# Tourism development in Alcântara (Lisbon): A case study and a survey[1]

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## Abstract

The tourist image of Lisbon and its uniqueness was shaped through the existence of "popular neighbourhoods", spaces of intense and unchangeable social life where the elements of cultural life are present as a landmark of each different space. Alcântara, Bica, Alfama, Mouraria, and Madragoa are examples of traditional Lisbon neighbourhoods, which today continue to be closely associated with specific representations of the city and of its people's ways of life within the city. As part of the tourism development that Lisbon has been experiencing in recent years, one of the emerging neighbourhoods is Alcântara, a former industrial district that is currently undergoing a functional reconversion. Situated by the river Tagus, next to the museum district of Lisbon (Belém), and not far from the town centre (Baixa), it presents a different tourist supply: besides the traditional local heritage, composed of monuments, palaces and museums, it is probably the best district of Lisbon to recall the industrial era, its buildings, activities and ways of life. This article deals with the transition process of the neighbourhood from an economic fabric based on industry to a tertiary type of area, within which a special reference to the tourism sector is given. As a reaction to the increasing demand of the tourists, several hotels, apartments and other types of local accommodation have emerged in the neighbourhood. In Alcântara tourists seek for the trendy local restaurants, unique libraries, modern business opportunities and young entrepreneurs' shops, which concentrate in former industrial facilities now reconverted into cultural and commercial activities, such as LX Factory and Village Underground. To understand this transformation a

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qualitative-quantitative method was used. Besides the documental analysis and the field research, a survey was conducted aimed at understanding the type of tourists visiting the district, their motivations and their assessment of the characteristics of Alcântara. The results show that Alcântara is an attractive district for young tourists interested in discovering trendy places. Alcântara's barycentric position is also significant both in the transport network and in the tourist geography of the metropolitan area of Lisbon.

**Key words**: *Alcântara, Lisbon, urban tourism, urban redevelopment, heritage.*

## 1. Introduction

Tourists give increasing importance to elements that reflect the cultural specificities of the place, such as the urban landscape and architecture, gastronomy and daily life of local communities. The trend is in fact to increasingly seek integration into the local reality and enrich one's experience by living the atmosphere. Today, in fact, the historic centre of the city is only one of the spaces available. What matters, especially for tourists who make a second or third visit, is the entire metropolitan area of the city, with its unique events and atmospheres (Joaquim, 2019).

The tourism sector is therefore fundamental for the recovery of urban spaces: despite the negative implications - the recent wave of "touristization" and "transnational gentrification" of the historic centres (Sequera and Nofre, 2018), the uncontrolled increase in real estate prices, the expulsion of the low-income population, the consequent weakening of local identities - tourism is also seen by various authors as a regenerating force (Brito-Henriques, 1996; Tiesdell *et al.*, 1996) which counteracts the degradation process by introducing new functions, creating employment and income and attracting a young population with new behaviour and consumption patterns.

In recent years, tourism in Portugal has been considered by national, regional and local policy makers as a lever for urban regeneration, in particular for some of the more traditional neighbourhoods of Lisbon, where after de-industrialization, renewal and revitalization of the coastal fronts and new tertiary centralities associated with the financial sector, trade and culture have appeared (Zukin, 2010). These relationships between tourism and urban regeneration have strengthened and acquired new forms especially after 2007, on the one hand with the emergence

of new incentives and financial instruments for the promotion of tourism within the framework of regional policies, on the other hand thanks to the regulatory flexibility introduced in the legal regimes of urban redevelopment, real estate rental and tourist accommodation (Barata Salgueiro *et al.*, 2017).

The regeneration policies and incentives for restructuring that are driving the gentrification and touristization of the central districts (Mendes, 2013; Nofre, 2013) also arrive today in those that are not part of the historic centre, such as Alcântara, the subject of this study (Figure 1) The tourist image of Lisbon and its uniqueness have also been modelled through the existence of "heterogeneous" neighbourhoods and distant from stereotypes such as Alcântara, which has suitable geographical and cultural conditions to consolidate itself as a tourist destination in the coming years, following the example of already established neighbourhoods, such as Alfama and Bairro Alto. Located in the western part of the city and lapped by the Tagus River, it is probably the best neighbourhood in Lisbon to recall the industrial era, its buildings, its activities and its "life styles", today declined according to the formula of recovery and reuse of disused industrial and port facilities (Chmielewska and Lamparska, 2012).

**Figure 1**

Lisbon administrative division: the *freguesias* (Source: Maria Gozner, 2019)
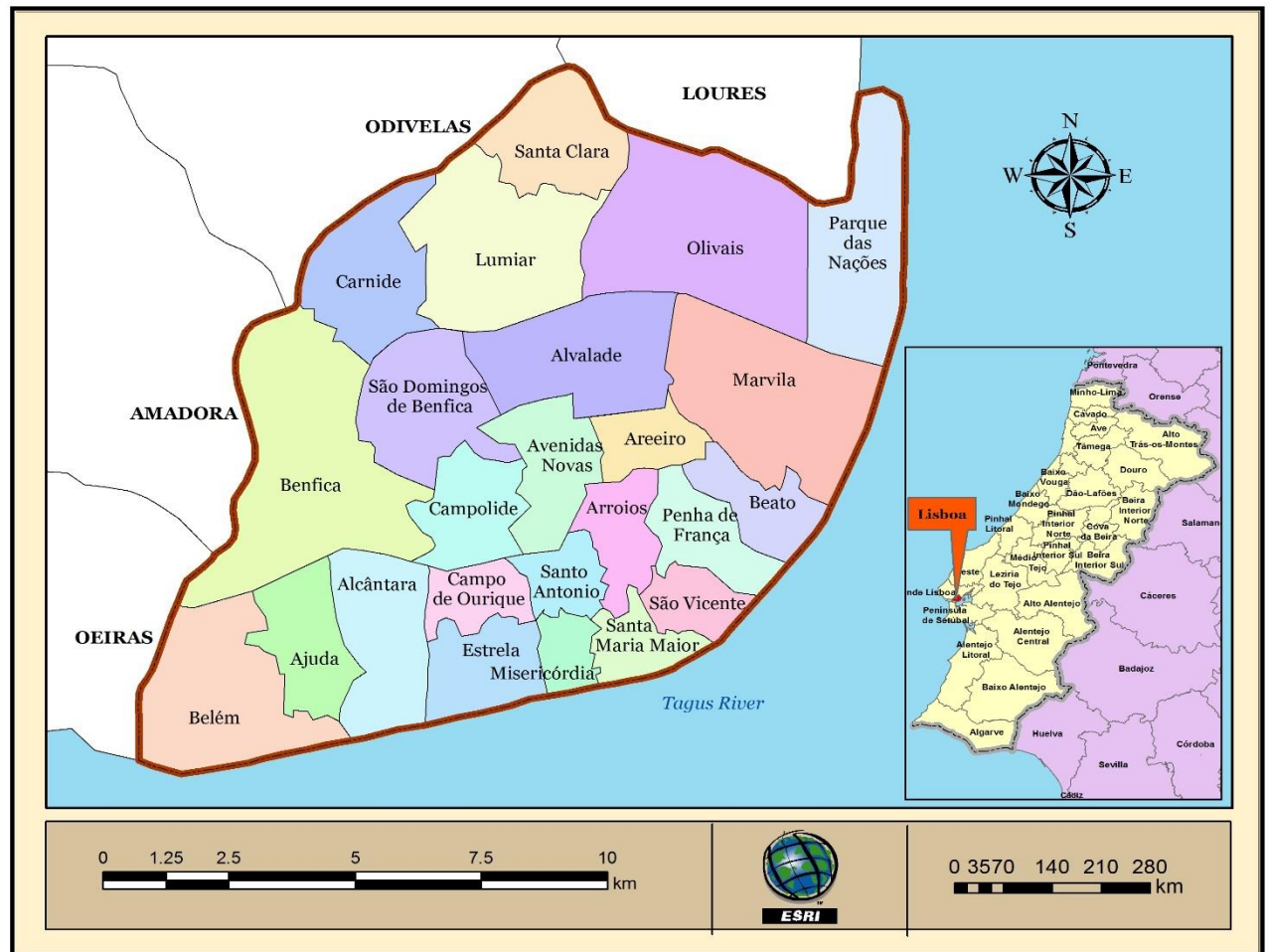


As a reaction to the growing tourist demand, the accommodation facilities (especially tourist apartments) are also multiplying in the Alcântara district. In addition to its location in the urban geography of Lisbon, with its waterfront and its central position with respect to the main tourist attractions of the city (the historic centre and Belém), the Alcântara district is also easily accessible - it is well served by different means of transport (city buses, trams, trains), and the metro could reach Alcântara within a couple of years. In this scenario, further tourism development is at least likely.

In the past five years the authors of this paper have analyzed the trends taking place in Lisbon and in the Alcântara district from the point of view of the trend of tourism (Zarrilli and Brito, 2013; Brito, Cappucci and Zarrilli, 2015; Brito, Zarrilli and Cappucci, 2015; Zarrilli and Brito, 2017). In this article, attention will focus on the role that tourism can play in the transition from an urban

industrial to a post-industrial "life" (Bujok *et al.*, 2014; Bujok *et al.*, 2015), trying to understand the main characteristics of tourists visiting the neighborhood, the changes that are taking place in their motives and mentality, new trends in the choice of accommodation. For this purpose, a survey was conducted to about three hundred tourists, the results of which allow us to hypothesize a future link to the tourism services sector, because they prove that Alcântara is an increasingly visited and less peripheral neighborhood in the "mental map" of tourists.

## 2. Historical evolution of the Alcântara district

The freguesia of Alcântara has a population of 13,943 people (2011) over an area of 4.40 km². The name Alcântara derives from the Arabic word *al-quantãra*, which means "the bridge", because of an ancient Roman bridge that still existed when the Arabs occupied Lisbon (718-1147) and that disappeared in the early eighteenth century.

After the earthquake of 1755, which destroyed the centre of Lisbon, the king and several aristocratic families moved to Alcântara, Belém and Ajuda districts, because these areas were less affected by the earthquake. In those days Rua da Junqueira, a long road connecting Alcântara and Belém, became very fashionable, and still today we find there many palaces dating back to that period, of which the Ribeira Grande palace and the Burnay palace are excellent examples.

The Portuguese industrial revolution of the nineteenth century radically changed the life of Alcântara. Between 1807 and 1824, members of the Ratton family had a porcelain factory built in the central square of the neighborhood, called Calvário. New factories of tanneries, chemicals, cereal grinding and cotton spinning were located in Alcântara, which therefore became one of the most important industrial areas in the Lisbon region.

To support industrial development, a new railway was inaugurated in 1887 connecting the Alcântara-Terra station to Sintra. The railway line was extended to the Alcântara-Mar station in 1891 and completed after the public rehabilitation works along the Alcântara beach (1876), which led to the recovery of another 500 meters of land from the Tagus river, quickly occupied by factories, docks and warehouses. At the end of the twentieth century, when industrial heritage became an object of tourist interest, and when the "culture of pleasure" (Zarrilli and Brito, 2013; Xie, 2015) imposed itself on the lifestyles of large sections of the population, the Alcântara district

has become a trendy place thanks to its night clubs and discos, located in areas abandoned by the industrial and port activities of the neighborhood. However, due to the distance from the houses, this recovery operation did not cause a "symbolic and material dispossession of residents' habitat" (Sequera and Nofre, 2018, p. 845), and therefore did not negatively affect the quality of life of the residents, unlike what happened in neighborhoods such as Bairro Alto, still today one of the main places of the Lisbon nightlife.


## 3. Heritage and tourist facilities

At first glance, Alcântara looks like an ex-industrial district dominated by buildings of different and more or less recent typologies, where the 25 de Abril bridge, the warehouses of the Docas de Santo Amaro (or simply Docas) stand out as a popular meeting place, and above all the modern CUF 2 Hospital, still under construction. A closer look, however, reveals a neighbourhood with an interesting and highly diversified heritage, relating to a large period of time between the sixteenth century and current days.

The religious heritage is dominated by the chapel of Saint Amaro (Figure 2), dating back to 1549. It is a curious building unique in Lisbon for its circular plan and its beautiful seventeenth-century tiles that tell the story of Saint Amaro. From this place you can enjoy a beautiful panoramic view over the whole Alcântara district, the Tagus river and the 25 de Abril bridge (Figure 3).

**Figure 2**

Chapel of Santo Amaro (Source: authors)



**Figure 3**

View of Alcântara from the Chapel of Santo Amaro (Source: authors)

On Rua 1º de Maio, one of the main streets of Alcântara, stands the eighteenth-century palace of the Pinto Basto family, name of the founder of the famous porcelain and glass factory Vista Alegre, still today the best Portuguese porcelain. The building houses the Macau scientific and cultural centre, with a specialized library and a museum including an exhibition of over 400 pieces.

This is also the street where the Carris museum is located, the urban transport company of Lisbon, where the vehicles that circulated in Lisbon in the last century are preserved, from the horse-drawn tram used in the beginning of the 20th century, called "the American", to current trams, various types of buses and other equipment connected to public transport.

In the same area, the so-called Village Underground can be visited, a reproduction of the English space of the same name, consisting of 14 disused containers and two old buses transformed into offices and co-working spaces. The Village Underground hosts cultural and musical events, and it is the location of several commercials.

Next to the Village Underground there is the most important tourist attraction of the neighbourhood, the LX Factory, an interesting example of the conversion of an industrial complex into a multifunctional space. Inaugurated in 2008, the LX Factory occupies a former industrial area of approximately 23,000 m$^2$ (a central avenue with two large lateral structures), where important companies were once present (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

LX Factory (Source: authors)



After a long period of inactivity, the complex was affected by a recovery operation completed by the Portuguese company Main Side Investments, which has preserved the original atmosphere of the "factory", although according to a contemporary formula. There are in fact, around 200 offices, design studios and shops, art studios, start-ups, creative restaurants, cafes, bookstores, nightclubs, co-working spaces and even a hostel, with a total daily occupation of about a thousand people.

The LX Factory also hosts several weekly events, workshops, concerts, cultural activities and a Sunday market of vintage and organic products and is an interesting and pleasant place to spend a Saturday evening or Sunday morning in a mood that "The Guardian" defined as cool (Moore, 2017). In this regard, we can quote the words of Xie (2015): LX Factory "experienced a process of gentrification from factory production to tourism" (Xie, 2015, p.174). "It is viewed as both an industrial icon and an ideal location for the logical transition to a service economy via the reinvention of traditions" (Xie, 2015, p.191).

Along the river, a short distance from the LX Factory and the Village Underground, there are the Docas, located under the initial section of the bridge. These are port structures (landing, warehouses) built during the redevelopment works of the port of Lisbon, completed in 1887. In 1995 the Docas were converted into a lively area of restaurants, bars and discos, frequented by both residents and tourists, especially during the evening and night hours, which contributes to making Alcântara one of the hubs of the Lisbon nightlife.

The 25 de Abril bridge, which dates back to 1966, is the main landmark of the Alcântara landscape and perhaps of the entire city of Lisbon. Despite being visible from almost every panoramic corner of the city, the bridge manifests itself in all its grandeur especially in Alcântara. Access from the Lisbon side is actually located in this neighbourhood, which guarantees the visitor a definitely stronger visual experience than in the rest of the city. The Interpretative Centre Ponte 25 de Abril - Experiência Pilar 7 was inaugurated in August 2017, a structure that allows visitors to know the history of the bridge and to experience it "from the inside", thanks to a lift and to a panoramic terrace located in correspondence with the seventh pillar (*pilar 7*).

## 4. Accommodation facilities

According to the following figures, it seems that the neighbourhood of Alcântara is now turning into an additional nucleus of accommodation[4], although semi-peripheral and residual compared to the central ones. There are in fact reasons to believe that a reconversion of a part of the housing stock into tourism is taking place in Alcântara, to an extent that can be estimated thanks to the data present in the Registo Nacional de Turismo, where all the accommodation facilities are sorted by year of opening and location.

As for the hotel services, there is not much to report - the facilities available in Alcântara are just two, though large in size and of high quality. More interesting, and definitely more dynamic, is the situation of accommodation facilities defined as *alojamento local* consisting mostly of apartments intended for tourist accommodation. This is the phenomenon that has been defined as

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[4] According to Jean-Pierre Lozato-Giotart's definition (2003), we can state that Lisbon is turning into a great multipolar tourist destination, with a tourist supply based on diversified poles of attraction, and also a multinuclear one, thanks to numerous districts for tourist accommodation.

"airbnbsation" (see in this regard Sequera and Nofre, 2018, p. 850), which in the entire city of Lisbon can count on 16,934 structures as of 31 October 2018, with a total with 47,346 beds.

As for Alcântara in particular, by 31st March 2018, 260 non-hotel facilities, with 498 rooms and 846 beds, have been counted out. Practically all the facilities started their activity after 1st January 2015, and over 50% of these (134) are operational since 2018.

In conclusion, the district of Alcântara can count an overall accommodation (hotel and non-hotel) of 951 rooms with 1,752 beds (Table 1). Even though about half of the total accommodation is ascribable to the two hotels, the non-hotel component shows a definitely livelier trend and is something new to the neighbourhood, in witness of an ongoing phenomenon - the increasing presence of Alcântara in Lisbon's tourism geography, not only in terms of resources, but also as a convenient location for tourist accommodation.

### Table 1

Accommodation facilities in Alcântara by 31.10.2018 (Source: our elaboration on data Turismo de Portugal - Registo Nacional de Turismo)

| Hotel | | | *Alojamento local* | | | Total | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| no. | rooms | beds | no. | rooms | beds | no. | rooms | beds |
| 2 | 453 | 906 | 260 | 498 | 846 | 262 | 951 | 1,752 |

## 5. Methodology

To carry on the research, a qualitative-quantitative approach has been used. The qualitative part was based upon:

 1) the direct observation of the analysed area during field missions between 2013 and 2019

2) the collection of information *in situ* from primary sources and

 3) the examination of the literature, with particular reference

   i) to post-industrial tourism (Gelbman, 2007; Chmielewska & Lamparska, 2012; Xie, 2015; Bujok et al. 2014; Bujok et al. 2015)

ii) to Lisbon related researches (Brito-Henriques, 1996; Mendes, 2013; Nofre, 2013; Tulumello, 2015; Muselaers, 2017; Barata Salgueiro et. al, 2017; Safara & Brito-Henriques, 2017; Graça, 2019) and

iii) to those relating to the Alcântara district (Marques, 2009; Vidal, 2014; Vidal, 2015; Rodrigues da Silveira, 2016), including material available on the Internet.

The quantitative part, which also made use of data provided by institutional sources (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, Registo Nacional de Turismo, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Turismo de Lisboa, Junta de Freguesia de Alcântara), was carried out mainly through the administration of a survey aimed at assessing the type of tourist, the accommodation facilities, the reasons for the visit and evaluation of the neighborhood.

## 6. The survey

The questionnaires were administered to a sample of 303 tourists by a team of 25 students of the second year of the Degree Course in Tourist Information of the Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies (ESHTE), in the months of March and April 2018. After a two-hour seminar on ethics and technique relating to the elaboration and administration of questionnaires, each student administered a number of questionnaires between 12 and 15. The average time each student spent on the interviews was ninety minutes.

The questionnaire consists of four sections:

1. *general information*, (nationality, gender, age, number of days of stay, whether first visit or not, number of repetitions if applicable);

2. *accommodation*, (type of accommodation, number of stars in the case of hotels, whether in the Alcântara district or not);

3. *motivation*, relating to the visit to the Alcântara neighbourhood (open question);

4. *evaluation*, in which the tourist is asked to give a score from 1 to 5 (according to the Lickert scale) to ten relevant aspects of the neighbourhood and of the tourist experience.

6.1 General information

The group made up of EU-28 countries is the main share of the sample interviewed (76.6%), followed by tourists from American countries (10.6%), half of which are from USA (Figure 5). Germans make up 31.9% of respondents from EU-28 countries and 24.4% of the total sample, followed at a distance by tourists from the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy (Figure 6).

**Figure 5**

Macro-areas (%)
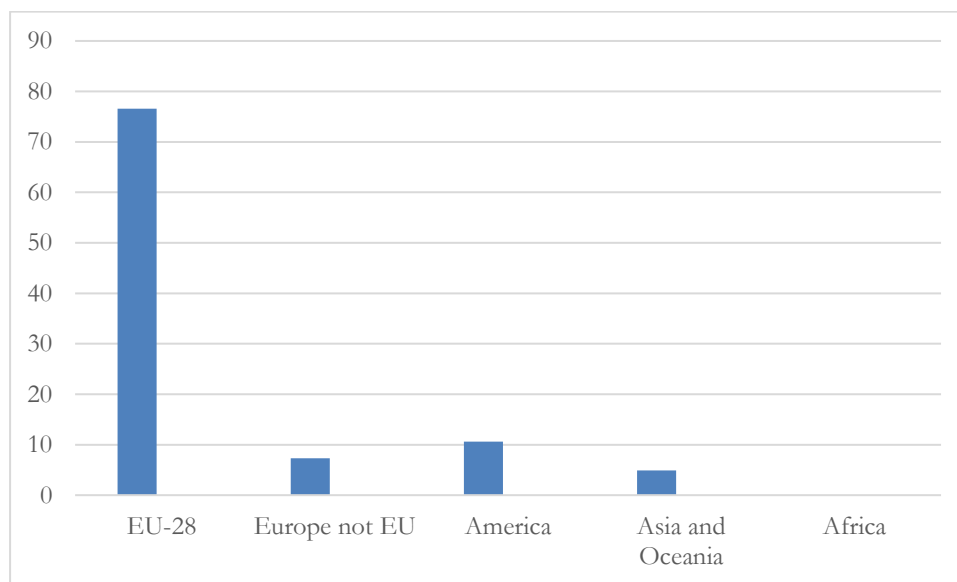


As far as gender is concerned, there is a substantial balance, with a slight prevalence of females (52.8%). The figure relating to age groups is more significant (Figure 7): 61.1% of the sample is between 20 and 40 years old, while a further 26.7% refers to respondents aged between 40 and 60 years old. The image of Alcântara as a neighborhood for young visitors seems confirmed.

The figure on the average stay in the city of Lisbon is very high (5.7 days) but is affected by the fact that five interviewees declared a stay between 30 and 180 days. If these particular cases are excluded, an average value of 4.4 days is obtained. For 69% of respondents this is their first visit to the city of Lisbon, while for the remaining 31% the average number of visits is 3.6, which could indicate, in addition to a certain degree of loyalty to Lisbon, the fact that a visit to Alcântara is more likely carried out by Lisbon *aficionados*, looking for still unexplored places in the city.

**Figure 6**

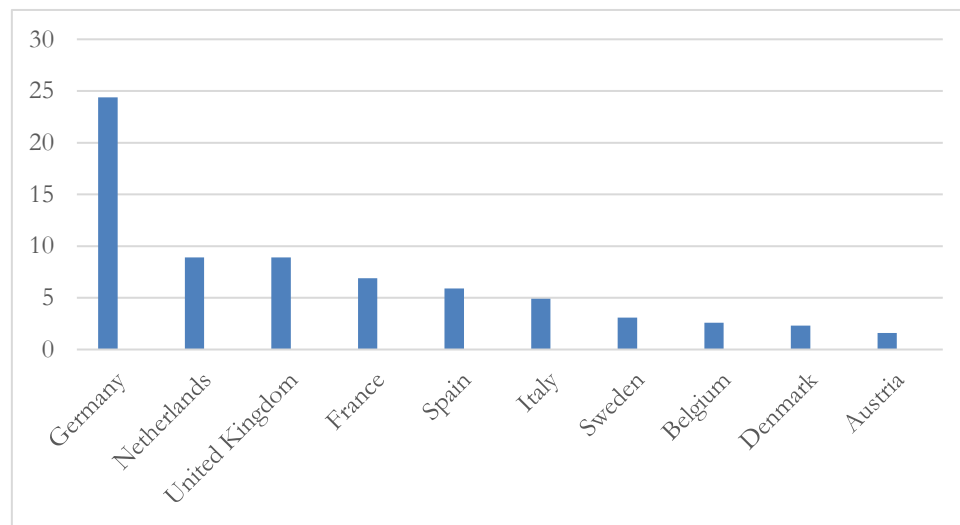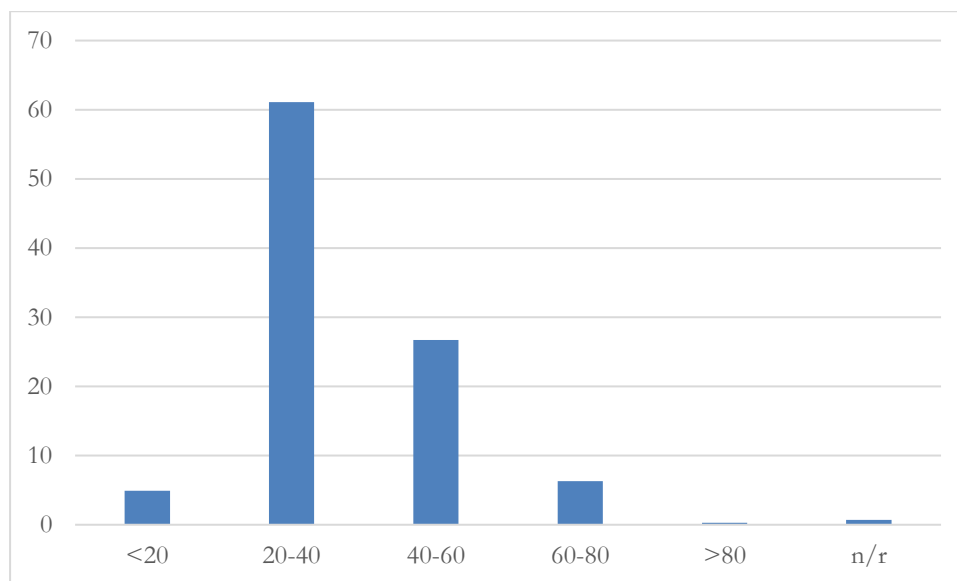EU-28 countries (first 10 nationalities; %)
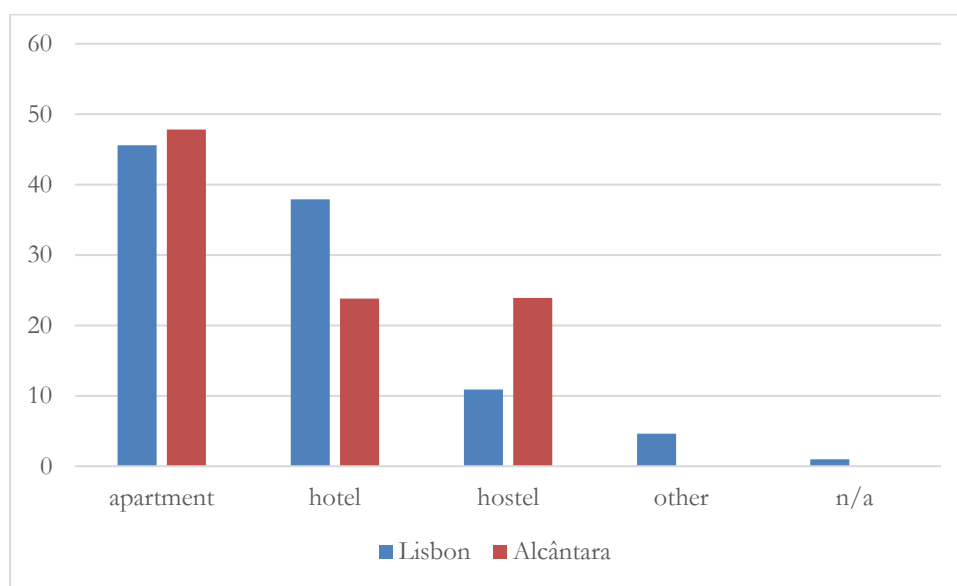


**Figure 7**

Age groups (%)



6.2. Accommodation

In this section, respondents were asked to indicate the type of accommodation facility used (Figure 8). The apartments for tourist use are preferred by the sample (45.6%), followed by the hotels (37.9%, with a prevalence for 3 and 4-star structures) and hostels (10.9%). They were also asked if the accommodation was located in the neighbourhood or not, in order to obtain an indication of the role of Alcântara as an alternative tourist accommodation area. 22.1% of the sample replied in

the affirmative, which is a not irrelevant figure if we consider the semi-peripheral location of the neighborhood with respect to the city center. Besides, 47.8% of those accommodated in Alcântara opted for the apartment, 23.9% for the hostel and 23.8% for the hotel. In fact, these data on accommodation facilities are consistent with both the image of the neighborhood - i.e. that of an attractive destination for "non-traditional" tourists - and with the figures displayed in chapter 4.
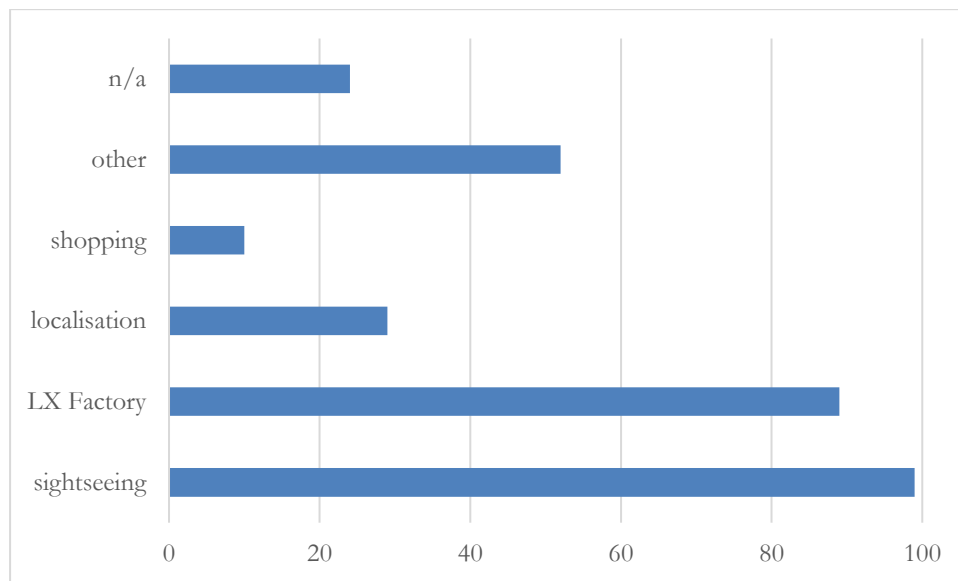
**Figure 8**

Accommodation (%)



6.3. Motivation

As mentioned above, this is an open question, in which respondents were asked to indicate the main reason for their presence/visit in the Alcântara neighborhood (Figure 9). We then tried to group the answers into homogeneous categories. A first group of answers refers to a generic motivation, namely the visit to the neighborhood (curiosity, desire to return, to take a walk, because perceived as fashionable, on the advice of friends and specialised media). Overall, this category obtained 99 responses out of 279 (24 respondents did not provide any answers), equal to 32.7% of the sample. But the specific reason by far prevalent, with 89 responses (equal to 29.4%), is the visit to the LX Factory, which appears to be the main attractor of Alcântara. To these 89 we should perhaps add the 10 respondents (3.3%) who indicated shopping as the reason for their visit, which most likely will have taken place in the LX Factory, where most of the shops of interest to

tourists are located. Another group of respondents (29 responses, 9.6%) indicated as motivation the "position" of the neighborhood, which, as already pointed out, is central to the two main tourist areas of the city (city center on the one hand, Belém on the other) and strategic in the Lisbon transport network.

**Figure 9**

Motivations (number of answers)



## 6.4. Evaluation

In this section of the questionnaire we tried to understand to what extent the tourist experience in Alcântara was appreciated (Figure 10). The overall evaluation is good, considering that no characteristic falls below a value of 3.63. The highest value (4.33) is obtained by the "atmosphere", an all-encompassing feature, whose good assessment also indicates that the identity of the neighbourhood is not only perceived but also appreciated by tourists. The "safety" follows with 4.18, a characteristic that is common to the whole city of Lisbon, which is considered by tourists as a safe destination. Immediately after rank the "restaurants" and the "cultural life", both with a rating of 4.07. The former, mostly concentrated between the LX Factory and the Docas, provide a very diversified and quality offer, addressing an international and demanding clientele. The latter finds its pivot in the LX Factory, which, together with the adjoining Village Underground, is the protagonist of the cultural renewal of the neighborhood. "Accessibility" and "landscape" get a score

of 3.90 and 3.85 respectively. The positive value achieved by the "accessibility" confirms the central and strategic position of the neighborhood, while the "landscape" is a characteristic similar to the "atmosphere", with a strong identity value, which can count on a landmark of great impact, the 25 de Abril bridge, but also on the hilly and riverside position.

The "attractions" score 3.87. This is a positive evaluation, considering that the heritage of Alcântara is far from being traditional. Similarly, the assessment of the "price level" (3.81) is influenced by the fact that the image of Lisbon as a cheap destination is less and less confirmed by reality. Finally, "cleanliness" gets the lowest score (3.63) and continues to be a weak point: the same non-enthusiastic judgment was expressed on the occasion of a previous questionnaire referring to Lisbon as a whole (Zarrilli and Brito, 2013).

**Figure 10**

Evaluation (0=very bad; 5=very good)
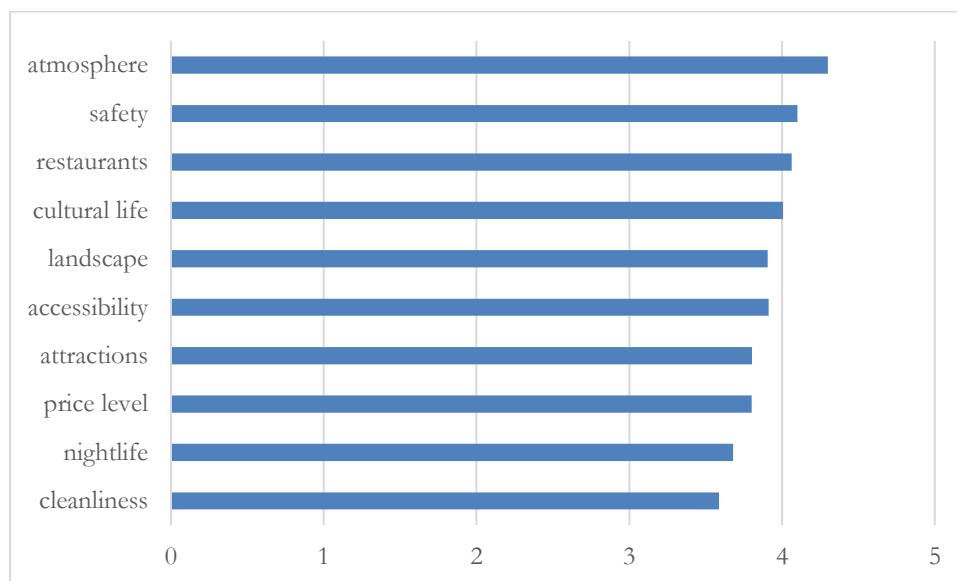


## 7. Conclusions

The distinctive trait of Alcântara can be found in its post-industrial heritage, which makes it unique in the Lisbon context. Furhermore, Alcântara is a neighbourhood of contrasts: ancient noble mansions and prestigious palaces dating from the 16th century to today are a short distance away from popular buildings and dilapidated housing environments. The amenity that one can breathe in some areas of the neighbourhood, also due to the the riverside position, as well as the

"scenographic" quality of the hilly part of Alcântara, are in conflict with the dismantled factories and the portual and transportation infrastrucures. This is due to the historical evolution of Alcântara, that has been characterized by the the 19th century industrial revolution, which has radically changed its urban, social and economic structure. The construction of the 25 de Abril bridge completed the landscape transformation of the neighbourhood.

The inevitable deindustrialization that followed has left an often-degraded legacy, however recovery and reuse are currently in progress. The result of this evolutionary course is the image of dynamism and transformation that the neighbourhood transmits, which arises not only from the intense recovery activities, still in progress, but also from its urban planning, strongly marked by important transport infrastructures (the 25 de Abril bridge, surface rail lines, the commercial port, the cruises terminal, the marina, the railway stations of Alcântara-Terra and Alcântara-Mar), which contribute, even metaphorically, to generate an idea of movement.

The findings of the survey show that LX Factory is undoubtedly the main attraction of the neighborhood, even if its facilities can be further enhanced, not only from the tourist point of view. German tourists are the most numerous among the interviewees, followed by tourists from other EU countries. Furthermore, almost two thirds of the visitors are young people looking for a different experience, that is connected to the arts, including the performing ones, and to gastronomy, but also to an alternative heritage (e.g. industrial facilities and street art). Finally, the central position of Alcântara is relevant, allowing easy access to the historic center, to Belém and to the nearby beaches.

We therefore believe that the neighbourhood of Alcântara, which today is a sort of "new frontier" of the tourism in Lisbon, will fit profitably into the tourist boom that the city has been experiencing for a number of years, thanks to several factors: Its diversified resources; Its image of dynamic neighbourhood, "trendy", but still authentic; Its barycentric position between two "strong" areas (the historic city and Belém); Its good accessibility, still being strengthened; The rapid increase in the accommodation, which is also a clear signal of the phenomenon – the transtion from industry to tourism - we have tried to analyse in this article.

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