RESEARCH OBJECTIVE
The purpose of my research was to evaluate local stakeholder satisfaction of an urban river rehabilitation project in the city of Coimbra (population 100,000). Parque Verde do Rio Mondego (Parque Verde) was part of the Programa Polis (Polis program), a national urbanism project that revitalized riverfront areas in 17 cities across Portugal.

RESEARCH METHODS
In my research, I used primarily the method of structured in-depth interviews with questions formulated with the help of colleagues at Instituto Superior Tecnico (IST) in Lisbon who have been involved in evaluating the success of the Polis program in several cities, of which Coimbra was one. Each interview lasted about 1 to 1.5 hours, and consisted of six main sections. These were: overall satisfaction and general recommendations, satisfaction with equipment and programming of Polis project, impact on the historical center, economic/cultural/tourism impact of the Polis project, accessibility from various parts of town, and the connection between the right and left banks of the river. In total, I interviewed five local stakeholders in Coimbra. The stakeholders I spoke to were experts in environmental and urban issues, are knowledgeable about Coimbra, and were more or less directly involved with the Polis project. A list of interviewees is available on my blog.

While I originally intended to interview local users at Parque Verde, I was advised by colleagues at the IST to instead carry out in-depth interviews given the language difficulties. IST colleagues provided me with contacts of possible interviewees, who were not only subject and/or local experts, but were also more likely to speak English or French, another language I was proficient in. Contacts for other potential interviewees were collected through a snowballing process, a list of which has been forwarded to IST colleagues.

Another research method used was informal observations during my one-week stay in Coimbra. I visited and photographed Parque Verde, other urban parks in Coimbra, as well as other local points of interest as directed by interviewees along the process. I also visited Lisbon and Porto for three days each, to get a general sense of other cities with well-integrated and well-used waterfront areas and carry out informal observations. However, the focus of my research was primarily the Rio Mondego waterfront and its relationship with the rest of the city of Coimbra.
I also created a blog, http://jane-in-orbit.blogspot.com, to provide those interested more contextual details, photographs, and maps. The blog was disseminated to interviewees and colleagues in Portugal and is open to feedback.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

**POLIS PROJECT HAS HAD LITTLE IMPACT ON COIMBRA’S HISTORICAL CENTER**

According to the stakeholders I interviewed, the Polis project has had little impact on the historic center, although some conceded that the project highlighted the need to connect the river to the city’s historical core. Given the river’s role in the history of Coimbra, and the historical connection between the river and the city, the stakeholders were asked to assess the project’s impact on the historical center.

The river is still fragmented from the Alta and the Baxia areas as well as the Botanical Gardens, without a clear pedestrian or public transit connection. The riverfront along the train station, for example, is starkly separated from the river despite the close proximity. Some downtown goers might park their car at the Parque Verde parking lot and walk to their destination, but it is a good 15-20 minutes’ walk from the said parking lot to Largo de Portagem. The Botanical Gardens is situated just upslope from Parque Verde, but there is no direct access through the gardens, and pedestrians have to walk around the garden (about 30-45 minutes) to access the river.

The downtown/Baixa area underwent depopulation as more affordable housing options became available in the mid 20th century, but rehabilitation efforts face challenges. The Baixa still appears depopulated and neglected with businesses facing competition from modern shopping malls in the outskirts of the historic center. Old structures are difficult to renovate, and incentive programs lack sustained funding. However,
the creation of Parque Verde by the Polis program has not played a significant role in these rehabilitation efforts, according to the stakeholders interviewed.

POLIS PROJECT ADDED VALUE RIO MONDEGO AND QUALITY OF LIFE OF COIMBRA RESIDENTS

All interviewees thought the Polis project in Coimbra contributed to a large extent to the development of the city by re-integrating the river into the urban fabric while providing a much-needed outdoor leisure space of high quality. Most interviewees thought the Polis project has enhanced the river’s value in the eyes of the city’s residents, thus achieving the program’s goal of revalorizing the river. The river is now accessible and open for people to enjoy after 20 years of neglect and poor image. The project made the river a part of people’s everyday lives, inviting residents to observe the river or otherwise reconnect with nature in a relaxed and relevant setting, especially during the late afternoons and the weekends, engaging families with children, individuals seeking quiet time, and other adults in various corners including a playground, jetties, exhibition spaces, a large event space, bars, and restaurants.

Some suggested further intervention was needed to maximize the impact of the project, including monitoring and improving water quality and ecological integrity, developing connections and public accessibility to smaller streams that feed into the Mondego, and the regulation of current construction patterns to reduce the impact of sedimentation and land conversion.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE POLIS PROJECT

All of the stakeholders I interviewed voiced displeasure at the rate of construction the project has apparently caused, citing the resulting problems of urban sprawl, increased demands on transportation and other infrastructure, and increased development pressure.
on greenfields and the destruction of open space. In anticipation of rising real estate values, the developer community engaged in a frenzy of land speculation and construction of high-rise luxury apartment buildings, resulting in an estimated 30% increase in the supply of housing units.

PLAN FOR ONGOING OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE LACKING IN POLIS PROGRAM

New physical spaces provided by the Polis project could benefit from more animation and regular programming. Exhibition cubes and event spaces were underused, while stakeholders pointed out the dearth of cultural activities and events in Coimbra. The lack of programming is perhaps a reflection of the disconnect between the use of space at the local level and the project planning and carried out at the national scale by the Polis program. Lawns and orange groves cover large areas of the park and are difficult and expensive to maintain at the local level without necessary funding support.

PARQUE VERDE POORLY CONNECTED TO VARIOUS PARTS OF TOWN, EXCEPT BY CAR

Access to the waterfront was an important objective of the Polis program. Due to the large parking lot, Parque Verde is most accessible by car. The park is a good 15-20 minutes’ walk from Largo de Portagem, through an older romantic riverfront park, Parque de Manuel Braga. The park is also not very accessible from other parts of town, with limited public transit options. However, one interviewee who was probably most involved with the project maintained that it was not difficult to get to the river from the historic center.
Access on foot from Largo de Portagem to Parque Verde is complemented by the Linha Azul, the “Blue Line” bus that takes residents into the urban core. Another part of the historic center that could benefit from better connection to the river is the Botanical Gardens, on

RECONNECTING RIGHT AND LEFT BANKS THROUGH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Beyond the symbolic connection in the form of a pedestrian bridge, the Polis project has not done enough to narrow the historical gap between the right and left banks of the Mondego. The park on the right bank has received priority, evident in the number of facilities and users. A tourism development plan, as part of a “Polis II” of sorts, could potentially improve connection between existing urban green spaces and other tourism points of interest on the two banks of the Mondego, bringing in benefits for residents on both sides of the river.