Light Festivals in Portugal: nightlife, tourism and culture

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Abstract: Light festivals have become key instruments in cultural and economic urban development, especially at the municipal level. This paper explores the evolution of light festivals in Portugal, through ethnographic research conducted from 2015 to 2023, focusing on festivals in Lisbon, Cascais, Lousada, Loulé and Aveiro. The study examines their roles in urban regeneration, tourism and cultural identity. Using participant observation, interviews and digital archival research, the research identifies the key phases in the growth of these festivals and contextualises their local impact. Findings highlight how these events contribute to the local economies, while fostering community engagement and influencing city branding. The discussion addresses the challenges of sustainability, commodification and political instrumentalisation of light festivals as tools for urban transformation.

Keywords: Light festivals; Municipal development; "Eventification"; Public policy; Portugal.

Festivales de luz en Portugal: noche, turismo y cultura.

Resumen: Los festivales de luces se han convertido en instrumentos clave para el desarrollo urbano, cultural y económico, especialmente a nivel municipal. Este artículo explora la evolución de los festivales de luces en Portugal a través de una investigación etnográfica realizada entre 2015 y 2023, centrándose en los festivales de Lisboa, Cascais, Lousada, Loulé y Aveiro. El estudio examina su papel en la regeneración urbana, el turismo y la formación de la identidad cultural. Mediante la observación participante, entrevistas e investigación de archivos digitales, la investigación identifica las fases clave en el crecimiento de estos festivales y contextualiza su impacto local. Los resultados destacan cómo estos eventos contribuyen a las economías locales, fomentan la participación de la comunidad e influyen en la imagen de marca de la ciudad. El debate aborda los retos de la sostenibilidad, la mercantilización y la instrumentalización política de los festivales de luces como herramientas para la transformación urbana.

Palabras Clave: Festivales de luces; Desarrollo municipal; Eventificación; Políticas públicas; Portugal.

1. Introduction

Light festivals represent a complex socio-historical, economic, political, and cultural phenomenon that has developed worldwide over the last three decades. However, their study as an object of academic interest only emerged at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, marking a turning point in academic research on festivals and events developed in public space. The work of Alves (2007) on the relationships between light festivals, heritage, and governance provided an initial framework for understanding these events, highlighting their role in the reconfiguration of the urban fabric and cultural management, albeit in a nocturnal context was determinant for later studies, and for understanding the great value of this events.

Light festivals respond to multiple logic and very different public policies, especially those associated with culture and tourism (Garcia-Ruiz, 2023). Light festivals can be found in various forms: some are primarily decorative, others aim to energize urban spaces, and some are aligned with production

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strategies focused on cultural democratization and city brand development, among other purposes shaped by their inclusion in different policy frameworks. Likewise, the character of these events will vary according to their organizer, being generally *top-down* when organized by large structures and *bottom-up* when self-financed and community-organized. These ephemeral events have played a crucial role in the internationalization of municipalities, placing them on the map as creative destinations.

Edensor (2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) studied light festivals in the United Kingdom motivated by their growing municipal adoption as tools for urban reactivation while reflecting on the temporal alteration of space and its potential to reinvent the urban environment. Undoubtedly, the work of this geographer was decisive for later studies such as Giordano and Ong (2017) that focused on more sophisticated forms of light festivals, including those that network on an international scale. The instrumentalization of light festivals by municipal and regional governments fits into the neoliberal narrative of cultural industries, especially in terms of their potential to generate new jobs, wealth, and attract highly skilled professionals, (Florida, 2012; Pratt, 2016; Sobrino, 2016) as well as the promise of audiences' sensitivity to the arts and their overall impact on generating an attractive image of the city. However, these events tend to be confused with religious or heritage enlightenment projects (Garcia-Ruiz, 2019a, 2019b, 2023; Giordano, 2017; Giordano & Crozat, 2017; Jiwa et al., 2009), which blurs their autonomous value and leads many city decision-makers to question their utility.

Light festivals, understood as post-traditional events, were born as a response to the constant need for new formats of public street entertainment and new configurations of leisure. These *new programs* aim to provide diverse activities that combine entertainment, innovation, and the arts in a completely secular context, free from any notions of tradition or religiosity (Anonymized 3). Professionally designed, these events offer memorable experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) and are very *Instagrammable* due to their visual appeal, which *guarantees* frequentation and visitation. Organizers strive to offer innovative content at each edition to revalue the programs symbolically and economically (Adongo et al., 2019; Homans, 1958; Lawler & Thye, 1999) and thus *conquer* the necessary funding for the next edition. The permanence of these programs and the decision to renew them -as municipally funded activities- often depend on visitors' satisfaction, measured by analysis of social network comments and the estimated number of visitors (Li et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2023). The first analysis intends to measure the *happiness* of visitors, while the second expects to measure the *revenue* generated by the hotel, restaurant, and catering lobby -something difficult either considering direct or indirect revenue. Complaints from non-visitors are another indicator often considered by the municipal authorities when valuing the local impact of a (light) festival. This encompasses those residents who report complaints about noise, uncivil behavior, or other nuisances. In this regard, it is important to recognize that light festivals involve a wide range of stakeholders with varying levels of influence and diverse interests (Camprubí & Coromina, 2019; Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, 2026), which municipal managers strive to accommodate as much as possible.

Richards (2007) highlights two levels of authenticity in festivals: a *constructive* one, related to local culture, and an *existential* one, experienced by visitors. Obviously, light festivals reconfigure space in an ephemeral way, liminalizing the authenticity of the physical urban park, and offering a new experience for both locals and visitors, all ending up being to one degree or another visitors even in their own localities. This concept aligns with the theory of Urry and Larsen (2011) on "tourist gaze," which emphasizes visitors' expectations and experiences based on their personal frame of reference. Greenwood (2004) would suggest that contemporary festivals have progressively become *commodified tourism*, a phenomenon that Cohen (1988) had already observed in terms of economic and mercantilist translation. However, these visions only highlight the distinction between traditional and post-traditional festivals, the latter being the ones I am concerned with in this paper. It is important to note that light festivals can be held anywhere, as they are not tied to a specific location, even that their curatorship can adapt the contents to the place where they are celebrated. They are designed for a diverse audience seeking an entertainment experience (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) rather than a purely cultural or *authentic*-based one. Chevtchouk et al. (2021) address the concept of "brand experience" in the context of festivals, arguing that organizers seek to create distinctive experiences associated with a specific product or event. This approach reflects a trend toward marketing and product positioning in festival design, where each event is conceptualized as a total experience or unique cultural product at the time that appoints to its commodification and instrumentalization.

In the context of the experiential economy, festivals have been transformed into tools for economic and cultural recovery in the context of neoliberal capitalism (Lamond & Spracklen, 2015), as I advanced before. The evolution of folk and cultural events (traditional events and festivals) towards an increasing variety of specialized programs reflects a market in constant (re)configuration and a professionalized

vision of leisure and free time. Richards and Wilson (2006) highlight the *overabundance of* festivals and the shift towards creative events based on ephemeral elements, suggesting a homogenization of the offer and the need to design events that allow consumers to personalize their experiences, which is a challenge for any cultural mediator, especially when the visitor, over time, becomes an expert *proconsumer* and progressively abandons the status of casual visitor. In contrast, more community--based and less commercially oriented festivals, like those explored by Skelly and Edensor (2020), emphasize the vernacular production practices that shape place identity through collaborative efforts. Foster (2022) similarly underscores the role of co-created festivals, which involve urban stakeholders in fostering inclusivity and urban development through creative collaboration. This distinction highlights the coexistence of market-driven and community-oriented models, each shaping cultural landscapes differently.

Light festivals significantly alter the local space, often using specialized equipment that may be external to the area where the event is held (although in recent years the cost has become cheaper, videomapping cannons continue to be expensive, and many places are forced to rent them from outside the region) (Popescu, 2022). As Lovell and Griffin (2018, 2022) explain, light festivals create *enchanting*, immersive environments through light installations and projection mapping, blending the real and the imaginary to transform familiar urban spaces into *magical* experiences. These *ambiances* not only appeal to shared global patterns to engage wider audiences (Bryman, 1999; Zukin, 1991), but they also enhance the festivals' potential for reproducibility in other contexts, reducing costs in this sense. Specialized networks of light festivals facilitate collaboration and competition for funding and performers (Smith, 2011), reflecting these events' interconnected and competitive nature.

Nocturnal cities have gained academic attention due to their significant impact on urban spaces, culture, and tourism (Anonymized 7). This study explores the evolution, adoption, and instrumentalization of post-traditional light festivals both globally and in Portugal, focusing on their role in urban regeneration, tourism promotion, and cultural identity formation. By analyzing five key phases in the history of these festivals and their adoption by municipal institutions in the cities of Lisbon, Cascais, Lousada, Loulé, and Aveiro, the research presents a chronological overview of their development. In the following section, the ethnographic methods and research approaches are explained in detail, while in the subsequent sections, the conclusions and broader considerations regarding sustainability, commodification, and political instrumentalization are discussed in terms of their long-term viability.

2. Methodology

The socio-historical analysis of light festivals in Portugal poses challenges common to global studies on this type of program, mainly due to the lack of systematized records and confusion with other events that use light in their production. In order to identify the light festivals, present in Portugal, historically so far, I used an online and social network research methodology (Hine, 2001, 2015; Kozinets, 2018), as well as an ethnographic study conducted between 2015 and 2023, including interviews with key informants, such as artists, festival directors, and autarchs.

In the first phase of the research, I identified light festivals on a global scale, intending to generate an extended vision of this type of program. For this purpose, intensive searches were conducted on social networks, especially Twitter/X and Instagram, obtaining 208 valid results. These valid results refer to programs that actually fell under the consideration of post-traditional light festivals, and not religious festivals such as Diwali, Hannuka or any holy procession with candles or other luminous devices; or music, theater or film festivals. Subsequently, these identified festivals were characterized and documented, creating a timeline and a global historical-geographical expansion. I should mention that for these searches, I used several nomenclators, expressed through hashtags, which are the language of these platforms. The results responded to searches using #*lightfestival* or #*lightfestivals*, being many times offered geo-referenced images with information in the comments that were later compiled in an anonymous and simple database that included the name of the festival, locality, edition found online, and if identifiable the organizer. The results referred to Portugal were scarce, not surprisingly, but six (6) festivals were identified.

The research was complemented by a systematic search for news about the light festivals in national and international press sources. This approach provided additional information and helped contextualize the festivals within the broader cultural and social landscape of Portugal. I should mention that on many

occasions, it was not possible to find additional information due to the closure of the programs' original websites or their abandonment, which, with the passage of time, ended with their web disappearance.

Given the lack of maintenance of the festivals' websites and the elimination of their digital footprints, digital archeology tools, such as the online archive *https://arquivo.pt/*, were used. This resource, which has indexed content since 1996, was crucial to reconstructing the history of light festivals in Portugal and overcoming the limitations of conventional search methods. The use of this archive reflects an innovative and adaptive approach to online ethnographic research, allowing access to historical data that would otherwise have remained inaccessible (Gomes, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021)

Having identified particular cases in Portugal, the ethnographic research included semi-directed interviews with curators and other key informants, who offered in-depth and nuanced perspectives on the light festivals, as well as being able to offer details now lost due to the lack of print or digital resources. These conversations not only brought an essential qualitative dimension to the study, but also provided direction to other festivals not identified in the online searches. The flexibility of this interview method allowed me to explore emerging themes and obtain information that went beyond the data available online, highlighting the importance of personal interactions in ethnographic research.

The methodology employed in this study demonstrates the need for a mixed and adaptive approach to sociological and ethnographic research. The combination of online research techniques, digital archaeology, documentary analysis and semi-directed interviews has overcome the challenges of the lack of systematized records and the dispersion of information. This holistic approach is essential for understanding complex and dynamic cultural phenomena such as light festivals, providing a comprehensive view that encompasses both the historical landscape and current individual and collective experiences.

3. Light Festivals as Sociocultural and Urban Phenomena

Emerging as post-traditional phenomena in the early 1990s, light festivals offer a unique combination of art and technology in nighttime urban space. Although the exact origins of these festivals are debated by directors who claim theirs as the oldest, it's challenging to determine the *first* festival due to local advertising and data collection issues. Nonetheless, these festivals are prime examples of how we've transformed the night into a more social and livable space. Light festivals present other problems, such as their nomenclature: in English, "light festival" is usually preferred for post-traditional events, but "festival of light" (which refers to traditional festivals) is frequently used for the same type of content, not to mention the influences of French branchism and its nomenclature of "fête des lumière" (trad. *party of light*). Finally, mention again the scarcity of consistent historical records, especially due to their profane and experimental nature which often did not motivate their timely archiving and classification. Nevertheless, these issues of terminology and documentation do not detract from the importance of light festivals as relevant subjects of sociocultural and urban study.

As mentioned above, the first phase of the research aimed to identify light festivals on a global scale, and I was able to identify five (5) phases, as shown in Table 1. These phases do not have the same extension and are delimited by important moments for the consolidation, expansion and reinvention of light festivals. This international contextualization will later allow a better understanding of the relationships and processes in Portugal, since the festivals are presented as glocal events in which artists circulate internationally, as well as technologies and creative trends.

Table 1: Phases of development of light festivals on a global scale, by phase and report of total number of new festivals per period.

Early Years	Popularization	Proliferation	Boom International	Stagnation
1993-2000	2001-2010	2011-2014	2015-2019	2020 ~
n=7	n=35	n=55	n=108	n=?

Prepared by the author.

During the *Early Years* (1993-2000), light festivals were very small in number, limited by the high cost of materials and the scarcity of specialized artists. This initial phase was fundamental to establishing the technical bases of *stage making* (adaptation of the urban space and definition of security measures), as well as artistic exploration (use of new materials such as LED or videomapping). There were few festivals, but the Fête de Lumière in Lyon was perhaps one of the major precursors of this type of event.

The period of *Popularization* (2001-2010) is marked by a significant growth of light festivals, especially in Central Europe. During this stage, municipalities began to adopt these festivals as elements of urban decoration and evening entertainment, integrating them into urban and cultural life. This process reflects a transformation in the perception and use of public space, where light becomes a means to redefine urban aesthetics and enhance the nighttime experience in the city.

The consolidation and *proliferation* of networks and associations such as LUCI[1] marked a milestone in the professionalization and international collaboration of light festivals (2011-2014). This organization facilitated the exchange of knowledge, the identification of new talent, and the promotion of sustainable practices, justifying the accelerated growth of this type of program in this context. In this phase, the Glow festival in Eindhoven stands out as a networking center and meeting point between artists and festival directors, reinforcing an informal network that would later consolidate as the ILO association[2].

The "International Year of Light and Light-based Technologies" proposed and approved by the UNESCO Executive Board at its 190th session in October 2012 and adopted at the 68th[a] session of the UN General Assembly in Paris. (2013) spurred an international *boom* in light festivals (2015-19). This initiative, although lacking its own funding, motivated countries to implement and promote light-related events, leading to a proliferation of festivals and increased awareness of their cultural and urban potential. The positive public response and the continuation of these events beyond the international year reflect their success and acceptance, indicating a stage of maturity with dedicated professionals and significant accumulated knowledge.

The *Stagnation* phase (2020-today) is marked by the global health crisis of COVID.19 Many events were cancelled or ceased permanently, and during this period (especially until 2021) no new festivals were recorded during this period. It is possible that there were new festivals but it is difficult to record them all systematically in a context of high change. The cancellation of festivals highlights their precariousness and dependence on municipal funding but also their resilience and capacity for reinvention, as seen at the beginning of the pandemic; some proposals were digitalized, while others were reconfigured to be visible from any point in the city.

The sustainability of light festivals is an increasingly important issue, especially in the context of environmental concerns and the COVID-19 crisis (Garcia-Ruiz, 2024a; Négrier, 2023). Reducing the carbon footprint, using efficient lighting technologies, and adapting to the challenges of a post-pandemic world are essential for the future of these events. As of this writing, I have not yet been able to see a significant enough change to signal the end of this phase and the beginning of a new one.

4. Dynamics of Cultural Production and Urban Transformation in the Festivals of Light in Portugal

At the beginning of the 21st century, Portugal experienced a significant period in terms of cultural and urban development. The city of Porto, as European City of Culture in 2001, and Lisbon, recovering from the post-Expo'98 hangover, represent two distinct poles of cultural activity that set the stage for the emergence of new cultural projects. In Lisbon, the Association Extra]Muros[, responding to a post-Expo cultural activity vacuum, initiated the project "Lisboa, Capital do Nada" (Caeiro, 2002; Roda Fernandes, 2011) in the Marvila neighborhood, marking a turning point in collaborative artistic intervention and the reimagining of urban space, and seeding the germ for light festivals.

4.1. Lisbon, Capital do Nada: Rethinking Urban Space

The "Lisboa, Capital do Nada" project challenged conventional perceptions of urban space and culture. The initially controversial choice of title reflected an intention to redefine the post-Expo void as a blank canvas for creativity and utopia. This interdisciplinary approach to urban voids underscores a crucial aspect of urban sociology: how seemingly forgotten or underutilized spaces can be revitalized and reimagined through artistic intervention, generating a sense of community and belonging (Caeiro, 2002). Marvila's activation through art - sculptures, fado concerts, human cordons - illustrates the capacity of art to transform spaces and foster social cohesion.

"A name was created: Lisbon Capital of Nothingness [...]; nothingness as a metaphor that would then allow us to build everything, or do everything we wanted. It was the right to utopia. [...] It was the nothingness with the potential to come and see things and allow us all together to make a different public space." (Teresa Alves, Interview. IGOT. Lisbon. 13 March 2019)

The evolution of the Extra]Muros[Association towards the realization of the first light festival in Portugal, Luzboa, is a testament to how artistic and cultural collaborations can lead to significant innovations in the use of public space. The collaboration between Mario Caerio and Marc Pottier, driven by a common interest in public art and the creative use of urban space, led to the creation of Luzboa. This project, influenced by the *Fête des Lumières* in Lyon and the growing importance of LUCI (Lighting Urban Community International) who shared studies on the efficiency and good results of light festivals, marked a milestone in the integration of art in public space and the development of a light festival culture in Portugal.

The development of the Luzboa conference cycle in 2003 and its culmination in the streets of Lisbon in 2004 coincided with a moment of cultural effervescence in the capital. The biennial not only coexisted with large-scale events such as Rock in Rio Lisbon and Euro 2004 soccer, but also contributed significantly to the cultural and touristic landscape of the city. The partnership between the organization and the Lisbon City Council, combining technical and financial resources and permits for the occupation of urban space, underlines the importance of cooperation between cultural and governmental entities for the success of such initiatives (Caeiro & Pottier, 2004).

The realization of Luzboa faced significant challenges related to financing, bureaucracy and logistics (Monchique, 2004), while highlighting the need for collaboration between organizers, municipal authorities, and sponsors, emphasizing the complexity of producing cultural events in urban spaces. The atomization of the pieces, located far from each other, in the first edition of Luzboa and the difficulty of creating a coherent experiential narrative were some details and lessons learned from the first edition as detailed by the organizers in the interviews, being highly important to create a narrative between the pieces and a relationship with the route, the territory, and the space they occupy in order to establish a relationship of dialogue with the visitor. The second edition of Luzboa addressed these difficulties through a creative segmentation of the festival route, which improved the visitor experience and the accessibility of the event.

4.2. Innovations and Lessons Learned in the Second Edition of Luzboa

The second edition of Luzboa in 2006 reflected a process of learning and adaptation. The creative division of the urban space into thematic zones based on the basic colors of light not only facilitated the navigation of the festival, but also added a pedagogical dimension to the event, including history and tradition in the route. The festival *path* was divided into three parts Red (*Aristocratic Lisbon*: Príncipe Real), Green (*Lisbon Pombalina*: Baixa-Chiado), Blue (*Old Lisbon*: Alfama) (Caeiro, 2007; Roda Fernandes, 2006). This program division allowed the festival's visitor to organize their visit, creating different scenarios and atmospheres. This segmentation, reinforced by the public lighting, which included color filters to delimit which section of the path the visiting, proved to be an effective strategy replicated in other light festivals. This approach reflects a deeper understanding of how art and design can interact with urban space to create immersive and accessible experiences.

The participation of Luzboa's organizers in international events such as Glow in the Netherlands, and its subsequent incorporation into the ILO (International Light Festival Organisation) network, underlines the importance of professional networks in the field of light art and culture. These networks not only provide opportunities to share experiences and knowledge, but also facilitate the development of cultural and artistic capital, essential for legitimization and professional growth in the field of light festivals, although it does not depend on them for a festival to achieve consecration and create a strong relationship with its audiences.

The Luzboa-Schréder Award, given to outstanding personalities in the field of the "culture of light", understanding this *culture of light* as a professional culture, highlight how light festivals are not only spaces for artistic exhibition, but also platforms for the recognition and valorization of contributions in the field of lighting and urban design. These awards were devised to reinforce the idea that the "culture of light" encompasses a broad spectrum of practices ranging from scientific research to art and urbanism, which I would propose as one more way for the complete artification (Heinich & Shapiro, 2012; Shapiro, 2004, 2019) of the practices associated with light art, and light festivals (Garcia-Ruiz, 2023).

The economic crisis 2008 and its effects on the financing of culture directly impacted the continuity of Luzboa. The reduction of financial support by the City Council of Lisbon and the increasing dependence on private sponsors revealed the vulnerabilities of this light festival and its inability to assume Portugal's economic and political changes in Troika (Moury & Freire, 2013). The dissolution of the Extra]Muros Association[as a result of economic tensions, and the sale of the Luzboa name illustrate the challenges inherent to the long-term sustainability of these cultural events and their high dependence on public funding able to cope with eventualities, as well as able to provide human staff and trained technical equipment, reducing costs.

Luzboa not only pioneered the introduction of light festivals in Portugal, but also established a model for the interaction between art, urban space and community. Through its editions, Luzboa demonstrated how light festivals can transform the perception and use of public space, foster community cohesion and stimulate cultural and tourism development. Despite financial and organizational challenges, Luzboa left a lasting legacy on the Portuguese cultural landscape, influencing the perception of light as an artistic medium and how festivals can contribute to urban and cultural development.

5. The Continuity and Evolution of the Post-Luzboa Festival of Light Production

The post-Luzboa experience in the production of light festivals in Portugal illustrates an interesting phenomenon in the field of contemporary art and cultural management especially outside the usual hours, and in particular during the night. The separation of key Luzboa decision-makers and their continuation in projects related to light festivals underlines a peak moment [Popularization phase on the international scene] in the art world and a growing demand for nighttime *experiential* content.

Other festivals followed at the end of Luzboa, such as the "lightning" light festival Óbidos-Luz (Caeiro & Cabau, 2015) which took place at the invitation of Obidos Creativa[3] , a municipal company for the development of tourist, cultural and educational events of the city of Óbidos in 2013. This project, developed in only two months, underlines the ability of light festival managers to adapt to varied contexts and budgets, accentuating the need for a commitment between the different stakeholders and a mutual ambition and desire for the activity to succeed. Despite the financial limitations, the festival managed to maximize the visitor experience, focusing on enhancing the characteristics of the municipality and highlighting local cultural and identity aspects. I should point out, on the other hand, that this festival was inserted in another program, *Óbidos Vila Natal*, which somehow ended up associating the exhibits with the Christmas context and reinforced the confusion I mentioned at the beginning, a relatively frequent confusion at this phase in which the divorce and individualization of these nightlife programs had not yet occurred. Despite everything, and being a moment of exploration and international *pre-boom*, it is evident here how light festivals, from very early on, were strategically understood and used by local governments to attract tourism and reinforce the cultural identity of a place, regardless of the size of the municipality.

It would not take long for the "boutique festival" concept to arrive in Lisbon, especially after the experience of *Lux Matrix* in Finland by Mário Caeiro. These events tend to concentrate more on *art* than on *entertainment*, with few pieces selected in the elaboration of the program, and usually performed by renowned artists. These *boutique festivals* offer a counterpoint to the more massive light festivals focused on the general public and held in the urban space during the night. Boutique festivals tend to be held in private spaces, including traditional cultural venues such as museums or galleries, and although they are rare, they really have the admiration of the light art world. In Lisbon, the *Lightcraft* project[4] curated by the former organizer of Luzboa, would benefit from the funds of the Frédéric Coustols collection at Palácio Belmonte for its planning, while inviting some artists to complete the event. These boutique festivals underscore the intersection of light festival art with the global art market, evidencing how artists and curators linked to these events transcend into other artistic spheres, that is, they are catalysts for an artification of practices and on the other hand, and in this particular case, a way to further professionalize the actors who initially participated in the first Portuguese light festival.

6. The Sociopolitical Instrumentalization of the Festivals of Light in Portugal

The Luzboa festival, a pioneer in Portugal, not only redefined the urban cultural landscape but also established a model for using these events in urban marketing and commercialization strategies. Luzboa provided a platform for contemporary artistic expression and revealed the potential of light festivals as tools for urban development and cultural reinvention. The subsequent popularization of these events underlines a significant change in the perception and use of nighttime public space and

culture, although in the Portuguese case, and unlike its European counterparts, it tended to move to secondary or peripheral cities and not to the large regional capitals.

After the cessation of Luzboa, there was a period of "obscurity", a significant pause before other light festivals emerged in Portugal. The Lumina festival in Sintra, which emerged in 2011, is a prominent example. Initially included in Sintraartes, an initiative of the Sintra City Council and Turismo de Portugal to position the region as "Sintra Capital of Romanticism," the festival stood out for its multimedia content and media impact. However, it would only be given once, perhaps due to its high production cost. Projection equipment in the territory and other lighting technologies used in other parts of the event were very expensive. However, Lumina expanded its scope and international weight by arriving two years later in the neighboring city of Cascais, where it would be held for several editions until its end in 2018. This festival became an emblem of Portuguese light festivals, standing out for its size, international impact and participation in specialized networks.

6.1. Municipal Strategy and Political Support for Lumina

The strategic evolution of Lumina in Cascais reveals how socio-political environments and tourist demands influence the organization and approach of these festivals. In 2014, the City Council of Cascais fully supported the realization of the Lumina Festival, integrating it into its strategic tourism offer and instrumentalizing the festival as one of the engines to attract tourism and reinforce a city's image.

> [when asked about the Lumina festival] "It is very important. It is part of an overall strategy for the municipality, and every year we invest millions of euros in events to attract new tourists to Cascais and this is one of those events. The main driver of this one is creativity. A young couple from Cascais, Nuno and Carole, are the real engine of this event. They, together with artists from fourteen different countries, make this very, very important for Cascais." Interview by Miguel Pinto Luz for aicep Portugal Global (2014).

The municipality's adoption of the Lumina festival, particularly during the International Year of Light in 2015, its second edition held in Cascais, serves as a pertinent example of how cultural events are utilized to foster economic benefits and urban rejuvenation during times of economic turmoil. The festival was strategically promoted within a neoliberal narrative of creative labor, following the trend of the time when cultural industries were celebrated as a panacea or solution to the economic crisis (European et al., 2023; Florida, 2012; Jelinčić, 2009; Ponzini & Rossi, 2010; Thomasson, 2015; Zherdev, 2014). The initiative aimed to create specialized employment opportunities and invigorate the local economy, impacting both the arts and related sectors such as hospitality and dining. It is important to note that this initiative occurred in the aftermath of the intense financial crisis of 2008 in Portugal, a situation from which the country's recovery was deemed complete only after enduring six years of rigorous austerity measures.

The Lumina festival was one of the founders of the ILO (International Light Festivals Organization), highlighting the Portuguese presence in the international space and gaining European funding through a cooperation program. The Spectrum Program[56] would provide a large economic sum to make its realization feasible between 2014 and 2016 while placing the municipality in a creative collaborative network.

The incorporation of Lumina into the cultural landscape of Cascais reflects a deliberate strategy of cultural diversification. The coexistence of the International Culture Festival (FIC) and Lumina in Cascais exemplifies how municipalities can use complementary cultural events to attract different audience segments. While FIC appealed to a more erudite cultural audience, emphasizing *high culture*, Lumina attracted families and tourists, functioning as an accessible entertainment event (even if its pieces were equally of great artistic value). This dual approach allowed Cascais to present a richer and more diverse cultural offering, maximizing its appeal to both residents and visitors.

From 2016, the political discourse around light festivals in Cascais began to change and FIC began to be presented as the new cultural banner of the municipality, indicating a change in cultural strategy and a progressive abandonment of nighttime cultural leisure programs. I should mention that in the editions so far, the municipality had received complaints about the behavior of visitors, as well as reported some losses in certain areas of the city that were excluded from the official path (something that was solved in later editions). This was aligned with that year's municipal elections, reflecting how cultural events can be instrumentalized directly and indirectly in political campaigns and urban image strategies. The Lumina festival, although it continued to be linked to tourism, began to play a secondary role in the municipality's cultural policy, which aimed to attract a certain elite rather than a large number of heterogeneous people with a medium or low spending profile.

Figure 1: Nighttime urban activation through light festivals
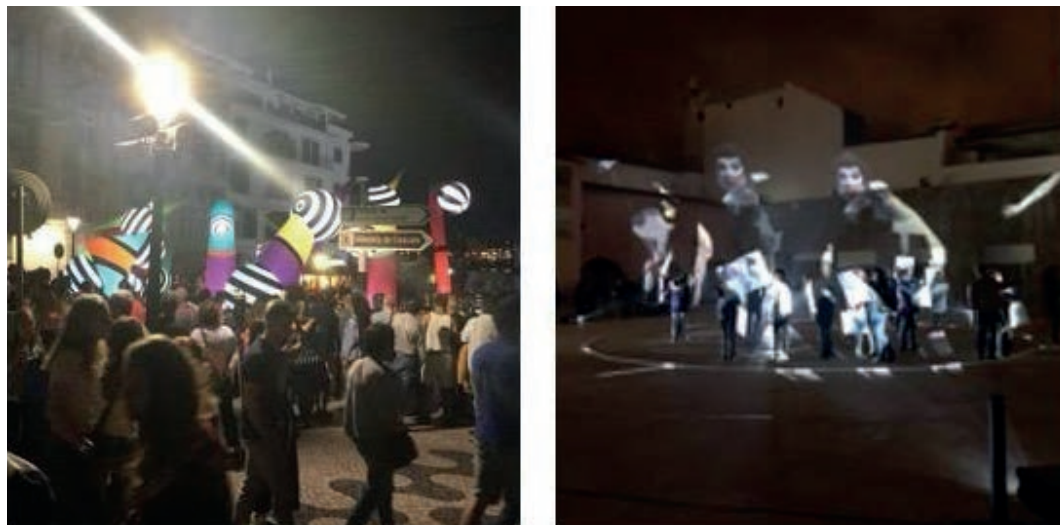
Note: Left: *Lumina Festival* in Cascais, 2018 edition. The image highlights the large number of visitors attracted by the event, approximately 400,000 per edition. Featured is the street circus work *Lampadophores* by Picto Facto Group (FR), which played a crucial role in managing crowd flow during the festival. Right: the interactive work *For iTernity* by Katja Heitmann, in Loulé, also from the 2018 edition. On a smaller scale, the festival attracted many visitors, promoting a social, playful, and artistically engaging interaction through this type of installation. Photos by the author (Cascais, 23/09/2018, Loulé 2/11/2018, respectively).

The cultural strategy and internationalization of Cascais have undergone a significant transition, shifting from a focus on mass entertainment, creativity, and the arts to prioritizing the attraction of investors, high-net-worth individuals, and a more select and specialized audience. This strategic shift particularly aims to attract digital nomads seeking locales with a high quality of life and a financial system that offers flexibility and is not overly burdensome in terms of taxation (Garcez et al., 2023; Getman, 2021). The festival ended in 2018, with no communiqué explaining the reasons for the cessation. However, it is possible that the festival could be held again in another location, as it has happened before.

7. Decentralization of the light festivals and their educational value

After being mentioned as one of the best light festivals in Europe by the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* (Beanland, 2014), the case of Lumina in Cascais became an example to be replicated in other regions of Portugal. A prominent example is the Algarve International Festival of Light (Luza), launched in 2017. This event represented a break with the concentration of festivals in the Lisbon metropolitan area, offering a new dimension to cultural tourism in southern Portugal. The Luza, integrated in the "365 Algarve" program[7], was a strategic bet to *rebrand* the region, traditionally seen as a *beach tourism destination*, towards a *cultural tourism* orientation.

The Luza festival in Loulé had two editions, with a third and final edition in Faro. This event had a significant impact on the local economy of Loulé, especially during the *shoulder season*, encouraging the circulation of people and promoting the cultural consumption of programs that traditionally did not reach the south, being for many the first experience with the arts that use light as a medium for many visitors. The intention of the municipal team and organizers of Luza was twofold: to increase attendance during the festival and at the same time stimulate local creative industries. This approach reflected a broader understanding of how light festivals can be strategic tools for economic development and cultural redefinition of a region as well as a good understanding of nightlife beyond the leisure of bars, clubs or other traditional entertainment establishments, perhaps more associated with drinking alcoholic beverages. However, the local reception was not as expected, and the festival ended once the regional funding came to an end, a moment that would also coincide with the arrival of COVID-19 in Portugal.

"I think they are very broad proposals, which can satisfy both a more purist public, who are looking for a more conceptual type of work from the artistic point of view, and perhaps find here pieces that they like; and the public that comes because they are going for a walk, and want to see something different and not be too concerned about who the artist is and not have any concern from the point of view of the artistic concept of the piece they are seeing. I'm sure he's satisfied here as well. So, even I think Luza, in this aspect, is a festival that manages to reach different audiences." Interview. Curator 365 Algarve. Loulé, 2018.

The *Festival of Light and Videomapping* in Lousada, in northern Portugal, initiated in 2014 by the Lousada City Council and with the collaboration of OCUBO (the company responsible for the Lumina Festival in Cascais), would be something different. This would use a community participation model, where the locals were actively involved in creating and presenting the content, similar to other projects such as the explained by Foster (2022) in Bristol. The involvement of local schools and students from the Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD), in conjunction with the participation of artists and community personalities in the projected works, demonstrates how light festivals can be instruments for community strengthening and social cohesion in addition to their artistic and cultural value. In addition to their economic and tourism impact, light festivals also play an essential role in educating and culturally sensitizing audiences (Bollo et al., 2017; Hadley, 2021). The diversity and variety of works presented in these festivals seek not only to entertain but also to educate and bring audiences closer to multimedia art. This aspect is crucial to encourage greater frequentation and appreciation of other cultural facilities, such as museums or galleries, and to encourage other healthier leisure consumption, such as visiting these programs at night.

Beyond their touristic and economic impact, light festivals have also played a significant role in the educational and community context. The Agrupamento de Escolas D. Dinis in Marvila[8], Lisbon, exemplifies this pedagogical dimension. This community and amateur festival, carried out with the participation of students under the direction of teachers and in collaboration with the Marvila Library, highlights the importance of light festivals as tools for cultural and technological exploration in education as well as the exploration of the night as a time for leisure and experimentation. These projects encourage creativity and the active participation of young people in the cultural life of their community, providing a platform for experimentation and hands-on learning.

Currently, the only active light festivals are in the northern region (fig.1), highlighting *Prisma, Light Art Tech*[9] in Aveiro. This program was integrated into the Criatech Aveiro program, the Aveiro Technology week, and in turn integrated into the municipal bid for the city's candidacy to be the *European City of Culture* in 2027[10]. This event combines art, technology, and heritage, demonstrating how light festivals can be a point of convergence for various disciplines and contribute to the long--term strategic vision of a city. This festival was announced as a kind of catalyst to "strengthen local creative industries, based on cooperation between creatives, students and companies, assuming itself as a platform for artistic and technological innovation in 2021, with its first edition. It also seeks to contribute to a good environmental management, alerting about the need for energy efficiency and inviting the use of soft modes of mobility." (Camara Municipal de Aveiro, 2020). Introducing the variable of energy concern, as well as light pollution within the pedagogical agenda of the festival.

8. Concluding notes

This analysis, although it does not exhaustively review all the light festivals in Portugal, due to space limitations, does manage to capture the dominant trends and the political instrumentalization of this type of nocturnal event, framing it with the key moments at the national level, and contextualizing them at the international level. It is important to recognize that any socio-historical study has its limitations, and there will always be aspects that remain unaddressed, or beyond the scope of the researcher.

In the context of local public policies, I argue that the post-Luzboa light festivals were framed from municipal governments as strategic tools for urban development, and responding to intention to boost tourism and reactivate the local economy, especially through the development of night economies alternative to alcohol and entertainment leisure (Nofre & Martins, 2017; Nofre et al., 2018) by promoting a creative nighttime industry model based on technologies that use the medium of light.

This framing was adopted under the neoliberal promise of the creative economy (Evans, 2017; Florida, 2012; Landry, 2000) and was adopted in the hope of being able to rebound from the economic

crisis of 2008. Likewise, I point here to the financial difficulties that festival directors face in the planning and production of festivals, especially in the face of the constant uncertainty of budget renewal, often subject to punctual funding or subjectively evaluated objectives that go to meet that instrumentalization for the internationalization and branding of the city. Dependence on external financing, both public and private, raises questions about its long-term viability. The instrumentalization of the programs, on the other hand, implies a commodification of the arts, transforming a cultural product, into a mere creative tool for *citybranding* destinations (Cudny, 2019; Dinnie, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2004; Rius Ulldemolins, 2014).

From a sociocultural perspective, light festivals transcend their role as mere entertainment or mere cultural events by facilitating moments of social interaction, attracting a diverse audience and promoting a sense of belonging and community (either because they like the program or because they dislike it), in other words favoring a certain *communitas* (Garcia-Ruiz, 2024a, 2024b; Turner, 2012). In addition, light festivals play a significant role in the educational and social field, as they contribute to the formation of audiences, the democratization of the arts and even the decentralization of culture (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Evrard, 1997; Silva et al., 2013). On the other hand, by integrating schools and local communities in the creative process, even if they were not all the festivals analyzed, they foster cultural democracy and become catalysts for arts education and social cohesion.

Finally, this study claims and highlights the relevance of light festivals as programs of great socio-cultural, economic, and tourism promotion importance for the territory. These events not only boost the local economy and enhance the visibility of the regions that host them, but also foster social cohesion and a sense of community belonging (Garcia-Ruiz, 2026). Moreover, light festivals constitute an emerging and significant area in the field of Night Studies, providing an innovative framework for exploring the interactions between culture, tourism and nightlife. Thus, this paper contributes to the consideration of nighttime cultural industries in cultural mediation studies, tourism studies and night studies, highlighting their impact and their potential to transform and revitalize urban spaces.

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Notes

[1]   For more information see: LUCI, Lighting Urban Community International, www.luciassociation.org
[2]   For more information: ILO,International Light Festivals Organisation, https://www.internationallightfestivals.org
[3]   For more information, see: https://www.cm-obidos.pt/criativa
[4]   For more information, see: https://palaciobelmonte.com/lightcraft-belmonte/
[5]   For more information visit: http://www.spectrum14-15.org/en/home/
[6]   For more information visit: http://www.spectrum16.org/en/pt_conference/
[7]   For more information: https://www.turismodoalgarve.pt/pt/menu/461/365-algarve.aspx
[8]   For more information, see: https://luzemmarvila.pt
[9]   For more information, see: https://www.criatech.pt/
[10] For more information: https://aveiro2027.pt/pt/capital-europeia-da-cultura/