

The CoLab initiative
promoted by Universidade Nova de Lisboa and Almada Municipality

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First of all, it is a great honour and a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much to the University who receives us and the team who organised this meeting so perfectly and the opportunity it gives us all to know better in what we are working right now, to build up those necessary connections between cities and universities in the European space and culture.

I must say that I am truly sorry to be here alone. The month of August, which is a priority in terms of vacation for public services in Portugal, was an obstacle for the presence of the deputy mayor of Almada, who is abroad. It is a pity, but I sincerely hope there will be other chances to hear him, especially about the connection that Nova University wishes to develop with the Almada municipality around the Colab project which I want to present to you today.

Two years ago, during the UNICA Conference in Lisbon, I defended the interest for an organization like ours and for the realization of its main objectives to look upon strong historical models for this connection between cities and knowledge. I took as examples Athens and especially its renaissance remake in Quattrocento Florence. At this occasion, I quoted the maestro Simon Rattle, who himself appeared quoted in the report on ***The Promotion of Cultural Knowledge, Creativity and Intercultural Understanding Through Education***, produced by the Council of Europe's Committee on Culture, Science, and Education:

“In matters of education, it is becoming very clear that society is changing: We no longer need the model that assumes there are a thousand obedient worker bees for each queen bee. Everyone in the industrial sector tells me we are educating our young people for the demands of today. We don't need people who think in straight lines. We need people who can see the wider picture; we need people who can make connections, unexpected connections. This is the area in which the arts are supreme, in which art and education can give more, in every respect, than any other discipline.”

Now, at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, we have the opportunity to give shape to some of these ideas and challenges, namely because the Almada Mayor invited us to consider the rehabilitation of an historical space and building in the village of Trafaria, in fact a former political prison deactivated more than fifty years ago. That proposal has a simple agenda: the desire to develop in this instalment a center for Art & Technology. It's up to the University to create the proper framework to develop this centre in all possible directions.

Because we don't have here the presence of the vice mayor of Almada, my proposal is to make a short presentation of the situation, which has geographical, physical as well as conceptual dimensions, explaining in what phase we are of the project, leaving some time at the end to hear your impressions and suggestions.

Saying that, I am thinking about the great advantage it is to have this new opportunity in the frame of UNICA. Because one thing is to internationalize a structure which is already in place with its own history, tradition and past, another thing is making the international dimension of this new structure already an important parameter for its own institution.

This Colab of Art & Technology must be seen as a pet project of Nova University, as Nova, which has 9 different schools, never had a proper Art School even if there is, mainly in the framework of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, a well-developed network of artistic competences – in terms of pedagogy, research and experimentation: in the fields of Music, Film, Digital and Media Art, Photography, etc.

In what direction are we working?

First of all, we are regrouping the artistic capacities of Nova University, in the domains I already mentioned – film, music, digital and media art, photography. Following the main pattern we have at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences we seek an identity which places art in relation with society and human and social sciences, very much in the spirit of *Documenta*, where critical studies appear at the forefront of the artistic work we are envisaging.

This accompanies, I believe, the concerns of Almada municipality as they see the new institute as a possibility to empower the human ecology of the region, promoting artistic creation as a way to question social, political, cultural and local issues.

Secondly, we seek to potentiate the social dimension and the identity of Universidade Nova de Lisboa, reinforcing its identity as a metropolitan university – somehow, in opposition to the University of Lisbon, which appears to be a more urban institution, centred in the city itself.

In that process, we all believe that the institute can reinforce the capacities of the western part of the Lisbon region as a new artistic pole (connexions with Maat, CCB and FCT).

Regarding the agenda of the project, something must be functioning at the beginning of the academic year of 2020-2021. Outside the difficult questions of financing and budget, our next big step will be to define the program of the project, that is, the domains we want to prioritize, knowing that we are interested in promoting interdisciplinarity and art pollination. That's why we are very much inclined in favour of an equation where digital appears as our main technology and design as our main artistic domain. When I speak about design I am not speaking of product design or equipment design but much more of production design – in the spirit of the Bauhaus, to call an example we all know.

This definition is of course an immediate priority as all the architectural and technological capacities of the project are dependent of what we want to do there.

To conclude, that's why I believe UNICA can be a relevant partner of the project. In the organization model we are thinking – with an installation committee and a steering committee -, I truly believe – as well as the Rector Joao Saagua and the Almada Mayor – that UNICA, and this group in particular, could be part of that Steering Committee. It could be an experiment but also an interesting opportunity for all. For the Almada project, we are all sure that it would represent a brutal increase in the critical mass of the project and its all potential and actual capacities.