disused warehouses, transforming them into affordable studios and workshops that sustained a vibrant grassroots scene (Comunian, 2011). These initiatives initially arose autonomously, responding to post-industrial vacancy and the lack of institutional support, but were later absorbed into the city's official "cultural quarter" strategy. Thus, a formerly marginal zone of artistic experimentation was reimagined as part of NewcastleGateshead's creative-city narrative, exemplifying how self-organized spaces can both resist and be subsumed by the neoliberal governance of culture. This period marked a crucial turning point: artists' self-organized modes of living and working, initially marginal and autonomous, were increasingly reframed as models of entrepreneurial flexibility and urban innovation, mobilized to serve processes of capital accumulation and real estate speculation, while pushing out the communities that originally nurtured them.

Yet, even as their presence was vastly instrumentalized, many artists continue to operate in the interstices of the city, developing hybrid and temporary spatial practices that contested neoliberal urban logics. Empirical examples from Helsinki and Brussels demonstrate how informal cultural actors have reclaimed neglected or indeterminate spaces to challenge top-down urban agendas. In Helsinki, the Makasiinit warehouses, repurposed by artists and activists into a vibrant non-institutional cultural hub, became the focal point of public resistance against the city's privatized redevelopment strategies. Although the warehouses were ultimately demolished, the conflict catalyzed public debate on cultural diversity, temporary uses, and participatory planning. Similarly, in Brussels, the occupation of the abandoned Leopold station by cultural activists not only opposed the European Parliament's expansion but also re-opened discussions on the democratic governance of urban space (Groth and Corijn, 2005).

As art is, first of all, a form of communication that can inspire, provoke, and drive social and political change, it is also a site of resistance (André et al., 2017). Alternative cultural initiatives like non-profit artist-run spaces and studios, independent cultural centers, and squats often emerge in response to the commercialization of culture within urban space, seeking to challenge dominant strategies and preserve autonomous forms of culture (Chatterton, 2010; Novy and Colomb, 2013). Such

initiatives reveal the productive tension between planning and improvisation: while they rarely prevent redevelopment, they temporarily create “free zones” of experimentation that influence urban discourse and expose the limits of neoliberal governance.

2.3. Political role of art in urban space

As Díaz and Gielen (2017) observe, cultural institutions remain among the few arenas where counter-hegemonic ideas can still be meaningfully articulated and tested. The artistic field offers space for experimenting not only with the aesthetics of public discourse but also with the material and organizational conditions under which such discourse occurs. Increasingly, artists engage in the deliberate construction of alternative social settings and the reconfiguration of their own labor as part of a broader inquiry into new modes of collective life. The imagination of new configurations in which art and work open pathways for alternative social relations and new subjectivities naturally challenges dominant ideological frameworks, offering spaces for resistance and proposing new forms of “common sense.”

The orientation at critical rethinking of social relations situates contemporary art within a longer lineage of debates on how artistic practice intersects with politics. Rather than a singular trajectory, these debates map out a spectrum of positions, ranging from the explicit use of artistic practice as a vehicle for political messages to more subtle interventions in everyday life. For example, Joseph’s Beuys (1974) foundational notion of social sculpture blurs the boundaries between artistic practice and political intervention by viewing art as a transformative societal force. Similarly, for Nato Thompson (2015), art activism is not merely expressive but materially embedded in the power dynamics of everyday life. Art can intervene directly in the infrastructures of political, economic, and technological systems – not just reflecting on power but strategically encountering it through figurative forms with the aim of transforming our understanding of politics and the self in its context. However, while this perspective acknowledges the political entanglement of art, it also risks overburdening artistic practice with political expectations it cannot fulfill; although art has a necessary relation to politics, it risks sliding into the performance of politics and losing transformative potential when it substitutes for direct political action.

Alternatively, Rancière (2009) argues that art's political character lies not in its content or representational strategies, but in its capacity to reframe social relations detaching from dominant discourses and creating new conditions for seeing, thinking, and relating. Through small gestures, affective atmospheres, and embodied rhythms, art provokes what Stewart (2007) calls "ordinary affects" – emotional and embodied responses to political pressures – without needing to be explicitly political. These subtle textures of everyday life – whether material or symbolic – can destabilize norms, reimagine meanings, and reframe experience, often through forms that are temporary, playful, or intentionally ambiguous. In Latour's terms (2005), this transformational potential emerges from the role art plays within the "assemblage" of the social – a dynamic network of actors, objects, discourses, and institutions. In this paradigm, subversive artistic practices do not operate from the outside as pure critique but participate in ongoing reassemblage simultaneously operating within and against the dominant social order and reshaping collective experience through situated responses that subtly influence the structures they inhabit (Juris, 2005; Pusey, 2010). The political power of art, therefore, lies less in its ability to formally or permanently refigure hegemonic structures and more in its capacity to reshape collective imagination by questioning, interrupting, or proposing alternative ways of seeing and understanding dominant systems (Diaz and Gielen, 2017; Phillips, 2011).

In the urban context, this framework is particularly relevant. As urban space is not merely as a container for action, but as a product of social relations and a site of growing social conflict and grassroots organizing, artists and cultural initiatives act as active, embedded participants in processes of spatial transformation, shaping the imaginaries, practices, and infrastructures of city life (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2008). Within urban debates, assemblage thinking exists as a flexible framework for understanding the city and its cultural infrastructures as networks of interconnected human and nonhuman elements shaped by broader socio-material dynamics. As McFarlane (2011) argues, urban assemblages emerge from the dynamic interactions of diverse components, where meaning and agency are relational rather than pre-given, co-produced through mutual co-functioning. Building on this, two key contributions of assemblage thinking to critical urbanism are particularly relevant: first, its reconceptualization of agency, which redefines critique by shifting attention from fixed power structures to the distributed, relational capacities of human and nonhuman

actors; and second, its potential as a critical imaginary of the city, opening space to envision and enact alternatives (Kwon, 2002; McFarlane, 2011). This perspective foregrounds spatial relationality and emphasizes that urban assemblages, although hierarchical, unequal, and shaped by power, are never fully fixed, leaving space for reassemblage as a critical intervention that disrupts settled structures and creates new possibilities (Diaz and Gielen, 2017).

In this light, assemblage thinking not only highlights the relational and unsettled character of urban space but also points to the need for normative frameworks through which alternatives can be imagined. If the city is understood as an assemblage – a particular mode of living in common where some interests and groups take precedence over others – Lefebvre's (1968) notion of the right to the city provides one such framework, articulating a collective right to actively shape urban life and reclaim decision-making power from market forces and state institutions. Building on this foundation, later scholars have translated the concept into calls for spatial justice, emphasizing community control over the production and organization of urban environments as a precondition for more equitable and inclusive forms of politics (Chatterton, 2010).

Within this framework, urban commoning acquires a narrower, practice-oriented meaning: as processes of sharing objects, spaces, or activities withdrawing them from capitalist exchange. Such practices resist enclosure and commodification, foster solidarity, mutual aid, and more democratic modes of living (Chatterton, 2010; Volont et al., 2022). As Hardt and Negri (2009, cited in McFarlane, 2011) put it, the city becomes “the space of the common, of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas.”

For this study, urban cultural commoning, understood narrowly as commoning practices by artists and cultural organizations, is particularly relevant. Rather than fixing meaning, these practices invite the rediscovery of urban space, opening it up to new interpretations and unexpected encounters, and shifting everyday perceptions of the city, thereby resisting the immediate logics of planners, developers, and city marketers. While commoning space may lack an overtly revolutionary character, it remains a form of civil action that requires courage to challenge real estate pressures or institutional constraints. Occupying a marginal position between market and

government, it creates a space where participants can share views and interests outside the private sphere, experiment collectively, and test possible actions before entering the wider public domain. From an assemblage perspective, such spaces operate as relational nodes in the urban network, gradually reconfiguring spatio-cultural order from within, while ordinary affects – atmospheres, trust, curiosity, and shared interest – circulate, enabling participants to co-imagine alternative ways of inhabiting and shaping the city through culture, and ultimately transform consumers into commoners, and residents – into active citizens (Volont et al., 2022).

In this way, cultural commoning practices enact modest yet significant experiments in artistic and cultural autonomy. They hold space for alternative cultural practices and prefigure different urban futures, offering models of self-organization, collective custodianship, social infrastructure, mutual aid, and cultural production that resist the dominant logics of neoliberal urbanization. Their continued presence reveals both the possibilities and limits of material and ideological resistance in the city, raising critical questions about who can produce, inhabit, and shape the urban cultural landscape (Chatterton, 2010; Pusey, 2010). However, whether current urbanized formations of neoliberalism allow openings for progressive, democratic reappropriations of urban culture, or entrench market-disciplinary agendas further, remains an open question (Peck et al., 2009).

2.4. Artist-run spaces as urban cultural commoning practices

Among the diverse forms of commoning practiced by artists and cultural organizations, this study focuses on artist-run spaces. These spaces are particularly significant because they occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of artistic experimentation, spatial and organizational autonomy, and political practice (Besson, 2017). Unlike larger institutional or commercially driven cultural projects, artist-run spaces are typically self-managed and non-profit, operating largely outside market logics and often without substantial institutional or private backing. Being semi-public cultural spaces, they can be understood as practices that both generate and sustain the cultural common, rather than producing commodities for the cultural and creative industries (Volont et al., 2022). Independence allows them to sustain space for creative experimentation and the dissemination of alternative art forms while simultaneously

putting them under pressure of navigating the precarity inherent to their position in the neoliberal city. From the perspective of autonomist Marxism, this independence can be seen as a form of self-valorization, generating alternative forms of value rooted in collective needs and desires rather than commodification or surplus value. As Carlsson and Manning (2010) term these “nowtopian” practices, artist-run spaces prefigure post-capitalist possibilities through everyday grassroots work. This makes them an ideal lens for examining how urban cultural commoning can resist commodification, foster alternative social relations, and intervene in the production and experience of city space.

In practice, these initiatives take shape as situated forms of autonomy: self-funding and collective stewardship of resources such as exhibition opportunities, residencies, and archives, and co-producing and maintaining cultural value. Drawing on frameworks of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, cited in Radywyl and Biggs, 2013) and peer-to-peer commons (Bauwens et al., 2012, cited in Radywyl and Biggs, 2013), these spaces can be understood as collaborative networks in which skills, knowledge, and resources are shared, collectively maintained, and iteratively developed. Artists, curators, and sometimes community members work collaboratively, sharing skills, making decisions collectively, and creating a shared culture. Their mode of operation is, among all, value-driven, emphasizing artistic freedom, experimentation and exchange, mutual aid, and horizontal governance, rather than profit generation, large-scale visibility, or institutional legitimacy. These hybrid, iterative practices construct modes of living that affirm autonomy, mutual aid, and use-value in the present, prefiguring post-capitalist possibilities even within capitalist constraints (Pusey, 2010). They generate new roles for artists and publics, novel forms of producing and presenting art, and reconfigured spatial and temporal arrangements – from where art happens, to how gatherings are organized, to how time is structured in exhibitions or events (Diaz and Gielen, 2017). Often emerging as locally rooted responses to commodification, social insecurity, and the erosion of social infrastructure, many of these practices are oriented toward social goals and contribute to more just, equitable, and collaborative urban cultural alternatives (Ärlemalm, 2013; Blessi et al., 2011; Novy and Colomb, 2013).

This orientation positions artist-run spaces in contrast to mainstream “sharing platform” logics, where urban spaces often serve private or commercial interests (Bauwens et al., 2012, cited in Radywyl and Biggs, 2013). Through independent curating and activities such as offering public access to cultural resources, hosting residencies, and archiving, artist-run spaces reclaim urban space for inclusive artistic production and cultural consumption, democratizing it for both who create and experience art. Success is measured not in market terms but by fostering social cohesion, artistic autonomy, and the cultivation of alternative urban imaginaries. However, like other commons-based initiatives, artist-run spaces face challenges in securing economic and social sustainability in an environment where artistic activity alone yields modest resources and limited visibility beyond their immediate networks. Their interactions with external funders, urban authorities, or institutional partners bring risks of co-optation and pressures toward isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, cited in Radywyl and Biggs, 2013), testing their capacity to scale values without diluting them.

2.5. Limitations and research gap

Building on the discussion above, this paper views artist-run spaces as embedded and adaptive formations that experiment with autonomy and collective value production within neoliberal urban conditions, rather than as marginal or oppositional enclaves. Literature thus provides a conceptual lens through which empirical analysis can examine how these spaces secure and sustain autonomy, develop alternative strategies of organization and cooperation, and explore practices of collective value beyond capitalist logic while remaining grounded in the material realities of the contemporary city. This paper advocates a nuanced and affirmative perspective, emphasizing the transformative potential of artist-run spaces even within systemic constraints. I do not consider explicit politicization necessary for their critical capacity; rather, their significance lies in their ability to reframe social relations, detach from dominant discourses, and create new conditions for seeing, thinking, and relating. From this standpoint, artist-run spaces are not expected to overturn neoliberal urban logics but to subtly reconfigure them from within – cultivating forms of collaboration, autonomy, and shared stewardship that, however modest, keep open the possibility of more just and imaginative urban futures.

Yet, while the previous sections highlighted the emancipatory potential of artist-run spaces and their capacity to reassemble urban life, it is crucial to acknowledge their limitations. Municipal dependence on corporate revenues, monopolistic market forces, and socio-spatial segregation shape the environment in which critical reflection and autonomous creative practices unfold (Harvey, 2005, cited in Peck et al., 2009; Young, 1990, cited in Rossi, 2018). In such contexts, cultural actors, including artist-run spaces, must navigate deep structural constraints while remaining constantly at risk of co-optation by urban policies that reduce their role to decorative or legitimizing functions (Estevens and Carmo, 2023).

Philips (2011) emphasizes how blurred the boundaries have become between critical/artistic discourse and neoliberal rhetoric. Terms like collaboration, co-production, and networking, while progressive in appearance, are often coopted and repurposed to legitimize market-driven agendas: precarity is reframed as flexibility, outsourcing as empowerment. Consequently, artist-run spaces risk validating artistic careers and being absorbed into institutional or commercial circuits, focusing on archiving their history or building alternative networks while remaining vulnerable to funding cuts and contributing unintentionally to gentrification (Besson, 2017). Moreover, the political impact of art is sometimes confined to self-awareness within relatively small, closed communities limiting its capacity for a more structural counter-hegemony (Diaz and Gielen, 2017; Phillips, 2011).

Besides, while independent creative subcultures often experiment with alternative forms of social reproduction, like informal economies, cooperatives and collective cultural practices, that challenge dominant capitalist norms, these interventions rely on specific spatial and social conditions, such as affordability and centrality, which are increasingly threatened by globalized waves of gentrification and urban corporatization (Hackworth and Smith, 2001; Shaw, 2013). The precarity of their material and institutional conditions risks diminishing transformative potential of artist-run spaces. This highlights a key research gap: although artist-run spaces appear as sites of autonomy and commons-based experimentation, there is few empirical understanding of how such spaces operate under the specific political, social, and spatial conditions of European cities.

Significant gaps also exist regarding cultural inclusivity and social reach. Many initiatives are shaped by relatively privileged groups, and the literature rarely addresses how similar practices could emerge from marginalized communities, or how they are constrained or suppressed when they do (Rose, 1984). Considering that gentrification and commodification cannot be entirely avoided, the key question is whether these initiatives can determine the steps towards that public action and evolve into something more collective and transformative. The hopeful possibility here is that these experiments might expand, collectivize, and become prefigurative, meaning they start to model or anticipate a more widespread just, democratic, post-capitalist way of life. However, alternative lifestyles might remain individualized, depoliticized, and exclusive, primarily tied to self-expression.

These contradictions and gaps underscore the relevance of the research questions guiding this study. By examining how not-for-profit artist-run spaces in Lisbon secure and maintain autonomy under conditions of neoliberal urban transformation, this research seeks to illuminate the practical and symbolic dimensions of their operations. The analysis will explore organizational, financial, and curatorial strategies through which these initiatives sustain themselves without fully aligning with dominant market or institutional logics, and how their practices articulate subtle yet significant critiques of mainstream cultural production. Given the spatially grounded nature of these dynamics, the urban context remains central to addressing how artist-run spaces secure and maintain space amid spatial precarity and contested urban development; this dimension will be further elaborated in the following section. At the same time, the study remains open to the possibility that some spaces may not overtly challenge or reconfigure dominant narratives of cultural value and urban space in Lisbon, despite their adoption of alternative strategies and critical artistic orientations. Ultimately, the study aims to assess the extent to which such spaces, despite their constraints, can open and sustain spaces for alternative urban futures, contributing empirically to broader theoretical debates on art, autonomy, and urban transformation.

3. Methodology

The methodology of the present research is informed with the understanding of commoning as enacted through curatorial politics, operational models, governance

The research was conducted between April 2025 and March 2026, with the fieldwork spanning over the summer 2025, and focused on the city of Lisbon, specifically on five neighborhoods where the selected art spaces are located: Penha de França, Picoas, Colina de Santana, Beato, and Ajuda. The former three neighborhoods are situated in the city center.

[illegible]

Situated on one of Lisbon's seven hills in the city's northeast, Penha de França combines residential stability with growing cultural activity. Shaped by Lisbon's postwar urban expansion, the area consolidated into a largely residential and

middle-class district, characterized by calm streets, manor houses, and panoramic viewpoints. Remaining relatively detached from mass tourism and central commercial flows, it has long retained a sense of everyday normality and local belonging. In recent years, however, it has begun to attract younger creative professionals seeking affordable yet well-connected urban living. Alongside historic landmarks, contemporary cultural initiatives signal a gradual artistic revitalization. This coexistence of established residential life and emergent cultural production positions Penha de França as a transitional urban context, where creative practices evolve within a stable but increasingly diversified social fabric.

Picoas (Situated on the border of Arroios and Avenidas Novas parishes)



Source: Wikipedia

Picoas is a bustling neighborhood in central Lisbon, known for its vibrant atmosphere and strategic location between Saldanha and Marquês de Pombal. Once a semi-rural area of scattered farms and paths, it was transformed in the late nineteenth century through the *Avenidas Novas* expansion, which introduced a rational urban grid of wide avenues and modern residential blocks. Originally envisioned as a bourgeois extension of the city, Picoas evolved into a mixed-use district where residential, administrative, and commercial functions coexist. Today, its landscape of office buildings, apartments, shops, and eateries reflects a dynamic, practical urban lifestyle. Positioned between Lisbon's historic core and its northern business axis, Picoas embodies both the legacy of planned modernism and the city's ongoing negotiation between tradition and modern urban life.

Colina de Santana (spanning through Santo António and Arroios parishes)



Source: Wikipedia

Situated on one of Lisbon's central hills, Colina de Santana has long occupied a prominent position between the city's two main northward axes, Avenida da Liberdade and Avenida Almirante Reis. Historically, it evolved from agricultural land and public grounds into an upper-class residential district during the 19th century, housing villas that overlooked the city's commercial center and port. Over time, the area also became home to major public institutions, including hospitals, universities, and cultural facilities such as the Goethe-Institut. Despite its centrality, Colina de Santana retains a quieter, almost enclave-like character, marked by its layered urban fabric that intertwines traces of its rural, medical, and aristocratic pasts. Today, it represents a historically dense yet relatively overlooked urban zone, where heritage, institutional presence, and emerging cultural uses coexist within Lisbon's broader processes of urban transformation.

The two latter ones are located on the city's eastern and western margins accordingly.

Beato



Ajuda



Situated between Belém and Alcântara on Lisbon's western hills, Ajuda is a historically modest and predominantly residential area that has long remained outside the city's main circuits of tourism and commercial redevelopment. Originating around the sixteenth-century hermitage of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda, the parish developed gradually, marked by working-class housing, small local commerce, and a strong sense of community continuity. Although home to several major landmarks, its everyday life unfolds in a quieter register defined by long-term residents. While gentrification pressures are emerging, Ajuda still retains a largely Portuguese and aging population, with a growing yet measured presence of foreign residents and creative newcomers. Its understated atmosphere, layered history, and slow pace of change position it as one of Lisbon's few remaining enclaves where ordinary urban life persists alongside gradual cultural renewal.

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach aimed at exploring, presenting, and comparing the practices of artist-run spaces in Lisbon in order to generate grounded insights into their organizational models, cultural strategies, and urban entanglements. This methodology was chosen due to its suitability for capturing the nuanced, context-specific, and relational dynamics that characterize independent cultural initiatives. A qualitative approach also allows for interpretative depth, particularly in understanding how values such as autonomy, collectivity, and spatial agency are enacted in practice. The study employs semi-structured interviews as its primary research method, chosen for their flexibility and capacity to uncover situated knowledge through a dialogical exchange between researcher and participant. In the context of artist-run spaces, where practices are fluid and often informal, this approach enables a deeper understanding of how values and strategies are enacted in practice – insights that could not be captured through surveys or purely observational methods. It allowed participants to articulate their experiences, motivations, and challenges in their own terms, prioritizing points of particular relevance to them, while still ensuring that core themes such as autonomy, sustainability, and spatial negotiation were consistently addressed across cases.

Subjects and sample

The research focuses on a small number of purposefully selected cases, identified through a combination of social media mapping, primarily through Instagram which functions as a key visibility tool for many independent art initiatives and snowball sampling. The criteria for inclusion were: being artist-run, operating independently from dominant market or institutional structures, being actively engaged in artistic programming, and having a visible presence within Lisbon's cultural landscape – actively producing, exhibiting, and engaging with publics.

The selection focused specifically on artist-run spaces in the field of visual arts, rather than the wider domains of the creative industries or cultural entertainment. This choice reflects an interest in forms of cultural production that operate outside both mass consumption and elitist art circuits. In independent, self-organized contexts, visual arts often emphasize experimentation, process, and critical reflection over spectacle or profitability. Unlike commercial galleries or mainstream cultural events, these spaces sustain deeper engagement with social, spatial, and economic issues. Concentrating on this field therefore provides a strong basis for examining how artistic practices intersect with questions of autonomy, resistance, and urban transformation in contemporary Lisbon.

As a result, five cases – Mono, Mais Uno, Buraco, Salto, and Ostra – were chosen to reflect a range of models that independent artistic initiatives can take: from slightly longer-standing to newly founded, from individual-led to collective, from hybrid studio–exhibition spaces to public-site experiments. Each having its unique character, together they provide insight into the diversity of Lisbon's independent art ecology, while sharing a common emphasis on experimentation, and self-organization. While the sample is not statistically representative, it enables an in-depth exploration of the practices, values, challenges, and diverse approaches to autonomy, labor, and urban embeddedness among contemporary artist-run initiatives in Lisbon.

Data gathering and analysis

Spaces were first contacted by email and then an appointment was set to make the interviews. A questionnaire comprising 11 questions was prepared to guide participants' descriptions of their values, practices, and experiences. Both founders and team members were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes,

were recorded with consent, and later transcribed. In addition to interviews, digital content (websites, social media posts, publications) was reviewed to contextualize and enrich the data. One case (OSTRA) provided written responses, followed by an informal conversation, instead of a conventional interview. The main difficulties and constraints in carrying out fieldwork in Lisbon referred primarily to accessibility and timing. Many contacted organizations did not respond to inquiries, and those who did were often stressed with work commitments and had limited time for interviews or extended conversations. Additionally, fieldwork coincided with the beginning of the August holiday season, during which many organizations slowed down operations as staff took vacations, further reducing opportunities for engagement and observation. These factors required flexibility in scheduling and adjustments to the planned fieldwork activities.

While preliminary patterns were identified on the transcribing stage, recurring topics emerged gradually through the coding process, rather than being imposed in advance. The inductive procedure made it possible to remain attentive to the vocabulary, concerns, and emphases of the participants. At a later stage these emergent themes were grouped into five broader analytical areas, which structured the comparative discussion of the cases and allowed to grasp both shared and divergent visions, strategies, experiences and concerns. These are the following:

1. Origins and Physical Space

This category examines the founding circumstances of each initiative, including the history, motivations and artistic needs that led to its creation. It also considers the characteristics of the physical location, including accessibility, spatial configuration, and how the site supports or constrains artistic and social activities.

2. Self-Image, Vision, and Values

This category explores how founders and teams conceive of their spaces, including guiding principles, ideological orientations, social or political positioning, and the values that shape the identity of the project.

3. Artistic Programming

This category focuses on the curatorial and artistic choices made by each initiative. It addresses the types of projects presented, the balance between

experimentation and sustainability, diversity of artistic approaches and participants, and the strategies through which programming reflects the initiative's vision and engages with audiences.

4. Organization

This category analyzes internal structures and operational practices, including decision-making processes, division of labor, team capacity, horizontality versus hierarchy, and how daily operations are managed. It also considers financing and resource management strategies as integral to sustaining organizational activities.

5. Partnerships

This category examines collaborations and networks, both formal and informal, with other cultural actors, institutions, and communities. It looks at the purposes of partnerships, including visibility, knowledge exchange, material support, and broader embedding within cultural ecosystems.

6. Challenges

This category addresses the main difficulties faced by initiatives, including financial precarity, limited human resources, audience engagement, and external pressures such as real estate, public policy, or cultural norms. It considers how these challenges intersect with the sustainability, independence, and ethos of the projects.

While these categories are broadly applicable, situating them within the specific socio-political and cultural context of Lisbon and Portugal is essential for the interpretation of the results. In Portugal, the neoliberal turn in cultural policy has unfolded within a distinct historical trajectory. After the 1974 democratic revolution, cultural policy was grounded in the notion of culture as a public good, with the state acting as the primary funder and guardian of cultural life. However, recent transformations in cultural demand and production have closely mirrored global neoliberal trends in urban development: state support has declined, while market logic, entrepreneurship, and civil society have assumed greater roles.

As Silva et al. (2012) note, Portuguese municipalities influenced by frameworks like Florida's creative city thesis and the economic valuations of culture by Throsby and KEA have progressively integrated cultural policy into urban development agendas.

This shift reflects a growing emphasis on culture's potential to drive urban regeneration, innovation, and economic competitiveness, reframing cultural production as both a business opportunity and an instrument of city branding. In this new model public funding is no longer assured, and cultural actors increasingly operate within a competitive environment shaped by project-based financing and market pressures.

Lisbon provides a particularly vivid illustration. In recent revitalization projects local authorities strategically subsidized the arrival of artists and cultural collectives as part of broader plans to stimulate economic growth and urban renewal (Estevens et al., 2020). These initiatives rebranded formerly marginalized areas as diverse, cosmopolitan, and “creative,” attracting tourists, investors, and new middle-class residents. Yet, they simultaneously accelerated processes of gentrification and displacement. This dynamic mirrors patterns identified in other global cities, underscoring how the creative city model embeds culture in circuits of capital accumulation, even in contexts with historically strong public cultural sectors.

Earlier empirical studies in Lisbon reveal these tensions vividly. Estevens and Carmo (2023) observe that grassroots collectives in the city have struggled to resist market-driven urbanization, often remaining fragmented, low-intensity, and with limited operational capacity.

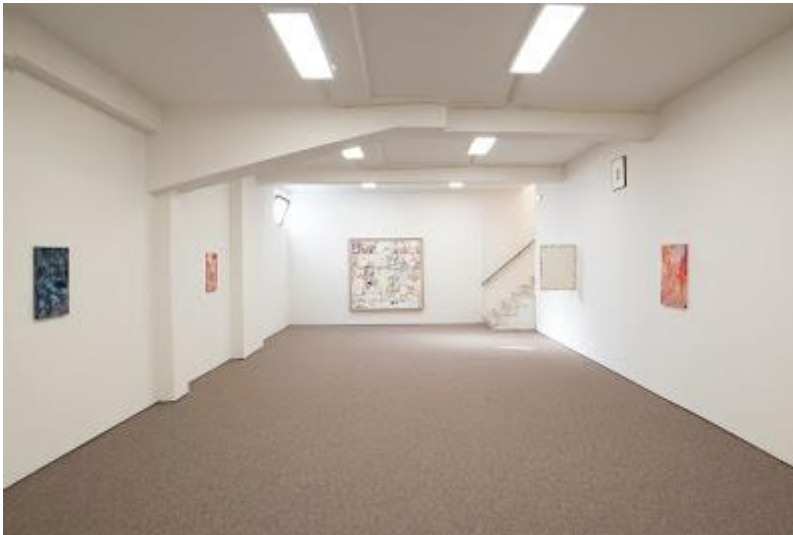
An in-depth investigation of Lisbon artist-run spaces provides an opportunity to examine how these initiatives enact counter-hegemonic practices while navigating precarity, co-optation, and gentrification pressures. Empirical attention to the social composition, governance models, and community engagement strategies of these spaces, particularly in Lisbon, where creative clusters emerge both organically and as a result of gentrification pressures (Silva et al., 2012) can illuminate their potential for broader cultural inclusivity and democratization.

4. Case presentation

To provide contextual grounding for the analysis, this section introduces each of the artist-run spaces included in the study. While diverse in approach and scale, all share a commitment to independent cultural production and occupy a significant role in

Lisbon's alternative art ecology. Together they illustrate a spectrum of strategies for sustaining independent practice: from informal collectives to hybrid studio–exhibition formats, from long-standing initiatives to newly founded spaces. The following profiles present these cases one by one, focusing on origins, curatorial approaches, funding structures, community engagement, and the challenges each one faces.

Buraco



Source: Google Maps

Buraco is an independent, artist-run art space founded by a Portuguese engineer, artist, and cultural organiser António Bolota, whose vision, long-standing presence in Lisbon's art scene, and insistence on supporting the scene through broad ways of thinking has allowed the space simply to exist. It began informally, hosting exhibitions in unconventional and temporary spaces, including a narrow basement in the Estrela neighborhood that inspired its name - "Buraco," meaning "hole." In 2024, Buraco established itself in its current location in Colina de Santana, in a place leased through the market – a fortunate coincidence, as the area is not crowded with other art spaces and galleries. The space now combines two exhibition rooms with five studios, creating a hybrid environment for artistic work and display.

The curatorial philosophy at Buraco is collaborative, DIY, and deliberately open. There is no rigid curatorial vision; instead, the approach is bottom-up: rather than imposing an aesthetic program, the space allows things to happen organically, privileging process and dialogue. The team prioritizes diversity across generations, genders, and

practices, bringing together established and emerging artists to diversify the art scene and create an inclusive, experimental environment. At its core, Buraco is both a platform and a workplace, created by artists for artists – friendly, unpretentious, and oriented toward showing art without strong intervention.

The broader, long-term goal has been to expand and cultivate a more communal vision, making art accessible to the wider population. The team has pursued partnerships with local organizations, municipal entities like Junta de Freguesia Santo António, and media outlets like Umbigo magazine. Initiatives include workshops, accessible art theory sessions led by artists, designed to engage the broader community. Buraco's commitment to connection and collaboration extends beyond Lisbon. The team has cultivated relationships with other independent initiatives, including Sismógrafo in Porto, and aims to join the Portuguese contemporary art network, which would enable for residencies, exchanges, and exhibitions in other regions, potentially reactivation less dense and often disconnected locales through art. In line with this vision, the team intentionally invites collectives without permanent venues, such as Spirit Shop, Upper Cut, and OSU Collective, to exhibit in Buraco, showing openness and commitment to supporting others in precarious circumstances. This ambition, however, is seriously constrained by funding. Much of the budget came from DGARTES funding, the loss of which posed many ongoing challenges, putting Buraco into an even bigger dependency on the founder's personal finances and prompting the team to pursue even minor partnerships and grants, charge studio users partial rent, and solicit small donations like contributions for drinks at the bar.

The physical character of Buraco's venue has shaped its identity. While earlier space encouraged an informal, community-oriented atmosphere, the current location, more akin to a traditional exhibition space, offers both advantages and constraints. Noise complaints, accessibility challenges, gentrification pressures, and relative isolation from the mainstream artistic spotlight have complicated its operation and visibility. Yet Buraco remains committed to its underground, DIY ethos. The team sees itself, along with similar small initiatives, as "little mushrooms" in Portugal's art ecosystem – distributed, community-focused, and intentionally modest – contrasting with large, mainstream exhibition spaces that often prioritize spectacle over connection. These

small-scale interventions, however, can be remarkably successful in engaging communities and sustaining artist-driven networks across the country.

Mono



Source: Google Maps

Mono was founded in 2019 by French artist and curator Hugo Cantegrel with the dual purpose of creating a personal studio and fostering artistic collaboration. Both artist and curator, Cantegrel was driven by a desire to counteract the isolation of studio practice and to support dialogue, sharing, experimentation, and collaboration in the process of artistic creation. Thus, Mono has become the space that combines the intimacy of a shared workspace with the possibility of public exhibitions and performances. Six resident artists of diverse origins currently occupy Mono, alongside two-month residencies for visiting artists, creating a constantly evolving environment where new practices and perspectives.

Mono also prioritizes representation and inclusivity. From the beginning, exhibitions have maintained gender balance, with slightly more women than men featured. While engagement with queer, non-binary, and Afro-descendant artists has been more limited, the team is aware of the gap and wants to expand these efforts. That said, the founder describes Mono's guiding principle as "poetics before politics," focusing first and foremost on artistic expression rather than overt political messaging, even while socially relevant themes naturally emerge in the work shown.

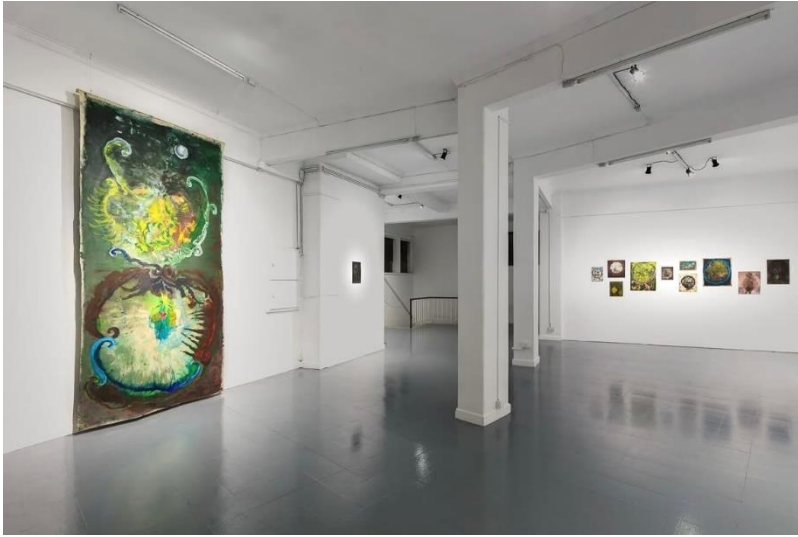
The curatorial focus at Mono is on innovative, non-mainstream work, prioritizing artists and perspectives not typically represented in commercial galleries. Exhibitions are chosen for their capacity to provoke thought and engagement rather than for commercial viability. The space supports a wide range of practices, hosting visual art, performance, contemporary dance, and sound projects, privileging process and exploration over polished final products. Artistic freedom is highly valued, with failure being not only tolerated but embraced, as it allows artists to test ideas and develop their practice. Mono also supports cross-disciplinary projects, such as AI-music collaborations and glass-and-water installations developed with neuroscientists, which exemplify the space's commitment to experimentation.

Financially, Mono has been relying on self-sufficiency since the beginning of its operations, avoiding public funding to maintain independence and radical (in terms of what to present) edge, instead profiting from small-scale sources such as bar sales and minimal external partnerships, while largely depending on personal investment. This autonomy has preserved creative freedom, though rising rents and operational costs are now pushing the space to explore more sustainable financial models, including public funding.

Beyond financial precarity, challenges include limited engagement with the local community. The space is situated in Penha de Franca - a residential area of Lisbon - to remain accessible, yet local engagement is limited, with the audience predominantly composed of foreigners living in the city. Seasonal and cultural factors, such as competition with Lisbon's beach culture, further affect attendance. Despite this, Mono persists in offering regular exhibitions, performances, and participatory events, aiming to cultivate curiosity and exposure to diverse artistic practices.

The space collaborates occasionally with international institutions, including partnerships with Swiss and Spanish cultural organizations, the American Embassy in Lisbon, and local festivals such as Tondimage. These collaborations expand the visibility of the artists and foster exchange across contexts, without compromising the space's independence. Yet, Mono deliberately remains outside formal networks, favoring ad hoc partnerships that support experimentation and emergent practices.

Salto



Source: Instagram

Salto was founded in 2022, emerging directly from the experience of the earlier residency project Third Base. For six years, its founder Nicolai Sarbib ran that program in Lisbon, welcoming both Portuguese and international artists for residencies and exhibitions. When Third Base ended, he chose to preserve the unique two-floor venue that had housed it – taking on the rent himself rather than see the space lost. The new name “Salto” echoes the building’s past as a shoe shop in an old industrial neighborhood of Beato. Unlike a commercial gallery model, Salto was built around a mixed structure: studios on the lower floor provide steady income, while the upper floor remains dedicated to exhibitions.

Salto’s program focuses on emerging voices and artists working at the margins of the established circles and aims at communication with different publics, staying open to the wider crowd. It has sought out those whose work shows potential but little exposure, as well as older artists whose practices have been overlooked or forgotten. This approach has already helped to spark renewed attention for some participants, opening further opportunities beyond Salto. Partnerships extend the reach of this mission: with Sol in Denmark, Salto exchanges exhibitions annually; with Alfaya in the Algarve and a forthcoming residency in inland Portugal, which links Lisbon to smaller or more peripheral contexts. These collaborations are seen as essential steps for sustaining and growing the initiative as well as to connect with like-minded projects.

Community engagement has also been central. From the beginning, Salto partnered with the local residents’ association, developing a parallel program that would include

activities for children, senior college students, and other neighborhood groups. Efforts are made to work with local craftspeople on production for shows and to include Lisbon-based artists, while open studio visits strengthen ties with nearby practitioners. Attendance at exhibitions often mixes the contemporary art public with younger locals who live and work in the area, ensuring that the project remains embedded in its surroundings.

Sustainability, however, remains an ongoing challenge. In its early years, Salto was financed almost entirely from the founder's personal savings, with exhibitions produced on minimal budgets and held together by sheer commitment to artists. Running the project single-handedly soon proved unsustainable, and the arrival of co-curator David Silversberg marked a turning point: together they secured support from funding bodies such as DGARTES and the Lisbon City Council, which has allowed them to pay artists, expand programming, and pursue more ambitious projects without compromising curatorial independence. Yet even now, programming requires planning a year in advance, balancing funding applications with the production of ongoing exhibitions. Neither founder draws a salary, both sustaining the project alongside other jobs, while rising costs and real estate pressures in Lisbon threaten the survival of independent spaces more broadly. Within this fragile ecosystem, Salto sees its role as providing affordable studios, curatorial support, and a platform for practices that might otherwise go unseen.

Looking forward, Salto hopes to continue growing carefully and organically, strengthening its network of partnerships and building international connections while holding fast to its independence. In a city where speculation and gentrification endanger cultural life and force a lot of independent art spaces to close, Salto insists on a slower, more collaborative model: a place where artists at all stages can work, take risks, and receive support, audiences can encounter work beyond commercial circuits, and the local community remains part of the picture.

Mais Uno



Source: personal camera roll

Mais Uno was established in Lisbon in 2021, growing out of earlier experiences of its current members – with project spaces in Estonia and with a series of online art talks held during COVID that brought artists together for informal exchange. Starting as a project space in Intendente, the initiative evolved into a collective that combines curatorial work, artistic projects, and research. It seeks the transformative power of art through the creation of incremental relationships and ecosystems between artists, communities, and territories, and positions itself as interdisciplinary, self-organized, participatory, and socially engaged. A defining step for the initiative was negotiating for space with the company that manages commercial properties in the Lisbon Metro. Rather than leaving shops closed and unoccupied, the Metro agreed to grant Mais Uno the use of a vacant space free of charge – a win-win arrangement that brought life and safety into the station while giving the collective a unique public venue. Currently, displaying artists pay a modest daily fee to cover utilities of daily use and legal obligations, making the space financially sustainable without placing heavy barriers to access. For Metro passengers, the space offers unexpected encounters with exhibitions, performances, and workshops, subtly changing the atmosphere of public transport in the city. Such unique character of the space keeps it accessible for both the artists and the audience.

The collective usually brings together around 10-15 members, each contributing an annual fee to a shared wallet that secures a basic level of self-financing. At times, interns and collaborators also join, supporting the day-to-day life of the space. Mais Uno's structure grew out of horizontality and informality, but partnerships and funding

have introduced an increasing number of formal responsibilities. While decisions are still made collectively in weekly meetings and most roles arise from personal initiative, the Metro contract and public grants have required members to take on tasks such as project management, accounting, and reporting. Daily operations such as welcoming artists, maintaining the space, and ensuring smooth handovers are often entrusted to interns. This balance means that while Mais Uno continues to value informality and self-organization, it must constantly negotiate between grassroots energy and the formal structures demanded by its partnerships and long-term sustainability.

Alongside its project space, the collective works across different neighborhoods of Lisbon, placing strong emphasis on community engagement and local territory. Many of these collaborations grow out of personal ties between members and local organizations or associations. Residencies and workshops have taken place in peripheral areas such as Talude and Quinta da Fonte, as well as in daycare centers and senior associations, creating opportunities for children, teenagers, and older residents who might otherwise have little access to art. Projects are built on invitations rather than impositions, ensuring that activities respond to local needs and focus not on enforcing change but on opening doors – offering contact with art and culture and affirming that people are welcome in the city and in the wider world. These encounters range from structured activities like mural painting or theatre workshops to spontaneous gestures, with the most transformative experiences often arising unexpectedly and through lived experience.

Collaboration also extends to knowledge and resource sharing. Partnerships with Gothenburg University, for example, have enabled seminars and guest artist programs, broadening the scope of activities and bringing new perspectives. Locally, resource exchange often takes the form of material support, equipment sharing, or hosting one another when spaces are scarce. The collective also observes how its residency program has generated ripple effects: some participating artists have gone on to form new collectives, underlining the importance of shared structures as support systems in an often-precarious art scene.

Mais Uno understands all of these choices – from occupying a vacant metro space to stepping into peripheral neighborhoods – as inherently political. The collective defines itself by offering a democratic, non-elitist platform that challenges conventional gallery

models and seeking to affirm that better living through cultural exchange, without framing itself as a counter-movement and turning this into an instrumental or self-declared goal. Still, challenges persist: despite its visibility in the metro and its accessibility, many in Lisbon remain unaware of the space or unsure of how to engage with it. Bridging this gap remains one of the collective's most difficult but important tasks.

Ostra



Source: Google Maps

Ostra was founded in 2022 by artist Bartolomeu Santos, following a period of displacement during the COVID-19 pandemic. After a two-year residency at Mono, Santos decided to transform his new studio in Lisbon's Ajuda neighborhood into a space that could also host exhibitions. The first show, "Oubliette," marked the start of this new format.

In the beginning, exhibitions were organized without fixed protocols, but over time, the space developed clearer structures and schedules. Currently, Ostra presents four exhibitions per year, usually between April and October. All organizational responsibilities and daily care of the space are managed by Santos.

The curatorial approach does not follow a fixed agenda. Exhibitions are organized through the selection of artists and works, consideration of their connections, and the timing of shows. Preparations include invitations, scheduling, and other practical arrangements.

Ostra does not have a stable funding model and is maintained largely through the founder's own resources. Plans under consideration include crowdfunding, membership schemes, and merchandise to support the project in the future. Meanwhile, the space collaborates with other initiatives and organizations. Partnerships to date have included NVS, The Tiny Art Gallery, Umbigo, FLAD, and a forthcoming project with Chain Reaction. Sponsorships have not yet been secured but are regarded as possible avenues for development, whether through a collector supporting acquisitions, an institution enabling Ostra to expand and enrich the programming or even curating abroad.

The space builds neighborhood embeddedness in Ajuda through informal community engagement. Local residents practicing arts have occasionally been included in the exhibition program, such as an exhibition of Polaroid photographs by a neighbor or the consideration of another resident's silk paintings. It functions as both the personal studio of its founder and an exhibition platform within Lisbon's independent art scene. Although Santos positions his role with humility describing Ostra as an art space where exhibitions can be seen, it remains another vital platform in Lisbon where artists can show work outside commercial circuits.

These profiles not only situate the spaces within Lisbon's artistic and cultural landscape but also inform the thematic analysis that follows. By engaging with artist-run initiatives that actively negotiate autonomy, space, and cultural value within the pressures of urban transformation, the study aims to explore how such organizations both adapt to and contest the broader socio-political conditions of the neoliberal city.

Table 1 summarizes key characteristics of the five spaces.

Table 1. Artist-run spaces and their key characteristics.

	Buraco	Mono	Salto	Mais Uno	Ostra
Origins & Space	Founded by António Bolota; began informally in temporary spaces. Since 2024 located in Colina de Santana with 2 exhibition rooms + 5 studios.	Founded 2019 by Hugo Cantegrel to combine studio and collaborative work. Located in Penha de Franca location with 6 studios + exhibition area.	Founded in 2022 by Nicolai Sarbib after the previous project Third Base. Located in the same two-floor space in Beato: studios below, exhibitions above.	Founded 2021 as a collective from earlier member projects and online talks. Project space in Picoas metro station secured free of charge.	Founded 2022 by Bartolomeu Santos after post-COVID displacement and Mono residency. Personal studio in Ajuda functioning also as exhibition space.
Self-image and Values	DIY, bottom-up, process-driven. Minimal curatorial intervention; dialogue-oriented; organic development. Strong diversity focus. Modest, community-centered, non-spectacular.	Inclusive, gender-balanced; expanding queer/POC engagement. Guided by “poetics before politics” principle – aesthetical value before agenda.	Supports emerging and overlooked artists. Inclusive, public-oriented, locally rooted.	Interdisciplinary, participatory, socially engaged. Territorially rooted. Grassroots yet political; non-elitist.	Humble, independent platform outside commercial circuits. Artist-focused, connection-driven.
Artistic programming	Mix of emerging and established artists. Process-driven with minimal curatorial intervention. Hosts venue-less collectives. Workshops and accessible art-theory sessions planned.	Innovative, non-commercial practices. Cross-disciplinary (performance, dance, sound, experimental). Embraces risk and process; failure welcomed.	Exhibits under-recognized artists, including older ones. Accessibility and engagement with varied publics. Parallel program of community activities with local groups.	Exhibitions, workshops, residencies. Works in peripheral neighborhoods, schools, and senior centers. Projects built on invitation; encourage both structured and spontaneous participation.	Four shows per year (Apr–Oct). Selection based on artist affinities, not themes. Occasionally features artistic neighbors.

Organization: labor and financing	The founder is responsible for administrative matters, the artist team – for curatorial and daily matters. Heavy reliance on self-funding after loss of DGARTES funding. Survives via small grants, partnerships, studio rent, donations.	Self-funded to maintain independence. Supported by studio rent + minimal partnerships. Considering more sustainable funding models due to rising costs.	Initially solo-run; now co-curated. Early self-funded; now with DGARTES + City Council support; supported by studio rent. No salaries; long-term sustainability requires careful planning.	10–15 members + interns. Annual member fees + small artist fees. Negotiates informal culture with formal demands of grants/partnerships.	Single-person operation. Self-funded; exploring crowdfunding, memberships, merchandise, sponsorship.
Partnerships	Local entities (Junta de Freguesia). Media outlets (Umbigo, Gerador). Links with independent spaces (e.g., Sismógrafo). Aiming to join national networks for exchanges / residencies.	Occasional collaborations with Swiss/Spanish institutions, US Embassy, festivals. Prefers ad hoc, flexible partnerships.	Exchanges with Sol (Denmark), Alfaya (Algarve), inland residency. Strong collaboration with local residents' association.	Local associations; Gothenburg University. Resource sharing; residencies generate new collectives.	Collaborations with NVS, Tiny Art Gallery, Umbigo, FLAD, Chain Reaction.
Challenges	Major financial strain. Noise, accessibility issues, gentrification pressures, low visibility. Balancing DIY ethos with the demands of a more formal venue.	Rising rents and financial precarity. Limited local engagement; mostly foreign audiences. Seasonal attendance drops.	High costs, real estate pressures. Heavy workload for small team. Need to align funding cycles with ongoing programming.	Low public awareness despite metro visibility. Balancing informality with administrative responsibilities. Maintaining accessibility and sustainability.	Financial instability. Limited capacity due to single-person workload.

5. Results

This section presents the results of five in-depth interviews with founders and team members of artist-run spaces in Lisbon, thematically organized to highlight commonalities and differences across six interconnected dimensions: origins and physical space; self-image, vision, and values; artistic programming; organization; partnerships; and challenges. Together, these dimensions trace how the initiatives emerge from personal and artistic motivations, take shape through specific spatial and urban conditions, articulate distinctive cultural positions, and translate those orientations into curatorial, organizational, and relational practices. The section moves from the material and historical foundations of the spaces, through their symbolic and political self-understandings, to the everyday operations, networks, and pressures that sustain and constrain their activity. In doing so, it shows how independent art initiatives in Lisbon are shaped simultaneously by autonomy, collective care, and experimentation, and by structural conditions of precarity, urban change, and limited institutional support.

5.1. Origins and Physical Space

Across the interviews, the first recurring theme concerned the personal nature of the origins: all initiatives emerged directly from the artistic needs of their founders or as a continuation of their previous projects in some way. Mono was born out of the dissatisfaction of working alone after leaving university and the desire to recreate the collective energy of a shared studio environment. Ostra similarly began by transforming the founder's own studio into an exhibition space where other artists can be featured as well, partly in response to his residency experience at Mono. As founders notice:

"I was not really happy going out of university and finding myself in a studio on my own for the first time. I was missing the energy of sharing the studio and having many people around. And I nourish myself theoretically and technically from the others." (Mono, Hugo Cantegrel)

“After the refurbishment at my studio was over, I was supposed to come back, but I loved working at MONO. I had to change something about my studio and the boundaries of what a studio is (was) for me. OSTRÁ was born [as] a reaction to Hugo’s Mono.” (Ostra, Bartolomeu Santos)

Salto and Buraco can be seen as successors to earlier projects initiated by their founders. The former grew out of the earlier international residency project Third Base¹, succeeding the already equipped and recognized venue when the project ended after six years. The latter carries the genealogy of António Bolota who is known for his numerous projects (including Avenida 211²) supporting the artistic scene through a very independent way of thinking. Finally, Mais Uno was inspired by a project space model observed in Estonia, where students created their own exhibition venue, and members of the collective adapted this idea to Lisbon upon their return. In each case, the initial impulse was less institutional than personal, rooted in artistic practice and the search for continuity, community, or new opportunities.

The process of securing physical space was often marked by chance, opportunism, or personal financial risk. Buraco found and rented the current space on the market by a fortunate coincidence, refurbishing it with limited means and regarding the location, not too dense in galleries, as both a challenge and an opportunity. Mais Uno secured a Metro storefront for free through direct negotiation with the operator, taking advantage of unused infrastructure and turning it into a highly visible cultural platform. Salto represents the clearest case of personal financial risk, with its founder assuming the lease after the end of the previous project and sustaining the space out of pocket until studio rentals stabilized the model:

“When [Third Base] ended, I had to make a decision what I would do with this space, and I ended up taking a risk and changed the rent to myself. I made

¹ The independent artist residency project initiated by Nicolai Sarbib in Lisbon with the support of two foreign investors. It operated for six years and hosted both Portuguese and international artists. Selected participants were offered a three-month residency period, which culminated in a final exhibition presenting the work developed during their stay.

² Temporary artistic occupation of the building at no. 211 Avenida da Liberdade in Lisbon (2006–2014). The four-floor property, owned by Banco Espírito Santo, was freely and temporarily occupied by artists and curatorial projects, functioning as an autonomous space outside institutional and commercial frameworks during a period marked by economic crisis and austerity in Portugal.

agreement with the owners, and I had to figure out how to sustain this because I also lost my job.” (Nicolai Sarbib)

Likewise, as an initiative fully reliant on personal finances, Mono avoided wealthier districts when searching for its location, prioritizing size and affordability over prestige.

In terms of configuration, all spaces demonstrate hybrid spatial models that combine production and presentation. Buraco consists of two exhibition rooms, a bigger one and a smaller one, an intermediate floor, and five 20 square meters studios. Similarly, Mono brings together a large hall for exhibitions and performances where the audience is welcomed with six artist studios. Salto is split across two floors, with permanent studios downstairs and an exhibition space upstairs. And Ostra integrates studio use and exhibitions within a single intimate space. Mais Uno adopts a slightly different format, separating residences from the exhibition space: while Metro storefront accommodates exhibitions, concerts, and workshops, residencies happen on the territories. This hybridity underlines the dual role of the initiatives as sites of both creation and display, setting them apart from conventional galleries. As Mono’s founder admits –

*“That brings a new dynamic, and also a new way of working, new point of views.”
(Hugo Cantegrel)*

Running such spaces involves continuous maintenance and shared responsibility. Mais Uno describes the daily labor of keeping its Metro storefront clean, orderly, and compliant with regulations, tasks shared by members and interns who manage artist check-ins, check-outs, and utilities:

“There are a few of them assigned to the space where they deal with the check ins and checkouts with the artists, keeping things in order, making the space clean and available for everyone to use – coming in and turning on the lights, turning off if it’s empty; [with] what we are doing in the space, what we want to exhibit, or showcase, or whatever. So they are the ones who are keeping these things daily.” (Nicole Sánchez)

Mono highlights its shared technical space, where collective discussion and preparation occur whenever new projects arise. Ostra is cared for by its founder,

reflecting its smaller scale and personal foundation. Buraco and Salto also depend on both team members and resident artists to balance programming with day-to-day upkeep. The necessity of ongoing care illustrates the labor-intensive nature of sustaining independent initiatives, where maintenance and administration exist alongside curatorial work.

Finally, the neighborhood context often plays a defining role in shaping the identity of each space. Buraco intentionally avoided areas already saturated with galleries, situating itself in a district with both challenges and opportunities due to such isolation:

“In the previous space ... we had a very different format, and exhibitions would open at a different hour, they would open later – there were a lot of people who were coming around 10... And it was a really special place, also because of that. But here we couldn’t do that at all. With this space, we became kind of a more traditional exhibition space; some of that warmth was lost a bit with it.” (João Bragança Gil)

Mais Uno is embedded in the Lisbon Metro, exposing projects to a public that may not otherwise engage with contemporary art, at the same time dealing with the logistics of being in a space like this:

“Stores are not soundproof, so you hear everything around us. It’s very common that sometimes you have an exhibition or a presentation here, and you need silence, and you need to go to your neighbors and ask them. Because it’s a common roof for everyone. And that’s why you hear a lot from one space to another.” (Nicole Sánchez)

Salto is located in Xabregas, a former industrial district with a growing number of art spaces but also marked by gentrification and real estate pressures. Ostra emphasizes the calm, almost village-like character of Ajuda, where its studio-turned-project-space sits in contrast to Lisbon’s more hectic cultural zones. In each case, the physical environment and its social atmosphere shape not only the practical functioning of the initiative but also its visibility and reach.

Taken together, these historico-spatial profiles of the five initiatives reveal the personal initiative, opportunistic access to space, hybrid forms, and DIY use and transformation

of modest infrastructures that lie at the core of them. These diverse elements can be read as forming an emergent assemblage in which each initiative takes shape. The initiatives are characterized by dual function of being a work and display spaces, daily collective care, and a sensitivity to neighborhood context. Moreover, the affective and relational qualities of shared studios, collective care, and everyday encounters help shape the character and rhythms of each space. All five trajectories underline both the precariousness of access to space in Lisbon and the creativity with which artists transform limitations into opportunities emerging from risk-taking, improvisation, and the reimagining of overlooked or underused parts of the urban fabric.

5.2. Self-Image, Vision, and Values

While the origins and physical configurations shed light on the ideas behind and the material conditions that sustain these initiatives, an equally important dimension concerns how the founders themselves conceive of their spaces – their self-image, guiding values, and broader vision for what such projects should represent within Lisbon’s cultural landscape. These orientations constitute the principles that guide their work and shape how the spaces position themselves within the wider artistic field.

To begin with, all spaces emphasize their independence and non-commercial orientation. Buraco explicitly identifies itself as “*completely non-profit*,” foregrounding its role as a platform that is “*friendly and unpretentious*” rather than commercially oriented and exclusive:

“There is no point to sell; we’re not really expecting any posh visitors – the goal is just to show... We welcome completely everyone... It’s completely indifferent why you came here; as long as you come, it’s enough, you know.” (João Bragança Gil)

Similarly, Mono stresses its identity as a “*non-commercial gallery*,” which allows for curatorial independency and higher radicality of presented work, compared to institutionalized or commercialized settings, while Ostra, though smaller in scale, adopts a similar stance, emphasizing freedom and the absence of strict rules or agendas. Salto positions itself clearly outside the commercial art market, stating that it never sought to operate as a gallery driven by speculation or sales:

“I respect in some ways the art market because it's necessary, and it's also how artists, and curators, and other people are able to make money. But there's so many aspects of it that I'm really not interested in... it's important that people can have spaces to visit that are free, that are showing work that's not just made commercially.” (Nicolai Sarbib)

Finally, Mais Uno is committed to providing an accessible space for artists to work and to exhibit, unlike commercial galleries where one must get chosen to exhibit. Yet, the collective is not coming into an open confrontation with the art market:

“While we are not saying we want this as a counter movement against galleries...it is a space that is moving counter gallery spaces. Are we embracing this or that? I would say in a more unthought way, we are. But if you read the manifesto of the project space, there's nothing that says we are a counter movement towards gallery spaces.” (Nicole Sánchez)

The absence of commercial pressure creates conditions where non-conformity is framed as both necessary and desirable: Buraco, Mono and Salto stress the importance of experimentation and tolerance of failure, respectively describing itself as an “*experimental space*” where artists are free to try things that may not succeed and put out something that is not as filtered (Buraco); noting that artists need opportunities like this to “*understand what works and what doesn't*” (Mono); and emphasizing curatorial independence with the aim to realize projects that may not fit conventional frameworks (Salto). All three initiatives are dedicated to young up and coming artists, yet they also highlight the importance of bringing different generations of artists together to create dialogue and exchange between them.

At the same time, the initiatives strongly emphasize community orientation, accessibility, and openness towards different publics. Buraco highlights its ambition to become “*more accessible towards the population in general,*” through workshops, educational sessions, and outreach to its neighborhood. Similarly, Salto emphasizes the importance of communicating with different publics and growing engagement with the local community. It is committed to the neighborhood embeddedness through collaboration with the association of local residents, schools, and local businesses:

*“We're hoping to be able to develop more and more programs and projects within Salto that create opportunity for participation of local communities.”
(Nicolai Sarbib)*

Mais Uno is perhaps the most explicit in this regard. Besides making art accessible for everyone that passes through their project space in the metro system, the collective positions itself as dedicated to territories and communities:

“From the beginning the collective wants to be interdisciplinary, involve participation and socially engaged art.” (Julia Dźbik)

Moreover, these views sometimes span beyond the local context. For example, João Bragança Gil from Buraco speaks of the importance of nurturing the broader, country-wide cultural community. The space thus attempts to be more present throughout the territory and to contribute to the reactivation of spaces and territories that were left forgotten through the interchange programs. Salto similarly strives to create dialogue between local artists, international artists, and multiple communities.

Internally, there is a strong commitment to collectivity, informality and self-organization. Mais Uno puts informality, horizontality and initiative-based involvement at its core; Buraco describes an overall “sharing attitude” within the space and collective decision making among its team to shape programming; and Salto emphasizes the flexibility of responsibility sharing between the two members of the team. While other initiatives were not so vocal about these issues, none of the cases follows or shares a sympathy towards the hierarchical, institutionalized models. Mais Uno, however, critically assesses the possibility of staying informal while balancing it with realizing their ambitions:

“We need to be aware that at some point, if we want to grow and thrive with a space of our own, with financial means to do projects, we have to be formal at one point. When you want to do things, and you want to grow, and you want to be more stable, you do become more formal. And at one point it will happen while the structure remains informal.” (Nicole Sánchez, Mais Uno)

While visions and values are fairly similar among all five spaces, their political and social positioning varies in emphasis. Mais Uno explicitly frames its activities as political:

“Anything that we do is political. There's no escaping to these unpolitical things. That only happens when you are a complete anarchist... I think everything you do from the day you are born within a society is political unless you live on your own somewhere with no contact to any society. So our choice of having this space in the Metro is already a political statement.” (Nicole Sánchez)

However, the collective says to embrace things in a more subtle way. Although the way they work, the communities they work with, naturally makes their activity a counter movement to a lot of causes, they restrain from using that flag towards their projects:

“We work on these communities, on these territories to provide them a better living. But it's not the goal. If it happens in between, that our presence there made them have better conditions for something else – perfect. But it's not our goal to provide anything else than whatever they have.”(Nicole Sánchez)

Both Buraco and Salto frame their mission socially, critiquing large-scale cultural projects and top-down, market-driven cultural policies in Portugal, and advocating instead for small, distributed initiatives that are closer to both artist and local communities. Even where the political dimension is not explicitly foregrounded, the values of accessibility, inclusivity, and in- and interdependence carry implicit oppositional force:

“I think if you can distribute these spaces [like Buraco] throughout cities and throughout the territory, it could be very successful to have these “mushrooms”, especially if you support them in the sense of letting them engage with the communities.” (João Bragança Gil, Buraco)

“... there are no public policies that are safeguarding local residents and influence three local businesses and they open... Unfortunately the type of policies that have been adopted have followed this kind of [profit-oriented] mentality because the city what attracted so many people in investment to the city was very unique.” (Nicolai Sarbib, Salto)

Mono adopts a more ambivalent stance, prioritizing *“poetics before politics”* and restricting any political message to a message that is anti-capitalist, but *“turned in a nice way”* first and foremost:

*“I really want the poetics to come first because politics will be there anyway.”
(Hugo Cantegrel)*

Similarly, Ostra reflects on its role in shaping the cultural landscape of the city:

“I’m nothing less than a sculptor taking care of an art space where one can see exhibitions.” (Bartolomeu Santos)

The five initiatives articulate a shared vision that prioritizes independence from commercial structures, openness to experimentation, and social commitment. Their emphasis on inclusivity and community-oriented work hints at a form of emerging urban cultural commoning, where resources, space, and artistic activity are shared across publics. While this section has outlined the broader cultural positions that situate them against dominant institutional and market frameworks, the following sections reveal how these orientations materialize in practice through programming, organization, and everyday operations.

5.3. Artistic Programming

Artistic programming provides the most tangible expression of each space’s vision, translating ideals into concrete curatorial and organizational choices. The programming models across the five artist-run spaces reflect their ambitions, available resources, and positions within Lisbon’s cultural landscape. While each operates at a different scale and pace, all demonstrate a commitment to diversity, experimentation, and adaptability to changing circumstances. Several of them also act as supportive platforms for other initiatives that have lost their spaces in Lisbon, highlighting their role in sustaining the city’s fragile independent art ecology.

The interviews show that overall there are no strict rules applied to curatorial approach so at times it even seems like an absence of such. Initiatives rarely seek certain work, rather – they stay open to proposals and welcome artistic initiative, welcoming multidisciplinary, experimentation, while trying to maintain diversity understood both in terms of gender and background, but also through variations in artistic approach, attitude, and temperament. For instance, Buraco is committed to presenting unconventional or unorthodox projects that resist easy classification and *“might not*

make a lot of sense.” Besides the intentionally broad curatorial approach, the team aims for parity between genders, languages, and generations of artists, integrating established artists with much younger ones. Mono operates across visual arts, performance, dance, and sound art. Hugo Cantegrel describes the curatorial approach at Mono as following:

“The choice whom to present is about the work, although I’m not very peculiar. I want just trying not to be in something too straightforward; innovative, supporting the emerging arts and trying to get away from the mainstream.”

He further foregrounds inclusivity and notes that *“55% women were exhibited over the time,”* while acknowledging a currently limited representation of queer and Afro-descendant artists, which they are seeking to improve. Similarly to Buraco, it resists an exclusive focus on early-career practitioners, highlighting the experience sharing that comes with inviting late career artists:

“It is interesting to speak with a photographer that has so much experience, that have seen a lot. This is going to bring in some super interesting talks.”

Salto describes its program as organic, alternating between exhibitions curated by the team and those proposed by independent curators or collectives and thus allowing different modes of practice to enter its program. Similarly to Mono, Salto team applies personal criteria, selecting artists whose work aligns with what the space seeks to represent and who contribute to a *“friendly environment.”* Finally, Ostra’s focus is less on specific disciplines than on conceptual coherence. Allowing for solo and group presentations, its curatorial approach emphasizes the synergy and the conceptual resonance between artists and works, curating combinations that generate dialogue between *“different artists, different works, similar ideas, different ideas.”* This overall intergenerational dialogue reinforces the spaces’ role as mediators between different stages of artistic development, positioning them as laboratories for exchange rather than as gatekeeping institutions.

The scale and rhythm of programming vary considerably across the five spaces, with each of them calibrating its artistic ambitions to available resources and balancing intensity with sustainability. Mais Uno maintains one of the most active calendars,

organizing three to four projects per month in addition to an annual residency. Mono sustains a steady pace with one to two inaugurations per month that involve performances and are followed by an exhibition. Salto currently runs about five shows per year; and Ostra operates on a seasonal cycle of four shows a year, timed between April and October when audiences are more likely to attend. Finally, Buraco is now in the process of restructuring its program after previously having a very dense schedule to tailor it to a smaller financial abilities while at the same time trying to maximize the media coverage by giving the reporters more time to visit and write about the exhibitions.

Finally, programming decisions are shaped by local context, the degree of embeddedness in the scene, and social surroundings. Buraco focuses mainly on Lisbon-based artists and initiatives, occasionally collaborating with those from Porto, but broader outreach remains limited by financial constraints. Mono frequently collaborates with festivals and institutions across the city, while Salto integrates presentations from artists who occupy its studio spaces. Importantly, some of these spaces also host displaced Lisbon-based collectives and initiatives, providing support in precarious conditions thus functioning as adaptive shelters for independent cultural activity within a rapidly transforming urban landscape:

“Sometimes we invite spaces to take over Buraco - spaces which have lost their space, for example, we invited this collective which was an exhibition space before, which was called Spirit Shop, which lost their space, so we invited them. Now the next exhibition we're going to have in October, it's from Uppercut, which is also a collective, which used to have a space but they lost it also because of the financial pressure. So now they're doing a project also here.” (João Bragança Gil, Buraco)

“Self Mistake - they don't have a fixed place, so they did their event here at Mono.” (Hugo Cantegrel, Mono)

Collectively, artistic programming of these five initiatives translates their shared ideals of openness, diversity, collaboration and experimentation into practice, providing flexible, inclusive, and context-responsive platforms for artistic production and exchange. Yet, the capacity to sustain exhibitions, residencies, and collaborations

relies on how each space organizes itself behind the scenes. In this sense, organization provides the framework that enables values to endure over time and involves labor and decision-making, and financial aspects. For independent initiatives, these are closely intertwined, jointly creating the practical infrastructure that supports autonomy and highlighting how independence relies equally on financial resourcefulness and organizational ethos.

5.4. Organization

5.4.1. Labor and Decision Making

All five spaces originated from spontaneous and informal beginnings, reflected in operations marked by flexibility, initiative, and DIY ethics. As Buraco's representative recalls, *"sometimes there were shows and sometimes there were no shows,"* while Ostra describes its early organization as *"without protocol."* Over time, however, these improvised models gradually incorporated more structured forms – both as a natural outcome of growth and in response to external commitments and partnerships. Buraco moved toward a defined team to better support artists and provide fees for shows; Mais Uno, after receiving public funding and a Metro-based space, introduced formal procedures for project management, accounting, and reporting. As Ostra's founder Bartolomeu Santos reflects:

"I guess the romanticism of having an artist-run space is becoming a more structured passion,"

with clearer schedules and boundaries.

Yet, even as structure has increased, the spirit of initiative and flexibility that marked these spaces' beginnings continues to guide their operations. Each initiative concentrates real responsibility within a small core group and structures internal work through adaptable, need-based coordination rather than fixed hierarchies or formalized roles. The division of labor thus emerges pragmatically, shaped by circumstance and availability rather than by rigid designation. Buraco separates programming from administration, relying on three to four individuals for programming and daily decisions, while the founder oversees infrastructure and accounting. Mais Uno lists between 10

and 15 members and emphasizes horizontality, when *“there is no such a thing as one certain role,”* and individual initiative determines who takes on what task at a given moment. As Nicole Sánchez explains:

“While we seem 10-12 of us regularly, it’s not 10 or 12 of us working... it’s dependent on whatever availability people have,”

leaving most practical work to a smaller subset and a few full-time interns. Salto also maintains a horizontal structure, yet on a much smaller scale, with two team members sharing curatorial and administrative responsibilities, often coordinating remotely and adapting to changing demands. Mono currently operates with two active team members, though ideally the team would include four or five, while Ostra remains largely managed by its founder.

5.4.2. Financing and Funding

The financial models of the five initiatives reflect a combination of precariousness, creativity, and pragmatism. Each space has developed hybrid strategies that mix internal resource-pooling with varying degrees of reliance on formal cultural support. For some initiatives, public funding plays a decisive role. Salto has been successful in securing DGArtes funding throughout the years and has also benefitted from Lisbon City Council support, allowing it to expand programming, pay artists, and professionalize operations. Having previously received the same funding but not being able to secure it the last time, Buraco multiple times admitted that the loss of it created a precarious situation for the initiative. Mais Uno has obtained occasional project-based funding; while the two initiatives, Ostra and Mono, who have never received public funding before, are now striving towards it, yet with different motivations:

“Would be cool to be sponsored by a solid institution, allowing us to go a little more crazy in terms of shows;” (Bartolomeu Santos, Ostra)

“It’s a fight to present what we present. And we got to the point that we do need to gentrify ourselves a bit.” (Hugo Cantegrel, Mono)

This highlights the central tension: while public cultural support is seen as valuable for sustainability regardless if the initiative has it or not, the attitudes towards having to

comply with the funding guidelines diverge and highlight the degree of willingness of each project to adapt and balance financial sustainability with (perceived) independence. First, all the initiatives realize that the constraints of application-related bureaucracy: the application process is time and effort consuming while the decision is subject to a human factor and not guaranteed. João Bragança Gil from Buraco highlighted the rigid requirements attached to DGArtes support:

“[It] requires justification how [the initiative] fits the guidelines or how does it fit the government directive, or whatever.”

Having to comply with certain requirements is also seen differently, either as a necessary compromise or a threat to independency. Nicolai Sarbib from Salto admits that although applications take much time and effort, the funding never undermined curatorial independence:

“Obviously, there are many things to keep in mind [when applying and after receiving the funding], but these are things that we also care about. We’ve never have to adapt ourselves artistically or in terms of what we’re curating.”

At the same time, Mono has intentionally chosen to avoid applying for cultural funds, citing the bureaucracy constraints and perceived loss of freedom associated with the acquisition of funds. Hugo Cantegrel remarked that

“Once you get the money coming in, you need to justify everything that you do. If you get some money, from this moment you know that you’re losing some freedom.”

Mais Uno admitted that the necessary adoption of greater levels of formality, such as registering as an association and undertaking detailed reporting, coming with the public funding and the project space was met differently by the members of the collective, with some of them being unable or unwilling to commit to it.

Alongside the intermittent public funding, all five initiatives rely heavily on self-financing and personal investment to provide modest but reliable baseline of sustainability. Buraco, Salto, Ostra, and Mono were initially financed out of the founders’ personal wallet and are up to date heavily reliant on it, while Mais Uno members regularly

contribute funds to projects upfront. A related internal financing strategy is the use of rental models as steady sources of income. Buraco, Salto, and Mono rent out studio spaces within their buildings to cover basic expenses such as rent and bills. Mais Uno cannot sublet the Metro space, but charges resident artists a small daily fee to cover utilities. All five spaces also supplement their budget through modest returns from sales and/or the bar. These financial tensions reflect broader dynamics of neoliberal urban cultural policy, where independent initiatives are encouraged to compete for scarce resources while maintaining entrepreneurial resilience.

These financial strategies reveal a hybrid and improvised model of survival that combines occasional public funding with a sustained reliance on personal and collective contributions. Across all five cases, financing remains fragile and labor-intensive, yet it is deeply embedded in the informal, experimental ethos of the initiatives themselves – one that not only exposes their fragility but also affirms their commitment to alternative ways of working beyond bureaucratic and market-driven models. Furthermore, partnerships also play an important role in sustaining activity, providing both material support and new opportunities for growth.

5.5. Partnerships

Partnerships also play an important role in sustaining activity, providing both material support and new opportunities for growth. They emerge as an important, though unevenly developed, dimension of the five artist-run initiatives and function as means of communication, production, and survival, while also serving as channels for embedding projects within broader artistic and social ecosystems.

A first prominent aspect concerns collaborations with the goal of expanding communication and reach:

“Partnerships help us find a new public. You have more people knowing your space;” (Hugo Cantegrel, Mono)

“These connections can facilitate international recognition of local art. When you have international curators or artists or writers coming to visit, participate in shows, and they get to also know other artists that we're working with, it's always

being, connecting with the environment, and that's really something that interests us.” (Nicolai Sarbib, Salto)

In practice, these collaborations take shape through a range of relationships among artist-run spaces and independent but more formalized initiatives, both within Portugal and abroad. Buraco has been strengthening ties within Portugal's independent scene, particularly with Sismografo in Porto and the Urso Collective in Caldas da Rainha, with whom it is launching a short-term residency. Salto sustains ongoing collaborations with the Danish gallery Sol, through which exhibitions are developed jointly and presented in both venues. A similar partnership has been established with Alfaya in the Algarve, aimed at creating a residency and exhibition program linking artists between Lisbon and Portugal's interior regions. Mono maintains a similarly outward-oriented approach, having collaborated with Pro Helvetia in Switzerland to bring Swiss artists to Portugal, with the Tondimage Festival; it also hosts artists selected by partner institutions in Spain and Saudi Arabia that award exhibitions abroad, as well as young artists who received the Flat Prize from the American Embassy in Lisbon. Ostra, meanwhile, cultivates connections with several independent platforms and institutional contexts, including NVS, The Tiny Art Gallery, the Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD), and the collective project Chain Reaction, reinforcing its commitment to dialogue and cooperation within the independent field. Mais Uno admitted, that they have not yet explored partnerships extensively, describing it as “a big missing hole” in the way they are settled. The only occasion when Mais Uno was directly partnered with a similar cultural structure was their year-long residency at Largo Residências, which provided the collective a project space.

Sometimes these partnerships extend to deeper forms of collaboration that encompass knowledge sharing and facilitate artistic exchange and cross-regional circulation:

“Collaborations should be good for both sides, and normally I'm looking into different ways of doing things... this means looking to break internal limits and prejudices, questioning the idea of what: an artwork is, a show, an artist, a curator, a gallery or an artspace;” (Bartolomeu Santos, Ostra)

“Partnerships are also important for our goal to create dialogue between local artists, the international art, and also multiple communities.” (Nicolai Sarbib, Salto)

Furthermore, media partners facilitate visibility and outreach. Buraco and Ostra, for example, have worked with major cultural publications such as Umbigo and Gerador, which cover research, news, and a variety of cultural initiatives. As Buraco’s team member João Bragança Gil notes,

“It is important having media partners to help our reach and our communication, as the whole point is to put on shows, but it’s actually for people to see the shows that you put up.”

A second pattern relates to partnerships with public or institutional bodies with a social or community-oriented mission. Buraco has worked with the parish council (Junta de Freguesia) to connect with local audiences and communicate the initiative’s activities to them. The space also seeks to join the Portuguese Contemporary Art Network, which would allow it to extend programming to less densely populated regions, activating these territories through shared exhibitions. Salto maintains a long-standing partnership with the local residents’ association in Beato neighborhood aimed at increasing participation of local community through jointly developed programs. Mais Uno identifies its main institutional partner as the Metro, which provides both recognition and infrastructural support:

“It’s amazing because we have a recognition from a public provider.” (Nicole Sánchez)

Beyond formal partnerships, Mais Uno also engages in collaborations that emerge from their work on the territories, including associations, cooperatives, and daycare centers. Such socially engaged partnerships provide legitimacy, practical support, and reinforce the initiatives’ commitment to community-focused and socially and spatially embedded practice.

Finally, beyond reach and symbolic recognition, certain partnerships deliver material and practical support. Mais Uno highlights that partnerships have provided tangible resources, including lighting systems and equipment donated by private companies

and former cultural spaces, as well as financial returns. For example, collaborations with Gothenburg University, which hosts annual seminars, generate both income and opportunities for knowledge exchange between students and collective members. Both Salto and Buraco underscore the importance of partnerships for accessing funding opportunities, noting that collaborations with other projects, at national and international level, strengthen applications. In this sense, partnerships function as key infrastructures for sustaining activity in financially precarious contexts.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that partnerships operate as multi-layered mechanisms: they increase visibility and recognition, provide material resources, enable international and local exchanges, and foster resilience in conditions of precarity. While formal collaborations with public institutions play a role for some spaces, most partnerships remain flexible, informal, and rooted in personal or collective networks. They are valued not only for what they bring in practical terms but also as expressions of solidarity and interdependence within the wider cultural landscape:

“Even small or flimsy partnerships, we always take a lot of pride in them and we always try to work a lot with them because it's how you build things.” (João Bragança Gil, Buraco)

Partnerships extend each initiative into a wider cultural assemblage of actors, resources, communities, and places, through which they also assert a cultural right to the city by opening access to art beyond elite or commercial zones.

5.6. Challenges

These challenges were most frequently articulated around financial constraints, the limited capacity of small teams, difficulties in audience engagement, broader issues of cultural politics, and the conditions of physical space.

Across the five initiatives, the tension between grassroots informality and the structural demands of financial and labor sustainability emerges as a layered challenge. First of all, finances themselves are a persistent challenge, regardless of whether resources are internally generated or externally received. Financial precarity is an immediate,

material constraint on the survival, scale, and programming capacity of the initiatives. Buraco highlights that its planned expansion is

“...now in jeopardy because we lost the DGArtes funding this year, which is a very dangerous moment for us. For the scale of our project, we're still very low on funding, both in terms of the money, but also in terms of the competition.”
(João Bragança Gil)

Mono describes the pressure of rising costs, while Salto both underscores the same concern and extends it:

“Rent is going higher, everything is more expensive than before. And so we need to find a new way of getting the money... It's been surviving for six years to be here;” (Hugo Cantegrel, Mono)

“The biggest worry, how can I afford to pay the rent of this space? And how can we do this? ... The more we grow, the more expenses we have. We want to always make the space... [and] future exhibitions better in terms of equipment or the possibilities of what you can do.” (Nicolai Sarbib, Salto)

Another common thread concerns the labor and team capacity required to sustain these initiatives, as the financial fragility is deeply intertwined with human resources. As Nicolai Sarbib framed it:

“You're always restrained by the budget you have – everything either costs money or is time consuming.”

Buraco notes that its small team not only has to pursue other jobs but also struggles to prioritize personal artistic practice. Ostra's founder similarly observes that either he is working for Ostra or for his own practice. Mono acknowledges that the team needs to be twice as big; and Salto notes that managing the project is intensive for only two people, and this workload is further restricted by the time they can dedicate outside their other professional commitments:

“The biggest challenge going forward... [is to] keep growing and gradually make it more... sustainable... for ourselves, so that we can dedicate more time to [Salto] without having... to work... our day jobs.” (Nicolai Sarbib, Salto)

Finally, the hybrid and improvised strategies that sustain these spaces, combining occasional public funding, partnerships, and personal or collective contributions, shape how labor is organized, decisions are made, and responsibilities are shared, and vice versa. As a result, each initiative continuously negotiates the degree of formalization it can adopt without compromising the flexibility and DIY ethos that underpins its identity. In some cases, financial or institutional obligations have forced greater structure, while in others, the desire to maintain autonomy and avoid administrative burdens has reinforced informal methods, even at the cost of precarity. Finding this balance proves uneasy:

“There is a lot of outside pressure, pressure that does not match what is on the inside of the collective and how we want to create it;” (Nicole Sánchez, Mais Uno)

“Since day one I knew it would be hard to find a happy financial solution.” (Bartolomeu Santos, Ostra)

This ongoing balancing act reveals that financial sustainability and team capacity are not merely operational concerns but are deeply connected to the very principles of independence and community that define these artist-run spaces. Ultimately, the challenge lies in sustaining artistic and social missions while navigating the structural realities of funding, labor, and partnerships – a negotiation that is central to the vitality, resilience, and continued reinvention of independent cultural initiatives.

Another common challenge concerns audience reach and public engagement. First, many spaces find it difficult to reach beyond existing art-world audiences. Salto and Buraco observe that there is not much participation of “local people that are not already interested in contemporary art,” and remark, that having a general audience is a persistent challenge faced by any museum, even big or known one. Mono, Buraco and Mais Uno further attribute the root of this challenge specifically to the way Portuguese society relates to art and culture. Interviewees describe a widespread lack of familiarity with artist-run or community-based spaces, noting that many people still associate culture either with popular entertainment or with elite art institutions, which is especially challenging to navigate for the contemporary visual artists. As Mais Uno explains,

“We are not a society that sees art and culture as something democratically accessible;” (Nicole Sánchez)

And, as a result, many perceive independent spaces as either irrelevant or exclusionary, staying unaware of what such spaces are and what they can provide. This distance is reflected in everyday encounters: despite open doors, free events, and active outreach, local audiences frequently hesitate to enter, unsure of what these places are or whom they serve:

“Middle ground is still not yet into the DNAs of the common people in Portugal. They don't see it as [they are] entitled to connect with contemporary art world without [it] being a top end gallery or a high end museum.” (Nicole Sánchez)

Mono similarly points to limited local engagement, remarking that people from Lisbon tend to visit only when they know someone, which makes the space more popular among foreigners living in the city than among Portuguese visitors. Hugo Cantegrel relates this to what he sees as a “*competition with the beach culture*,” which discourages locals from discovering new artists they “*would not have the chance to see [elsewhere]*.” Furthermore, Mono and Buraco share an experience of conflict with their neighbors:

“Neighbors in the building really don't like the fact that there's noise;” (João Bragança Gil, Buraco)

“Neighbor small time ago wrote us on Instagram saying “people stay after your parties,” almost like we're doing a club here. We close at 9-10, not [at] night... These people live 10 meters away, and they never come in. It's a bit of a shame.” (Hugo Cantegrel, Mono)

Mais Uno, beyond passersby, see limited engagement from their direct neighbors – people that work in the metro station:

“We used to have our open store studios; we would frequently invite them in and say, come and see our work. Until their responsible manager told them “what were you doing inside of the store?”

Underscoring that over time they were not successful in transmitting the idea of their space, despite the consistent efforts. Furthermore, this pattern of engagement spans over the artists, who collaborate with the space:

“All the artists that came through this space – 10% were Portuguese. And of those 10%, maybe 5% were our friends, where we explained what the project was about.”

Audience reach can also be limited by the characteristics of a space's location and the presence of competing cultural offerings, as Buraco's experience illustrates. After relocating to a new area, the initiative found itself more isolated: the site was harder to reach by public transport, the format of openings had changed, and being distant from other cultural spaces intensified competition for audiences. As a result, Buraco experienced a significant drop in attendance.

These pressures situate the initiatives within broader processes of gentrification and neoliberal urban restructuring, where cultural spaces are both valued symbolically and squeezed materially. Thus, the above-mentioned challenges are intensified by the absence of cultural policies that recognize the broader value of art beyond short-term commercial gains. Independent initiatives are often the first to struggle or disappear, precisely because they are not driven by profit and rely on small, precarious budgets. Rising rents, real estate pressures, and limited public or private support make it difficult for these spaces to remain open, while artists themselves must often juggle multiple jobs to cover basic living costs. This combination of financial and temporal precarity constrains the ability of artists and collectives to fully dedicate themselves to their practice, limiting both the production of new work and the potential for deeper engagement with local audiences. These conditions are not only structural but also felt in everyday life: fatigue, frustration, hesitation, and fragile persistence register how broader political and economic pressures take shape as ordinary affects – emotional responses to living and working in a precarious urban cultural landscape. In this context, the very independence that defines these spaces also renders them highly vulnerable, highlighting the need for broader recognition and structural support for experimental, non-commercial cultural production.

Table 2 summarizes the main conclusions.

Table 2. Main conclusions across six analytical dimensions.

Thematic Category	Main Conclusions
Origins & Space	• Emergence from personal artistic needs and community-driven motivations. • Precarious and opportunistic access to space, relying on chance, personal risk, and repurposing overlooked infrastructures. • Hybrid production-presentation spaces shaped by immediate neighborhood contexts.
Vision & Values	• Guiding principles: independence from the commercial art market, commitment to experimentation, emphasis on cultural value. • Intergenerational dialogue, equality and inclusivity in representation are central. • Curatorial ethos grounded in non-conformity, risk-taking, and tolerance for failure. • Openness, informality, and community orientation guide operations. • Political stances vary, from explicit engagement to subtle or poetic approaches.
Artistic Programming	• Flexible, low-rule programming prioritizing unconventional, multidisciplinary practices and diverse artistic backgrounds. • Rhythms range from intensive monthly cycles to slower, sustainability-oriented tempos shaped by resources and internal capacity. • Strong support for emerging and marginalized creators and parallel programs for local residents.
Organization (Labor and Financing)	• Structures evolve from informal DIY modes toward partial formalization as responsibilities grow. • Small cores shoulder most labor, balancing horizontal intentions with administrative and partnership demands. • Teams receive no salary. • Financial models are fragile hybrids combining public funding, personal investment, and modest earned income, creating continuous tension between autonomy and survival.
Partnerships	• Expand visibility, legitimacy, and resources, connecting spaces to national and international networks. • Enable knowledge exchange, mobility, and collaborative programming. • Local partnerships anchor the spaces in their territories, enhancing social relevance and resilience.
Challenges	• Persistent financial precarity, rising rents, and unstable funding threaten long-term continuity, compounded by weak cultural policy. • Relative spatial isolation, limited labor capacity, and difficulty engaging local publics constrain programming and outreach. • Ongoing tension between grassroots autonomy and sustainability demands, requiring constant negotiation between flexibility and formalization.

6. Discussion

Maintaining physical space in Lisbon has become increasingly difficult for artist-run initiatives due to the combined effects of entrepreneurial governance, intensified real-estate speculation, and the disappearance of underutilized spaces that once offered room for experimentation (Harvey, 2006; Peck, 2005). The growing scarcity of affordable, flexible space means that securing a venue is no longer a matter of strategic choice or symbolic pioneering; rather, it requires navigating volatile rental markets, short-term leases, and neighborhoods that have already experienced gentrification (Ley, 2003; Rose, 1984; Shaw, 2013). In this context, spatial precarity is not primarily the result of friction with planning regimes, but a structural condition: opportunities for independent cultural production are constrained by market-driven pressures, property instability, and the financialization of urban space (Colomb, 2012).

Historically, “alternative” cultural spaces in Lisbon could act as urban pioneers, occupying underused post-industrial sites and contributing to rebranding and commercial reactivation of stigmatized neighborhoods, and until recently artistic and cultural infrastructures played a central role in elevating the symbolic and market value of these territories (Estevens et al., 2020; Estevens and Carmo, 2023). Today, artist-run spaces tend to enter already valorized urban environments, where their presence adds comparatively little to existing market dynamics and where their capacity to shape urban trajectories is correspondingly reduced. At the same time, the disappearance of indeterminate sites of urban land has eroded the spatial conditions that once enabled spontaneous, experimental, and radically counter-hegemonic forms of urbanity. Where Groth and Corijn (2005) describe informal creative occupation as driven by ideas and emerging spontaneously, contemporary access to space is increasingly shaped by urgency and constraint, driven by the need to secure any minimally affordable niche, even if spatially compromised or peripheral. Rather than choosing locations for symbolic or political reasons, the spaces studied here secure whatever openings remain possible, often through coincidence or personal risk, as illustrated by Buraco’s fortuitous discovery of its venue on the market, Salto’s assumption of a lease after the end of a previous project in a rapidly gentrifying Xabergas, and Mais Uno’s extraordinary collaboration with the Metro. To speak with Colomb (2012),

temporariness, too, is no longer purely experimental but structural – imposed by short-term leases, volatile rental conditions, and a high probability of displacement. As a result, independent initiatives occupy a paradoxical position within late-stage neoliberal urbanism: rhetorically celebrated within urban branding narratives yet materially constrained and vulnerable to displacement, forced to operate strictly within the dominant logic of real-estate markets that no longer allows them to function either as “marginal gentrifiers,” or as sites of radical counter-hegemonic urban transformation. The spatial conditions of artist-run spaces are thus contingent and unstable, shaped through shifting constellations of actors, resources, and infrastructures.

Furthermore, in the absence of policy support, the costs of artistic production are increasingly offloaded onto cultural workers themselves. Independence thus emerges less as a stable position outside institutional frameworks than as a structural condition of exposure and precarity, requiring continuous negotiation with administrative frameworks, funding systems, and partnership demands (Peck, 2005). Questions of survival become inseparable from questions of labor, risk, and responsibility, and maintaining a space depends on forms of autonomy that are themselves heavily mediated (Besson, 2017). Thus, while hybrid spatial configurations combining production and presentation environments maximize use-value within limited square meters, supporting the capacity to maintain a foothold in an increasingly inaccessible city, adaptive organizational, financial, and curatorial strategies requiring extensive self-management and bureaucratic labor ensure operational continuity.

Organizationally, spaces originate in informal, DIY modes but gradually adopt partial formalization as responsibilities expand (Blessi et al., 2011). Mais Uno’s move toward formal registration and reporting procedures after securing the Metro space and public funding and Buraco’s shift toward a more structured team illustrate this trajectory. Full professionalization and implementation of managerial standards is avoided; decision-making remains horizontal and collaborative, committed to the production and dissemination of experimental visual art. Financially, sustainability relies on hybrid and adaptive models: public funding has become increasingly important, yet it is consistently supplemented by personal investment, volunteer labor, and small streams of earned income, like studio rentals and bar sales. Curatorially, autonomy is articulated through flexible, low-rule programming that prioritizes experimentation,

multidisciplinary practices, and risk-taking. Rhythms of activity vary from intensive, cyclical calendars to slower tempos shaped by members' capacity, but the emphasis on process, openness, and tolerance of failure remains consistent. This mix reflects both commitment to independence and pragmatic adaptation to institutional realities, enabling operational continuity without full alignment with institutional or market realities, even as it remains resource-intensive and structurally precarious. The spatio-cultural environment is thus an active, shifting configuration in which each initiative takes shape through contingent encounters between artists, landlords, funding bodies, and publics. Across all five cases, autonomy is inseparable from self-exploitation and uncertainty, exposing the limits of narratives that treat cultural production as a self-sufficient sector capable of thriving under marketized conditions. Artist-run spaces are neither external to institutions nor fully absorbed by them; they persist in a structurally mediated in-between, where independence is both structurally imposed and constrained.

Persistence under such conditions is lived through what Stewart (2007) calls ordinary affects: the low-intensity, ongoing feelings of exhaustion, hesitation, frustration, but also care and attachment that accumulate through daily work. These affects are not simply personal emotions; they are the ways in which broader political and economic pressures are embodied and managed in practice. At Mono, for example, the emphasis on shared technical spaces and collective discussion reflects not only a curatorial logic but an affective need for mutual support in conditions of instability, where artistic and administrative labor blur and individuals rely on one another to cope with uncertainty. Similarly, Mais Uno's daily labor of keeping the Metro storefront open, clean, and compliant reveals how care, discipline, and vulnerability become routine practices through which precarity is endured and normalized. In both cases, independence is sustained less through formal structures than through ongoing affective labor that holds the space together.

Although autonomy in artist-run spaces emerges less as an elective stance or explicit political discourse and more as a structural condition, all five spaces articulated their identity in explicit contrast to commercial gallery models, prioritizing community orientation, accessibility, and openness to diverse publics over marketability, exclusivity, and commodification. By orienting themselves toward a deliberately

alternative identity, these spaces enact tentative, practice-based forms of self-determination, testing and sustaining alternative cultural infrastructures. Within this tension, the critique of dominant cultural narratives is enacted through the very organizational and curatorial mechanisms that determine and sustain the spaces' existence. Beyond securing day-to-day survival, these practices articulate a value-laden distance from institutional, market, and state logics, expressed through choices about collaboration, governance, and cultural purpose, pointing to an ongoing effort to sustain not only structural, but also ideological distance from dominant governance and market imperatives.

First, by holding space for non-commercial cultural activity in neighborhoods under pressure, artist-run spaces redefine access to culture as shared use rather than consumption, and art as a collaborative process embedded in daily life, care, and mutual recognition rather than as an end-product. Operating as semi-public infrastructures, these spaces create settings in which strangers gather around shared artistic interests. In this sense, they generate what Volont et al. (2022) term a "third atmosphere": a relational sphere situated between the privacy of the home and the exposure of the formal public sphere, where individuals feel sufficiently safe to share passions, vulnerabilities, or desires. By allowing affect, meaning, and collective attachments to circulate beyond intimate circles, this "third atmosphere" becomes a zone in which alternative social relations and cultural values are practiced and normalized. Informality, low thresholds of participation, and trust-based governance enable participants to test forms of cooperation without the immediate pressures of explicit political articulation, market expectation, or institutional scrutiny. Second, by integrating daily artistic labor with public-facing programming, simultaneously functioning as studios, exhibition rooms, production sites, and social spaces, these initiatives create proximity between creation, display, and reception, challenging institutional separations and hierarchies of cultural production. Furthermore, as small-scale initiatives anchored in local histories and collaborating with neighborhood businesses, artisans, and local public actors, they cultivate place-based cultural identities rather than feeding into branding-driven creative city agendas. Finally, through parallel programs, public discussions, and collaborative projects, they enact everyday forms of cultural citizenship grounded in presence, exchange, co-production,

and mutual aid, generating micro-publics that reinforce public space as a site of encounter and collective imagination.

Understood through the lens of new urbanities (André et al., 2017), these practices subtly introduce alternative spatial logics into the city, shaping how cultural life can be organized, valued, and experienced differently. Furthermore, according to Tulumello (2016), neoliberal effects are not automatic but shaped by how policy agendas intersect with existing socio-spatial fabrics. Thus, local networks, everyday sociability, and the public presence of actors holding a critical stance and actively negotiating their independence can create openings for experimentation and the rehearsal of alternative infrastructures, and therefore mitigate, transform, and partially counter depoliticization, exclusion, or displacement. In this sense, relational practices generate infrastructures for collaboration, learning, and exchange, aligning with the peer-to-peer, iterative processes (Bauwens et al., 2012, cited in Radywyl and Biggs, 2013).

This relational logic further extends outward, shaping how spaces connect, hold territory, and make culture public. Rather than integrating into prestigious or well-funded institutional circuits, they consolidate lateral alliances with like-minded venues and collectives, fostering exchange, experimentation, and solidarity across local and transnational informal networks: Buraco's hosting of displaced collectives such as Spirit Shop or Uppercut, Mais Uno's territorial work with local associations, Salto's partnership with a gallery in Algarve and collaboration with residents' groups, and Ostra's relational curation exemplify commons-based practice. Here, partnerships do not simply serve instrumental goals but extend each initiative into a wider cultural assemblage of actors, resources, and territories, asserting a cultural right to the city beyond elite or commercial zones. Lisbon's independent cultural scene thus emerges as an urban assemblage continually shaped and reshaped through collaborations, partnerships, and exchanges (McFarlane, 2011). Spaces, knowledge, and infrastructures are shared, co-managed, and maintained collectively, even in the absence of formal recognition. Independence hence becomes relational and solidaristic rather than individual, sustained collectively across diverse actors and sites, and forming a networked autonomous space: a form of spatial politics grounded in horizontal coordination, mutual support, and flexible alliances, positioned as the

opposite of dominant cultural policy logics that is organized around competitiveness, visibility, and branding (Juris, 2005).

Together, these practices shift cultural value away from competitiveness and individual distinction toward process, relationality, and collective relevance. Cultural worth is generated less through external validation than through participation, shared labor, use-value, and situated meaning, embedding alternative evaluative criteria into everyday cultural life. By reshaping the roles of artists and publics and reworking how, where, and for whom art is produced and presented, artist-run spaces in Lisbon translate structural autonomy into concrete urban effects. Under conditions of unstable property regimes, fragmented infrastructures, and spatial scarcity, they transform fragile urban conditions into functioning cultural environments, demonstrating a collectively produced capacity to hold space, absorb shocks, and reorganize in response to volatility while carving out micro-environments that interrupt market rationalities and redirect infrastructures away from accumulation and toward maintenance, care, and shared use. What emerges is not a fixed alternative system, but everyday, localized rehearsals of post-capitalist possibilities oriented toward exploration and commons-based practices rather than accumulation or prestige (Carlsson and Manning, 2010), becoming part of a broader translocal alternative cultural milieu grounded in the values of the commons and resonant with struggles over urban rights (Besson, 2017; Blessi et al., 2011; Radywyl and Biggs, 2013).

At the same time, the reliance on informal negotiations, tacit agreements, and trust-based arrangements underscores the absence of durable cultural infrastructures capable of supporting non-commercial production outside market logics. Although municipal actors have become central to cultural governance, their capacity to protect common goods or sustain non-market uses of space remains limited by centralized governance structures and ongoing financial pressures (Guterres and Seixas, 2019; Silva et al., 2012). As policy increasingly mobilizes networks, partnerships, and flexibility as tools for urban regeneration, tourism, and economic upgrading, the relational practices through which artist-run spaces navigate precarity and express critique also become legible and instrumentalized within policy frameworks. The resulting blurring of boundaries between grassroots criticality and policy-driven network governance echoes Besson's (2017) concerns about the collapse of

alternative and mainstream spheres, Phillips's (2011) critiques of neoliberal appropriations of collaborative vocabularies, and Peck's et. al (2009) account of creative-city agendas that neutralize dissent, complicating the ability to sustain a clear critical distance.

At the level of scale and reach, the interaction of artist-run spaces with Lisbon's wider urban environment remains circumscribed by material and relational limits. Their activities tend to engage relatively small, "inner circle" audiences already versed in experimental contemporary art, with limited capacity to expand participation or connect to broader publics. Difficulty engaging neighbors, passers-by, and Portuguese audiences more broadly was acknowledged by Buraco, Mais Uno, and Mono as a central struggle. Precarious resources further constrain the extent to which these practices can consolidate, scale up, or generate sustained spillover effects into the wider cultural economy – for example, with the loss of DGArtes funding, Buraco not only had to scale down the programming, but also postpone the introduction of the educational program. Partnerships with like-minded venues or organizations are often driven by immediate survival rather than long-term strategic alignment, while fragmented institutional landscapes and uneven local capacities keep initiatives loosely connected and frequently unaware of parallel efforts.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that while artist-run spaces reconfigure cultural value and urban practice at the micro-scale, their capacity to reshape dominant cultural narratives remains embryonic and uneven. Importantly, structural precarity both limits expansion and temporarily shields spaces from full co-optation: anti-commercial values remain robust under conditions of scarcity, yet greater institutional recognition could simultaneously open opportunities and expose vulnerabilities, testing the resilience of these values (Radywyl and Biggs, 2013). Nevertheless, the practices and commitments developed within these spaces demonstrate latent collective capacity. If recognized, connected, and supported without being instrumentalized, they could form the basis of a more intentional and cohesive cultural front capable of exerting more sustained influence on Lisbon's cultural and urban futures.

7. Conclusion

This research set out to examine how not-for-profit artist-run spaces in Lisbon maintain independence under conditions of neoliberal urbanization, and to what extent their practices prefigure alternative urban futures. Rather than positioning these spaces as either drivers of gentrification or sites of pure resistance, the study approached them as situated urban cultural actors operating within the structural, institutional, and affective conditions of the neoliberal city. The central finding is that independence is neither a stable position outside dominant urban logics nor a pure oppositional stance, but a fragile, composite, and continuously negotiated condition produced through everyday practices of space-making, organization, curation, and cultural production.

In answer to the main research question, the study shows that artist-run spaces in Lisbon maintain independence through a combination of structural autonomy and normative distance. Structural autonomy refers to their material and organizational capacity to operate with a degree of self-determination within a vastly marketized system: securing and maintaining space under precarious conditions, sustaining informal governance and hybrid funding models, and maintaining flexible, low-rule curatorial rhythms. Across the cases, autonomy does not appear as freedom from constraint but is largely imposed by the system itself and manifested as an operational capacity under pressure. Normative distance, in turn, refers to their effort to sustain critical distance from dominant cultural, policy, and market narratives, especially those tied to entrepreneurial creativity, visibility, and accumulation. Empirically, it is enacted through the very everyday practices that sustain their operations, rather than through explicit political positioning, so that survival strategies become simultaneously sites of critique and value-making. Thus, the two dimensions of independence are deeply intertwined and co-produced through practice: autonomy enables critique, while critique gives meaning and direction to autonomy. Independence, therefore, is neither pure freedom nor simple resistance, but a lived, practical achievement, enacted through decisions about space, labor, funding, governance, and cultural purpose.

Consequently, these practices reconfigure prevailing narratives of cultural urbanism on multiple, interrelated levels. Organizationally and spatially, artist-run spaces carve out semi-autonomous zones of practice that resist total market or institutional capture.

Culturally, they decenter the logic of entrepreneurial creativity, demonstrating that cultural production can thrive through shared resources, collective care, and non-market-oriented experimentation. Affectively and socially, they open micro-fissures within an increasingly financialized city, generating experiences of being and acting together that sustain relational networks, community engagement, and inclusive cultural imaginaries. While fragile and often incremental, these practices both respond to the material constraints imposed by neoliberal urbanization and quietly contest commodified, visibility-driven conceptions of the “creative city,” keeping alive alternative imaginaries of what cultural and urban life can be (Stewart, 2007).

Rather than opposing neoliberal urbanism from the outside, artist-run spaces operate within its constraints to reconfigure cultural value, social relations, and urban space from within. Their politics is not primarily discursive or programmatic, but practical, affective, and relational, enacted through everyday forms of commoning that foreground cooperation over competition, use-value over exchange-value, and relational autonomy over institutional dependency (Besson, 2017; Radywyl and Biggs, 2013). By sustaining alternative modes of producing, sharing, and valuing culture, and by carving out small but significant spaces in which art can be made, shown, and lived differently, they reshape the cultural and spatial imaginaries through which the contemporary city is understood. Their contribution lies not in overturning neoliberal urbanism, but in holding open material and symbolic spaces for more just, experimental, and imaginative forms of urban cultural life. In this sense, they exemplify forms of urban change that emerge through micro-practices, affective atmospheres, and relational infrastructures rather than through policy or macro-economic intervention, inviting us to think in terms of situated, partial, and lived transformations that accumulate through everyday acts of making, sharing, and holding space together, beyond overt activism.

7.1. Future research

This research is shaped by several contextual and methodological influences which condition its limitations. First, it is grounded in Lisbon’s specific urban trajectory, marked by intense real-estate speculation, tourism pressure, and cultural commodification. In relation to existing research, this study builds on work by Estevens

et. al (2020), Estevens and Carmo (2023), Guterres and Seixas (2019), Mendes (2017), and others on Lisbon's cultural urbanism, while extending it by focusing not on policy or regeneration outcomes, but on everyday practices of independence and commoning. It also connects to broader international debates on artist-run spaces, DIY culture, and cultural commons (Besson, 2017; Blessi et al., 2011; Novy and Colomb, 2013; Pusey, 2010), contributing to a situated, Southern European case that foregrounds affective labor, relational autonomy, and institutional ambivalence. Second, the focus on artist-run spaces necessarily centers a relatively privileged group of cultural producers and does not capture the full spectrum of urban inequality. Third, the qualitative, practice-based approach privileges depth over scale: it reveals how independence is lived and negotiated but cannot claim generalizability across all urban contexts. These influences both the scope and the limits of the conclusions.

At the same time, the study remains attentive to internal contradictions. Artist-run spaces operate under conditions of structural precarity, limited scale, and partial institutional exposure. Their publics remain relatively narrow, their resources – fragile, and their critical distance – constantly at risk of being absorbed into policy and branding frameworks. Independence, therefore, is not a permanent achievement but a continuous labor – organizational, affective, and political. The transformative potential of these initiatives lies less in their capacity to scale up than in their capacity to hold open spaces of difference within dominant urban logics. As Carlsson and Manning (2010) put it, although vulnerable to co-optation and reintegration, these practices collectively form a decentralized effort to innovate toward a potentially post-capitalist, post-petroleum future. Hence, this research opens several directions for further inquiry.

First, future research could explore broader publics and impacts, shifting the focus from the perspective of cultural producers to the perspective of visitors and participants. While this study focused on the practices of artist-run spaces, it would be valuable to examine how neighborhood residents, local users, and non-art publics experience and interpret these spaces. This would help assess whether and how artist-run initiatives contribute to wider forms of social inclusion, urban belonging, or exclusion. Second, comparative research across different cities and policy contexts would deepen understanding of how independence is negotiated under varying urban regimes. Comparing Lisbon with cities that have stronger public cultural infrastructures or

different housing and planning systems could clarify which aspects of artist-run autonomy are context-specific and which are more generalizable. Third, future studies could examine the long-term trajectories of artist-run spaces: what happens when initiatives become more institutionalized, receive stable funding, or gain visibility that they are striving for? Longitudinal research would help track how structural autonomy and normative independence evolve over time, and under what conditions critique is sustained, diluted, or transformed. Fourth, further work could investigate the labor dimension in greater depth. This study touched on affective, administrative, and unpaid labor, but future research could focus more explicitly on questions of burnout, sustainability, care, and inequality within artist-run cultures, including gendered and classed dimensions of cultural work. Fifth, future research could link artist-run spaces to broader urban movements for housing rights, migrant justice, environmental struggles, or cooperative economies to understand how cultural commoning intersects with other forms of urban activism and social transformation (Tulumello, 2016).

Finally, a particularly urgent direction concerns the question of coordination and collective capacity. Here, a research-informed, practical effort is needed to help artist-run spaces connect more intentionally with one another to form a more cohesive cultural front. This includes studying experiments in collective advocacy, shared resource pools, legal support structures, and policy engagement that move beyond isolated survival toward coordinated cultural power. Such work would address not only how independence is maintained locally, but how it might be strengthened collectively within the urban cultural field. Together, these directions would extend the insights of this study and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural practices, independence, and urban futures are negotiated under conditions of neoliberal urbanization, and most importantly, how an urban society can move past capitalist-conditioned relations.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Could you share the story of how your project began - how did this space come into being, and what was the idea behind it?
2. What drew you to this location, and what circumstances shaped the way you inhabit it?
3. Have you faced any challenges in keeping the space alive?
4. What are your main practices at [name of the space], and how do they reflect your broader values?
5. How do you approach curatorial decisions within the space?
6. How do you sustain and manage your space in terms of funding, organization, and resources?
7. Who uses and cares for the space on daily basis?
8. How do you relate to cultural institutions, if at all? In what ways have these relationships influenced your work?
9. Do you collaborate with other spaces, organizations, or collectives locally or internationally? Are you part of any networks? How do these relationships serve you?
10. Are you engaged with the local community? If so, how?
11. Finally, how do you see your role in shaping the cultural landscape of the city?