***Barrocal Park* – Bringing Nature to the Heart of a City (Castelo Branco, Portugal)**

It could be that "enchanted island" acclaimed by the poets. The *Barrocal* rises, timeless, highlighted and lately marginalized, among the white neighbourhoods of the Portuguese city of Castelo Branco, not far from the border to Spain. For those travelling from south, Barrocal marks the beginning of the urban area. It stands in the landscape alongside the imminent São Martinho hill, as a colossal gate collapsed in geological times. Who comes from the west can cross it on an extensive avenue that, for a moment, abandon the plot of streets and houses, to dive back into the heart of the life in this city; it is a natural oasis, granite stone and oak, which stands at the window of who arrives, for the first time by train, to this city. Born 310 million years ago, in the depths of the Earth of almost 30 kilometres and 750ºC of temperature, it could only result in a very special landscape. Barrocal Park is nothing but the first account of an ancient history, of such a special place in the city Castelo Branco.

But how much do we think we know about this Barrocal? There is no doubt that there are many granitic landscapes in Portugal. In an apparent chaos of cyclopean rocks, this Barrocal from Castelo Branco does not seem to differ from many granite landscapes in Portugal or even worldwide, extending towards the outskirts of the city and shaping the surrounding landscape. What makes Barrocal unique is to constitute the natural origins of the city, which has evolved as landscape with it, contributed as raw material to build the city and that today, more than ever, is part of. Talking about Castelo Branco, of this city and its origins dressed in granite is necessarily talking of its Barrocal. Of these megalithic forms, residual testimonies of ancient erosions, that served as a foundation but also as stonework resistant to more than eight centuries of a vibrant history of wars and peace, and that persists in the urban sprawl as resistant to remember that from Nature we provide and prosper.

The history of the Barrocal landscape is counted by millions of years. Each of its granite landforms sculpted by each drop of water that seeps into the rock, so providential over the dense network of fractures, transmit us a chapter of the geological stories that we as humans have not lived. However, these are the past episodes that have shaped a human coexistence that we now know to have existed in the area for more than 3000 years, connection that may have reached a dimension that goes beyond subsistence from the granite sandy soil. The Barrocal and its entire landscape reached its peak in the sacredness by the native people of Iberian plateau. This passion for the identity of the living horizon would be assimilated by various religions over millennia, but even today it persists in the local devotion to the Our Lady of Mércoles.

Is Barrocal Nature in its pure state? By no means. In old Europe strongly humanized, where the ancient intervention of human ingenuity reaches the summits of Alps to the Carpathians, it is not expected to find “Lost worlds”. For more than three millennia, Barrocal was home and garden, a space for sacred and shelter for shepherds, pasture for animals and raw material for construction. Its valleys were walked millions of times, here and there we stumbled over ruins, and on its slopes the scars persist of quarries opened in different periods of need. But are all transformations, all uses, all the abandonments that shaped the Barrocal in what is presented to us today. One landscape of great scenic wealth, made of details, natural and artificial habitats that multiply into wild plant and animal species.

Barrocal is an example of the natural and cultural wealth of the territory declared by UNESCO in which it is integrated. For this reason, it is a privileged starting point for its understanding and discovery. Also, it is part of a strategy at the local level that aims to contribute to achieving some of the for Sustainable Development Goals proclaimed by the United Nations, a broad and ambitious agenda that addresses various dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, environmental). The 2030 Agenda is therefore “a common vision for Humanity, a contract between the world leaders and people”. The granite landscape in the Barrocal was certainly shaped by natural climate changes occurring in the past and can be understood as a laboratory for climate action, in an effort on its valorisation in the sense of creating a nature regeneration space for Castelo Branco, an important oxygen reserve, an accessible area for health and well-being, a territory of intervention for a quality citizenship.

Our attitude towards nature nowadays is critical for the future of humanity. We have the power to change it and to destroy it deeply, although we know, better than ever before, its importance to the quality of life for all of us, and mainly for the survival of the human species. If we think that Man is an integral part of nature, immediately we realized that the conflict against it is inevitably a war against ourselves. So, we face today the biggest challenge ever, to prove our intelligence and our ability to protect nature, and with that, we and those who will come after us. This project for the preservation of the Barrocal clearly signals the city that we aspire in the 21st century, placing Nature at the centre of Castelo Branco and providing the city’s future expansion to the south a renewed vision of sustainability and habitat enhancement that extends and updates a path of 20 years of urban intervention and aggrandizement.

The project developed by the Municipality Castelo Branco, which rehabilitates the Barrocal in a Nature park, come precisely to open up this vast area, which is the size of about 40 football fields, bringing it closer to the whole community. To the community of Science, who will be able to develop monitoring projects here and contribute to the discovery new and compelling Barrocal stories; to the Education community, which here will find countless study examples *in loco*, for informal learning so close to the School; to Visitor, who seek in Nature a new way of healthy leisure and experiences, small corners of this world that can generate a permanent mental image but also a selfie viral image for social networks; to citizens, all those who at some point in their lives felt and needed this space as them, in multiple child's play, in the adventures of discovering youth, and who can share and enjoy it now at family, or sharing and reliving memories in a revitalizing walk in safety.

The Barrocal Park project has as main goal to safeguard and protect nature. But, underlying this mission, there is actually much more. There is an exchange, in which society is also defended and benefited by the presence of this preserved area. The park was designed to promote Barrocal as a museum of nature, alive, dynamic, interactive, educational and playful. To showcase the characteristics of the Castelo Branco landscape, its genesis and evolution, relationship with the geological landscape of the region and beyond. To highlight the existing natural resources, ecosystems and their interrelationships, the importance of preserving natural resources and biodiversity for a healthier, more balanced and harmonious future. The Barrocal Park provides ways of living this nature space in harmony with the present values. To welcome the visitors warmly, invite them to go through and experience the Barrocal in its most diverse valences, making it comfortable and respectful way. The park is a privileged space for walking and contemplation, conviviality and sharing of experiences and knowledge, because it is born from the contact with nature.

Barrocal is simultaneously resistant and fragile. It is a space of resilience to climate change but, like any natural area, is a fragile system, in particular to human pressure - direct and indirect-, and easily destructible with excessive and inappropriate use. The Barrocal is a space in renaturalization, which was definitely marked by different uses but also for abuse. In an area of urban expansion, Barrocal was often used as a dumping ground for construction waste; as a marginal location, so close to the city, it was chosen for illegalities that have degraded this space of their humanity. Pasture for fires and farm for unruly activities. Target of many acts of vandalism, in 2008 the Barrocal suffered the ultimate fire that destroyed most of its native forest.

But, for its extensive area and particular geological features, the Barrocal Park resisted and remained until today as a bastion of the original landscape, that the natural regeneration process under the project accentuated and valued, constituting unequivocally a scenic reference of the city and the region, and a space of individual and collective memories that the local community wants to preserve. The Barrocal is, therefore, a cluster of nature, in the heart of Castelo Branco, an island of transition between anthropomorphic spaces: the city and the *ager* (farmland).

Barrocal Park was born in 2020 from this transitional environment, in an ambitious 1.5 million euros project, with panoramas that widen for more than a hundred kilometres, that span the peninsular space of the European Union, but visionary as enhancer of new projects and dynamics for the city, and while attractive to a new type of tourist in the post-COVID 19, for all those who seek a new approach to Nature and a detachment from pandemics of our unsustainable society. At this time that we are living, which is inevitably a time of great reflection and change, the Barrocal Park can take on even more importance as an area of ​​freedom and emotional decompression.

From a simple walk for immersion in nature to a set of organized activities in a vibrant agenda of activities for nature interpretation and edutainment, suitable for residents and visitors, kids and their grandparents, the Park are providing many individual and collective experiences, diversified throughout the year, and in safe conditions. Barrocal Park is a heritage that belongs to the city of Castelo Branco in Portugal. But in a broader sense, it belongs to and deserves the attention and care of all of us. To all those in present, and all that will come later. So, we need to respect and cherish the Park, helping nature continue its regenerative path with conservation projects, which we all in the community want for Barrocal Park and we can now follow closely. This Barrocal Park, right in the heart of Castelo Branco.