

Article

Temporal Governance and the Politics of Time Beyond Delay in Spatial Planning

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Abstract

This article examines how governance structures and procedural timing influence the effectiveness of Territorial Management Instruments (TMIs) in Portugal. Anchored in a comparative analysis of two key legal reforms (Decree-Law No. 380/1999 and Decree-Law No. 80/2015), the study explores the tensions between democratic legitimacy and regulatory complexity. While the 1999 framework emphasized vertical coordination and participatory rights, it often led to procedural rigidity and institutional inertia. Conversely, the 2015 reform promoted digital tools and streamlined processes but introduced new governance gaps, reduced stakeholder diversity, and compressed consultation timelines. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of legal texts, policy documents, and technical documentation, the article introduces the concept of temporal governance, the idea that planning time is not merely a constraint but a governable resource. Through this lens, planning delays are reframed as either pathological (caused by inefficiency and fragmentation) or productive (used strategically to enhance environmental assessment and stakeholder engagement). A new conceptual framework is proposed to classify types of planning time, differentiate delays, and support temporal calibration in governance design. Findings show that effective planning outcomes hinge not only on legal architecture or participatory norms but also on the institutional ability to balance speed with deliberation and strategic foresight with procedural pragmatism. The paper concludes by calling for adaptive governance models that integrate time as a dynamic dimension of spatial planning, with implications for environmental resilience, democratic value, and, above all, institutional trust.

Keywords: territorial governance; participatory planning; planning delays; temporal governance; regulatory complexity



Academic Editor: Tigran Haas

Received: 15 May 2025

Revised: 23 June 2025

Accepted: 26 June 2025

Published: 17 July 2025

Citation: Gonçalves, J.; Condessa, B.; Bizarro, S. Temporal Governance and the Politics of Time Beyond Delay in Spatial Planning. *Urban Sci.* **2025**, *9*, 279. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci9070279>

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1. Introduction

Territorial Management Instruments (TMI), the designation used in the Portuguese legal framework for spatial planning instruments, are central to operationalizing public policies related to land use. In Portugal, the evolution of TMIs reflects broader shifts in planning philosophy (from hierarchical control to networked governance, from legal formalism to procedural streamlining, and from passive public consultation to ambitions of active civic participation). Yet, these transitions have produced new contradictions because institutional simplification has not always resulted in effectiveness, and increased participation has sometimes slowed or fragmented implementation.

This article focuses on two pivotal legal milestones (Decree-Law No. 380/1999 and Decree-Law No. 80/2015) as entry points to explore how governance architecture, participatory design, and regulatory complexity interact in practice. The 1999 framework, grounded in Law No. 48/98, emphasized vertical integration and legal transparency, creating a coordinated yet procedurally dense planning regime. The 2015 reform, emerging from Law No. 31/2014, sought to modernize this landscape by introducing digital tools, redefining strategic–operational distinctions, and compressing public consultation timelines. While these features were not explicitly framed as trade-offs in the legislation, our analysis of planning documentation and procedural norms reveals that they reshaped participatory routines and legal sequences, particularly at the municipal level [1,2].

Although the two frameworks aimed to address different challenges, both struggled to strike a balance between efficiency and democratic legitimacy. In practice, planning processes often continue to be slow (see Figure 1), conflict-laden, and susceptible to administrative inertia. These observations emerge from our cross-analysis of legal provisions and planning outputs, particularly in Almada, where the prolonged revision cycle exemplifies these systemic patterns [3].

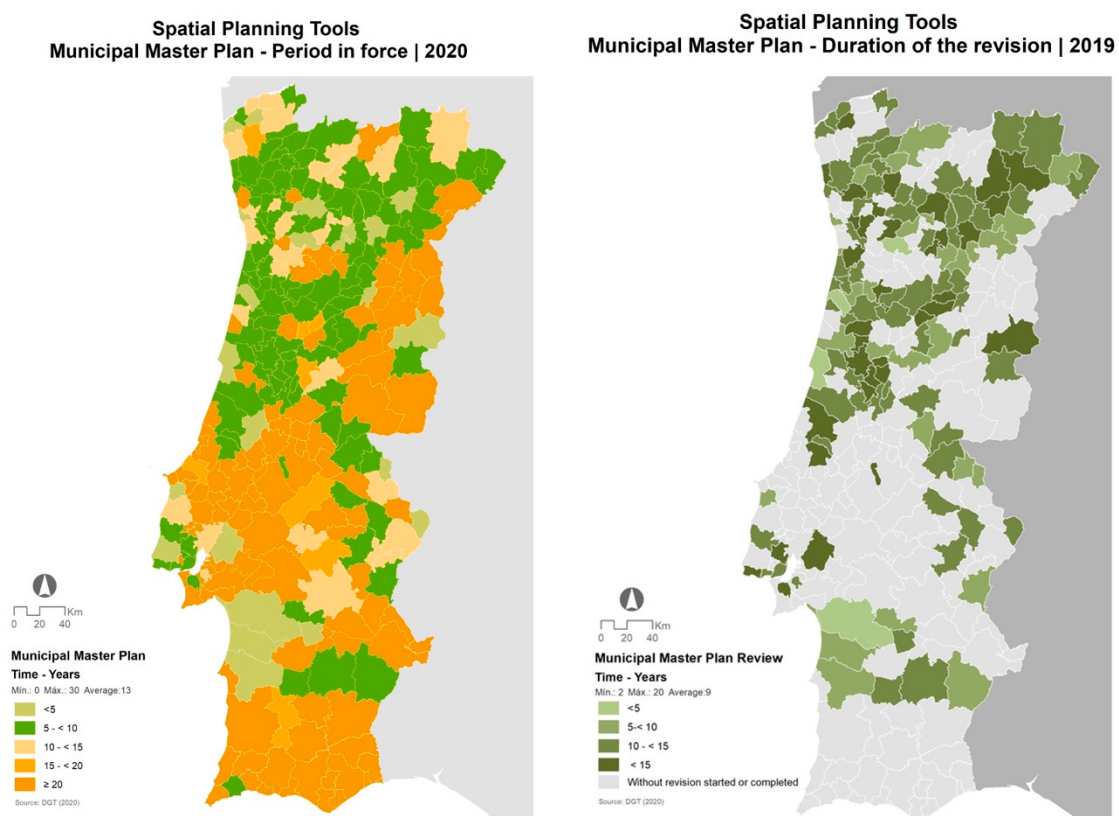


Figure 1. Examples of the slowness of special planning. Plans in force beyond the legal horizon (10 years) and revisions that can last more than 15 years. Source: Authors with data from [4].

To take the analysis further, the article introduces the concept of temporal governance, i.e., the idea that time in planning is not a neutral backdrop but rather a strategic variable that shapes institutional adaptability. By considering this perspective, we move beyond binary debates (fast vs. slow; inclusive vs. efficient) and advance towards a richer understanding of governance in complex contexts.

This article analyzes how institutional frameworks have changed over time and what these changes reveal about the dynamics of spatial governance. Institutional complexity is examined through a comparative legal analysis of Decree-Laws No. 380/1999 and

No. 80/2015, as well as planning documents that reveal fragmentation, overlapping competencies, and obstacles to coordination. Participatory design is operationalized through the analysis of consultation deadlines, procedural guarantees, and empirical material, especially the revision of the Almada Municipal Master Plan, which illustrates inclusive and compressed forms of involvement.

In particular, perceptions of procedural justice are assessed through technical literature, summaries of public consultations, and participatory feedback reports, allowing us to examine how institutional design influences legitimacy and trust. The article also proposes a critical reframing of procedural delays. Rather than viewing them solely as inefficiencies, it explores whether delays can serve as opportunities to better integrate environmental and social dimensions into planning, thereby improving long-term outcomes.

These questions are explored via a qualitative examination of legal frameworks, an in-depth review of pertinent documents, and a theoretical integration of concepts. Consequently, the article adds to ongoing discussions regarding adaptive governance, the design of procedural mechanisms, and the instrumental significance of temporal elements in spatial planning.

2. Consequences of Delays in Spatial Planning Beyond Bureaucratic Inefficiencies

2.1. Spatial Planning Governance and Institutional Complexity

Governance in spatial planning has undergone a profound transformation in response to increasingly complex challenges. Traditionally characterized by a top-down, hierarchical structure dominated by state actors, planning systems in Europe have gradually evolved toward more polycentric, participatory, and adaptive forms of governance [5,6]. This paradigmatic shift reflects broader societal trends, such as decentralization and digitalization, that redefine how territorial strategies are conceptualized and implemented.

In Portugal, this evolution is evident in the legal and institutional reforms introduced through the spatial planning framework laws of 1999 and 2015. These reforms marked a departure from rigid planning hierarchies and introduced mechanisms for horizontal coordination, more stakeholder engagement, and better spatial integration across governance levels [7]. The 2015 reform, in particular, emphasized simplification and procedural streamlining, aligning with EU directives on subsidiarity and the more recent digital governance agenda [8]. While the move toward digital platforms and decentralized decision-making enhances local responsiveness and administrative efficiency, it also introduces new risks, such as uneven institutional capacity and increased coordination complexity [9]. Empirical studies, such as [3], identified more than 20 formal steps in some municipal plans for spatial planning (MPSP) review processes, many of which do not add substantive value but are mandatory due to excessive regulations or legal interpretation.

Crucially, as Healey [10] and Innes & Booher [11] argue, governance in complex planning environments cannot rely solely on institutional design or legal instruments. Instead, it demands relational and adaptive capacities such as the ability to co-produce knowledge, manage interdependencies, and respond to emergent spatial dynamics in real time. This view aligns with resilience thinking in planning, where uncertainty and contested values require continuous negotiation and learning among diverse actors [12].

The Portuguese experience illustrates this tension vividly. Despite efforts to modernize and rationalize planning, the practical implementation often reveals persistent challenges such as fragmented stakeholder engagement, jurisdictional overlaps, and conflicts between efficiency-oriented planning and the need for legitimacy, inclusiveness, and place-based nuance [2]. In some cases, the emphasis on procedural efficiency and digital governance

may inadvertently marginalize less technologically equipped municipalities or actors with lower institutional capital, reinforcing spatial and social inequalities.

Therefore, governance in the field of spatial planning should not be seen merely as a set of institutional frameworks but rather as a continuous and context-sensitive process influenced by power dynamics and constantly changing socio-environmental circumstances. The Portuguese case offers a relevant perspective for analyzing the potential benefits and drawbacks of governance reform when faced with complex territorial issues.

Institutional complexity produces direct temporal ramifications: burdensome procedures, ambiguous mandates, and inconsistent implementation capacities generate disconnected timelines, recurring interruptions, and cycles of rework or reversal. This dynamic shows that the temporal aspect of planning is not a neutral variable but rather an effect of governance arising from the tension between legal aspirations and institutional capacities. In this context, temporal governance provides a framework for examining not only the duration of planning processes but also the reasons behind the uneven progression of time in various governance contexts, along with the associated policy implications.

Recognition of this issue opens the door to normative change, shifting from a view of planning institutions as static, rule-governed structures to an understanding of them as dynamic, negotiated arenas where time is co-produced through institutional interaction. This new conceptualization sets the stage for the following section, which examines how participatory mechanisms operate within these complex temporalities and sometimes challenge them.

2.2. Participatory Planning: Promise and Pitfalls

Participatory planning has emerged as a normative ideal in contemporary spatial governance, grounded in the principles of deliberative democracy. Rooted in Arnstein's [13] "Ladder of Citizen Participation" and Forester's [14] emphasis on communicative ethics, the paradigm seeks not merely to inform citizens but to empower them as co-creators in the planning process. This shift is driven by both democratic imperatives, enhancing legitimacy, transparency, and trust, and pragmatic considerations, such as harnessing local knowledge and fostering place-based solutions [15,16].

Portugal's planning reforms reflect these global trends. The 1999 legal framework represented a significant institutional commitment to participatory democracy, introducing extended public consultation periods of 60 days, mandatory public exhibitions, and in-person deliberative events. Participation was thus embedded not only as a procedural step but as a legal right, institutionalizing the citizen's role in shaping territorial futures [17]. However, this model also revealed structural challenges such as low engagement rates, excessive procedural formalism, and strong limitations in inclusivity, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas [7].

The 2015 reform, however, compressed these timelines and emphasized digitalization and procedural efficiency. Consultation periods were halved to 30 days, and platforms for online participation became the primary interface between planners and citizens. While this transition improved accessibility in urban and digitally literate contexts, enabling asynchronous participation, broader outreach, and real-time feedback, it also accentuated structural inequalities. Many non-urban or metropolitan municipalities lacked the necessary digital infrastructure or civic digital literacy, leading to uneven participation geographies and reinforcing existing power asymmetries [8,18].

Recent research has emphasized that digital participatory platforms are not universally empowering and often produce divergent outcomes depending on design, context, and user capability. For instance, Gonçalves et al. [19] show that participation strategies must be tailored to actors' capacities and institutional contexts, revealing that there is no "one-size-

fits-all” digital solution to participation. Similarly, Ataman et al. [20] propose a framework to evaluate not just access but the quality of citizen input and its translation into policy action, exposing the limits of tokenistic digital engagement in urban settings.

Digital participation constraints are not only technical; they are temporal. Citizens excluded from digital channels often lack the time resources (availability, access windows, digital fluency) to respond within compressed consultation periods. This creates temporal inequality, where the ability to participate is shaped by access to time, not just information. Temporal governance thus provides a lens to analyze whose time is recognized and embedded in planning cycles.

When participatory processes are properly planned and given sufficient time, as was the case at the thematic conference in Almada in 2015, they reinforce the legitimacy, common vision, and resilience of planning. These negotiated delays, although slow, illustrate how time can be used constructively in governance.

Empirical research underscores a key paradox: efforts to streamline participation for efficiency often risk reducing its depth and transformative potential. Shortened timelines can disproportionately exclude marginalized or time-poor groups, turning participation into a symbolic exercise rather than a substantive deliberation [21]. In such cases, public input may be acknowledged procedurally but sidelined substantively, resulting in what Fung [22] terms “participation without redistribution”.

However, when participatory processes are carefully structured (with sufficient time-frames, inclusive facilitation, and meaningful feedback loops), they can significantly enhance planning outcomes. They contribute to empowering communities and improving the legitimacy and resilience of planning decisions [23]. Participatory governance thus functions best not as an isolated step but as a continuous, dialogical process integrated across planning cycles.

Portugal’s mixed experience reveals that participation is not inherently empowering; its effectiveness hinges on how, for whom, and under what conditions it is operationalized. The challenge is to balance efficiency with inclusivity, ensuring that, for instance, digital innovations do not compromise the democratic ethos at the heart of participatory planning.

2.3. Regulatory Complexity and Delays in Planning

Modern spatial planning operates within an increasingly intricate regulatory landscape where multiple legal instruments, institutional layers, and policy frameworks converge. This regulatory complexity is especially pronounced in systems like Portugal’s, where EU directives, national legislation, regional frameworks, and municipal plans intersect, often with overlapping mandates and competing temporalities [7,24]. While such density is frequently criticized as bureaucratic overreach, it may also signal deliberate efforts to reconcile normative goals—economic development, environmental protection, and social equity—within a pluralistic governance framework [25].

It often happens that public bodies, such as municipalities, end up eschewing territorial planning instruments, opting for other ways of transforming urban territories that are more invisible and have far fewer formal requirements for public participation. However, it also happens that what was designed to be quicker and faster ends up taking longer because of popular protests [26,27].

From this perspective, regulatory complexity is not intrinsically dysfunctional. Rather, it reflects the normative ambition of planning to mediate conflicting interests and value systems. However, when coordination mechanisms are weak or absent, this multiplicity can devolve into institutional inertia and, in a paradox, administrative opacity [28]. In the Portuguese context, successive reforms have introduced new legal tiers—such as sectoral plans, inter-municipal strategies, and integrated territorial investments—without always

ensuring coherence or clarity in their implementation [29]. The result is a planning environment that, while comprehensive, often suffers from procedural overload and conflicting statutory obligations.

Importantly, planning delays, typically framed as inefficiencies or symptoms of dysfunction, can also serve as strategic instruments. Scholars like Broitman [30] and Enoguanbhor et al. [31] argue that temporal flexibility allows for adaptive learning and more inclusive stakeholder engagement. Delays can be especially valuable in contexts involving Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA), where comprehensive cumulative impact analyzes and public consultations require extended timelines to ensure more robustness and transparency [32].

In Portugal, SEA-linked delays have, in several cases, been utilized not as bureaucratic stalling but as opportunities to embed ecological intelligence into planning. For example, environmental objections raised during SEA processes have led to the reconsideration of infrastructure alignments, redesign of urban development areas, or incorporation of ecosystem services into zoning decisions [2]. These delays, while politically contentious, reflect a more deliberative and precautionary approach to territorial transformation.

However, the ambivalence of delay must be acknowledged. Poorly managed or politically motivated delays can impose significant costs because they discourage private investment and reduce the credibility of planning institutions [33,34]. Moreover, in competitive urban and regional markets, prolonged uncertainty can exacerbate land speculation, drive up development costs, and create disincentives for long-term planning. The challenge lies in distinguishing constructive delay, which enhances planning quality, from dysfunctional delay, which merely signals governance breakdown.

In sum, regulatory complexity and temporal slowness are not inherently pathological features of spatial planning. When designed and governed with intent, they can be tools for accountability and sustainability. Yet, without institutional capacity, interagency coordination, and political will, they risk becoming obstacles rather than enablers of effective territorial governance.

2.4. Consequences of Planning Delays: Evidence from Portugal

2.4.1. Empirical Evidence from Almada's PDM Revision as a Typology of Planning Delays

The revision of Almada's Municipal Master Plan, a municipality in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, provides a compelling empirical window into the complex temporalities of spatial planning in Portugal. Officially initiated in December 2008, nearly a decade after the original 1997 plan, the process remained incomplete more than seventeen years later. Rather than a linear progression, Almada's revision unfolded in phases marked by distinct types of delay, which exemplify the analytical categories proposed in this article's temporal governance framework.

i. Procedural delays (2009–2011)

The early stages of the revision, marked by the establishment of a Monitoring Commission (CA), the initiation of public participation under the 1999's LRTMI (Legal Regime for Territorial Management Instruments) framework, and the development of baseline territorial characterization studies, reflected legally induced procedural delay. These steps, although time-consuming, were largely driven by compliance requirements and environmental assessment obligations. The need to align with statutory norms, conduct SEA scoping, and engage with multiple state actors resulted in predictable but extended timelines.

ii. Negotiated delays (2012–2015, 2022–2025)

Between 2012 and 2015, the process entered a more deliberative phase, characterized by targeted engagement with local stakeholders, such as parish councils, civic groups,

and thematic actors in education, culture, and economy. Events like the congress “Almada: Thinking about the future” (2015), involving 11 thematic sessions across the municipality, reflected a conscious extension of planning time to incorporate divergent perspectives and co-produce a shared vision. This period exemplifies a negotiated delay, in which time was used as a resource to enhance legitimacy and collective learning. The second period (2022–2025) has been marked by intense negotiation with entities with institutional and technical influence in the territory to reach a consensus on the final document so that it is truly a master plan co-created by all those involved in the development of the municipality of Almada.

iii. Strategic delays (2016–2017)

Following the participatory cycle, the revision team leveraged the outcomes of the Congress to update key analytical outputs: projections to 2031, urban centrality maps, the delimitation of consolidated urban areas, and the integration of new legal frameworks (e.g., Law on Soils, Land Use, and Urbanism of 2014). These activities constituted strategic delays as intentional extensions of planning time to incorporate new knowledge, ecological criteria, and evolving institutional requirements. Although technically productive, they required calibration against shifting legal and political conditions.

iv. Pathological delays (2018–2021)

Despite progress, from 2018 onwards, the process exhibited features of pathological delay. The transition from the Monitoring Commission to the new Consultative Commission in 2019, combined with institutional turnover, political ambiguity, and disruptions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, led to a loss of momentum. The overlapping of planning cycles, lack of a clear timeline for approval, and administrative silos across agencies contributed to a phase marked by institutional drift, with limited visible output and diminishing public engagement.

The protracted timeline of Almada’s Master Plan revision, spanning over 17 years, should not be viewed as an isolated anomaly but rather as symptomatic of a broader national pattern.

The prolonged review of Almada’s Municipal Master Plan, which lasted more than 17 years, should not be seen as an isolated anomaly but rather as symptomatic of a broader national pattern. A comprehensive study by Pereira & Grave [3], based on several municipal planning processes in Portugal, found that the average duration of the revision of Municipal Master Plans ranged from 7 to 10 years, with several cases far exceeding this limit. These delays often occur despite the existence of legal deadlines and efforts to simplify procedures. The case of Almada, with its multiple phases of procedural, negotiation, and strategic delays, thus reflects the systemic issues highlighted in the national data, in particular, the accumulation of unstable institutional responsibilities and recurring interruptions linked to legal and political cycles. As such, Almada should be understood not as an exception but as a microcosm of the structural inefficiencies that continue to affect spatial planning processes across the country.

2.4.2. Credibility and Legitimacy Loss

One of the most critical and recurring consequences of planning delays in Portugal has been the erosion of public trust in planning institutions. The 2015 reform’s reduction of participation timelines from 60 to 30 days, along with digitalization, often translated into superficial consultation practices, especially in municipalities with limited digital capacity [18]. This shift contributed to a perception of tokenism, where citizen input was seen as a procedural obligation rather than a substantive dialogue. As Fung [22] notes,

participatory mechanisms that lack transparency and feedback loops tend to degrade institutional legitimacy and reinforce civic disengagement over time.

2.4.3. Outdated Planning Instruments

The long approval cycles inherent in both the 1999 and 2015 planning systems have consistently resulted in the production of plans that are obsolete by the time they are ratified or implemented. This misalignment between planning horizons and decision-making cycles undermines the ability of spatial plans to remain adaptive and responsive to emerging socio-economic or environmental conditions [24]. In a rapidly changing context marked by urban sprawl, climate change, and all kinds of transitions (digital, energy, demographic, ...), static plans produced through lengthy processes fail to provide actionable strategic guidance, thereby diminishing planning's anticipatory function [10].

2.4.4. Economic Costs and Investment Deterrents

Prolonged uncertainty caused by regulatory or procedural delays generates significant economic opportunity costs. In both pre- and post-2015 frameworks, investors and developers frequently reported challenges in navigating unpredictable approval timelines and unclear responsibilities [33,34]. These conditions not only deter capital inflow but also increase the transaction costs of land development, slowing down project implementation and reducing the competitiveness of local and regional economies. Additionally, uncertainty can provoke land speculation and inflated prices, further distorting spatial development outcomes [35].

Another source of delay in Portuguese spatial planning stems from judicialization and legal ambiguity, which often prompt public authorities to adopt overly cautious, risk-averse behaviors. As Pereira & Grave [3] observe, the fear of litigation, exacerbated by the complex and sometimes contradictory legal framework, frequently leads to administrative paralysis, where planning actors delay decisions or engage in repetitive consultations to avoid future legal challenges. This results in planning timelines being extended not due to technical complexity but due to a perceived need for legal defensibility. Municipalities, uncertain about how courts might interpret vague or evolving legislation, tend to overcompensate with procedural formalism and redundant documentation. The cumulative effect is a planning environment where legal risk management eclipses strategic territorial vision, imposing indirect economic costs through project stagnation, uncertainty, and diminished investor confidence.

2.4.5. Environmental Trade-Offs and Gains

Conversely, one positive externality of strategic delays, particularly those linked to Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA), has been the deeper integration of ecological concerns into planning decisions. SEA processes often necessitate comprehensive environmental evaluations, stakeholder consultations, and inter-sectoral alignment, which naturally extend planning timelines [32]. In Portugal, several municipalities used these delays to re-evaluate project boundaries, integrate green infrastructure, and apply the precautionary principle more rigorously [30,31].

The cases where SEA-linked delays enabled deeper ecological integration highlight a positive dimension of temporal governance: using strategic extensions of time as a lever for environmental reflexivity. Here, the deliberate deceleration of planning serves not as dysfunction but as a purposeful strategy to embed long-term ecological values into territorial decisions.

2.4.6. Governance Fragmentation and Bottlenecks

The cumulative impact of delay-prone planning has been a fragmentation of governance structures, especially following the 2015 reforms. The introduction of new layers (such as inter-municipal plans and digitized procedures) was not always accompanied by clear role delineation or institutional coordination mechanisms. As Swyngedouw [5] and Brenner [36] argue, fragmented governance landscapes often produce institutional bottlenecks, where overlapping competencies and unclear mandates inhibit effective policy delivery. In Portugal, this fragmentation has, at times, reduced actor diversity, limited horizontal coordination, and intensified administrative silos, ultimately constraining innovation and responsiveness in territorial management.

Fragmentation also often produces asynchronous planning cycles, uncoordinated timelines across administrative levels, and temporal mismatches in decision-making. These issues exemplify how weak temporal governance and the inability to synchronize institutional rhythms and responsibilities can exacerbate delays and policy drift.

2.4.7. Bypassing Formal Planning: Informality as a Response to Delay

One of the most significant yet under-acknowledged consequences of persistent delays in formal spatial planning is the gradual proliferation of informal or semi-formal planning practices. Faced with lengthy and unpredictable MPSP revision cycles, some municipalities have increasingly opted to bypass the rigid formal instruments, resorting instead to more flexible, project-based urban interventions. These often include isolated urban operations, ad hoc land-use adjustments, or planning exceptions justified on the basis of “public interest” or “strategic opportunity”.

This phenomenon clearly illustrates how rigid and lengthy formal planning deadlines can inadvertently encourage informal governance practices. Informality, in this sense, is not just an institutional solution but a temporary adaptation, a response to the misalignment between legal timelines and political or local development urgency. From a temporal governance perspective, this highlights the risks of poorly calibrated planning deadlines that fail to reconcile legality with responsiveness.

Moreover, the increasing reliance on these parallel mechanisms raises serious concerns about transparency and democratic oversight. These discretionary practices tend to concentrate decision-making power within a narrow circle of political and technical elites, reducing opportunities for public scrutiny and participation and potentially provoking civic backlash [26]. Over time, this can contribute to a dual-track planning culture [27] where formal instruments are symbolically maintained but substantively sidelined.

For example, in Lisbon’s Sant’Ana Hill urban regeneration process, municipal authorities bypassed formal plan revisions and instead relied on exceptional planning mechanisms and urban rehabilitation operations. These actions, while legally justifiable under discretionary clauses, were not accompanied by robust participatory processes or transparent public debate. The result was significant civil society mobilization and contestation, highlighting the risks of planning informality in contested urban contexts [27].

Paradoxically, the rigidity of formal planning, intended to guarantee legality and transparency, may be accelerating the drift toward informality. The more burdensome and time-consuming the formal procedures become, the greater the incentives to bypass them. This logic undermines the strategic role of spatial planning as a platform for collective visioning and long-term coordination and risks turning it into an administrative formality detached from actual territorial transformation.

Therefore, delays should not only be analyzed in terms of their direct temporal impact but also in terms of the institutional behaviors and planning cultures they generate. Bypassing formal planning is a symptom of deeper structural dysfunctions in the Portuguese

planning system and highlights the urgent need for reforms that balance legal robustness with procedural agility and strategic foresight with operational responsiveness.

2.5. *Rethinking Time in Planning*

Conventional planning paradigms often treat time as an external constraint, something to be minimized in favor of efficiency, predictability, and delivery. However, this perspective overlooks the qualitative dimensions of time in governance. Drawing from recent shifts in planning theory and temporal political economy, we propose re-conceptualizing time not merely as a cost or burden but as a strategic and structuring resource. When time is managed with intent and aligned with broader governance goals, it can enhance the legitimacy and adaptability of planning outcomes [12,37].

This rethinking starts with a distinction between pathological delays and productive delays. Pathological delays arise from bureaucratic inertia, institutional fragmentation, or adversarial conflict. They reflect systemic dysfunctions that hinder responsiveness and erode trust in public institutions. By contrast, productive delays represent deliberate temporal stretches used to allow for environmental due diligence, inclusive deliberation, and conflict mediation. Such delays are not inefficiencies but investments in planning quality, akin to temporal buffers that safeguard public interest and long-term resilience [30,38].

The recognition of time as a resource also opens up a richer conversation around temporal justice. Different actors and communities experience time differently because what is a delay for a developer may be a window of negotiation for marginalized groups. Similarly, intergenerational equity (central to sustainability) requires planners to account for future temporalities, ensuring decisions today do not compromise ecological or social viability tomorrow [12]. Thus, time becomes not just an operational factor but a political and ethical dimension of planning.

In the Portuguese context, this reconceptualization invites planners to move beyond binary views of fast versus slow planning. Instead, it calls for temporal calibration as deliberate alignment of planning timelines with project-specific attributes such as scale, risk, stakeholder diversity, and environmental complexity. It rejects a “one-size-fits-all” approach to planning timeframes. For instance, routine urban interventions may benefit from accelerated timelines, whereas large-scale strategic projects (particularly those with environmental or cultural sensitivities) require slower, deliberative pathways.

Operationalizing this perspective entails building institutional capacities for temporal reflexivity, as the institutional capacity to critically reflect on and adjust planning timelines in response to evolving circumstances, new knowledge, or stakeholder feedback. A possible illustration of this idea would be if, during a Strategic Environmental Assessment, new data on biodiversity emerged, reflective institutions could pause to incorporate this information, even if this delayed the approval phase. It also requires reforming legal and procedural norms that treat time rigidly and instead promote flexible, context-sensitive temporalities grounded in principles of equity, sustainability, and democratic participation.

2.6. *A Framework for Temporal Governance in Spatial Planning*

The framework presented in this section was developed through a cross-process, combining (1) inductive insights from the empirical analysis of planning delays and stakeholder engagement in the Almada case; (2) analytical synthesis of key concepts from planning theory, adaptive governance, and temporal political economy [12,15,30]; and (3) normative reasoning to formulate decision-support tools aligned with democratic and ecological governance objectives. Rather than arising from a single method, the framework integrates empirical evidence, theoretical abstraction, and institutional design logic to

provide a comprehensive and transferable tool for analyzing and managing time in spatial planning processes.

To move beyond binary discussions of delay as either dysfunction or virtue, we propose a conceptual framework that repositions time as a governable dimension of planning. This framework integrates the following interrelated components: (1) typologies of planning time, (2) delay differentiation, (3) temporal calibration, and (4) temporal justice. It aims to support planners and policymakers in designing more context-sensitive and strategically timed planning processes.

This framework reframes time as a governance variable, not merely an operational constraint. It integrates insights from planning theory, systems thinking, and institutional design to support context-sensitive temporal strategies. The model is structured across four interrelated dimensions:

i. Typology of planning time

Type of Time	Description	Purpose
Chronological Time	Measured by clock/calendar (e.g., 30-day consultations)	Ensures predictability and legal compliance
Political Time	Influenced by electoral cycles, administrative mandates, and strategic political considerations (e.g., conflict avoidance, negotiation with key actors).	Shapes windows of opportunity; can delay or accelerate planning for political gain or risk management.
Deliberative Time	Time required for meaningful participation and negotiation	Builds legitimacy and social resilience
Reflective/Adaptive Time	Time for learning, revision, and integrating feedback	Enhances adaptive capacity and long-term fit

While this typology organizes planning time into ideal types, each category interacts dynamically with the institutional and political context. In particular, political time often extends beyond simple electoral cycles. It may include deliberate manipulations of the planning timeline to postpone conflict, secure favorable conditions, or accommodate negotiations with powerful actors. For example, local governments may delay plan approvals to avoid public backlash during sensitive periods or fast-track projects to showcase policy success ahead of elections.

This strategic use of time illustrates how its control becomes a political resource, determining who participates, when, and under what circumstances. As such, political time requires closer examination, as it can both enable and obstruct democratic and sustainable outcomes in planning.

ii. Delay differentiation matrix

Delay Type	Causal Factors	Outcome	Strategic Value
Pathological Delay	Inefficiency, conflict, fragmentation	Institutional bottlenecks, trust erosion	Low
Procedural Delay	Legal requirements, inter-agency review	Compliance and risk management	Moderate
Negotiated Delay	Stakeholder engagement, social contestation	Enhanced legitimacy and consensus	High
Strategic Delay	Intentional pause for better design/data	Improved environmental or social integration	Very High

The strategic value assigned to each type of delay is based on its potential contribution to governance objectives, such as legitimacy or stakeholder engagement. For example, strategic delays are classified as “Very High” because they reflect intentional pauses aimed at improving the quality of the planning process through the incorporation of new knowledge and ecological sensitivity. Negotiated delays are given a “high” value due to their role in strengthening democratic legitimacy through participatory co-creation. In contrast, pathological delays are classified as “low”, as they usually result from procedural dysfunctions, producing inefficiency and degrading public trust. This matrix thus aims to provide a normative guide to help technicians and politicians distinguish between delays that are symptoms of failure and those that serve as tools for adaptive governance.

iii. Temporal calibration tool

A decision-support tool that helps planners match project complexity with appropriate temporal strategies.

Project Complexity	Suggested Temporal Strategy
Low (e.g., zoning revision)	Chronological/ Accelerated
Medium (e.g., inter-municipal plan)	Hybrid with structured stakeholder phases
High (e.g., large infrastructure + SEA)	Slow planning + adaptive timelines

Encourages adaptive temporalities, ensuring that time investments are proportionate to impact, uncertainty, and value conflict.

iv. Temporal justice lens

This normative lens asks, who controls time? (Planners, politicians, communities, ...?); Whose time is prioritized or excluded? (Investors vs. marginalized groups?); Are future generations accounted for (for instance, intergenerational equity)?

Applying this lens ensures that equity and justice are embedded into the temporal design of planning processes.

By embracing this temporal governance framework, spatial planning systems can move beyond binary debates (fast vs. slow; efficient vs. participatory) and instead optimize time use based on stakeholder needs and systemic complexity. Time, when treated as a flexible and governable dimension, becomes a strategic asset, a lever for sustainability, and institutional resilience.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative document-based approach to examine how the governance and effectiveness of TMI in Portugal evolved across two major legal frameworks: Decree-Law No. 380/1999 and Decree-Law No. 80/2015. Rather than relying on interviews or field-based case studies, this methodology draws from systematic legal analysis, policy document review, and secondary literature to capture the implications of procedural reform and participatory restructuring.

3.1. Comparative Legal Analysis

At the core of this research is a comparative legal assessment of the two statutory frameworks that defined Portuguese spatial planning at the turn of the 21st century. Decree-Law No. 380/1999 is analyzed for its emphasis on legal hierarchy, institutional coordination, and formal participatory rights. In contrast, Decree-Law No. 80/2015 is evaluated for its prioritization of procedural streamlining, digital governance, and strategic-operational separation (programs vs. plans).

This legal comparison focuses on the following:

- i. Participation mechanisms and consultation timelines (Articles 5 and 6 of the 1999 framework vs. digital provisions in 2015).
- ii. Environmental assessment integration (Art. 14 of the 1999 framework and SEA requirements in 2015).
- iii. Procedural timelines and approval stages.
- iv. Intergovernmental coordination mandates.

This analysis resulted in a comparison of nine dimensions that clearly showed the evolution and even the change in perspective between one legal framework and the other.

The objective is to trace how institutional intentions evolved over time and how legal instruments have restructured governance logic and procedural sequencing.

3.2. Policy and Planning Document Review

To complement the legal analysis, the study appealed to a documentary review based on a targeted sampling strategy. The selected documents were directly related to the implementation of Decree-Law No. 380/1999 and Decree-Law No. 80/2015. These included the following:

- i. National-level planning reports from the Directorate-General for Territory and the Portuguese Environment Agency;
- ii. Municipal Master Plan documentation (with a particular focus on Almada, Lisbon, and Cascais);
- iii. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) reports accompanying TMI;
- iv. Public consultation summaries and participatory feedback reports;
- v. Independent evaluations and academic assessments of spatial planning reforms.

A thematic content analysis was then conducted to identify and systematize evidence related to four core analytical dimensions: governance coherence and actor roles; environmental integration and strategic assessment cycles; procedural bottlenecks and sources of delay; and public participation uptake and digitalization impacts.

The analysis followed a deductive-inductive coding approach. Deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework of the study (temporal governance, participatory planning, and institutional complexity), while inductive sub-codes emerged during the iterative reading of the material (e.g., “institutional discontinuity”, “participation fatigue”, or “digital asymmetry”).

Findings were compared across document types and institutional levels, allowing for the identification of converging patterns, recurring governance constraints, and mismatches between the normative intent of legal reforms and their practical consequences. This approach ensured that the empirical material provided a grounded and nuanced basis for evaluating how planning laws are interpreted in real-world contexts.

3.3. Theoretical and Scholarly Integration

The temporal governance framework was used both as a conceptual basis and as a guiding structure for empirical analysis, facilitating the systematic coding of planning delays (procedural, negotiated, strategic, pathological) and considerations on institutional flexibility, participatory timetables, and regulatory constraints, while shaping our understanding of temporal dynamics in planning processes, such as transitions from deliberative consultation phases to accelerated consultation phases and the strategic use of delays for ecological integration, thus ensuring a coherent analytical approach that integrates conceptual insights with empirical observations in planning documents, EIA reports and participatory summaries.

In reality, the literature review adopted here did not follow a formal systematic approach, with the selection of academic sources being guided by structured thematic criteria, giving priority to peer-reviewed publications in the areas of spatial planning, governance, and time management in planning. The sources were selected for their relevance to the analytical dimensions of the study and cross-referenced with legal and empirical data.

The empirical materials are interpreted through a multi-theoretical lens, incorporating concepts from adaptive governance [12,15], deliberative democracy [13,14], and temporal political economy [30,37].

By integrating legal and documentary insights with academic theory, the study intends to offer a critical understanding of how time, participation, and complexity intersect in shaping the governance and performance of TMI in Portugal.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Evidence of Governance Transformation

The transition from the 1999 to the 2015 spatial planning framework in Portugal illustrates a foundational shift in the design logic of governance. The 1999 Decree-Law emphasized top-down coordination, mandatory vertical harmonization across planning levels, and formal participatory rights. In contrast, the 2015 Decree-Law introduced institutional streamlining, separating strategic “programs” from binding “plans” and reinforcing municipal autonomy.

Despite these intentions, the shift toward networked and digitalized governance introduced new coordination burdens. Fewer actors were formally involved, and public consultation chains were compressed, often at the cost of institutional coherence. As Allmendinger & Haughton [9] suggest, such reforms may trade institutional inclusivity for speed and predictability, undermining long-term legitimacy.

These tensions between reform intentions and practical outcomes are clearly illustrated by the prolonged revision of Almada’s Municipal Master Plan. The attempt to comply with the 2015 framework required reconfiguration of planning diagnostics, institutional realignments, and legal reinterpretation, significantly extending the process and revealing the inertia embedded in legal transitions.

4.2. Participation and Planning Outcomes

A fundamental difference between the two legal frameworks concerns the structure and timing of public participation. The 1999 framework institutionalized broad, in-person involvement, while the 2015 reform reduced participation deadlines to 30 days and moved consultation online. This change was in line with the broader objectives of e-governance [8] but perhaps unintentionally exacerbated the digital divide and hampered accessibility in regions and socio-demographic groups that are less digitally included [18,39,40].

Participation, seen as an obstacle, has become more procedural than substantive, fulfilling legal requirements without necessarily increasing the depth of deliberation. This aligns with Fung’s [22] critique of “participation without redistribution”, in which stakeholder participation is symbolically recognized but marginalized in substantive terms. Short deadlines and digitization weaken deliberative democracy [14,15].

The case of Almada’s thematic participatory congress in 2015 with 11 thematic sessions reflected a negotiated delay that enhanced the social embeddedness of the plan. While time-consuming, this phase represented a negotiated delay that enhanced the social embeddedness of the plan, contrasting with the procedural compression embedded in the 2015 legal reform.

4.3. Strategic and Pathological Delays

The analysis also reveals that delays were both strategic and systemic. The introduction of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the 2015 framework aimed to mainstream ecological considerations but increased procedural complexity. As Broitman [30] and Therivel [32] argue, such delays can serve a productive regulatory function, enabling environmental due diligence and adaptive redesign.

Portuguese municipalities used SEA delays to integrate ecosystem services, risk maps, and biodiversity constraints more thoroughly into spatial plans, demonstrating that “slowness” can improve planning quality when aligned with robust deliberation and data-driven assessments. However, where institutional capacity was weak or fragmented, delays became pathological, producing gridlock and deterring investment [33,34].

The Almada Municipal Master Plan revision provides a rich empirical illustration of different types of planning delays. Documentary records identify the following:

- i. Procedural delays (2009–2011), linked to environmental assessments and compliance steps;
- ii. Negotiated delays (2012–2015, 2022–2025), used for deepened stakeholder engagement;
- iii. Strategic delays (2016–2017), applied to integrate new legal and environmental inputs;
- iv. Pathological delays (2018–2021) arising from institutional turnover and diminished public momentum.

These stages illustrate how different forms of delay were mobilized or emerged throughout the planning process, with variable impacts on legitimacy, coordination, and output quality.

4.4. Institutional Fragmentation and Procedural Bottlenecks

Planning documentation and SEA reports highlight that governance fragmentation intensified under the 2015 framework. The shift from the Monitoring Commission to a new Consultative Commission in Almada, without clear transition mechanisms, created discontinuities in coordination. At national and inter-municipal levels, documents reveal overlaps of planning responsibilities and an absence of stable procedural handovers. These issues contributed to non-linear planning sequences, reliance on exceptional instruments, and weakened stakeholder participation.

The analysis confirms the relevance of the proposed Temporal Governance Framework. Projects with low complexity (e.g., minor zoning changes) benefited from accelerated processes. However, strategic and environmentally sensitive interventions required deliberative and reflective timeframes, which were often misaligned with legally prescribed deadlines.

The Almada case provides empirical validation for the Temporal Governance Framework. Each delay type—procedural, negotiated, strategic, and pathological—manifested in distinct phases, highlighting the importance of calibrated planning timelines. This example underscores the need to align planning temporality with project complexity, stakeholder engagement intensity, and institutional capacity.

This mismatch created a recurring legitimacy-speed trade-off (see Table 1). While shorter processes delivered faster results, they frequently undermined the quality of stakeholder engagement, environmental assessment, and social buy-in. Conversely, slower processes, though contested for inefficiency, fostered greater resilience and community ownership, especially when delays were managed strategically.

Table 1. Comparison of the two legal frameworks according to 9 dimensions.

Dimension	1999 Framework (Decree-Law 380/99)	2015 Framework (Decree-Law 80/2015)
Governance Model	Hierarchical, rule-based, with strong inter-level coordination (national, regional, municipal)	Decentralized, adaptive, emphasizing the distinction between strategic (programs) and operational (plans)
Public Participation	Legally guaranteed (Art. 6); 60-day public discussion; emphasis on face-to-face engagement	Digitalized participation; 30-day window; emphasis on online platforms
Actor Involvement	Broad and diverse: municipalities, central government, NGOs, public institutions	Streamlined: fewer actors, more municipal autonomy, focus on technical authorities
Timeframes for Planning Stages	Longer timelines: elaboration and discussion took months to years	Shorter timeframes but procedural compression led to simplified and rushed consultations
Environmental Integration	Environmental protection included (e.g., ecological structure, natural resources) but often delayed	Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) formalized; more comprehensive but adds complexity and delays
Implementation Dynamics	Procedural rigidity, multiple approval layers	More flexible but prone to inconsistencies and legal exceptions
Legitimacy vs. Efficiency	Higher legitimacy through extended participation; lower implementation speed	Improved speed; lower legitimacy in some cases due to reduced stakeholder diversity
Evaluation and Feedback Loops	Weak institutional mechanisms for periodic review	Introduced ongoing evaluation and reporting obligations, including digital tracking
Role of Technology	Minimal; mostly paper-based processes	Prominent use of digital platforms and online publication of plans

The decentralization and procedural simplification envisioned in the 2015 reform paradoxically amplified institutional fragmentation. With fewer actors in formal roles and reduced inter-agency coordination, responsibilities became diffused and ambiguous. Swyngedouw [41] and Brenner [36] describe this phenomenon as the “Janus-faced” nature of governance reform, where innovation can simultaneously erode accountability structures.

Fragmentation also led to non-linear planning sequences, increased reliance on exceptions and ad hoc mechanisms, and the sidelining of less powerful stakeholders. The absence of a clear governance architecture created bottlenecks, particularly in inter-municipal coordination and environmental review stages.

4.5. Synthesis and Framework Validation

Empirical analysis of planning processes in Almada, but also in other municipalities, reveals recurring challenges, such as prolonged delays and procedural fragmentation. These local manifestations, although specific to the context, reflect broader systemic patterns in the Portuguese spatial planning landscape. In this sense, they provide a valuable perspective for assessing the analytical robustness and applicability of the proposed Temporal Governance Framework.

Instead of treating municipal cases as isolated or exceptional, they should be interpreted as microcosms of national planning dynamics. The types of delays observed (procedural, negotiated, strategic, and pathological) mirror those described in the framework, reinforcing its analytical and explanatory utility. The findings also illustrate how

different forms of delay are not mere technical obstacles but rather the result of institutional design, participatory regimes, and the legal sequence.

This alignment between empirical evidence and the conceptual framework justifies a broader analytical step: revisiting the legal-institutional architectures that underpin these patterns. Specifically, a comparative analysis of the 1999 and 2015 land use planning frameworks provides insights into how governance design shapes temporal outcomes. Although the 1999 framework was characterized by hierarchical coordination and expansive participatory guarantees, it often led to procedural inertia. On the other hand, the 2015 reform, while aiming at simplification and efficiency, compressed participation deadlines and introduced new layers of institutional ambiguity.

These legal transformations did not occur in a vacuum; their effects are reflected in how planning is practiced on the ground. Almada's prolonged plan revision, for instance, required recalibration under the 2015 law, resulting in diagnostic revisions, legal reinterpretations, and institutional reconfiguration. Similar patterns are echoed in Lisbon and Cascais, as well as in national-level assessments [3,4].

To consolidate these insights, Table 1 offers a comparative overview of the two legal frameworks across nine governance dimensions. This comparison reinforces the argument that legal reforms—while often justified by efficiency goals—can produce unintended consequences in terms of temporal fragmentation, participatory depth, and implementation coherence.

In short, the validation of the Temporal Governance Framework is twofold: it is empirically grounded in local planning trajectories and conceptually affirmed through national legal developments. This two-layered analysis underscores the importance of temporal calibration and strategic differentiation of delays as tools for managing complexity in spatial governance.

5. Discussion

Empirical results confirm that accelerating technical processes within the 2015 framework often came at the expense of the quality of participation and procedural legitimacy, as the changes made already suggested. On the other hand, slower and more deliberative approaches, although often considered inefficient, contributed to greater legitimacy of planning and adaptive learning. We believe that this is consistent with the temporal calibration logic proposed in the study, which advocates differentiated planning deadlines based on the complexity of the project and the requirements for stakeholder involvement.

The Almada case, specifically, reveals that delays are not mere symptoms of dysfunction but can serve as tools for strategic reflection and process redesign. Production delays allowed for the integration of updated legal provisions and a collaborative vision. These moments of pause supported legal coherence and social legitimacy, reaffirming that planning time can be (should be?) a governable resource rather than an obstacle.

This new conceptualization of time as a resource positions it not only as a procedural constraint but also as a political and institutional instrument within governance. It suggests that reflexivity in time management is central to addressing the challenges of contemporary planning, from adapting to climate change to the growing demands for democratic legitimacy.

To this end, future planning reforms should not focus obsessively on speeding up deadlines or reducing procedural burdens. Instead, they should embrace the principles of temporal justice and calibration. This means designing planning systems that respond not only to technical efficiency but also to the temporalities experienced by the communities affected and the intergenerational commitments that sustainable development entails.

Strengthening institutional capacity for temporal sensitivity and adaptive governance will be key to ensuring that time in planning is not wasted but invested wisely.

6. Conclusions

This article has explored how governance frameworks, participatory mechanisms, and planning temporality interact to shape the effectiveness of TMI in Portugal. By analyzing the evolution from Decree-Law No. 380/1999 to Decree-Law No. 80/2015, the study reveals a critical paradox: reforms intended to simplify and accelerate planning have, in many cases, introduced new complexities, diluted participatory depth, and challenged institutional coherence.

The comparative analysis underscores that governance quality in spatial planning cannot be reduced to either hierarchical control or procedural streamlining. Instead, it depends on the system's capacity to foster inclusive participation and manage time as a strategic planning resource. The introduction of digital platforms and streamlined timelines, while promoting efficiency, has also generated exclusions and weakened deliberative legitimacy, particularly in regions with limited institutional or technological capacity.

Planning delays, often perceived as governance failures, emerged in this study as ambivalent phenomena. While some delays result from administrative inertia or legal fragmentation, others function as strategic instruments that enable deeper stakeholder negotiation, environmental integration, and policy learning. The proposed Temporal Governance Framework supports this nuanced perspective by differentiating types of time and delay and by offering tools for temporal calibration in complex governance environments.

The Portuguese experience reveals that neither speed nor inclusion alone guarantees effective spatial planning. What is required is an institutionally embedded capacity for reflexivity to distinguish when to accelerate and when to pause, when to consult broadly, and when to act decisively. This balance is particularly vital in the face of climate challenges, urban inequality, and declining public trust in institutions.

As such, the study contributes to broader debates in planning theory by arguing for a temporalized understanding of governance, one that accounts for the political, procedural, and distributive dimensions of planning time. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to rethink time not as an external constraint but as an internal variable that can (and must) be governed with care.

Although the analysis is based on the Portuguese planning system, its underlying logic (that time is a governable and strategic dimension of spatial governance) has potential relevance in various contexts. However, we recognize that its applicability may vary in systems with different legal architectures, institutional capacities, or participatory cultures. Future empirical research, particularly through cross-national comparisons or case studies, could test and adapt the framework outlined here, thereby extending its usefulness to a wider range of governance environments.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.G.; methodology, J.G., B.C. and S.B.; formal analysis, B.C. and S.B.; investigation, J.G.; resources, B.C. and S.B.; writing—original draft preparation, J.G., B.C. and S.B.; writing—review and editing, J.G. and B.C.; supervision, J.G.; project administration, J.G.; funding acquisition, J.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was funded by national funds, Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) in the framework of project UIDB/05703/2020 from the research unit CiTUA.

Data Availability Statement: Data will be made available upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflicts of interest.

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