

The Shops That Disappear as a City Grows

*The family-run businesses that still tell
the story of a place*

There is a watchmaker's shop in Alfama where time, ironically, has stood still. There is too much dust and too little light in the windows, the watches on display all show different times, and the man who has been repairing them for forty-three years uses a magnifying glass they no longer make. His name is Fernando. He learnt the trade from his father, who in turn learnt it from a Swiss watchmaker who came to Lisbon in the 1950s and never left. When Fernando closes his shop — and he will, because no one wants to learn how to replace a mainspring anymore — a very real piece of the city will disappear with him, one that no commemorative plaque will ever be able to replace.

This is happening on old streets in almost every European city, but in Lisbon it feels particularly urgent. A grocery

shop selling salt cod by weight and tins of preserves with labels designed in the 1960s gives way to a luggage store. A second-hand bookshop where you might once have found a forgotten first edition tucked between old schoolbooks becomes yet another short-term rental, decorated just like the one next door. A hat shop that dressed three generations of the same family becomes an ice cream parlour with an English name.

None of these changes, taken individually, is a crime. The problem is what happens when you add them all together. A city does not lose its identity when one shop closes. It loses it when a hundred close, one by one, quietly, without ceremony and almost always without anyone noticing until it is too late to do anything about it. What replaces these businesses is usually more efficient and more photogenic, but it rarely has a story to tell. And a city without shops that tell stories is a city that has become a backdrop.

In Alfama, there are still signs of resistance. There is a hardware shop where screws are sold individually, counted

one by one by the same hand that has been doing it for thirty years, and where the owner knows, without having to ask, whether a particular screw belongs in an old lock or a modern window shutter. There is a neighbourhood bakery where bread is still sold by weight rather than as a decorative object, and where customers call one another by their first names as if they were family — because, in many ways, they are. These shops do not survive by accident. They survive because, every day, someone chooses to open the door again, even knowing it would be easier to give up the space to the economics of tourism.

At memmo Alfama, this world is quite literally on our doorstep. Walk down the narrow steps connecting the hotel to the heart of the neighbourhood and you will pass two or three of these shops that are still very much alive. They are not always easy to find, because they have no advertising and no presence on travel apps — just a half-open shutter and a hand-painted sign whose lettering has begun to fade. Those who take the time to step inside almost always leave with something they did not need and a conversation they will remember for longer than any monument they

visited that day.

Ask an older Lisboaeta where they bought bread as a child, or where their father took his shoes to be repaired, and there is a good chance they will point you towards one of these shops — if it still exists. Often, it no longer does, and the answer is followed by a brief silence, almost a quiet kind of mourning for a place that has become something else entirely.

Visiting a city should not mean simply photographing its prettiest façades. It should also mean stepping inside the shops that are still holding on, buying something you may or may not need, and asking the owner how long they have been there.

The answer is almost always a small history lesson that no guidebook could ever offer. And, perhaps, a small reason for that door to remain open a little longer.

Gonçalo Câmara
Columnist memmo Journal