

'Now it's beginning to happen'

Simon Brooke



When the recession of the late 1980s struck in Britain, photographer Kenton Thatcher did what so many freelance workers did when they found their order books drying up – he left London with its economic problems and high living costs and went abroad. In Thatcher's case his destination was Lisbon, a city he already vaguely knew.

"I thought I'd go for six months just to get some shots for my portfolio and then come back but six months turned into a year, which turned into six years and I've been here ever since," says Thatcher, whose clients include the Pirelli calendars and Tag Heuer watches.

The neighbourhood of the Portuguese capital he moved into was Santos, a former industrial zone. The area became the site for a design school, the Instituto de Artes Visuais, Design e Marketing – commonly known as Iade – nearly 20 years ago but over the past few years it has been attracting not just students but designers and architects. A supply of young creative talent, along with large office spaces at very affordable rents, has proved to be quite a pull for the creative industries, ranging from furniture designers and architects to computer graphics artists.

"In London I was living in Old Street, where there were creative industries working out of former industrial premises and I think that was part of the appeal of Santos for me," says Thatcher.

Near Lisbon's docklands area, neighbouring districts include Lapa, with its smart homes and embassies, and Estrela, a pretty and very desirable but slightly less expensive area.

Buildings in Santos range from 19th-century warehouses to older apartment blocks. Some, complete with French windows and wrought-iron balconies, date back more than 250 years to when the great earthquake of 1755 resulted in much of the city being rebuilt.

Alongside these classic buildings are plainer, more functional 20th-century apartment blocks and light industrial workshops. Towards the docks themselves the area naturally becomes rougher – but for many of Lisbon's hip young crowd this edginess has been part of the appeal.

For many years the area was considered slightly dangerous with a wild nightlife, says Christina Hippisley, until recently a Lisbon resident. "Santos has reinvented itself as a funky area full of nightclubs and restaurants and, latterly, designer furniture shops showcasing Portuguese products, and art galleries," she says. "These days there are around 4,000 students studying

design, architecture, illustration and the audio-visual arts in some of Portugal's cutting-edge design colleges, which have been set up in old warehouses and factories."

The real impetus for change came in 2005 when the area was rebranded by a group of local design businesses, interiors shops and smart restaurants as "The Santos Design District", complete with website and unofficial marketing operation.

When it opened, the local branch of Armani Casa was something of a trailblazer but many of the shops are one-off stores owned and managed by Portuguese designers and retailers. Outlets such as Santos de Casa focus Portuguese talent while Paris-Sete is where residents can find homewares by names such as B&B Italia and Vitra in an airy, neo-industrial setting.

"Santos is very much the place for designers to show their work in Lisbon these days – there is nowhere else quite like it," says furniture and interior designer Tereza Prego, whose pieces are appearing in a recently opened shop. "Every month the design shops are open until 10pm [one night] and people come and look around, have a drink and then go to eat in one of the restaurants. This event, which was initiated by the Santos Design District group, has made a big difference in the area."

There is little local government involvement compared, for instance, with London's Covent Garden or Docklands, where a background for new homes, shops, offices and restaurants was created. In Santos, the infrastructure has been little altered and developments have been more organic.

"The changes have been slow and there hasn't been as much of a collaborative effort as with some redevelopments but clearly the area has potential," says John Chamberlain, a British architect who has lived and worked in the area for more than 30 years. "It's been on the verge of coming up for years but now I think it's beginning to happen. It's got some good public spaces and an interesting variety of architecture."

Property prices in Lisbon have been "solid", with growth at about 2.4 per cent and rental yields of 5 to 6 per cent, according to Adrian Medd of estate agency European Villa Solutions, which has a range of apartments starting at €190,000 for a studio.

"Opportunities for growth continue to exist in the prime city areas where there is urban redevelopment – hence the growing importance of the historic areas of Lisbon where there are good quality projects," says Medd. A new high-speed train link between the Portuguese and Spanish cities, well as a new Lisbon airport, will also stimulate growth.

Thatcher is one of a small number of "Beefs", as Brits are affectionately known, to buy in the area. His 200 sq metre, three-bedroom apartment, which includes his photographic studio, cost €150,000 although he recently had it valued at €500,000.

"It has got four-metre-high ceilings and it was built after the great earthquake," he says. "It was an apartment block for servants who worked in a palace that stood nearby and the walls here are nearly a metre thick in places, which is great for soundproofing."

He says the cost of living is so much lower than in the UK, especially London. There are cafés and bars outside the apartment that he shares with his partner and baby and the beach is a 20-minute drive out of Santos. He bought an investment property nearby.

"Even in Santos, the local government is very particular about developments and alterations and the police on their scooters are on the lookout for people doing things without permits so you have to be careful about what you do," he warns.

The Portuguese are traditionally buyers rather than renters. The purchase process in Lisbon, like most of Portugal, is relatively simple. After verifying the ownership of a property, a sale then involves a promissory contract with details of the property, purchaser and vendor. Once signed, this becomes binding on both parties.

Foreign nationals wanting to buy also need to appoint a fiscal representative to handle tax issues. A deed of transfer is later drafted and signed by both parties in the presence of a notary. The new owner of the property is then registered at the land registry.

A recent change in the law boosting landlords' rights over tenants is expected to fuel an increase in levels of buy-to-let investment. Paul Houston of estate agent Lucas Fox has just sold a one-bedroom apartment in a recently restored building in Santos for €150,000; its new owner plans to rent it to tourists.

Lucas Fox also has new apartments with river views for sale. One- and two- bedroom properties start at €355,000. "There's quite a range of building styles here, some from the 1970s and 1980s, but the period properties are usually the most attractive and sought after now," says Houston.

Although Santos's transition has been slow, the gentrification process could be accelerated by a new development from British architect Norman Foster, currently going through the planning process. This 65,000 sq metre development will include homes, shops, restaurants, arts spaces and a hotel. It will also be environmentally friendly and its centrepiece will be a tower paying homage to the Campanile in St Marks Square in Venice.

Miguel Stanley, whose heritage is British, South African and Portuguese, bought a penthouse apartment in a 200-year-old building in one of the area's broad avenues in 2004. He paid €500,000 for 2,000 sq ft, with three bedrooms and two terraces, and has recently had it valued at nearly €1m.

"Santos used to be the place people came to for nightlife but now that same energy and style is being expanded with the growth of the creative industries and cool shops and restaurants," says Stanley, who himself personifies the district's creative dynamism – a practising dentist, he also produces a make-over show on Portuguese television. "Santos still has a way to go but things are moving faster here than ever before. I've known the area more than 15 years and seen the changes taking place but there is real buzz here now."

Disponível em: <<http://www.ft.com>>. Acesso em 14/4/2008.