

PLACES IN MOTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF DIGITAL NOMADS IN LISBON

LUGARES EN MOVIMIENTO: LA EXPERIENCIA DE NÓMADAS DIGITALES EN LISBOA

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ABSTRACT

Architecture creates places by merging subjective experience and physical space. Digital nomadism challenges the static notion of place, as its practitioners temporarily inhabit different cities thanks to remote work. This article explores the notions of place and belonging within this mobile context, reflecting on how architecture and cities respond to new temporary forms of habitation. Through participant observations and interviews conducted in Lisbon, the role of both digital and in-person communities in the construction of belonging and their interactions with urban space is analyzed, using the concepts of "Architectural Place" and "Third Places." The results show that these transient inhabitants reconfigure spatialities and intensify inequalities, while generating senses of place linked to mobility. Based on these findings, the article proposes reconsidering the role of architecture in emerging forms of habitation.

KEYWORDS

Mobile communities, contemporary living, Lisbon, place, digital nomads

RESUMEN

La arquitectura crea lugares al unir la experiencia subjetiva y el espacio físico. El nomadismo digital desafía la noción estática de lugar, ya que sus practicantes habitan temporalmente distintas ciudades gracias al trabajo remoto. Este artículo explora las nociones de lugar y pertenencia en este contexto móvil, reflexionando sobre cómo la arquitectura y la ciudad responden a nuevas formas temporales de habitar. A través de observaciones y entrevistas realizadas en Lisboa, se analiza el papel de las comunidades digitales y presenciales en la construcción de pertenencia y en las interacciones con el espacio urbano, utilizando los conceptos de 'lugar arquitectónico' y 'third places'. Los resultados muestran que estos habitantes transitorios reconfiguran espacialidades e intensifican desigualdades, generando sentidos de lugar vinculados con la movilidad. A partir de estos hallazgos, se propone repensar el papel de la arquitectura en las formas emergentes de habitar.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Comunidades móviles, habitar contemporáneo, Lisboa, lugar, nómadas digitales

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between space and place runs through different discourses in the field of architecture, whether because of its potential to harbor the meanings deposited in it, for bringing forth feelings of belonging and identification, or by constituting itself as a temporal milestone in the existence of cities. According to Norberg-Schulz (1979), architecture transcends the act of designing buildings and is connected to the human experience of inhabiting the world. Architecture transcends the act of designing buildings and connects deeply with the human experience of inhabiting the world. For the author, it plays an existential role, helping people orient themselves and feel that they belong to a place. It goes beyond tangible constructions, incorporating the idea that the built environment is not only a product of the human being, but also a generator of behaviors and an active player in the construction of identity of social and cultural groups. Like Tuan (2013), We understand places as spaces endowed with value and meaning. We agree with the vision of Massey (2008), who challenges the static notions of place by considering that these are created and transformed daily for several reasons and are guided by different social groups. In this sense, this article's proposal is to understand how this dynamic manifests itself in a group that is constantly in motion: digital nomads.

Digital nomadism emerged in the late 20th century and has gained popularity in the last ten years, driven by the rapid technological advancement and the possibility that the workers execute their duties remotely, requiring only a good internet connection and a computer. The acceleration of this phenomenon does not occur in isolation from technological progress, but is inscribed also in the contemporary dynamics of globalization. Like technological development, constant movement is a central characteristic of digital nomads. They are remote workers who, thanks to the flexibility of their work, can move between different cities and countries, temporarily inhabiting different urban spaces.

This temporary form of habitation invites reflection on how digital nomads create places and how their occupation of the city affects those who already reside in it. To understand these dynamics involves articulating classical notions of place with concepts that address contemporary mobility and ephemerality. This article seeks to understand how these subjects construct senses of belonging in temporary urban contexts and how these interactions reconfigure local spatialities. What role do communities and shared spaces play in this process? How are places transformed when there is no permanent rooting? Drawing on this ethno-topographical methodology, based on interviews and participant observations, we analyze how these mobile experiences reconfigure urban spatialities. The study proposes an articulation between traditional notions of place and concepts related to mobility, discussing how these subjects produce places in motion and new forms of inhabiting the contemporary city.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of inhabiting the city has always been associated with the continuous engagement between subject, space, and culture (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). Traditionally, inhabiting implies a pause in mobility, a fundamental moment in the creation of places (Tuan, 2013). However, in a context of increased acceleration of exchanges and movements, contemporary dwelling incorporates a constant movement of people, goods, services, and information, thereby changing the perception of place. For Elliott & Urry (2010), people inhabit both at home and away from home, in the dialectic between roots and routes or, as described by Clifford (2008), “dwelling-in-travel.”

The increase in global mobility has generated new forms of mobile lifestyles, characterized by flexibility and adaptation. These lifestyles are not only a result of human activity, but of complex configurations that involve affections, desires, social relations, and global institutions (Elliott & Urry, 2010). According to Hall (2008), globalization contributes to dismantling geographic barriers, promoting the integration of regions that were previously relatively isolated. This process, together with increasing mobility, triggers the emergence of phenomena such as digital nomadism, which was initially described by Makimoto & Manners (1997). According to Hannonen (2020), the digital nomad is part of an emerging class of mobile professionals, whose work does not depend on fixed locations. These individuals live semi-permanently while traveling. Cook (2023) points out that a digital nomad must visit, at least, three different countries, reflecting a practice of temporary stay based on the periods allowed to tourists, but which is also common among these professionals.

Cresswell (2006) argues that mobility does not imply lack of roots, but rather a practice that shapes and transforms the environment, making movement an essential factor in the construction of the sense of belonging and the relation with spaces. On the other hand, this constant movement has an impact on urban space. The gentrification of neighborhoods and the alteration of local characteristics are some of the consequences of this phenomenon (Hayes & Zaban, 2020; López-Gay et al., 2021; Navarrete et al., 2025). In Bali, for example, the proliferation of coworking spaces and accommodations catering to digital nomads has created tensions between the Balinese identity and the growing global influence (Radha et al., 2024). In Chiang Mai, Jiwasiddi et al. (2024) also observed and classified the impacts of digital nomads in economic, sociocultural, digital, and environmental terms. Similarly, Barcelona faced problems related to the increase in rent prices and mass tourism, which intensified urban conflicts (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020; Matos & Ardévol, 2021). In Lisbon, digital nomads gather in different environments from those usually frequented by the local population, causing spatial and social segregation (Mancinelli, 2020). In Gran Canaria, however, some nomads are considered 'new locals' as they integrate more into the local community and create stronger ties with the space (Hannonen et al., 2023).

In this context, we understand that the idea of place must be revised, since, for digital nomads, this is not static, but dynamic and transitory. In architecture, place is often treated as a fixed container that is loaded with meaning. However, by adopting the concept of 'architectural place' (Duarte et al., 2023) we may understand it as something that is shaped by flows of people and meanings. Elliot & Urry (2010) argue that place is under constant transformation, reconfiguring itself over time, which can be applied to the experience of digital nomads.

In this sense, Massey (2008) proposes that 'local places' are, paradoxically, products of globalization and reinforces the notion that they are in constant motion and transformation. These preexisting places seek to reaffirm themselves against the 'decorporealized' and rootless force of globalization. Anderson (1989) emphasizes that these communities, formed here by digital nomads, are frequently imagined, given that their members, due to the transitory nature of their lifestyle, do not always meet face-to-face. Understanding the sense of belonging, therefore, must consider that it is not solely based on physical territorial roots, but in dynamic interactions, fluid experiences, and a network of spaces (Cresswell, 2006). The latter ends up creating what Hall (2008) calls shared 'maps of meaning', which help in to maintain these communities offline.

These maps of meaning are related to the concepts of ‘piece’ and ‘stain’ proposed by Magnani (2002). The piece has a strong symbolic and relational character, based on the social support generated by the interactions between members of a community. It is not linked to a fixed place, as its essence lies in the network of shared relationships and meanings, which is reflected in the online and offline dynamics of digital nomads. The stain, on the other hand, has a more stable materiality defined by urban infrastructure and facilities. The sense of belonging to the stain is based on functionality of the space, rather than in interpersonal ties. It enables varied encounters and specific relationships without necessarily generating lasting communities. Its social support is more diffuse: those who frequent it do not need to share common codes, but rather recognize it as a suitable place for certain activities. This recognition depends on specific infrastructures like cafés, coworking spaces, and other public places that facilitate a daily appropriation of the urban space by digital nomads.

Oldenburg (1999) refers to these spaces as ‘third places’, places for socialization and preservation of the sense of community, which are not directly linked to home (first place) or work (second place). According to the author, these spaces are essential for the construction of informal social ties and promoting spontaneous interactions, reinforcing the sense of belonging and collective identity. The ‘third places’ are characterized by being accessible, welcoming, and neutral, allowing the circulation of individuals and the development of casual interpersonal relationships. They operate as meeting points that encourage dialogue, leisure, and the exchange of ideas, becoming key for social cohesion, especially in urban contexts. These places offer a favorable environment for the formation of social networks, stimulating a sense of familiarity even in scenarios marked by transience.

Understanding how these dynamics manifest in Lisbon’s urban space demands an analysis of the experience of different digital nomads and of the way they articulate among them and with the city. Additionally, the role of architecture as a mediator of these encounters is revealed, promoting interactions that go beyond the physical function of the spaces, even for those who do not establish lasting roots.

METHODOLOGY

The research works that supports this article draws on a qualitative approach to investigate the sense of belonging, the communities, and the relationship of social groups with space, prioritizing a subjective interpretation of the individuals in

the understanding of urban impacts. For that end, we adopted techniques such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and a work notes, aligning ourselves with Geertz's (2022) notion of 'dense description' and Magnani's (2002) ethnographic perspective, which proposes a 'up close and from within' look at the studied groups, as opposed to more distanced architectural approaches.

In this context, the methodology is based on ethno-topography (Duarte & Pinheiro, 2019), which integrates ethnography with spatial analysis to understand how places reflect and build social and cultural relations. Ethno-topography proposes a qualitative and situated reading of urban space, based on the subjective, sensitive and cultural experiences of inhabitants, mapping the city on the basis of its routes, memories, affections, and symbolic links with places. Techniques such as participant observation to record the uses and appropriations of space; spatial interviews carried out in places that were meaningful for the participants; and the work notes to document the experiences and patterns of interaction with the environment over time.

Thus, between 2024 and 2025, observations were made, a work notes was compiled, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with different digital nomads. The observations were carried out in Lisbon, at various locations and neighborhoods in the city frequented by this group. These spaces were selected based on the number of confirmed participants in events organized through platforms such as Meetup, the mention of cafés on specific lists and guides for digital nomads, and direct recommendations from other nomads and remote workers living in Lisbon during the period (Figure 1). We also resorted to groups on Instagram, Facebook, Slack, and WhatsApp, as well as the suggestions by residents of a co-living space in the city, where we established a more stable contact base to live the 'up close and from within' experience (Magnani, 2002). Among the places and events where participant observation was conducted are: bars in the Bairro Alto region, cafés in Saldanha, Santos, Anjos, and Cais do Sodré, coworking and co-living spaces in Benfica and running groups in the Cais do Sodré and Santos regions.

In total, seven digital nomads aged between 27 and 38, who had lived or still live in Lisbon, were interviewed. The interviews were recorded on audio and some excerpts will be transcribed or quoted in the analysis section. The digital nomads who participated in the interview were of different nationalities, which will be used to identify the interviewees: 01 Brazilian (B),

01 Italian (I), 01 German (A), 01 Canadian (C), 01 Portuguese (P), 01 Slovak (E), 01 Swiss (S). Four interviewees lived in the same co-living space, and all nomads interviewed had resided in the city for over three months (in consecutive periods), exceeding the time allowed for a tourist stay and indicating that their stay was related to a specific visa for digital nomads or for European passport holders. All interviews participants work remotely and use coworking spaces and cafés to do so.

FIGURE 1

Maps with digital nomads meeting points in Lisbon; places of observations and interviews



Source. The authors.

Initially, the main criteria for determining participants would be self-identification as a digital nomad. However, from the beginning of the immersion in the field, a particularity was observed in Lisbon. As a city that receives different international migratory flows (Erasmus students, expatriates, migrants seeking work in Portugal, and digital nomads), the latter group has been associated with rising prices in the city. Therefore, many digital nomads preferred not to be identified as such, despite possessing all the characteristics of a person with a mobile lifestyle.

Nobody wants to say something like... “No, I am not a digital nomad. I don’t like being called that”. But officially, I travel a lot too. And the other thing is like, expatriate... It sounds very foreign... So, it’s in an intermediate stage. I’d say that... I’d wish that there were another term situated in the middle, for somebody who lives there for a long time, but without fully integrating. (C, January, 2025)

I am a digital nomad, but I never call myself that. I would never call myself that. I am in Peniche for two months; before that, I was in Japan for two months; and before that, I was in Canada for a month. So, technically, I am a digital nomad, but I don't know anyone. (E, December, 2024)

Therefore, rather than self-identification (which was verified in some interviews), it was essential to talk to international remote workers who were in Lisbon at the time but did not consider the city their permanent residence and had plans to move in the near future. After transcribing the interviews, it was possible to reread and analyze them, highlighting the fragments related to the concepts of belonging, community, and place. Within these excerpts, the fragments were organized into three categories according to each concept. In those related to the feeling of belonging, ideas were identified regarding the mobile lifestyle and how the group establishes an experience in the city. From this point, throughout the questions, issues were addressed that brought out the particularities of the social and physical support for this experience, seeking to understand how places are established. Thus, in the fragments related to community experiences, the social interactions between digital nomads and the local culture were highlighted. Finally, to understand how such relationships are spatialized, fragments related to urban spaces were analyzed and highlighted: areas where they work, meet, and socialize, or daily decisions made in the city based on the transience of this group.

ANALYSIS

The results of the analysis were based on the emergence of the concepts addressed in the theoretical framework, such as belonging, community, and place. In the initial observations, even during the selection of interviewees, it was possible to identify that the relationship between temporary residents of the city of Lisbon is quite sensitive. One of the interviewees mentioned feeling a 'love-hate' relationship on the part of the locals:

On the one hand, they don't want us to be here, and on the other, if we weren't there, there wouldn't be this... This can... So, it's something difficult. I'd say there is... like a tension, I'd say. (C, January, 2025)

For another interviewee, the experience was even more direct, as by interacting with a local resident and identifying as a digital nomad, he had to deal with an adverse reaction.

—This is the problem with digital nomads... We are also part of the explosion in costs and rising rent in some areas. Lisbon faces the challenge of low wages, high rents, and many people from abroad earning much more than the local average. This is also why you sometimes get negative comments, especially if you mention the term “digital nomad” in Lisbon to certain people.

—Have you experienced something like this in a conversation? Have you heard of it?

—Yes. Once in a bar. It was a friendly conversation, but then he asked me what I did, what my firm was. I replied that I worked remotely from abroad and that I had started out as a digital nomad. Suddenly, the conversation turned quite bad: I realized there was no longer a connection because this person became truly angry and said that we were destroying everything. I was a terrible experience. (A, January, 2025)

This sensation also permeates the way in which this group seeks to create a sense of belonging to the city, starting with the way they live in it. In recent years, Lisbon has seen an exponential increase in the cost of living, especially in the cost of housing (Sequera & Nofre, 2020). For this reason, and due to the large influx of foreigners into the country seeking temporary accommodation, alternatives such as co-living have become increasingly widespread throughout the city. Many nomads still use platforms such as Airbnb to rent temporary housing (Arslan, 2024). But co-living spaces have also become an option for those who want to be part of a community from the moment they arrive. This became quite clear during interviews with residents of a co-living space located in the Benfica neighborhood. Although the neighborhood is not central, it proved to be fundamental in determining these nomads’ stay in the city.

—In fact, it was here or nowhere, because I already...

—Then if you hadn’t come here, you wouldn’t have come to Lisbon at all?

—I don’t know. I’m not sure. Maybe not, but... I still don’t want to go to a private studio here in Lisbon because I still don’t know the city, I don’t have friends yet, so the first thing I want to do is to make friends, and the easiest way of doing it is in a co-living space. (I, January 2025)

If, on the other hand, some nomads seek daily social interaction through co-living, some connect in an even more intentional way, through activities around the city. It is this context that the different communities emerge (Thompson, 2021; von Zumbusch

& Lalicic, 2020). During the field observations, it was possible to find a large number of these communities, widely disseminated in social media or through their own applications. Many of them promote weekly events and feature monthly subscriptions so members can enjoy events and discounts in establishments that have agreements with them.

And also, as I said, the community is a rather crucial factor. Meetup is quite popular here. So, if it weren't that popular, it wouldn't really fit with what I like. So, I think these two factors, sports and Meetup... also fit very well. (C, January, 2025).

My friend, for instance, depends on the group, on the running group, to socialize... He says, if I twist an ankle, or, if I don't feel well, it's like I'm lost, I have no way to socialize. I have to be 100% by Tuesday, you know? And his mindset is this: for him, it's the only way to interact with the city. (C, January, 2025)

I mean, I think you can start calling your place "home" when you really have, maybe, been part of a true community of friends that live there. This might be better to start calling this place "home." It's the required starting point for a home. (I, January, 2025).

This showed that, despite identifying as nomads, social interaction between peers becomes a strategy for identifying with the place. The search for a network of belongings is woven from countless initiatives. Partnerships between communities and establishments tend to concentrate in cafés, restaurants, and coworking spaces aimed at the international and transient community, generally managed by expatriates or migrants from other countries. In these spaces, service is predominantly in English and Portuguese is rarely heard.

The presence of these imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) seems to be related to the growth in the number of digital nomads in the city. Over time, this group seeks simpler ways to navigate the new environment, and these communities are built around an urban infrastructure that adapts to this audience. Thus, cafés, coworking spaces, and restaurants emerge that cater to a different purchasing power profile than that of the majority of the local population and that often show little interest in interacting with the local culture or learning the language of the country.

- Well, I don't know, I'm truly bad at this because I am not integrating too much into the local culture.
- And how do you see it? Is it something that you'd like to do? Is that something that... is not part of your routine?
- It's not something I care too much about, though. (C, January, 2025)

As a result of this attitude, common among the different interviewees, the need emerges for third places, supported by these imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Oldenburg, 1999; Thompson, 2021). These third places actually establish a network of 'specialty cafés,' modern 'instagrammable' restaurants, coworking spaces in combination with bookstores and cafés, or shared working spaces accessible through monthly subscriptions. In those spaces, a search for a homogeneity of experiences is also perceived, since the characteristics of the physical space and of the services are repeated not only in Lisbon, but also in other cities that have undergone urban transformation and gentrification. Therefore, the notion of belonging also emerges in the repetition of experiences, especially those oriented towards consumption. In other words, belonging is also repeating routines already practiced in other cities, like going to the same markets and seeking similar experiences in cafés and coworking spaces.

For example, one interviewee pointed out that he preferred to shop at a supermarket chain with branches all over Europe instead of the Portuguese markets, because he knows he will find the same products that he found in Germany. For another interviewee, the choice of café to work in also revolves around the international community in the city.

There are many cafés like this one, where they invest a lot of effort to create spaces for expats. It feels good, and that is what we need, you know? We will not necessarily go to a *padaria* to work, which has a completely different vibe [...] I mean, here [the interview was conducted in a café] you can see that everybody has a laptop. And nobody is really talking. Everyone is simply working, you know? (C, January, 2025).

Spaces like the ones alluded to in the interviews are scattered around the city, but in some points the contrast between the preexistent, the local, and the foreign or international becomes more evident.

- I think it's just the nature of normal people, who earn 800 Euro a month here, while there is some son of a bitch from the US who works here remotely and earns 10k a month. Then you see the differences in lifestyles, you

know? They, uh, open their own cafés where these people meet and...

— You wanted an espresso, right?

— Espresso. (E, December 2024).

A gateway for observing these points was in one of the international communities: a running group. Their two weekly meetings are organized by three women, none of them Portuguese. At the end of the activities, the whole group meets at two locations, both are international chain cafés that have opened branches in Lisbon in recent years. Upon entering these environments, Portuguese is rarely heard, and the employees speak English with all the customers. Both establishments are located in the Cais do Sodré and Santos region, identified by one of the interviewees as an attractive area for foreigners and one that has undergone major urban transformations in recent years, especially after the reopening of the Mercado da Ribeira, renovated as 'Time Out Market,' and after the restructuring of industrial areas that gave way to projects such as the LX Factory, a space for culture, leisure, and gastronomy. These two points, one in Cais do Sodré and the other in Alcantara, were classified by one of the interviewees who has followed Lisbon's transformation for the longest time as 'drivers' of this transformation.

I was 21 years old then, now I'm 38. So, it was like 18 years ago. Since then, this area, Cais do Sodré, was like a forbidden zone, You went there at night by taxi to... There were some clubs, and then you would take a taxi home, but you wouldn't walk around the area, it was quite dangerous, you know? One of the few really dangerous places in Lisbon. And now it's like the coolest area, the trendiest, it has changed a lot. (E, December, 2024)

One of the interviews, for example, was conducted in a café widely used by the international community and digital nomads for work. This café is located in the region between Cais do Sodré and Santos, particularly on a block where the contrast between the local and the foreign is quite visible. This is because there are three establishments, side by side, located in renovated buildings near Largo de Santos. Two of them have English names and 'surround' the Portuguese restaurant A Merendeira (Figure 2). Upon entering the café, the scene recorded in the work notes was the following:

A crowded café, with almost all the tables occupied. Most of the tables were occupied by single individuals, all working on their computers. Some sat in chairs and more comfortable and simple armchairs, usually in a face-to-face

meeting with a coworker. In a few cases, it was possible to see couples or small groups of four people occupying a table where everyone was also connected to their computers. The main sounds in the place were those of the café with its machines, blenders, and griddles. In addition, background music could be heard from a playlist of international pop music. (Freitas, work notes, January 28, 2025)

In contrast, later, upon entering the Portuguese restaurant, the experience is transformed:

Both at the outdoor tables as well as inside, only Portuguese (mostly from Portugal) was spoken, except for a couple who apparently spoke French. The place was crowded because it was lunchtime, and I had the impression that it was Portuguese workers from offices in the area that were coming out to lunch. This, because I observed many with name tags or backpacks. Still, there wasn't a single laptop open on the wooden tables. Patrons chatted casually with each other; some were drinking beer as they ate lunch seated on backless wooden benches. The whole atmosphere seemed to refer to the old building where the establishments are located. Stone arches, stone floors, yellow tones, and exposed rustic materials made up the ambiance. Pigeons flew into the main hall and competed with customers for food. When I went to place my order, I was served in Portuguese. I felt like I was in a "local place." (F. Freitas, work notes, January 28, 2025).

In the spaces studied, certain architectural constants are observed, which influence the experience of digital nomads. Predominant are interior settings with warm lighting, natural materials such as bamboo, straw, and fibers, as well as exposed concrete and versatile furniture that allows for both concentration and interaction. The arrangement of tables and the presence or absence of comfort elements (such as carpets, plants, or curtains) create atmospheres that directly impact the use of the space. These formal qualities not only affect functionality but also activate feelings of welcoming or distancing, influencing the possibility of generating community in ephemeral contexts (Figure 3).

Compared to local residents, digital nomads make more flexible and intentional spatial appropriations. A recurring feature is the occupation of tables with two chairs, where one is used by the person and the other by his/her backpack or personal

belongings, thus delimiting an individual work area (Figure 3). This appropriation responds to an intention to establish one's own space, even in shared contexts, and transforms cafés and coworking spaces into temporary extensions of their domestic-work environment. These forms of use contrast with a more contained and localized occupation by stable residents.

These observations allow us to understand how new places are created and how existing spaces are transformed into the high mobility context of digital nomads. Although they circulate around the city, many do not feel the need to engage with the local culture and, therefore, seek to replicate experiences they have had in other cities, putting pressure on the urban infrastructure to adapt to such demands. This movement, combined with the gentrification processes already underway in some areas of Lisbon, is driving the growth in demand for third places. However, these spaces do not emerge to strengthen the local community or reaffirm the sense of belonging of the inhabitants, but to offer this sense to those who occupy the city on a temporary basis. In this way, they redesign the network of places that structure the urban experience of both newcomers and permanent residents.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interviews showed that digital nomads construct their own notions of place and belonging, drawing on both social and physical support, as highlighted by Tuan (2013). The repetition of experiences influences the choice of places, causing the city to adapt and develop services that facilitate the daily lives of these individuals and reinforce their sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is negotiated through trans-local communities or "bubbles," which bring together similar values and lifestyles (Hannonen, 2023). These bubbles, although they promote an internal identity, may also increase inequalities when the experience of the digital nomads is prioritized over the local communities. These communities are also digitally mediated, and the idea of composite space (Duarte et al., 2007) allows us to understand how the sociability of digital nomads is constructed simultaneously in urban space and in the digital environment. In this sense, the third places (Oldenburg, 1999) the group uses are spaces of socialization and work that are part of a hybrid ecosystem where the urban experience is fragmented between the physical and the virtual. This fragmentation reinforces the sense of belonging without demanding local ties, allowing digital nomads to generate familiarity and routine in mobile contexts. In this way, digital nomads become agents of cultural and urban transformation, continually renegotiating their relationship with place.

FIGURE 2
Photographs of the work notes

Note. Left: a café popular among digital nomads; right: a local café with less presence of temporary residents.

Source. Photograph by Fernanda Freitas.



FIGURE 3
Work notes entries about photographs of cafés frequented by digital nomads, detailing the characteristics of the spaces and the appropriation of the observed environments



Source. Photographs by Mohammed Boubezari and Fernanda Freitas. Adapted and edited by Fernanda Freitas.

Urban transformations are linked to gentrification processes and intensify inequalities, creating and reinforcing gentrification niches in areas of the city. This process generates a lifestyle that distances itself from the local population, which stands out in the socioeconomic configuration of neighborhoods and drives the demand for third places (Oldenburg, 1999). For digital nomads, these serve as temporary anchors that facilitate the creation of ties and a sense of normality amid the ephemerality of nomadic life. Spaces such as cafés, coworking spaces, and co-living spaces offer not only practical support but also opportunities to connect with other nomads and local residents.

Although digital nomadism implies mobility, this is reduced to zero in the daily commute to work. Remote work eliminates the need for commuting, transforming these individuals' relationship with urban space. While this reduces the impact on transportation, it also reinforces the centrality of the workplace as a fixed point that organizes the other spaces inhabited by the nomad, influencing urban services and the local real estate market.

This phenomenon revisits Magnani's (2002) notions of piece and stain, since the network of third places created in Lisbon generates stains or islands where digital nomads establish their temporary homes. These stains are in constant negotiation with the local community, mobilizing interactions and transformations. Digital nomads, therefore, play a dual role: they are influenced by global dynamics, but they also redefine the places they occupy, creating spaces for symbolic negotiation between the global and the local. This study broadens the discussion by considering the interaction between digital nomads and the local community, examining how this relationship influences urban transformations and the way we inhabit urban spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of digital nomads' habitation dynamics reveals a contemporary phenomenon that challenges the traditional notions of place and belonging. As they move through different urban spaces, these individuals not only live in, but also build and transform the places they pass through, establishing an ephemeral yet meaningful relationship with the built environment. In this context, architecture ceases to be merely a physical structure and becomes a dynamic agent in the formation of a sense of belonging and identity, both for digital nomads and permanent residents. The city, for its part,

adapts to this new model of living, responding to the needs and practices of these new temporary inhabitants while reflecting on the flexibility and transformation of urban spaces.

These changes, although seen as a short-term phenomenon, reveal a complexity in the relationships between individuals, urban spaces, and cultural practices. The experience of digital nomads redefines the concept of belonging by integrating global and local flows into a network of interactions that traverses urban infrastructure and creates new forms of community. However, these changes can generate tensions, particularly when the presence of nomads redefines urban spaces, impacting local life and the traditional identities of places. Digital nomadism, therefore, challenges conventional notions of belonging, demanding a reconfiguration of social and spatial relationships in contemporary cities.

In this way, by investigating the spatial practices and senses of belonging among digital nomads in Lisbon, this article proposes a critical reading of the notion of place in light of contemporary mobility. The research shows that, far from representing a homogeneous threat or a cohesive group, digital nomads construct experiences of inhabiting marked by trans-local networks of sociability and specific appropriations of the city, often mediated by globalized commercial spaces. These practices challenge fixed conceptions of belonging and reveal that 'place' is not something given, but continuously (re) produced by flows, affects, and infrastructures. By articulating concepts such as architectural place and third places, the study contributes to broadening the understanding of how architecture and urban space operate in the constitution of ties in contexts of high mobility. Thus, it is argued that thinking about contemporary living implies recognizing the ambivalence of these new forms of presence between integration and exclusion, between localism and global standardization, and architecture is presented with the challenge of creating spaces that embrace fluidity without cancelling the local senses of belonging.

The combination of participant observation, interviews, and work notes allowed for an in-depth analysis of the participants' interactions and choices, aligned with ethno-topography and ethnography, offering a careful look at how these groups relate to the urban environment. The categories of belonging, community, and place provided a broad view of the urban and social implications of this phenomenon, showing the transformation of the city and the construction of new ways of living.

As this is a qualitative study, the methodology adopted does not cover the entire heterogeneity of the group studied, offering only a specific snapshot within the city of Lisbon. In addition, more than half of the interviews were conducted with residents of the same co-living space, which may have influenced the urban references cited, as experiences are shared among residents. This highlights the importance of precise delimitation when researching digital nomads, a heterogeneous group.

For future investigations, it is essential to establish clear inclusion and exclusion criteria in the selection of subjects ensuring a representative approach. Furthermore, given that the objective of this research was to understand notions of place and their dialogue with existing spaces, it is essential to involve local residents in the debate. In this way, the subjectivities of both groups can be highlighted and the dynamics of negotiation that influence the transformation of cities can be better understood. This bridge between temporary and local inhabitants raises questions: How do residents perceive the transformations caused by nomads and the “stains” they create in urban areas? How do urban environments transform when these two groups coexist? And how does the city respond, beyond the third places, to the phenomenon of contemporary living?

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors do not have conflicts of interest to declare.

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