

Creative Horizon – renewing Belo Horizonte’s historic cultural neighbourhood of Centro-Lagoinha

Region	Latin America and the Caribbean
Award Scheme	Shanghai Manual
Themes	Others Public Space Regeneration Rehabilitation Youth & Livelihoods
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
New Urban Agenda Commitments	Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Prosperity and Opportunities for All Planning and Managing Urban Spatial Development

Summary

Focused on the regeneration of Belo Horizonte's Centro-Lagoinha district, the Creative Horizon project has worked to advance the development of a local creative economy, promoting cultural heritage as a central asset to further sustainable urban development.

Background and Objective

As Brazil’s first planned capital, Belo Horizonte has long been one of the nation’s most important cities. The birthplace of architectural modernism and cultural heritage, the city is today a dynamic hub of fashion and gastronomy, accommodating an eclectic mix of culture and art, and enmeshed with culturally historic buildings and activities. The city boasts several striking cultural features including the Pampulha Modern Ensemble – a UNESCO recognized World Cultural Heritage Site as of 2016 – which combines architecture, landscape design, sculpture, painting and other art forms in an innovative fashion. In addition, Belo Horizonte is renowned for its innovative cuisine containing flavours and cooking styles passed down for generations, and which reflects the local cultural understanding and respect for the natural environment. Possessing a rich history, Belo Horizonte's creative urban outlook and inner vitality laid the foundation for the development of a creative economy which attracted 104,000 creative industry jobs to the city in 2017. With this respect for the intrinsic value of the city, Belo Horizonte seeks to use culture as a tool for sustainable urban development. Accordingly, the city's Economic Development Bureau established the Creative Horizon project, a strategic cross-departmental programme to help create an environment in which creative activities can flourish in the city. It is implemented in two different aspects. Firstly, through creative projects (e.g. culture, entertainment, fashion, design, gastronomy, and technology and innovation) it identifies talent in the city's neighbourhoods and promotes projects that contribute to the formation of the creative economy chain. And secondly and simultaneously, the city is divided into different communities to identify the challenges and obstacles each community faces, helping unlock its potential as a creative economy investment destination. Centro-Lagoinha, located in the north-west of the city, is the first community to benefit from the project. A neighbourhood of great disparities, as the city’s first working-class neighbourhood, Centro-Lagoinha was the cradle of Italian immigration during Belo Horizonte’s construction, accommodating a large number of immigrant families who traded as vendors and artisans, it was a hotspot of creativity, culture and history; rich in bars with a thriving samba and Bohemian music scene. However, due to its close proximity to the city centre, the neighbourhood has experienced a series of unplanned urban development projects over the past 50 years which has had a detrimental impact on the local environment, most notably the Lagoinha Road complex built in the 1980s which strengthened the connection between downtown Belo Horizonte and the city’s periphery. Fearing that entrepreneurs might invest in the site at any time, the inhabitants gradually moved away reducing the number of formal cultural venues and performances. Compared with the prosperity of new infrastructure, historic buildings are today long deserted and used by the homeless, drug abusers and illegal traders which has led to an increased rate of crime. This area has since become a microcosm of the marginalization of the city, facing challenges including the absence of historical heritage preservation; inadequate protection for vulnerable groups; and a lack of community security. Viewed as an urban heritage area since the 1990s, Centro-Lagoinha’s historical and cultural values have been vastly underestimated. It was designated as the first location for attention under the Creative Horizon project which aims to restore and revitalize the area to allow creative activities to prosper once again.

Actions and Implementation

As the main facilitators of the project, Belo Horizonte's Municipal Secretariat for Economic Development, along with additional areas of the City Hall (e.g. culture, tourism, urban policy, social assistance, technical, information and social communication, and security departments), the private sector and the local community have all played major roles. The project team received free consulting from SAP Social Sabbatical whereby participation in the SAP Social Sabbatical and Pyxera Global Programme provided knowledge and structure for the Creative Horizon project through the integration of specialist guidance, bolstering technical capacity within the team across the project development phase. Several common interventions were identified as the main elements for development to revitalize and stimulate creative sectors promoting culture and tourism; improving the business environment; promoting socio-productive inclusion; increasing public security; and urban requalification and renewal. To promote greater dynamism in local tourism and culture, efforts have been articulated between the Municipal Department of Culture and Beltour, a municipal tourism company from the city. This collaboration has helped to map traditional cultural manifestations and contemporary cultural production across the neighbourhood, gauging the potential of local infrastructure for investment and tourism opportunities. In addition, they have worked to promote the performance of local actors that provide new experiences and forms of interaction between tourists and local residents. Accordingly via cultural cartography, activities such as the mapping of services, local attractions, cultural economic sectors and cultural events plus historical surveying were all highly valuable to help contextualize the importance of local cultural heritage. It was found that the integration and promotion of gastronomy into Centro-Lagoinha was of high value (with 66 gastronomic establishments found present following reporting). In addition, to draw in visitors and tourists, sightseeing tours and cultural events were also expanded. Through Creative Horizon, the assurance of logical spatial transformation that preserves cultural heritage in line with the generation of a creative economy has been key. As part of a series of physical urban interventions, Centro-Lagoinha's requalification proposal has thus sought to re-establish the relationship between the existing material heritage of the neighbourhood and the city whilst enhancing local dynamism through the recovery of its existing cultural heritage. Strong physical barriers such as the railway, the Lagoinha road complex and the Ribeirão Arrudas canal which separates Lagoinha from the central region, have been major hurdles for development. To reconnect Centro-Lagoinha, a pedestrian terrace that establishes a connective zero point and an architectural and conceptual landmark is planned, with the establishment of commercial activities such as restaurants, nightclubs, garden areas amongst other uses envisioned to drive creative sector integration. Through the Lagoinha and Bonfim Cultural Corridor Programme (one of the oldest and most traditional pericentral regions of the city), cultural assets are under protection to help transform the area into a new regenerated space. Combining the preservation of cultural assets and promotion of creative sectors through spatial transformation has therefore been central. Art has been viewed as an instrumental tool to help regenerate neglected urban spaces in the neighbourhood. As a movement to help transform unfriendly parts of the urban environment into more welcoming and beautiful spaces, and better connect the city with its citizens, the Gentileza (kindness) Lagoinha project was initiated. Here, over 100 local artists were involved in painting murals and street art across different parts of the neighbourhood in a process of renovating urban infrastructure through art. The internal walls of the Liberalino Alves de Oliveira Cultural Centre located inside Lagoinha market, as well as the walls surrounding the IAPI complex on Araribá and José Bonifácio streets, were painted in March 2019 in a day of art and leisure for the local community. In addition, to acknowledge the neighbourhoods historic, secular relationship with Italy, the renowned Italian urban artist Alice Pasquini was invited to paint a 400 m long walkway and its surroundings, creating an open-air art gallery along the footbridge that connects Praça Vaz de Mello to the Lagoinha bus station. To increase awareness and understanding of the value of Lagoinha's local cultural heritage, several key activities were promoted. In cooperation with NITRO Histórias Visuais, the Municipal Department of Culture and the Municipal Foundation of Culture launched the Residents – A Heritage Humanity project. Running from June to July 2019, the project integrated an art installation across public spaces, mixing audio-visual production with photographic exhibitions and storytelling to facilitate education on cultural heritage. Through the revival of memories of former and current residents, workers and regular visitors, the project helped to awaken the realization that Lagoinha is part of their own history and encouraged them to become valuable custodians of the neighbourhood. Marquees were set up in five different local areas creating inviting spaces for people wishing to share their version of Lagoinha's history, values and aspirations, and participants were also called upon to celebrate their contribution to cultural heritage in the neighbourhood. Subsequently, through Moradores (residents) da Lagoinha all materials (photos/videos/testimonials) were transformed into a photographic exhibition with 12 panels of portraits of the characters of Lagoinha, a short documentary film, a photographic clothesline, and several interventions in the streets and buildings of the community. Activities such as these have helped to increase an appreciation of local cultural identity, and it was an important event in heritage education through exchange, interaction and memories. Following this, the Cura Lagoinha Cultural and Historic Festival was set up (running from 5–15 September 2019) which included a gastronomic fair, shows, exhibitions and the chance to follow the creation of urban murals in real time. With 104,000 jobs in the creative economy, Belo Horizonte is the third largest creative hub in Brazil, comprising 2.26 per cent of the nation's total creative economy jobs (21.5 per cent of Belo Horizonte's companies). As a rapidly emerging sector, the promotion of local entrepreneurship through creative industry was made central for socio-economic development in Centro-Lagoinha, leveraging cultural heritage to attract investment and business. A creative economy map was also produced in June 2019. Through the Creative Horizon programme, courses and workshops were offered to the local population – specifically those in vulnerable situations – to provide professional opportunities in the creative sector and foster socio-productive inclusion. Building on its historic heritage as a gastronomy hub, vocational courses were opened across the food industry in December 2020 with 40 vacancies in confectionary, 50 vacancies in gastronomy and 60 vacancies in the baking industry. The professional school Raimunda da Silva Soares was opened offering 831 spots for professional qualification courses. The reoccupation of locally listed properties was also promoted, most notably in Rua Itapeperica, home to many antique stores and precious houses most of which are under preservation orders due to their degraded state. A women's civic-service centre was established on Rua Itapeperica with 80 spots opened for entrepreneurship and qualification courses.

Conclusion

As integral elements of the city and urban life, cultural heritage and creative activities have spearheaded the development of Belo-Horizonte's regeneration model in the Centro-Lagoinha neighbourhood. Where cultural strengths were locally identified and diagnosed, the process of mapping and understanding local cultural heritage was central to facilitating responsive urban development in tune with the values of local people and the community. In addition, the role of cultural heritage in advancing socio-economic growth can be seen as significant, further highlighting the potential of historic cultural assets to unlock business opportunities, stimulate investment and create socio-economic value. However, it is important to note that the process of urban regeneration is complex, and only by fully understanding the factors hindering the development of local culture can we know the deep-rooted issues. The process of the mapping, identification and diagnosis of local culture is thus not only crucial for promoting urban development but also essential to building sustainable local development paths. Culture and heritage should be considered as key metrics in the delivery of socially equitable development and in the paradigm of sustainable cities. In driving sustainable urban development, this case attached great importance to the role of cultural space based on historic heritage and the use of open spaces. Residents were encouraged to participate in the micro-transformation of space, providing them with a full understanding of undeveloped resources and emphasizing the concept that true cultural spaces are those that are used by people. This has enhanced the sense of community by cultivating a stronger connection to the culture and history of the neighbourhood. Where the role of culture in urban regeneration is still poorly understood, it is important for cities and urban decision-makers to go beyond traditional top-down urban cultural strategies and rediscover the spaces in which local culture and mobilization capacities are attached. Through this process, community members can be centred as core actors in the promotion of culture-led development, and hence empowered to participate in and shape the process of sustainable urban development. The integration of street art (such as murals and paintings) in underutilized or neglected parts of Centro-Lagoinha's urban fabric has improved the quality of the urban space and the living experience of local inhabitants, encouraging a closer interaction to their environment. Urban street art is a powerful tool in reflecting urban experiences, provoking engagement between people and their environment and consequently helping to re-socialize urban spaces. By increasing encounters with art in everyday city life, cities should seek to incorporate street art and other art installations to help create social interstices and unlock new ways of experiencing the city. Engaged urban art should be encouraged both as a mechanism for beautification and for reconceptualizing deprived urban spaces. As exemplified by activities in Centro-Lagoinha, art can have a profound impact on the remembering and revival of cultural heritage, re-emphasizing its value in urban cultural development. In addition to enhancing the public awareness and recognition of cultural values, the Creative Horizon project has promoted vocational training and opened up job opportunities, especially for vulnerable groups such as women. Where the training started in cuisine, of which the city prides itself as a creative hub, it naturally attracted citizens and greatly increased the effectiveness of governmental intervention. In tandem, small and micro local food enterprises amalgamated, helping citizens who completed vocational training to enter the labour force. To develop local creative vocational training, it is therefore important to first determine the most favourable field where labour skills can quickly be applied into the labour force based on the specific conditions of the local creative market.