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Infrastructuring Silicon Valley Mimicry

Digital Nomadism, (Geo)Arbitrage, and the Making of Lisbon's Nomadland

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Portugal entered a protracted phase of austerity characterised by rising unemployment and shrinking public investment. From this conjuncture of constraint emerged a techno-political narrative in which innovation was recast as the vehicle of national and urban redemption. Particularly in Lisbon, policy discourses and institutional programs converged around the imperative to reposition the city as a dynamic node within the global knowledge economy. Incubators, accelerators, and flagship events such as the Web Summit materialised this narrative spatially and symbolically, projecting "innovation" as a pragmatic mechanism for overcoming austerity through the attraction of investment, entrepreneurship, and mobile human capital.

This post-crisis imaginary was structured around a global referent: Silicon Valley as the paradigmatic locus of technological creativity and capitalist futurity. As studies of "Silicon Elsewheres" (Pollio, 2026) demonstrate, the global diffusion of this imaginary generates heterogeneous processes of siliconisation (McElroy, 2024), through which cities seek to emulate, yet never fully reproduce, the Californian archetype. Silicon Valley thus functions as a performative fiction of development (Beckert, 2016), mobilising public and private actors around speculative forms of urban and economic transformation.

Central to these projects of mimicry is the mobilisation of the creative class (Florida, 2012) as a developmental resource. In Portugal, this idealised category - mobile, entrepreneurial, and self-organised - was strategically invoked to displace the politics of austerity with a forward-looking agenda of talent, flexibility, and connectivity. Within this framework, the digital nomad emerges as the paradigmatic extension of the creative class: a figure embodying flexibility, innovation, and transnational mobility. The institutionalisation of this subject through policies such as the Digital Nomad Visa (D8) and favourable tax regimes attests to the state's role in cultivating mobility as an asset within Portugal's post-crisis political economy.

Around these mobile professionals, a set of infrastructures – grouped under the umbrella term of *Nomadland* - has crystallised. These assemblages encompass platform-mediated medium-term rentals, hybridised work hubs, and migration infrastructures mediating the encounter between global mobility and local economies. To interpret these formations, the dissertation advances arbitrage as a central analytical metaphor. Beyond its financial connotation, arbitrage denotes a logic through which actors capitalise on social, spatial, regulatory, and temporal differentials. By tracing arbitrage across mobility, housing, and work, the study conceptualises Lisbon’s Nomadland as a speculative, situated articulation of Silicon Valley mimicry - revealing the valuation logics that underpin it and showing who is positioned to capitalise on these dynamics and who is, instead, left arbitrage-less.