

Set of exercises / simulation of real-life situations



How to unblock the relations between the city and inhabitants as well as between various groups of people living in the same area. The case of Braga 2030 Public auscultation

Braga 2030 Cultural Strategy

The city of Braga decided to design a strategy for its culture policies for the next 10 years (2020-30). It's an ambitious strategy that is part of the broader intention of the city to apply to be European Capital of Culture for the year 2027. It was important for the city that this strategy would be representative of the population's views and aspirations on culture. The final document that reveals the strategy was published in late 2020 ([link here](#)), but to reach that moment, during the previous two years, the city of Braga promoted a wide range of consultation and participation activities with its residents, institutions and cultural actors, by applying diverse formats and methodologies. These activities ranged from individual interviews with key actors related to culture in the city; organization of thematic focus groups; online surveys; video documentation of all public or collective moments that were part of the consultation process; promotion of a pilot project - named *Variações* - which included a very diverse program of activities from workshops, to artistic residencies and shows; and an open listening program to the population, named "Let's talk?" that promoted ten activities, of different scales and typologies.

"Let's talk?" Public auscultation

The "Let's Talk?" program ran for 6 months of 2019 and promoted several activities aimed directly at the Braga population. These activities took place in different locations in the city. It sought to gather residents of the city and foster a debate and a collective reflection about the city on emerging themes, not only

related to culture but also about other topics such as the sustainable development of the territory.

As a way to reach different publics and reach different areas of the city the program devised three typologies of gatherings. In a larger scale, covering more remote or suburban areas of the city, the program organized workshops and a collective meal. On a smaller scale, and in more densely urbanized areas of the city the program organized small auscultations — or as they were named micro-auscultation — composed of flash and informal meetings in the public space.

It is important to say that these activities were designed in a performative way. This implied that all parts and the smallest details of these gatherings would be fundamental elements of auscultation. And also, these gatherings wouldn't be only about listening to peoples' opinions, but also about creating an opportunity for the participants to get to know different areas of the city or to meet other people with shared interests.



“Let’s talk?” workshop

A walkshop is a workshop in movement. It’s about the act of producing something while walking. In this case, it’s about producing and sharing ideas and thoughts about culture in Braga. A walkshop is composed of different moments: there are different walking stages, there are the stopping and resting areas, and there is the experience of crossing over to somewhere new.

Braga 2030 organized two walkshops:

Each participant arrived at the meeting point and received a map where the walking path would be represented. This map would be given out randomly with a small geometric symbol on the top, that would include that participant in a specific group. Once everyone was signed in and had their maps the walkshop would begin. The walk would be punctuated with 4 resting points and each point would have questions associated to it. Once reached the first point the moderator would release the question to the participants, but only the participants that had the specific symbol of that stop in their map could answer. These answers were audio-recorded for further reporting. The other participants could participate by writing down their answer on a dedicated and removable part of the map. It is also important to state that during these walks there were representatives of the Braga 2030 Cultural Strategy representatives. These representatives should not be well-known politicians such as the mayor, because they could compromise peoples’ comfort to share their opinions. It should be the technical person who is taking care of the project. This person would not engage in the conversations but only listen and understand the participant's opinions.



The first stage to organize a workshop is to decide where to go. The chosen place should be connected to the topic that you wish to explore. If the topic is sustainability, maybe you can choose a place with ecological problems such as a wasteland or a park; if the topic is social, maybe chose to walk in a problematic neighbourhood of the city; if its architectural heritage, chose to walk around a special unknown building; if it's about urban regeneration, chose to walk in areas of the city that lacks good public space infrastructures. The place you chose should reflect the topic you want to work on.

For the "Let's Talk?" program the city of Braga organized two walks. One around and inside an old medieval Benedictine monastery on the outskirts of the city of Braga (Mosteiro de Tibães). We chose this monastery because we wanted to talk about Europe, and as many scholars say, the Benedictine order can be considered one of the first European projects one can recall.

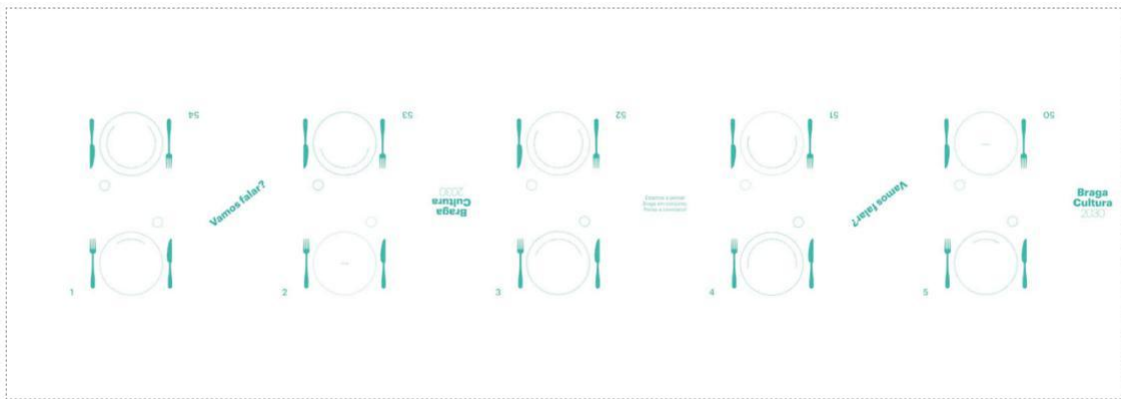
Our second workshop was along the Cávado River, a river that designs the northern administrative border of the Braga municipality. We chose this place for this workshop because we wanted to talk about limits, between rural and urban, between centre and periphery.

The amount of people you invite and accept for a gathering like this is crucial. If you accept too little people the gathering might not seem representative to generate a collective opinion on a certain topic, if the group is too big, it may happen that some energy is lost and some participants might get dispersed or lose interest. For these workshops, we invited 40 participants and divided the participants into 4 groups.

The questions were inspired by a previous set of questions that the Braga 2030 team had already designed for individual interviews with different cultural stakeholders of the city, and also for online surveys. For the workshop the team chose questions that would relate better to the aim of the workshop. But what is important is to decide what the Braga 2030 Strategy team wanted to know about peoples' opinions.

“Let’s talk?” collective meal workshop

A collective meal workshop is a way of converting the time and space of a meal into a performative and active activity of creating meaningful conversations between people that in any other occasion would not talk with each other. By designing each piece of a meal, from the menu to the display on the table, and so on... it is possible to conduct and catalyse ways of engaging different stakeholders in a conversation.



For the “Let’s Talk?” collective meal, Braga 2030 chose a beautiful park within an agricultural area close to the Braga urban centre. This park had a very long stone table that was perfect for a meal with many people. Before receiving any guests a huge amount of effort was put into deciding what the menu would be: all ingredients should be produced from a range of 500 meters from the meal site and the food should be cooked with the help from the local community. By doing this, it was possible to engage the local community such as farmers and associations into the event. An open call was sent through social media and email to all citizens of the city. 35 people applied.

A big tablecloth was designed dividing the participants into 6 groups. Each group was composed of 5 participants and a host. This host was an invited person by the Braga 2030 team to stimulate and instigate the conversation of the group.



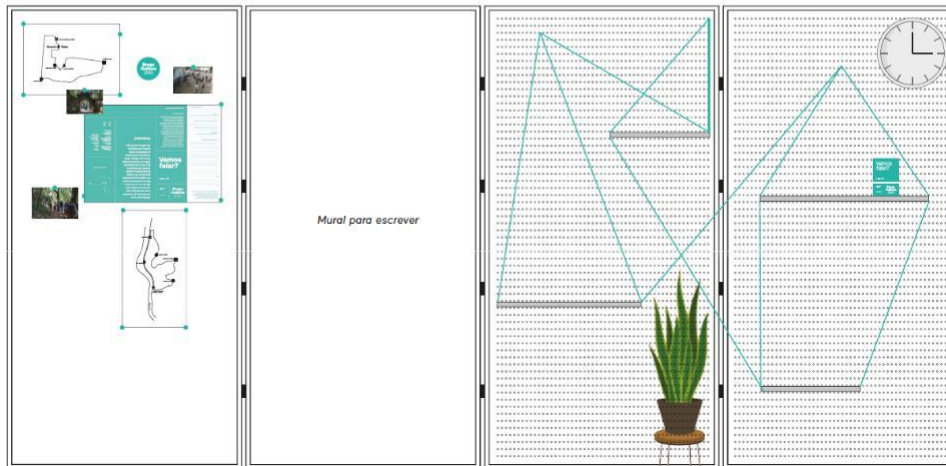
Once people arrived they would be given a menu with 3 courses (starter, main course and dessert). At the site of each course, there was a number. That number defined the number of the seat where the person would have to sit during that course. By doing this, at each course, the group would be composed of different people and make a multiplicity of interactions possible. Each course would also correspond to an act, which was defined with a question and specific content for discussion.

The final result of this auscultation was recorded and participants could write down key ideas from the conversation on the tablecloth.

“Let’s talk?” micro-auscultations

Micro-auscultations were small meetings that took place in different parts of the city. These meetings unfolded in the form of informal conversation triggered by questions. A group of people gathered around a table in unusual areas: in the middle of the park, in a greenhouse, in the main square. Some of the participants would be invited and others would join, from curiosity, because

they were walking by. The idea was to confront different types of people and stakeholders of a given area with issues related to culture in Braga, and its relation to multiple themes associated with it, such as environment, sustainability, mobility, heritage, public space, art, education and many others.



A wooden screen was developed and built, with the ability to function as an information kiosk for the project and as a background for conversations held abroad. On the inner faces, this screen was equipped with different materials that allowed the most important contents of the conversation to be written, fixing photos, leaflets and brochures, attaching shelves, hangers and cables to use as a showcase and display of elements that were considered relevant for the conversation. The planning of the use of this element was structured to satisfy the needs of the different sessions and was dependent on the weather conditions.



This wooden screen would be set on-site two days before the meeting, by closing the screen so that it formed a box. On the day, the box would open and reveal the inner faces and the meeting space. The idea of setting the box two days before the meeting day was for locals to familiarize with this object and with the project. The external sides of the screens had information concerning the Braga 2030 Cultural Strategy program.



Once the wooden box would be open, and a table was set in-between, the auscultation process was ready to begin. All participants would sit around this table and a card game would be set on top of the table. This game was developed having as a reference to the question a guide that structured all the Braga 2030 strategy plan. This cards were divided into 9 colours and each colour corresponded to the different themes. Participants were invited to choose a card and answer freely to it. This first answer would become the motto to start the debate between all the stakeholders at the table. All the dialogues that resulted from this auscultation were recorded and also, representatives of the Braga 2030 team were present to listen.

It's all about listening

Although each "Let's Talk" activity have a different format of public consultation, what they all share in common is the aspiration to create a space and time where people can fell listen. Contrary to what is generally considered, listening is a more demanding and delicate task than simply acknowledging the



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words that come from the other's mouth. Listening is a specific act but also a metaphor for the capacity of recognizing in the other, or in a given topic, its specificities, its hidden layers, that a superficial and quick conversation or observation cannot encounter.

Just listening, in an active and engaging way, can be considered a participatory action, that could and should happen in different stages of a problem solving such as designing a cultural strategy for a city or planning an urban regeneration development.

We suggest that listening as a participatory action can happen in different ways through the following steps:

- ❖ Listening before proposing: In a way, a given problem and the communities interested in it (such as the cultural community in a cultural strategy or residents from a specific neighborhood), already carry a lot of knowledge on the topic and might know what is best for them. Listening before proposing is a way of learning about the context, understanding the "soul" of the topic or the place, to help design the program for a given problem.
- ❖ Listening while proposing: A proposal should be drafted in a way that it is available to receive contributions. I think participation projects fail a lot because they do phase 1 of listening and think that the proposal will already contain all peoples concerns. But the truth is that we all see things in different ways in our minds until we see a solution in front of us. So having the first draft of a proposal and showing it to the community is creating a space for dialogue under the same premises. The proposal is the support to which people can react to. And communities will only react meaningfully when they have something physical, concrete in front of them to react to. If in the first phase of listening, a good question would lead to a good answer, here a good design can lead to good reactions and feedback. When we mean good, we don't mean this process will be undisturbed. I mean it will be engaging.
- ❖ Listening as a way of being present (during implementation): When a proposal is established then comes the implementation period. It's frequent that publics

will still feel afraid that what will be implemented might not correspond to what they think might be better for them. So it is important that there is a person from the implementation team that is present all along the implementation period, just to listen to people's concerns. This person should clarify the doubts that people have. Usually, when people are left alone with their doubts they imagine the worst scenario possible. This might be an ancestral human survival reaction.

Inspired by the book "You're not listening", 2020, by Kate Murphy we propose a series of tools for listening:

Don't let your preconception get in the way: We all have them. It's part of living in society. But it is easy to let them get in our way while we are listening to someone, and that person might only end up reacting to you, and not giving you the juicy information you need. Maybe when you understand their point of view you might also change your preconceptions. "It's far more useful to listen to find out how other people arrived at their conclusions and what you can learn from them—whether it changes or shores up your own thinking. At the moment you feel you are going to react with hostility toward those who disagree with you, take a breath and ask them a question, not to expose flawed logic but to truly expand your understanding of where they are coming from." (Kate Murphy, "You're not listening", 2020)

Be curious: Being curious might be the best tactic to engage by listening with someone. Being curious is about asking questions from a point of view of who really wants to know more. We usually ask questions because we want a specific answer. Being curious is the opposite, it's about wanting to know something new, to be surprised. You already know about you. So, by listening curiously you get an opportunity to know more about someone else and about a different way of seeing the world.

Listening as translating: It's hard to say how we feel on a given topic directly. We usually say it in another way and "hope" the listener understands what we mean. Listening as translating is about recognizing the hidden narratives and



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emotions in arguments. When someone is being stubborn or inflexible about a given topic, maybe they might just be afraid, or concerned about their future. "Listening goes beyond just hearing what people say. It's also paying attention to how they say it and what they do while they are saying it, in what context, and how what they say resonates within you." (Kate Murphy, "You're not listening", 2020)