

Rethinking boundaries in contemporary Porto: the case of Fontaínhas an In-Between territory

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Keywords

Fontaínhas, In-between territories, Place-based planning, Urban fragmentation, Cultural landscapes

This paper examines the neighbourhood of Fontaínhas as a critical case for rethinking the conventional dichotomy between ‘urban’ and ‘extra-urban’ within contemporary territorial studies. Although centrally located in Porto, Fontaínhas displays characteristics typically associated with ‘inner areas’, including socio-economic fragility, demographic ageing, and uneven access to services. Such conditions challenge rigid spatial classifications and instead support a network-oriented conception of territory, where centrality and marginality coexist within the same urban fabric.

The study situates Fontaínhas within broader processes of territorial transformation driven by tourism growth, property market pressure, and evolving economic dynamics. These forces have contributed to an increasingly fragmented spatial structure, characterised by uneven development and micro-territorial hierarchies. While some parts of Porto undergo rapid valorisation, Fontaínhas remains in a condition of partial integration, functioning as an ‘in-between’ space that connects historic centralities with peripheral dynamics, yet lacks cohesive and place-sensitive planning frameworks.

Conversely, this paper also argues that this marginal condition constitutes a latent resource. Fontaínhas retains a stratified system of cultural landscapes, vernacular architecture, and resilient social networks that resist homogenising urban processes. These qualities position the area as a potential laboratory for innovative, place-based planning strategies capable of reconciling local identity with broader territorial integration. Methodologically, the research combines spatial analysis with qualitative observations of local practices to explore how small-scale interventions—such as public space regeneration, adaptive reuse, and support for local economies—can reinforce the neighbourhood’s role within wider urban networks. The findings highlight the importance of multi-scalar planning approaches that connect neighbourhood-level initiatives with metropolitan and regional strategies. Ultimately, Fontaínhas exemplifies a hybrid territorial condition that calls for more inclusive and balanced models of urban development.