

The *Isle of Sculptures* of Pontevedra (1999-2019): a model to recover nature as a social and cultural space in the city¹

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Recibido: 19 de diciembre de 2020 / Aceptado: 26 de febrero de 2021

Abstract. The *Isle of Sculptures* was created as a cultural construction of nature and reverted to an aesthetic landscape, taking in consideration the ethnographic, historical and anthropological uniqueness of the place where it is located: the *Xunqueira* del Lérez in Pontevedra. At the same time, it is a tribute to the identifying material of sculpture from all eras and a reference to culture and art that its authors connect with the mythical consciousness and symbolism of *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. Just as in *The Waste Land*, which reunites past and present, with metaphors and symbols, the sculptors who take part in the space outlined by the Lérez River embrace, as a whole, a plurality of cultural allusions, languages and concepts, classical references and more contemporary experiences. Twelve artists were invited to take part: Giovanni Anselmo, Fernando Casás, José Pedro Croft, Dan Graham, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Jenny Holzer, Francisco Leiro, Richard Long, Robert Morris, Anne & Patrick Poirier, Ulrich Rückriem y Enrique Velasco.

Keywords: Sculpture; isle; nature; landscape; granite.

[es] La *Isla de esculturas* de Pontevedra (1999-2019): un modelo para recuperar la naturaleza como espacio social y cultural en la ciudad

Resumen. La *Isla de Esculturas* fue concebida como una construcción cultural de la naturaleza y revertida a paisaje estético, teniendo en cuenta la singularidad etnográfica, histórica y antropológica del lugar donde se enclava: la *Xunqueira* del Lérez de Pontevedra. Constituye igualmente un homenaje al granito, material identitario de la escultura de todas las épocas y una referencia de la cultura y el arte que sus autores entroncan con la conciencia mítica y el simbolismo del *The Waste Land* (La

¹ We have carried out this work within the framework of our Interdepartmental and Interdisciplinary Research Group ES2, of the University of Vigo, in which the Knowledge Areas of Drawing, Sculpture and Art History converge, which participates, among others, in the following lines of research: Contemporary artistic creation. Sculpture and public space. poetics and politics of / in the city. Artistic creation as a self-regulating system: conceptions and redefinitions. Artistic organization and management. Art and technology. Contemporary thought and visual culture. Public art. Current art criticism. Cultural and patrimonial management.

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tierra baldía) de T. S. Eliot. Como *La tierra baldía*, que reunifica pasado y presente, entre metáforas y símbolos, los escultores que intervienen en el espacio contorneado por el río Lérez acogen, en un todo, una pluralidad de alusiones culturales, lenguajes y conceptos, referencias clásicas y experiencias más contemporáneas. Fueron invitados a intervenir doce artistas: Giovanni Anselmo, Fernando Casás, José Pedro Croft, Dan Graham, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Jenny Holzer, Francisco Leiro, Richard Long, Robert Morris, Anne & Patrick Poirier, Ulrich Rückriem y Enrique Velasco.

Palabras clave: Escultura; isla; naturaleza; paisaje; granito.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The aesthetic principles of the Sculpture Isle 20 years later. Humanized nature and artistic landscape. The palindrome of T. S. Eliot. 3. An artist for a site-specific work. The landscape as a plural structure. 4. A space to exist and to active stroll. Granite as an identity. 5. The Isle of Sculptures within the framework of other sculptural projects of urban nature. 6. Expansion of the urban territory: recovering the edge space in the city model. 7. The commitment to natural and cultural heritage and climate change: a protected topography for fauna and flora. 8. Modern artistic heritage and the transformation of use: the new behaviors of space and its multiplicative effect on the architecture of the periphery. 9. A new social space: the culture of leisure. 10. The hermeneutics of interventions and their social projection: beyond The Waste Land. 11. Art as a poetic restitution of nature and landscape. 12. Conclusions. References.

Cómo citar: Castro-Fernández, X.A.; Herranz-Pascual, Y.; Pastor-Bravo, J. (2022) The *Isle of Sculptures* of Pontevedra (1999-2019): a model to recover nature as a social and cultural space in the city. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* 34(1), 187-207.

1. Introduction

“(…) The Isle of Sculptures wants to spread the medieval internationalism of the Camino de Compostela (aka Way of St. James)” (Garraud, 2007, p. 228).

The project *Isle of Sculptures* of Pontevedra⁵ is carried out in the context of the Xacobeo-99 and was funded by various public and private institutions of the Autonomous Community of Galicia, between 1998 and 1999.

Pontevedra is a city historically defined by granite and its province, a traditional land of stonemasons, with an ethnography and anthropology linked to stone and its art, from antiquity to contemporary times, it is also one of the great areas of production and exportation of said material: granite became, then, a symbol not only cultural, but also economic and, above all, aesthetic, capable of linking the past and the present. In this way, the nature and culture issues would go hand in hand with the achievements that twelve artists from different countries had to propose, those artists were invited to participate and the project were explained to them in its entirety, taking into account the cultural and historical conditions, the geography of the land, the fauna and flora of the environment and an essential and common nexus: granite, the most identifying factor of the project, which would be the material they had to use in the creation of their works.

The artists selected were Giovanni Anselmo (Italy), Robert Morris, Jenny Holzer and Dan Graham (United States), Ulrich Rückriem (Germany), Ian Hamilton Finlay

⁵ *Illa das Esculturas* appears in the *General Register of intellectual property* in the name of X. Antón Castro Fernández. The author of the project shared the curatorship with the art critic Rosa Olivares.

and Richard Long (Great Britain), Anne and Patrick Poirier (France), José Pedro Croft (Portugal), Enrique Velasco, Fernando Casás and Francisco Leiro (Spain). Most of them are artists of recognized international prestige, some of whom set the standards for sculpture and intervention in nature from the sixties to the present day.

It was also about addressing the importance of contemporary heritage in the cultural, tourist and economic development of the city, expanding the traditional limits of the historical legacy, bounded to a very specific territorial area –the historic city– and incorporating a space of edge and disused. In other words, trying to socialize the peripheral territory that the city had turned its back on for decades.

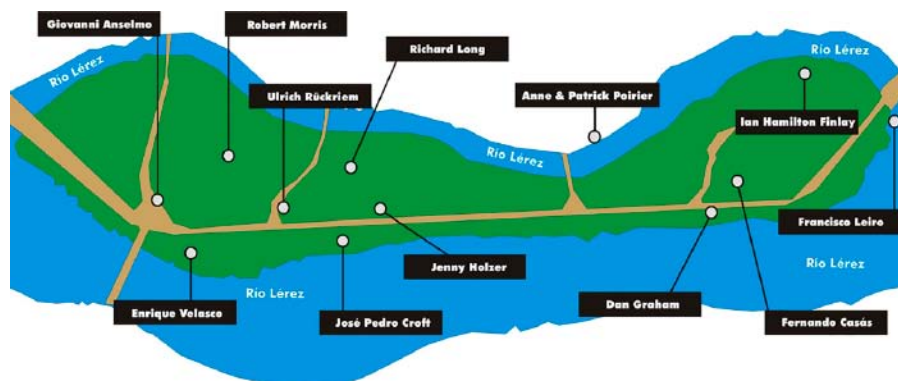


Figure 1. Map of the location of the works of the twelve artists in the *Island of Sculptures*. The Xunqueira de Lérez, Pontevedra. (Image made by the authors of the article).

Twenty-one years after the Isle of Sculptures was built as a project of intervention of art and nature, in the periphery of the city, we consider important to expand the research, in order to study its impact on the urban development of the city, as well as its social and cultural impact, in addition to highlighting the work methodology that we have used, outside the official art circles. That choice proves why we have chosen the proposed theme: *Artistic performances in the urban territory. A model to recover nature as a social and cultural space in the city: The Sculpture Isle of Pontevedra (1999-2019)*.

The first reconsideration in urban integration and the enhancement of the urban edge idea is the one that defines the intervention of the artists on the Sculpture Isle, before the *+ Pontevedra Model. Sustainable and Integrated Urban Development Strategy of Pontevedra (2016-2022)* (Council of Pontevedra (2016), pp. 1-165) begins to be executed, basis of the philosophy of change in the city, which is considered as a model of urban transformation already in motion and internationally recognized:

The *DUSI '+ Pontevedra Urban Model'* Strategy has as its main challenge to deepen the urban transformation project of Pontevedra centered around people, continuing, reinforcing and adapting its model not only in the urban center, but also in urban spaces on the urban edge and in the peripheral crown that surrounds the compact city, places where there are social, urban quality, sustainability and functional deficits. (Council of Pontevedra (2016), pp. 6-8).

2. The aesthetic principles of the Sculpture Isle 20 years later. Humanized nature and artistic landscape. The palindrome of T. S. Eliot

The conversations with the chosen artists focused on the philosophy that was intended for that island of 70,000 square meters, populated by a varied vegetation and, especially by high eucalyptus, and populated in its waters and on its river banks by dozens of ducks and swans.



Figure 2. The *Island of Sculptures*. The Xunqueira de Lérez, Pontevedra.

Two views (of the surroundings). Images recovered from: https://www.turismo.gal/recurso/-/detalle/31817/illa-das-esculturas?langId=es_ES&tp=5&ctre=18
<https://www.destino.gal/es/illa-das-esculturas-pontevedra>

Granite, an identity material, with which all artists would work, came to determine the “specific place” in the landscape, built from the rugged nature of the Isle, with which it was not only a question of defining what is understood as a landscape in english, humanized space (artistic landscape and sometimes, garden, “territory to exist”), but rather the very nature of the “Site specific work”.

Each of the artists, in agreement with the curator, had chosen their place of performance and there they would develop their work based on the proposed principles, so that the territory was a whole, as a single intervention, under the protection of this wonderful collection of poems. which is *The Waste Land* (Eliot, 2001, pp. 1-22), a deconstructed model and ideal synthesis of the island of juxtapositions, fragments or images that can be presented simultaneously, starting with the entrance, through the one accessed by a narrow isthmus, where we find *Cielo acortado* by Giovanni Anselmo, or by the opposite end, which delimited the floating room –*Saavedra, zona de descanso*– by Francisco Leiro. A programmatic and conceptual development that was exposed in one of the texts of the book-catalog published on the occasion of the inauguration (Castro, 1999, pp. 47-74).



Figure 3. **Ian Hamilton Finlay**, *Petrarch XXXV, CXXXII and CCCX*, 1999. Green slate from Lugo. Three oval medallions of 42 x 26 x 5 cm, each one. Occupied surface: 500 m². **Francisco Leiro**, *Saavedra. Rest area*, 1999. Sofa and library in pink granite from Porriño and two black granite *Tetilla* cheeses from Campo Lameiro, 200 x 700 x 400 cm. **Giovanni Anselmo**, *Shortened sky*, 1999. Black granite from Campo Lameiro, 120 x 22 x 22 cm. (Images made by the authors of the article).

However, today those principles, which gave birth to the project 20 years ago, are no longer the only ones that justify those interventions, since the passage of time itself and the progressive transformation of use to which they have created, make us rethink the new incidents and the effects they have had in the social and cultural sphere, aware that the Isle of Sculptures has gradually become one of the lungs of the city and a fundamental pillar of sustainable urban development in the peripheral crown.

The verification of the exposed reality is, therefore, the starting point of our research and, thus, of the new research project that we now propose.

3. An artist for a *site-specific work*. Landscape as a plural structure

The twelve artists, whose projects were located in different places on the small river island, followed the coordinates of the chosen area, according to the agreed keys and took into account the “specific site”, but also its vegetation, the proximity of water, the abundance of eucalyptus trees, the sunrise or sunset (something that obsessed

Ian Hamilton Finlay when placing his slate medallions suspended in the trees), the orientation regarding the mainland, in order of culturally reinventing that nature, in the most respectful way, turning it into the collection of poems sought by its ideologists, under an order established by architecture, from whose combination a new concept of “landscape” would be born.

The unsoiled landscape allowed the artists to reinforce not only the wild and irregular morphology of the reed beds, the groves or the bushes, but even the significance that the place has been acquiring in recent years as a privileged natural lung of the city that, thanks to its recovery and that of the river that surrounds it, it has become the social reference of moles par excellence, to the point that it can illustrate the presumption with which Jean-Luc Daval defined, a few years ago, the new sculpture, the one that arose from the pioneering works of Isamu Noguchi, after the fifties, with nature and the landscape within themselves: a sculpture that will no longer be an “object to see”, but a “space to exist”, which avoids the decorative or commemorative functions that history had attributed to it (Daval, 1996, pp. 287 and 288). This is where the social function of the intervention is born.

All of the above allows us to confirm that the new landscape is essentially plural, a new territory whose most immediate predecessors are found after the second half of the 1960s in a series of artists who have worked with nature. Consider, for example, Peter Walker’s minimalist gardens in Great Britain, which do not exclude primitive references, from the Nazca lines, in Peru, to the Chromelech of Stonehenge, in England, to French classic and Cartesian models of the 17th century, to the zen landscaping or parks by Isamu Noguchi (Levy, 1997, p. 7). Concept that have been resorted to in the case of certain artists who have intervened on the Isle, such as Robert Morris –who was inspired by the prehistoric *Laberinto de Mogor*– and Richard Long, with his *camino-alineamiento*, or Ulrich Rückriem with its *stelamenhir*.



Figure 4. **Richard Long**, *Pontevedra Line*, 1999. Installation of 17 t of white granite chunks, 60 x 120 x 3700 cm.

Robert Morris, *Labyrinth of Pontevedra*, 1999-2000. Granite from Arcade, slate from Valdeorras and gravel, 900 x 1200 x 200 cm.

Ulrich Rückriem, *Stela*, 1999. Pink granite from Porriño, 500 x 100 x 100 cm.
(Images made by the authors of the article).

In other cases, such as in the *Folie o Pequeño Paraíso para Pontevedra* by Anne and Patrick Poirier, we could refer to models that have been established in recent years, from a deconstructionist and postmodern position, understanding the garden *-folie* in the model studied— as a hybrid of movements and styles, which we can find in Marta Schwartz and her landscapes: a diverse *assemblage*, built with pictorial and object images, including profuse vegetation, elements of *Land art*, Japanese tradition and the use of symbolic elements (Meyer, 1997, pp. 8-9).

4. Space to exist and to active stroll. Granite as an identity

Following the logic that has been sought, the nature intervened by the artists could not be achieved without taking into account that sculpture today is very different from the conception of its traditional status, which was defined as a monument and self-referential structure. Referring, again, to Daval, it must be more a space to live or to exist. And the artists invited to a natural public place, in which they must act collectively, commit to this premise, because they are aware —it happened on the Isle and the debates between ideologues and authors were about that— that they were building a single poem. Hence, they were told about Eliot's *The Waste Land*, that is

capable of merging the past with the present to reflect on the time of its existence. Once they chose their space, they encouraged the necessary dialogue so that the old consciousness of homage, which we usually discovered in each sculptural work, would alter its ornamental or commemorative functions to which “the specific purpose of maintaining individual feats or destinies, always alive, and present in the consciousness of future generations” (Riegl, 1987 (1903), p. 23)⁶ was referred and for a renewed space for the sake of individual or collective identity in contrast with the homogeneous idea of neutrality. This way, a recovery of nature-landscape is produced, which, in the future, will be modified by human presence, that is, by an active stroller, who will provide new connotations, which finally turns the traditional definition of sculpture into its wider field.

And in relation to this, from identity purposes, the material used as sole support, granite, contributes to reaffirm its bonds with the oldest sculptural tradition and with the artistic references of the area since prehistoric times; an implication that equally concerns all the sculptural periods of the peninsular Northwest. A material considered even from its industrial potential, taking into account that Galicia is the first Spanish granite producing area and the fifth in the world, it constitutes a major element in its exports and economic development. Without excluding the relationships of the aforementioned stone mineral and its incidence in the ethnographic tradition, emphasizing aspects such as *hierophany*, something that should continue to serve as support in the theoretical approaches that concern not only our unique case, but, in the same way, to a part of the sculpture nowadays, although, in this case, it would have to be related to the potential of the quarries and their defining value of the city.

In 2006, Pontevedra obtained the *Cidade de Pedra Award*, awarded by the Galician Granite Association, for the excellent use of this raw material in its urban transformation. The Isle of Sculptures was born with that identity vocation.

5. The Isle of Sculptures within the framework of other sculptural projects of urban nature

Up to now there have hardly been any comparative studies on the different “art and nature” projects inside and outside our country. Those that have been published in recent years, except for some doctoral thesis –which have never been published– are usually mere territorial guides, which analyze sculpture parks or art and nature centers by country and region. Few publications like the French *L’artiste contemporain et la nature. Parcs et Paysages européens*, (Garraud, 2007) lead us to the domain of analogies and to a classification scheme, where the Isle of Sculptures of Pontevedra acquires extraordinary relevance.

For this reason, we consider that it would be of great interest to make a comparative analysis of the case at hand and put it in relation to the context of the wide proliferation of parks and art centers that have emerged in recent years around the world. We mention, below, some of these documents, which can serve as help and reference to carry out a comparative study:

⁶ Despite this, the definition of a monument in the sense that Alois Riegl did, evoking its original function as human fulfillment, continues to be valid in the cultural policy of many cities, even in sculpture programs that are related to more current experiences.

- *Art-Sites Spain. Contemporary Art + Architecture Handbook.* (2001).
- *Arte y naturaleza. Guía de Europa. Parques de Esculturas.* (2006).
- *Landscape for Art. Contemporary Sculpture Parks.* (2008).
- *International Directory of Sculpture Parks & Gardens.* (2010).
- *Outdoor Art, Extraordinary Sculpture Parks and Art in Nature.* (2015).
- *Sculpture Parks in Europe. A Guide to Art and Nature.* (2017).

6. Expansion of the urban territory: recovering the edge space in the city model

The most immediate effect of the launching of the Sculpture Isle has been to rescue a lost and unused space for the city: recovering that space on the edge of the peripheral crown also meant optimizing the functions of the River Lérez, which, for many years, was oblivious to the consideration of the citizens. Proof of this is that, over time, it has not only become the preferred leisure area on the outskirts of the city, but it has also served to encourage the creation of new projects in annexed places, such as small parks, especially for children, recreational or sports areas and a river beach.

We should not forget that, in 2005, within the framework of the enhancement of the river, the Isle of Sculptures was included by the City Council in its river path programs.



Figure 5. The *Island of Sculptures*. The Xunqueira de Lérez, Pontevedra. Six views (of the surroundings). (Images made by the authors of the article).

Study how the Isle of Sculptures has managed to consolidate the projection of the unfinished urban planning of the periphery of the city and generate a new engineering and service architecture, with the implementation of renewed accesses, roads and bridges, to connect the urban territory with the nascent University Campus

and the institutes and vocational training centers that are on the other side of the river, as well as the Pazo de Cultura of the award-winning architect Manuel de las Casas, was a priority objective of the ideologues of the project. In the same way, we will be able to see the transformative effect of the “living” space and its repercussion on the multiplier effect of culture, leisure or the local economy and, by extension, that of the city.

The + *Modelo Pontevedra. Estrategia de Desarrollo Urbano Sostenible e Integrado de Pontevedra (2016-2020)* launched by the City Council is the grounding of the philosophy of change in the city, which is proposed as “a model of urban transformation already in motion and internationally recognized” (Council of Pontevedra, 2016, p. 6).

This Plan addresses:

“Expand and deepen the people-centered urban transformation model, which the City Council has been implementing for more than 15 years and whose approach has been aimed at achieving a more friendly, comfortable, safe, high-quality urban city, accessible, without acoustic or atmospheric pollution, egalitarian, cohesive and that also facilitates the autonomy of people. This model responds to a strategy in which its fundamental principle is to understand public space as a place of coexistence for people”. (Council of Pontevedra, 2016, p. 6)⁷.

Within this model, the *DUSI Strategy* seeks to reinforce and adapt its philosophy to both the urban center and the peripheral crown of the city.

The vivid effect and the transformative impact on the territory of the Sculpture Isle have contributed to solving some of these problems, and one of our goals will be to see how such incidence has occurred.

7. The Commitment to natural and cultural heritage and climate change: a protected topography for fauna and flora

In its strategy, the aforementioned *Plan + Modelo Pontevedra* assumes the commitment to natural and cultural heritage and climate change, developing actions that allow improving the environmental behavior of Pontevedra in order to gain new natural and heritage spaces for visitors and citizens, “so that they improve their quality of life and contribute to a better connectivity of the compact city with its peripheral urban continuum” (Council of Pontevedra, 2016, pp. 6-7). Among them are the six large natural parks that are located in the vicinity of the city, one of them the Illa do Covo or de las Esculturas, which with 6 hectares of extension surrounded by the Lérez river, in an enclave of remarkable natural and scenic value, is included in the Natura 2000 Network (Council of Pontevedra, 2016, p. 49).

In this sense, the Isle of Sculptures has only revalued its social use, recovering that territory and the river for the citizens.

In the environmental field, the Isle is a space that has drastically reduced air, noise and water pollution, aware that the regeneration and enhancement of the local

⁷ With this city model, Pontevedra obtained international recognition based on different awards such as the UN-Habitat Award / Dubai International Award, in 2014, where Pontevedra is recognized as the most comfortable city to live in Europe, according to the UN. ABC, 3-12-2014. The media frequently speak of Pontevedra's urban transformation model. We highlight the “España directo” program on TVE on December 4, 2014.

natural and cultural heritage will help a better cohesion of the territory and will mean a promotion of local attractions for visitors to Pontevedra. The artistic performances have highlighted the plant formations and the specific fauna of the area.

The Isle landscape is dominated by trees, which, originally, were planted there to dissect the marsh and reed beds and make possible the solidity of its gardening. Among its species, which some of the sculptors have taken into account –the works of Anne and Patrick Poirier or that of Fernando Casás and José Pedro Croft, for example, would hardly be understood without taking this aspect into account– acacias, the American and European oak, the Atlas cedar, different forms of eucalyptus, such as river red gum or ornamental eucalyptus, bald cypresses, sweetgums, plane trees, willows, birchs, tulips, etc.



Figure 6. **Anne & Patrick Poirier**, *Folie or Little Paradise for Pontevedra*, 1999.

Porriño pink granite, stainless steel, plants and trees of different species.

Occupied surface: 3,000 m².

Fernando Casás, *Lamed Vad. The 36 Righteous*, 1999. 36 black granite blocks from Campo Lameiro of different sizes (40, 60, 80 cm high x 40 and 50 cm in diameter).

Occupied surface: 4,000 m².

José Pedro Croft, *Untitled (The Little House)*, 1999. Pearl grey granite from Mondariz, 320 x 300 x 560 cm. (Images made by the authors of the article).

As for the fauna, it is fundamentally aquatic: they are water birds, such as common sandpipers (*Actitis Hypoleucos*), waders –which live in mud or silt–, expert in shellfish gathering on the banks of the river and included in the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), mallards (*Anas Platyrhynchos*), a peculiar duck that has a flat shape to better catch the vegetables from the bottom of the river on which it

feeds, common kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis*), gray herons (*Area cinerea*) or little egrets (*Egretta Garzetta*), birds adapted for spear fishing, with strong and pointed beaks, or great cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), among others, fuels life to this wide paradisaical *folie* that the Isle of Sculptures has become.

8. Modern artistic heritage and the transformation of use: the new performance of space and its multiplier effect on the architecture of the periphery

Another of the effects that are due to the unique territory aestheticized with the sculptural interventions integrated in the mimesis of the natural landscape and that have generated transformations of use in it, that should be studied carefully, is the appearance of new facilities, which until a few years ago they were exclusively in the central city.

Currently the facilities have reached this periphery “humanized” by art and are characterized by their sociocultural specialization, integrating, in their multiplicative effect, a new functional architecture in the vicinity of the Isle, such as teaching centers (Pontevedra hosts one of the three Campus of the University of Vigo, which includes seven schools), the A Xunqueira Sports Complex, cultural centers and playgrounds.

With all this, a city with an integrated, accessible and well cohesive edge and peripheral middle-density crown has been achieved with the compact historic city.

In reality, it would be a matter of studying to what extent the Isle of Sculptures has contributed to the transformation of the sustainable urban model of the often unique, Pontevedra project and its relationship with the aforementioned compact city, in order to determine the levels of cohesion between the periphery and the center.

Did the Isle and its implementation lead to the formation of accessible, pollution-free spaces and generated equipment and services?

In 2015, the city obtained the *Center for Active Design Excellence Award*, an award granted in New York by this institution linked to the Michael Bloomberg Foundation, which promotes exemplary actions that promote health through architecture and urban planning focused on people. The organization considered Pontevedra as a pioneer city in urban design centered on people and promoter of healthy lifestyle habits. Since 1999, and as the first space intervened in the *Xunqueira de Lérez*, the Isle of Sculptures constitutes today –if not the most important– one of the bio-healthy lungs of the city.

9. A new social *space*: the culture of leisure

From the recovery of the idea of edge, underlies the setting of new social places and one of them, in terms of its functions, acquires special interest: the one related to leisure culture, undoubtedly the most impressive.

As we have already explained, the scenic, environmental and patrimonial restoration that the work of the twelve artists has meant in the nature of the Isle and in its river space has generated a tourist, cultural and environmental interest, which is one of the objectives of the + *Modelo Pontevedra*, through the DUSI strategy, promoter of interventions for the recovery of unique natural territories linked to the Lérez River, in order to improve connectivity with the center, “favoring non-

polluting mobility that provides new incentives to help attract visitors to Pontevedra and generate new spaces for the enjoyment of local citizens” (Council of Pontevedra, 2016, p. 133).

To what extent has the Isle of Sculptures managed to transform the natural spaces of Xunqueira de Lérez into centers of socialization and integrated plural uses?

We can try to explain how the multiplicative effect caused by the Sculpture Isle Project has been decisive in establishing a social mole, defined by the culture of leisure, optimized in the amplitude of its 70,000 square meters, fundamental today for the city and its inhabitants. Urbanized meeting place with bike lanes, fountains, walks, playground, jogging area, pleasure boats, etc., where concerts and other events are held that would never be possible before due to lack of use and marginalization, in an unlimited fallow without access to the public.

Over the years, the Isle of Sculptures has become a meeting place and especially a recreation area for families from Pontevedra, who can take long walks to enjoy the natural environment, a place for the aquatic birds on the river and the vegetation, to enjoy the bike lanes and green areas to have picnics, to spend the afternoon with the little ones, since it has a children’s area, built with wood and niobium, benches for rest and various fountains. All this has caused citizens to start using the synonym of *Parque de la Familia*, a name that has already passed to the municipal gazetteer. Periodically the City Council organizes guided tours and there is an association –the *Isle of Sculptures Association*– that frequently organizes activities.

Citizens and visitors have at their service a guide released by the City Council and they can try to discover the sculptures, which, with no doubt, they will find in the different areas. Some, such as the eight benches by Jenny Holzer, aligned along the central path of the isle, will invite the walker to a productive dialogue, since each of them consists of twelve “truitsms” or quotes, with which the artist tries to establish a direct relationship with the people. Although, in all cases they are useful benches, as they serve to rest. That dialogue is what emanates from the works.



Figure 7. **Jenny Holzer**, *Untitled (Stone benches)*, 1999. Pearl grey Arcade granite and text.

A bench: 64.5 x 138 x 45 cm. Installation with 8 benches: 64.75 x 20000 x 45 cm.

(Images made by the authors of the article).

The Isle is also a place to celebrate performances of different nature such as sports races or concerts, especially in the summer time. As the plural space that it is, it welcomes musical celebrations and, in a particular way, one of them has become famous and links its success to the isle territory of Xunqueira since its beginnings: the *Festival Surfing the Lérez*, which takes place every June, and becomes a rock, pop rock or folk rock party with bands and styles for all kinds of audience. It is a

festival that exalts the playful element and dedicates special attention, as well as a good part of its activities, to children,

It is presented as a charitable and free festival, although it allows the voluntary contributions of the attendees, donations that will later be destined to a solidarity cause that, in the last edition of 2018, would serve to collect food for those groups most in need.

10. The hermeneutics of the interventions and their social projection: beyond *The Waste Land*

The twelve artists, whose projects were installed in different places on the small river isle, following a harmonic composition dictated by the coordinates of the chosen area, according to the proposed key points –which varied, depending on the case, taking into account the vegetation, the proximity of the water, the profusion of eucalyptus trees, the sunrise or sunset, the orientation with respect to the continental territory...– they finally managed to reinvent that nature in a cultural and most respectful way, turning it into the collection of poems that their ideologists were looking for, under an order established by the architecture of what would be, in all its breadth, the concept of “landscape”. In the end, the result could be read as a vast and extensive puzzle, classic and contemporary at the same time, following the example of *The Waste Land* (Eliot, 2001, pp. 1-22), symbol of tradition and experimentation of past and future.

However, our current analysis, twenty years later, tries to get involved not in the poem’s references, which conceptually encouraged the beginning of the project, but in the interpretation or hermeneutics of each of the works and how they have been interpreted by the public from what has been told about them in the texts, in the conferences or in the guided tours.

Seeing or understanding the balance between what the artists tried to convey and what that audience has really been perceiving would be one of our objectives, which has led us to propose an analysis of the two perceptions. Finally, what will remain in the collective memory will be what goes viral in the eyes of the perceiver, the same one who baptized that space as Isle of Sculptures, over the will of the City Council, which tried to impose the name “Illa do Covo” (Crows’ Isle) without success to that territory intervened by art.

The unsoiled landscape allowed the interventions to reinforce not only the wild and irregular morphology of the reed beds, the groves or the bushes, but also the reimagination that the place has been acquiring in recent years as a privileged natural lung of the city that, thanks to its recovery and that of the river that surrounds it, it has become the social reference of the territory in which the sculptors worked.

11. Art as a poetic restitution of nature and landscape

To value an artistic dimension that goes beyond the self-referential aesthetic exercise itself would be another of the objectives of the ideologues of this Isle, because all artists, to one degree or another, allow their work to be inserted in a framework of different meanings. Polysemic and semiotic will that links the literary and the

historical, criticism and a transcendent conceptualization, subjected, on many occasions, to the poetic force that emanates from the disposition of the global model.

Only in this way could we perceive the space that Ian Hamilton Finlay dreamed of for love or to share solitude with the complicity of Petrarca or the one that Anne and Patrick Poirier imagined, in the manner of the old folies of romantic gardens, until we reached the hortus conclusus of rest. The one who set the path in the distance to take possession of the sacred landscape, in the way that Ulrich Rückriem or Richard Long define it, the latter tracing a stone path that leads to all possible natures. Or remembering the trace of the old petroglyphs that one day illuminated symbolic spaces without origin or return to cryptologically explain the world, as it happens with Robert Morris's labyrinth. Or suggesting a debate on the social ethics of nature and the perversions to which man subjects it, as proposed by Fernando Casás. A nature that is always stronger than culture as a modifying element, as evidenced by the little house embedded between the trees by José Pedro Croft, finite in the Taoist balance of Enrique Velasco's station and perception of light, which is reflected in the sunrises of the Dan Graham Pyramid. And the social space is idealized in the distance of an imaginary floating room that Francisco Leiro (Water as the subject and support of artistic intervention) places in the middle of the river as much as it is pragmatized in the banks of Jenny Holzer's truisms (Herranz, 1999, p. 8): benches that serve, finally, to rest the stroller and the different stages in a debate that introduce us to real life, through his writings on stone. Debate that Giovanni Anselmo defines in his monolithic *Cielo acortado* to try to outline infinity, bringing the symbolic and unattainable celestial image closer to the earth by one meter and twenty centimeters.

Located in the meandering puzzle that makes up the elongated, narrow and irregular islet, oriented from south –the entrance or the beginning– to the north –the exit or the end–, the topographical simplicity will allow us to make a reading of its authors as a palindrome, that is, to move indistinctly, in one direction or another, to find the keys that hide each of the works.



Figure 8. **Dan Graham**, *Pyramid*, 1988-1999. Pink granite from Porriño, 190 x 190 x 180 cm.

Enrique Velasco, *Xaminorio xunquemenes obay (Way of reeds)*, 1999. Pink Porriño granite, grass, trees and fused mineral. Installation of 4000 x 2000 x 90 cm.

(Images made by the authors of the article).

12. Conclusions

The artistic interventions in this peculiar hidden place for the city, whose inhabitants not only did not visit, but were unaware that it had a name, apart from being in the muddy and marsh lands of the *Xunqueira* of the Lérez river, led to the fact that, since its inauguration, it was renamed *Illa das Esculturas* (Sculpture Isle). In other words, the work of the artists has given a name to that river island of 70,000 square meters that lacked an identity and was always alien to the urban population, from which it is less than a kilometer away.

The Isle of Sculptures project has provided a brand-new work and management methodology regarding interventions in the nature or public space, establishing direct contact with its protagonists, regardless of their galleries or agents, a fact absolutely unusual. It is demonstrable that acquiring the projects directly from the artists, establishing a service contract with them to monitor and carry out the work, has resulted in considerable financial savings, which, in some cases, would have multiplied their market value tenfold.

The case of Pontevedra, by preserving nature in a *quasi*-original state and by refounding it as a plural landscape –space to exist in opposition to the idea of monument or commemoration– has contributed to define the concept of intervention in urban margins, avoiding the idea of sculpture park, designation that many of the artists reject when they are invited to intervene in a territory.

The definition of the Isle of Sculptures from granite as an identity material is a unique case in Europe, as recognized by experts, which is why it has not only reinforced the use of this material in the performances of modern artists, but has also validated its aesthetic possibility in the Galician quarries, some of which have, since then, have collaborated or carried out work with artists from all over the world.

The intervention of a select group of modern sculptors from different countries, proven by their notable prestige on the international art circuit, most of them present in the great museums around the world, has managed to give an equally contemporary profile to an administrative and of a very conservative tradition, like Pontevedra, integrated, since then, as the most rigorous art and nature guides show, on the world map of this type of event.

One of the most important transformations generated by the artistic intervention of the Sculpture Isle, previously an unused and marginal territory, was the recovery of the urban edge space and the peripheral crown of the city. Therefore, it constitutes the first model of this recovery in the city, which, years later, it would be tried to imitate and carry out in the same *Xunqueira* of the Lérez river, with actions of a different nature. Proof of this is that it has been integrated into the Plan + *Modelo Pontevedra. Estrategia de Desarrollo Urbano Sostenible e Integrado de Pontevedra (2016-2020)*, multi-award winning worldwide. This led to new accessibility, new bridges, a Palace of Culture and the expansion of the University Campus.

The Sculpture Isle, through the DUSI Strategy for the peripheral crown of the city of Pontevedra, has been included as a protected space for fauna and flora, acquiring a commitment to natural and cultural heritage and climate change and integrated as a natural park and territory also protected by the European Union in the Natura Network 2000.

Is widely demonstrable that the Isle of Sculptures has fostered a multiplicative effect in the implementation of a new social space, defined by the culture of leisure, the greatest lung for the city and its inhabitants, generating a meeting place for recreation, with bike lanes, fountains, walks, playground, jogging area, pleasure boats, etc. New functions assigned to that space, which, over the years, has allowed the birth of a popular synonym to name the Isle: Parque de la Familia (Family Park).

Artistic interventions, camouflaged—and sometimes hidden among the vegetation—in the island’s plant and river landscape, having them not been invasive in public recreation areas, have allowed the development of numerous events, especially charity or sports and musical events: Since its inauguration in 1999, the Isle has been the setting of athletic competitions such as the Zonal Cross-School Championship or the Galician Cross Country Championship, in the same way that it hosts festivals, such as the aforementioned Surfing the Lérez Festival.

In the transformation process associated with the culture of leisure and sports, in 2007 the City Council promoted the Sculpture Isle with a bio-healthy circuit program that can be enjoyed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. and a “mini outdoor gym” so that walkers can use each of the twelve devices installed there. Something that would be unthinkable before the actions carried out in 1999.

As a consequence of the aforementioned transformations, the Isle of Sculptures has become the only space in the city that has a sensory route for people with disabilities so that they can take a route that highlights both the surrounding nature and the pieces of art that they inhabit, turning it into an open-air museum.

The enhancement of the Isle has meant a reinforcement of the service sector, as a product of cultural tourism, which has generated an influx of visitors to see the performances of the artists and, at the same time, discover the nature and the landscape, the fauna and the peculiar flora, a fact that has a multiplicative impact on the city’s economy.

The sculptural space of the *Xunqueira de Lérez*, having incorporated into its artistic interventions ethnographic references and prehistory—from megalithism to petroglyphs—, ancient history and the Middle Ages of Galicia, has reinforced the place not only as a cultural event that puts the contemporary on stage as a *revival* of certain eras, important for identity purposes, but rather as a place for the study of the “past as memory of the present”.

We have been able to verify that the hermeneutic or complex interpretation of the signifiers and meanings that underlie each of the sculptors’ interventions have contributed to generating a social and cultural debate, of different signs —of acceptance or rejection— among citizens, who however, after many years, are proud of *their* Isle of Sculptures.

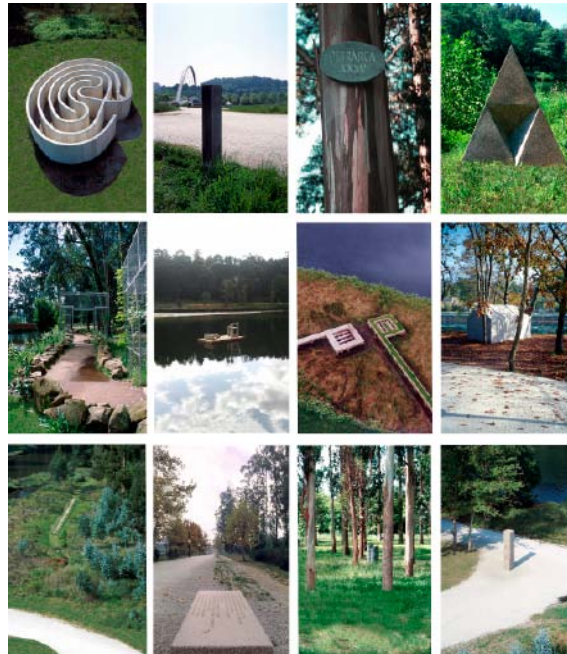


Figure 9. Twelve sculptural works by the selected artists: **Robert Morris, Giovanni Anselmo, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Dan Graham, Anne & Patrick Poirier; Francisco Leiro, Enrique Velasco, José Pedro Croft, Richard Long, Jenny Holzer, Fernando Casás, Ulrich Rückriem.** *The Island of Sculptures.* The Xunqueira de Lerez, Pontevedra. (Images made by the authors of the article).

Because of this, the promoters of the project have proposed a language of a “therapeutic” nature, applicable to the artists and their works, in order to bring this paradisaical space, in which their interventions have had so much to do, to an informative public. The same public to whom they have explained that Giovanni Anselmo cut the distance from the sky 120 centimeters to measure and define infinity or that Robert Morris fulfilled the will of the old settlers of the Bronze Age, dedicating the labyrinth they had drawn three thousand years before, on a stone from Mogor, to the inhabitants of the XXI century. That Ulrich Rückriem, emulating the ancient inhabitants who had conquered a profane territory, marked it with a stone to make it their own and sacred: chaos became a cosmos and the German sculptor, marking the place, intervened and identified nature as landscape. That Richard Long had managed to turn walking into a work of art that takes time into account and thus defines its nature in motion, petrified on the *Línea de Pontevedra*, turned into a real landscape, where everything is true and there is no depiction: grass is grass, earth is earth and stones are stones. A state of the soul like the romantics, but without painting the picture, but rather “presenting” it. That Anne and Patrick Poirier in their *Pequeño Paraíso* have dedicated a garden of memory or reminiscence, “to dream and rest”, to visitors, making use of local plants. That Ian Hamilton Finlay, using Petrarca’s sonnets, scattered among the eucalyptus trees, offers us a space dedicated to poetry, love and solitude. That Francisco Leiro with his *Saavedra* floating room, has created

a rest area on the calm waters of the river to imagine the utopia of a new social territory. That Fernando Casás in *Lamed Vad*, recalling the 36 righteous people of La Cabala, who established harmony in the old world, built 36 tree trunks to hinder the invasion of the eucalyptus trees, appealing to ethics to face the renewed awareness of ecology. That Dan Graham's "Pyramid" became the less strange expression of geometry and melancholy, which seeks, in the polished solidity of the stone, the complicit reflections of the sun and water, to achieve the same multiplying effects that allow us to see each other inside the work. That the eight benches that Jenny Holzer desined for the longest of the island's path, inviting the visitor to sit down in his "thinking benches" and their 96 truisms or sentences, written on them, useful for a social debate that will not leave us indifferent. That the little house that José Pedro Croft hid among the trees and in front of the river's waters, where it emits its reflections, shows us that nature is always stronger than culture: when the trees grow, they will break the walls of the building that man has done without remission. That Enrique Velasco's *Camino de juncos* is not only a Proustian exercise in evocation of his childhood and his memories in the river banks, but also a place to recover from the walk and the encounter with recollection and rest.



Figure 10. Aerial view of *Sculpture Island*. Covo Island, 70,000 m². The Xunqueira de Lérez, Pontevedra. Image recovered from: <https://www.visit-pontevedra.com/es/naturaleza/a-illa-do-covo-parque-de-las-esculturas>

That the Isle of Sculptures has become a sustainable model of *Art, Nature and Landscape*, whose dissemination and visibility as well as the applicability and possible transfer of the results will be of interest to the sector.

The Sculpture Isle project has shown the profitability of interventions that concern art and landscape, where a group of internationally recognized sculptors has managed to empathize with nature and socialize it, which they have not only treated in a respectful way, resorting to mimesis, but enhancing it by reinforcing its historicity and cultural identity.

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