Digital Geoarbitrage, Workation, and Remote Work Migration in Lisbon, Madeira, and Las Palmas: Socioeconomic Impacts and Reflections

Abstract

This article investigates the social, economic, and political implications of digital geoarbitrage by analyzing three emblematic cases in the Iberian Peninsula: Lisbon, Madeira, and Las Palmas. Rather than focusing on the lifestyle narratives of remote workers, it questions and discusses how international digital nomads might, or not, influence local housing markets, labor dynamics, and urban governance regimes. Drawing on empirical data on salary differentials, rental inflation, and visa issuance, the article situates these movements within broader processes of urban commodification (Harvey, 2008), platform-mediated mobility (Moriset, 2022), and post-pandemic labor flexibilization (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018).

The analysis is grounded in critical urban and mobility studies, particularly debates on spatial justice (Soja, 2010), digital enclaves (Bozzi, 2024), and symbolic governance (Shore & Wright, 1997). It highlights how digital nomadism—though promoted as a tool for economic revitalization—often accelerates gentrification, reinforces socio-spatial stratification, and bypasses participatory policymaking (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023). In response, the article advocates for inclusive governance mechanisms that incorporate local voices, assess distributive impacts, and reframe mobile work not as a private good, but as a collective challenge for cities undergoing global transitions.

Can a small but high-income population segment significantly shape housing trends or local integration? To what degree do short-term stays and limited social interaction affect host communities? And how does digital tourism blur the boundaries between work, leisure, and residence? Rather than proposing definitive answers, the article offers a grounded and comparative discussion that situates remote work mobility within broader socio-economic and spatial transformations.

1. Introduction

The global proliferation of remote work has significantly altered the geography of labor, dissolving traditional connections between employment and physical location (Choudhury et

al., 2019; Braesemann, 2022). Among the various strategies that have emerged from this transformation, digital geoarbitrage—the practice of earning income in high-wage economies while residing in low-cost regions—has become emblematic of new mobility regimes. Popular among remote professionals and digital nomads, this practice reflects broader shifts in how individuals and institutions pursue quality of life, productivity, and spatial autonomy (Merriman, 2024; López et al., 2024).

As remote work gains institutional legitimacy, governments across the Global North and South are incorporating it into economic development strategies. In Southern Europe, Portugal and Spain have introduced digital nomad visas, tax incentives, and place-branding efforts to attract high-income remote workers (Sardinha et al., 2023; Bozzi, 2024). These policies signal not only a response to post-pandemic economic uncertainty, but also a reconfiguration of urban competitiveness in the context of global digital labor (Aroles et al., 2022; König & Schultz, 2023).

Yet, the capacity of digital geoarbitrage to reshape cities and communities remains an open question. While some argue that even small populations of affluent newcomers can influence housing markets and social dynamics (Penn, 2007), others urge caution against overstating their impact. Is the number of visas granted statistically significant enough to explain rental inflation or cultural displacement? What role does the duration of stay play in mediating local integration? And how does the line between digital tourism and remote work blur policy and planning responses (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; König & Schultz, 2023)?

Moreover, this form of mobility is not universally accessible. It is predicated on income differentials, technological infrastructure, and legal regimes that privilege certain nationalities and professions. As Sutherland and Jarrahi (2018) argue, remote work reinforces “platform-enabled stratification,” wherein some workers experience hyper-flexibility and privilege while others face precarious, immobile conditions. Digital nomads thus represent a new kind of selective transnationalism, where labor mobility is asymmetrically distributed and spatial power is unequally exercised (Braesemann, 2022; Sargsyan, 2024).

This article explores these possible invisible tensions through the cases of Lisbon, Madeira, and Las Palmas—three sites that exemplify different urban and regional responses to remote work migration. Drawing on salary and rental data, policy documents, and academic literature, we question to what extent geoarbitrage is a transformative force or a symbolic amplification of broader global inequalities. Rather than offering deterministic conclusions, we aim to provoke debate about how numerically small but economically powerful groups

shape urban governance and imaginaries, and how these processes might be governed more inclusively (Teodorovicz et al., 2023; Touraine, 1998; Toffler, 1980).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 From Agrarian Labor to the Industrial Revolution; and the Rise of Factory Labor

Between the 15th and 18th centuries, European economies were largely agrarian. Labor was tied to feudal obligations and subsistence farming, with growing urban centers and guild-based craft production slowly reshaping economic life (Ellinghausen, 2008; Tomlins, 2010). This foundational transformation laid the groundwork for wage labor and urban mobility.

The Industrial Revolution brought radical reorganization of labor through mechanization and centralized factories (Hobsbawm, 1962; Landes, 1969). The division of labor, long hours, and urban migration created the modern working class (Thompson, 1963). This period saw new social dynamics, labor movements, and a shift toward time-discipline in production (Pollard, 1965).

2.2 The Emergence of the Knowledge Worker

By the late 20th century, thinkers like Toffler (1980) and Bell (1973) described the transition toward post-industrial societies, where value was generated less by physical goods and more by information and knowledge. Touraine (1995) emphasized the centrality of cultural and symbolic production, marking a new phase in labor politics. The knowledge worker emerged as a mobile, self-directed actor empowered by digital tools.

Technological infrastructure enabled the rise of telework and virtual teams well before the pandemic. Scholars like Nilles (1975) and Olson & Primps (1984) explored early forms of remote labor facilitated by telecommunications. The internet and mobile devices accelerated these changes, making location-independent work viable at scale (Mokyr, 2001; Drucker, 1993; Kumar, 2004).

2.3 COVID-19 as a Historical Rupture

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a global stress test. Eurofound (2023) notes a jump in EU remote work from 5.4% in 2019 to 24.4% in 2021. OECD (2023) data confirm that this shift was stratified—available mostly to high-income professionals. Choudhury et al. (2020) highlight how remote work untethered labor from city cores, creating new spatial preferences based on lifestyle and affordability.

2.4 Digital Nomads and Geoarbitrage

Digital nomads are individuals who blend remote work with international travel and multi-local living, enabled by portable technologies and reliable Internet connectivity (Mancinelli, 2025). The concept, popularized in the 1990s, refers to a mobile professional class that leverages location independence to combine work and travel (Mancinelli, 2022). This lifestyle is characterized by autonomy, flexibility, and the capacity to adapt to different environments (İLİ, 2024; Moravčević et al., 2024).

The term has evolved to encompass professionals who perform their work online while residing temporarily in various locations, often outside their country of origin (Heo, Zhang, & Hua, 2025). According to Bozzi (2024), digital nomadism emerged from the intersection of remote work trends, digital technologies, and a growing desire for lifestyle mobility. It represents a shift from fixed-location employment to mobile professional routines mediated by digital infrastructure.

This phenomenon is also embedded in socio-economic dynamics such as the decentralization of workspaces, global connectivity, and the proliferation of short-term rental platforms (Mancinelli, 2022; Moravčević et al., 2024). Digital nomads typically seek destinations offering a favorable cost of living, good infrastructure, and legal pathways for medium-term residence, such as digital nomad visas (Bozzi, 2024; Mao & Xu, 2024).

Their presence in specific locations can influence local economies through increased consumption, the stimulation of co-working spaces, and the diversification of tourism markets (Moravčević et al., 2024). At the same time, concerns have been raised regarding housing inflation, socio-spatial exclusion, and the uneven accessibility of this lifestyle (Heo et al., 2025).

2.5 Spatial Symbolism and Urban Branding

As Castells (2000) theorized, cities now compete through flows and symbols rather than territorial production. Digital nomads are not just consumers—they are marketing assets for cities (Sardinha et al., 2023). Programs in Lisbon, Madeira, and Las Palmas illustrate a new urban strategy: attract individuals with high spending power and global prestige.

2.6 Stratified Mobilities and Global Inequality

Access to remote work and geoarbitrage remains uneven. Bozzi (2024), López et al. (2024), and Teodorovicz et al. (2023) describe a hierarchy where some enjoy mobility rights and others face barriers. This duality reflects deeper inequalities in labor markets, digital infrastructure, and border regimes.

2.7 Workation: A Blind Spot Between Tourism and Remote Labor

While digital nomadism has gained increasing academic and policy attention in recent years, particularly through the institutionalization of Digital Nomad Visas (DNVs), a closely related phenomenon remains conceptually underdeveloped: *workation*—the hybrid practice of working remotely while on vacation. Unlike digital nomadism, which is often framed as long-term or lifestyle-oriented mobility, *workation* tends to involve shorter stays, often ranging from a few days to several weeks, and is frequently undertaken within the bounds of traditional tourist infrastructure (Gretzel et al., 2023; Harpham, 2020).

The lack of legal or definitional clarity surrounding *workation* makes it analytically elusive. It does not fit neatly into existing migration categories, nor does it benefit from the regulatory frameworks developed for DNV holders. Nevertheless, *workationers* utilize many of the same resources: co-working spaces, short-term rentals, urban amenities designed for flexibility, and digital connectivity. As such, they form part of the expanding class of "location-flexible professionals" who contribute to the ongoing spatial reconfiguration of labor and leisure (Hannonen, 2020; Mancinelli, 2025).

Crucially, *workationers* often remain statistically invisible in remote work surveys and visa programs. However, their material presence—especially in Airbnb-dominated neighborhoods or regions with strong tourism economies—may equal or surpass that of formal digital nomads. For example, in Lisbon, short-term rental platforms accounted for over 20% of the housing stock in central neighborhoods pre-pandemic, with new surges reported post-2021 due to hybrid travel trends (INE Portugal, 2023; Idealista, 2024). Similarly, in Las Palmas and Madeira, the overlap between seasonal tourism and remote work initiatives has blurred the line between visitor and temporary resident (Sardinha et al., 2023; Bozzi, 2024).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design situated at the intersection of critical urban studies, mobility studies, and policy ethnography. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness or causal generalizations, the objective is to uncover how

narratives of digital geoarbitrage and remote work migration are constructed, contested, and embedded in the symbolic and material infrastructures of cities.

Drawing on the interpretive paradigm proposed by Yanow (2000) and expanded by Shore and Wright (1997), policies are not viewed as mere regulatory instruments, but as "cultural artifacts" that reveal underlying values, assumptions, and power relations. In this perspective, visa regimes, urban branding strategies, and economic development programs are analyzed as part of a discursive governance apparatus that legitimizes certain forms of mobility while marginalizing others (Shore, Wright & Però, 2011).

Methodologically, this approach enables a "thick description" of how digital nomadism is translated into local practice—not just through policy, but also through language, infrastructure, and everyday encounters. We treat cities as semiotic landscapes (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005), where competing imaginaries of work, modernity, and value intersect in space.

The research relies on document analysis, combining public policy documents, government websites, visa portals, and statistical data from Eurostat, INE (Spain and Portugal), and OECD. These are triangulated with academic literature, media reports, and discourse analysis of promotional campaigns to trace how narratives of digital migration are constructed and institutionalized.

Rather than isolating variables, we adopt a multi-scalar lens, inspired by Brenner (2004) and Collier & Ong (2005), to understand how global processes like remote work are mediated through regional frameworks, national policies, and local urban strategies. This perspective captures the simultaneity of mobility and fixity—where digital workers cross borders with ease, but their presence remains entangled in local housing markets, infrastructures, and cultural representations.

3.1 Case Selection and Comparative Strategy

The research focuses on three locations: Lisbon (Portugal), Madeira (Portugal), and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain). These sites were selected through theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), as each represents a distinctive model of how public institutions engage with remote work migration and digital mobility.

Lisbon functions as a metropolitan capital embedded in global circuits of digital entrepreneurship. Madeira represents a semi-autonomous region deploying targeted strategies to attract remote workers as part of its development agenda. Las Palmas, a

medium-sized city in the Canary Islands, reflects a peripheral context undergoing active rebranding through promotional urbanism.

The comparative approach follows the logic of a “most similar systems design” (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), where comparable sociopolitical and geographic conditions (Southern European, EU-member, post-touristic economies) allow the identification of divergent institutional narratives, policy tools, and spatial outcomes.

3.2 Data Sources and Collection

The study is based on three interrelated data sources, which allow for methodological triangulation. First, national and municipal-level policy documents were examined, including official strategies, visa regimes, tourism promotion plans, and urban development proposals. These sources include government websites, official gazettes, and policy briefs related to remote work programs in each location. Second, statistical and economic data were collected from Eurostat, INE Portugal, INE Spain, the OECD, and the Global Digital Nomad Report. These include indicators such as median income, remote work rates, labor market composition, and demographic trends. Third, academic literature, institutional reports, and selected media coverage were reviewed to contextualize dominant narratives and identify key discursive patterns. These texts provided insights into how digital nomads are represented and mobilized as policy objects and symbolic figures in public discourse.

3.3 Analytical Strategy: Interpretive Policy Analysis

The analysis relies on interpretive policy analysis, particularly the approaches developed by Yanow (2000) and Fischer (2003). This method focuses on uncovering the implicit cultural meanings and normative assumptions embedded in policy texts and institutional framings.

Additionally, the study draws from the field of critical mobility studies (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Bozzi, 2024) to trace how ideas of autonomy, entrepreneurship, and global connectivity are spatialized in urban policy. Concepts such as “talent attraction,” “innovation ecosystems,” and “smart destinations” are examined as key categories in the construction of geoarbitrage as a legitimate urban strategy.

3.4 Limitations and Scope

The study is exploratory in nature and does not aim for statistical representativeness. Its goal is analytical generalization: to identify transferable patterns and mechanisms that may inform further research or policy debate.

The absence of ethnographic fieldwork or primary interviews constitutes a limitation, particularly regarding the perceptions of local residents. However, the triangulation of institutional, economic, and discursive data allows for a grounded understanding of how geoarbitrage is constructed and operationalized in these cases. Future research may build upon this foundation through ethnographic immersion or participatory methods.

4. Empirical Context & Results

The Iberian Peninsula has become a strategic destination for remote workers and digital nomads, not only due to favorable visa policies and affordable living costs, but also because of its consolidated tourism infrastructure and symbolic appeal as a work-leisure hybrid zone. Portugal and Spain have proactively branded themselves as hubs for innovation, flexible work, and lifestyle migration, integrating remote labor into broader strategies of urban competitiveness and post-pandemic economic recovery (König & Schultz, 2023; Aroles et al., 2022).

From a mobility perspective, geoarbitrage is not only about income differentials—it is embedded in long-standing tourist flows, real estate logics, and symbolic representations of Southern Europe as a space of escape, leisure, and authenticity (Bozzi, 2024). In this context, nomadic workers do not replace tourists; they extend the tourism economy by engaging in longer stays and hybrid modes of consumption (Mezzadri, 2023).

4.1 Tourism Data and Structural Intersections

Recent statistics reinforce this convergence. In 2022, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria surpassed its pre-pandemic tourism levels, registering 406,651 visitors and 1.4 million overnight stays, the highest numbers in five years (ISTAC, 2023). Foreign tourists represented 43.7% of total visitors, and in December 2022 alone, they accounted for 58.3%, led by Germany, Sweden, and the UK. These are the same nationalities dominant in digital nomad networks (Nomad List, 2023), pointing to significant overlap between tourism and remote work migration flows.

Recent data from INE Portugal (2025) confirm that tourism remains a structural pillar of the Portuguese economy, with 29 million international arrivals recorded in 2024, representing a 9.3% increase compared to 2023. The same period saw the lowest seasonality rate since 2013, with only 36.6% of total overnight stays concentrated in the three peak months. These trends reflect a broader diversification of tourism flows and a partial decoupling from traditional vacation periods. This shift, consistent with the rise of hybrid worker-tourist profiles such as workationers and digital nomads, strengthens year-round demand in

housing, mobility, and digital infrastructure. However, as noted by Gretzel et al. (2023) and Ioannides & Timothy (2010), the convergence of long-stay tourism and mobile work regimes raises new challenges for governance—especially in regions where public services and housing systems remain under strain.

Lisbon, according to data from *Público* (2024), concentrated 28% of all tourist stays in Portugal in 2023. The city broke national records in tourist revenue, contributing to the country's €25.1 billion in tourism income—a 19% increase over 2022 (OMT, 2024). This influx has contributed not only to urban regeneration, but also to housing inflation and gentrification, particularly in central districts with high remote work density (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023).

Madeira followed a similar trajectory. In 2023, the region received 2.1 million guests, generating 11.2 million overnight stays—a 13.7% increase over 2022 and 32% over 2019. Notably, 84.5% of these stays came from foreign residents (ACIF-CCIM, 2024). Programs such as *Digital Nomads Madeira Islands* are increasingly difficult to distinguish from long-stay tourism marketing, blending economic development with lifestyle branding.

This data reveals that the digital nomad phenomenon is not emerging in isolation—it is embedded within pre-existing circuits of international mobility, tourism economies, and housing commodification (Sardinha et al., 2023). The idea of *workation*—working while traveling—has become institutionalized in municipal and regional discourse, framing mobility as both a productive and consumptive act.

4.2 Tourism, Infrastructure, and the Economic Logic of Geoarbitrage

In parallel to the digital labor migration, tourism continues to play a pivotal role in reshaping local economies across Southern Europe. In countries like Portugal and Spain, tourism represents between 12% and 15% of GDP, according to WTTC (2023) and INE (2023), with even higher dependency in regions such as Madeira and the Canary Islands. The arrival of digital nomads often overlaps with existing tourist infrastructure—hotels, short-term rentals, cafés with reliable Wi-Fi—creating hybrid urban forms where work and leisure blur (Ioannides & Timothy, 2010; Aroles et al., 2022).

In villages and mid-sized towns, the influx of remote workers can prolong the tourism season and increase off-peak demand, supporting year-round economic activity. This phenomenon, sometimes called "slow tourism" or "residential tourism", brings measurable increases in local consumption, contributes to tax revenues, and incentivizes the improvement of digital and transport infrastructure (González-Pérez et al., 2021; Gretzel et al., 2023). Investment in

fiber-optic internet, urban revitalization of historic centers, and better mobility services often follow this new demand—improving access not only for newcomers but for residents as well (OECD, 2020).

However, as indicated by Dredge and Gyimóthy (2015), these economic gains are not automatically inclusive. Without redistributive mechanisms or territorial cohesion policies, such transformations can reinforce dual economies—where one segment of the population benefits from transnational income and another remains structurally excluded. Still, when combined with participatory governance, tourism-induced improvements in infrastructure can serve broader development goals, offering a platform for local economic diversification.

4.3 Economic Leverage and Local Pressure

While digital nomads may represent less than 2% of local populations in Lisbon, Madeira, or Las Palmas, their economic footprint is disproportionately large. According to the Global Digital Nomad Report (2023), nearly 80% earn above USD 50,000 annually, compared to median local salaries of €21,500 in Portugal, €29,000 in Spain, and even lower in Madeira. When comparing income disparities across the EU, the economic rationale for geoarbitrage becomes evident. Eurostat (2023) shows that average gross salaries in Germany and the Netherlands exceed €50,000 annually. These disparities help explain the growing interest in geoarbitrage strategies by Northern workers seeking a Mediterranean lifestyle with lower costs.

The mismatch between income levels and local economies creates what König and Schultz (2023) term a symbolic and financial duality: nomads operate in a global digital economy, while local residents remain bound to territorially constrained labor markets. Rental markets absorb this tension: in Lisbon, rents increased 65% between 2015 and 2022 (INE Portugal, 2023); in Las Canteras (Las Palmas), 26% between 2020 and 2023 (Idealista, 2023); and in Ponta do Sol (Madeira), over 30% in the same period (INE Madeira, 2023).

As König and Schultz (2023) argue, territorial data—if transparently collected and locally shared—could serve as a democratic tool for redistribution and planning. Yet current systems prioritize economic performance indicators over social impact assessments, effectively silencing the voices of those most affected by this shift: residents with no access to international income streams.

Portugal launched its Digital Nomad Visa in 2022, offering remote workers from outside the EU the right to reside and work for foreign companies. Applicants must show proof of income equivalent to at least four times the Portuguese minimum wage (currently €886/month),

alongside proof of accommodation and work contracts. The government also created specific programs through *Startup Madeira* and *Lisboa Unicorn Capital* to support incoming digital workers (Startup Madeira, 2023; Startup Lisboa, 2023).

In terms of scale, official sources such as *Público* (2023) report that over 2,600 digital nomad visas were issued in the first year of the program. These workers often concentrate in Lisbon, Porto, and Madeira—areas where housing costs have increased significantly. According to *Idealista* (2023), rental prices in Lisbon rose by 41% between 2020 and 2023, while the national average increased by 30%. This intensifies pressure on local residents, particularly in the lower-middle-income brackets.

Spain, following the 2022 *Ley de Startups*, introduced a visa category for international teleworkers in 2023. It allows residence for up to three years and requires that no more than 20% of a nomad's income comes from Spanish sources. By early 2024, several hundred visas had already been granted, with *Nomad List* (2023) citing Barcelona, Valencia, Las Palmas, and Madrid as top digital nomad destinations in the country.

Gran Canaria's *Nomad City* program reported that over 10,000 nomads passed through Las Palmas between 2021 and 2023 (Nomad City, 2023). With a population of ~380,000, this equates to an average annual nomad population of ~3,300—or about 0.87% of the resident base per year. Though not a dominant demographic, their economic presence is amplified by above-average income levels, mostly from foreign sources.

The housing market reflects this shift. In Barcelona, *Idealista* (2023) reported a 28% increase in rental prices between 2020 and 2023. Similarly, rental inflation in Las Palmas and Madeira has outpaced wage growth, contributing to socio-spatial tensions and calls for regulatory responses (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023).

Thus, while both countries have actively pursued remote work migration, they have done so without fully anticipating its impact on affordability, integration, and urban cohesion. This context frames the need for a critical examination of geoarbitrage not just as an individual strategy, but as a structural transformation reshaping the urban and economic landscapes of Southern Europe.

4.4 Lisbon: Remote Work and Urban Restructuring

Lisbon has undergone a visible transformation in the post-2015 period, becoming one of Southern Europe's most dynamic hubs for mobile professionals. While the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed global adoption of remote work, Lisbon had already been experiencing

an influx of foreign residents with high purchasing power, many working remotely in technology, design, and consulting sectors (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2023).

Although Portugal's official digital nomad visa was only implemented in 2022, programs such as the Non-Habitual Resident (NHR) tax regime, introduced in 2009, had already been attracting professionals with international income streams. Combined with the relative affordability of Lisbon prior to 2015, these incentives made the city particularly attractive for geoarbitrage strategies (Merriman, 2024; Braesemann, 2022).

From 2015 to 2022, rental prices in Lisbon rose by over 65%, with the sharpest increases concentrated in areas with high nomad and tourism density, such as Alfama, Cais do Sodré, and Graça (INE Portugal, 2023). Jover and Díaz-Parra (2023) note that these changes are not just economic but spatial and symbolic: new spatial codes, architectural renovations, and the proliferation of coworking cafés displace not only tenants but entire cultural practices.

Lisbon's municipal programs—such as Startup Lisboa and Lisboa Unicorn Capital—actively promote the city as a destination for innovation, flexibility, and quality of life. Yet these narratives, as König and Schultz (2023) argue, often marginalize the lived experience of long-term residents who cannot access the same mobility regimes or economic benefits. What emerges is a dual urban system: one oriented to high-mobility knowledge workers, another constrained by stagnant wages and housing precarity.

4.5 Madeira: Institutionalized Geoarbitrage and Regional Policy

The Madeira Digital Nomads program, launched in February 2021 by Startup Madeira in partnership with the regional government, was among the first institutionalized efforts in Europe to attract remote workers. Designed as a regional development strategy, the program offered coworking spaces, temporary registration support, and partnerships with local accommodation services (Sardinha et al., 2023; Startup Madeira, 2023).

Between 2021 and 2023, over 10,000 digital nomads passed through Madeira, according to data published by Startup Madeira and supported by Sardinha et al. (2023). With a regional population of around 250,000, this figure represents an annual average of 1.3–1.4%—a significant proportion when spatially concentrated in towns like Ponta do Sol.

Madeira's strategy reveals the active territorialization of remote work as a development tool. Following the logic described by Teodorovicz et al. (2023) and Bozzi (2024), digital nomads are framed as drivers of economic revitalization. Yet these assumptions often overlook the

socio-spatial frictions generated by concentrated foreign presence in regions with limited housing supply.

Rental prices in Funchal and Ponta do Sol increased by over 30% between 2020 and 2023, according to INE Portugal (2023), well above the national average. Sardinha et al. (2023) document the emergence of parallel digital communities, often integrated with global networks but disconnected from the local economy and public services. The resulting dynamic is one of “discursive inclusion with material segregation” (König & Schultz, 2023).

4.6 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Peripheral Urbanism and Symbolic Centrality

Las Palmas, the largest city in the Canary Islands, has actively positioned itself as a digital nomad hub through branding, infrastructure, and strategic partnerships. Supported by the Sociedad de Promoción Económica de Gran Canaria (SPEGC), the municipality, and the Nomad City initiative, the city has hosted international events, launched co-living spaces, and been featured in nomad rankings since 2020 (Nomad City, 2023; Martínez & Rodríguez, 2024).

According to the Nomad City 2023 report, approximately 20,000 digital nomads stayed in Las Palmas between 2020 and 2023. With a population of around 380,000, this implies an annual average of 6,700 people, or 1.8% of the local population. Though not a major demographic shift, the symbolic presence of nomads—highly visible and concentrated in neighborhoods like Las Canteras and Triana—has had disproportionate effects on real estate, business ecosystems, and urban branding (Bozzi, 2024; König & Schultz, 2023).

Rental prices in Las Canteras rose by 26% between 2020 and 2023, based on Idealista market data and INE Spain (2023). Simultaneously, the Canary Islands maintain one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Spain (Eurostat, 2023), exposing the tension between the external influx of capital and local economic stagnation.

As Penn (2007) notes in Microtrends, even one percent of a population—if spatially concentrated and economically differentiated—can reshape policy narratives and social hierarchies. Las Palmas exemplifies this phenomenon: the digital nomad presence is amplified by public discourse and institutional framing, rather than by numerical dominance alone.

5. Discussion

The findings from Lisbon, Madeira, and Las Palmas reveal that digital geoarbitrage, although numerically limited, constitutes a socially and economically relevant phenomenon. Remote workers—especially digital nomads—operate with high mobility, elevated incomes, and often enjoy privileged status within local governance narratives and policy frameworks. As Penn (2007) reminds us, social impact is not solely a function of demographic weight, but of institutional recognition, symbolic power, and purchasing capacity. When such actors are spatially concentrated, framed positively in public discourse, and economically empowered, even a small fraction of the population—1% or less—can generate measurable transformations in local housing markets, service economies, and neighborhood dynamics.

This idea is echoed in social trend prediction models, where statistical and network-based approaches show that small, highly visible subpopulations can disproportionately affect broader systems (Altshuler et al., 2012; Hofman et al., 2017). These effects intensify in settings where local infrastructures are fragile or responsive to changes in short-term demand.

The disproportionate influence of these mobile elites also resonates with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital, which suggests that power lies not merely in numbers, but in the alignment of economic resources, cultural legitimacy, and institutional validation. In this sense, digital nomads function as urban multipliers, shaping both material processes and symbolic narratives through which cities seek to rebrand themselves as "global," "innovative," or "digitally ready" (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; König & Schultz, 2023).

This influence is magnified by stark income asymmetries. While digital nomads earn significantly more than local residents—78% earn over USD 50,000/year (Global Digital Nomad Report, 2023)—the median gross income in Portugal and Spain remains below €30,000/year (Eurostat, 2023). In this context, geoarbitrage enables a small class of mobile professionals to convert international wages into local spatial dominance, often inflating housing prices and intensifying the scarcity of long-term rentals (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2023).

These dynamics raise pressing questions for urban governance: Who participates in defining the city? And who benefits from its transformation?

5.1 Data Governance and Local Empowerment

One underexplored dimension across the analyzed cases is the role of data governance in enabling local empowerment. While selective metrics on nomad inflows are often publicized to promote regional programs, there is a notable absence of structured, multi-dimensional

data collection on the broader social impacts—particularly regarding housing displacement, gentrification, cultural tensions, and labor market distortions.

This selective visibility reflects a larger issue in urban policy: data is often used as a tool for legitimizing strategic narratives, but rarely for fostering inclusive accountability (König & Schultz, 2023; Leigh, 2023). As Hastings et al. (2019) argue, effective public governance depends not only on data availability, but on its usability, granularity, and capacity to inform *redistributive* decision-making.

Open and disaggregated datasets—such as neighborhood-level trends in rental inflation, shifts in social composition, and local business turnover—could function as early warning systems to detect areas vulnerable to exclusionary urban change (Yerden & Luna-Reyes, 2021). However, in all three cases analyzed, such metrics remain either nonexistent or inaccessible to local stakeholders.

Moreover, the potential of Open Government Data (OGD) initiatives to foster co-responsibility and democratic planning remains largely untapped. As noted by Li and Zhang (2024), real-time monitoring of social dynamics through big data can enable proactive, targeted policy interventions—provided that communities are meaningfully involved in data interpretation and deliberation processes.

The absence of participatory data infrastructures represents a missed opportunity for inclusive urban governance. If properly anonymized and shared, administrative data could support community-led initiatives, participatory budgeting, and localized responses to the pressures induced by remote work migration (Katsimpris, 2022). Fostering data literacy and local access—particularly in neighborhoods most affected by housing and commercial restructuring—would enable civil society not only to contest top-down programs, but also to co-create alternatives.

In short, data governance must evolve from extractive logics to inclusive practices. Cities that aim to host mobile professionals must also equip their resident populations with the analytical tools and institutional spaces necessary to critically engage with digital transformations—not merely adapt to them.

5.2 Social and Cultural Integration

Perhaps the most under-discussed dimension of geoarbitrage is its cultural impact. Digital nomads are typically framed as non-intrusive, mobile professionals whose presence is

temporary and apolitical. However, their practices shape local culture—especially in small or mid-sized communities like Ponta do Sol or Las Canteras.

Research by Bozzi (2024) and Sardinha et al. (2023) shows that digital enclaves often operate in parallel to local communities. Co-living hubs, coworking spaces, and English-only services create semi-autonomous bubbles that limit meaningful exchange with residents. In extreme cases, this can foster perceptions of social displacement and symbolic marginalization, particularly when nomads are portrayed as the ideal urban subject.

This lack of integration raises deeper questions about belonging and reciprocity. If mobile professionals are to be treated as legitimate urban actors, should they not also contribute to the commons—economically, socially, and culturally? Should there be obligations in terms of local participation, language learning, or contributions to social services?

5.3 Rethinking Inclusion in Remote Work Policy

Current policy frameworks focus primarily on attraction: they seek to make cities desirable to remote workers by offering tax breaks, flexible visas, and lifestyle marketing. However, very few policies address distribution, accountability, or coexistence. As Braesemann (2022) and López et al. (2024) highlight, digital labor mobility operates within a system of global privilege that tends to reproduce inequalities between host communities and mobile elites.

Therefore, policy innovation should move beyond economic incentives and adopt inclusive urban design principles, such as:

- Community impact assessments before implementing nomad-focused programs
- Participatory budgeting in districts most affected by housing transformation
- Legal frameworks ensuring equal access to housing for residents and newcomers
- Support for cultural mediation programs and intergroup dialogue

5.4 Workation: Intersecting Flows and Invisible Pressures

While digital nomadism is increasingly addressed through specific policy frameworks such as DNVs, the phenomenon of workation—temporary remote work embedded within tourism mobility—remains analytically underexplored. This hybrid practice, often involving stays of

several weeks without formal migration procedures, constitutes a blind spot at the intersection of tourism, labor mobility, and housing governance.

Recent data from Las Palmas (Ayuntamiento de LPGC, 2023), Lisbon (Público, 2024), and Madeira (ACIF-CCIM, 2024) indicate a strong rebound in tourism post-pandemic, with record numbers of overnight stays in 2022 and 2023. In Madeira alone, 11.2 million overnight stays were recorded in 2023—far surpassing the total of registered digital nomads. Lisbon captured 28% of Portugal's total tourist arrivals in 2024, while Las Palmas exceeded 1.4 million pernoctations in 2022.

The coincidence of rising short-term rentals, digital infrastructure development, and flexible work policies suggests that many of these tourists may also be engaging in temporary remote work without ever appearing in official nomad statistics. This workation segment occupies a legal and statistical grey zone, making it difficult to quantify but essential to understand in terms of local impact. The conceptual ambiguity of *workation* generates practical policy blind spots. Unlike DNV holders, *workationers* are not subjected to income thresholds, legal verification, or monitoring mechanisms. Yet they may exert equal or greater pressure on housing markets, service economies, and public infrastructure. Their intermittent presence, while seemingly less disruptive, compounds the socio-spatial effects of geoarbitrage by inflating demand without necessarily contributing to local tax bases or long-term economic integration (Gretzel et al., 2023; López et al., 2024).

Moreover, the symbolic framing of *workation*—often marketed as a form of personal empowerment, well-being, and lifestyle optimization—aligns with post-industrial narratives of labor flexibility and individual responsibility (Aroles et al., 2022). These discourses obscure the structural dynamics at play, particularly the convergence of tourism and labor regimes within neoliberal urban governance (König & Schultz, 2023).

Unlike long-term digital nomads, workation travelers amplify seasonal pressures. Their consumption patterns resemble those of high-spending tourists, but their housing and infrastructural demands mirror those of residents. This dual role—*traveler-worker*—can intensify housing scarcity in neighborhoods already experiencing gentrification, such as Ponta do Sol, Alfama, and Las Canteras, while escaping regulation designed for more permanent mobile professionals (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; Sardinha et al., 2023).

As König and Schultz (2023) argue, the governance of digital mobility requires new tools capable of tracing layered mobilities and their variegated effects. In this regard, workation embodies the convergence of lifestyle tourism and geoarbitrage in ways that challenge both

tourism policy and urban planning. Failing to include this population in urban data systems may underestimate the true scale of transformation affecting local economies, cultural landscapes, and housing systems.

Workation, therefore, should not be seen merely as a fringe behavior, but as a structural symptom of post-pandemic labor flexibility and hypermobility. Its effects, though diffuse, are spatially concentrated and temporally amplified—particularly in cities already under pressure from speculative real estate and digital labor migration

5.5 Digital Nomads as Catalysts for Local Innovation and Knowledge Exchange

Although the dynamics of digital geoarbitrage might generate visible, or invisible, socio-spatial tensions, it is important to recognize that the mobility of skilled professionals can also foster local innovation—especially in peripheral regions historically disconnected from global knowledge networks. As Rodríguez-Pose and Crescenzi (2008) highlight, regional growth increasingly depends on the capacity to absorb and transform external knowledge into local value. In this context, digital nomads, if properly integrated, can act as boundary-spanners—individuals who connect global circuits of innovation with local entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Initiatives that connect mobile professionals with local co-operatives, universities, or SMEs can enhance absorptive capacity and generate new forms of cross-cultural collaboration (Bathelt, Malmberg & Maskell, 2004). For instance, partnerships with digital hubs, civic tech labs, and open innovation platforms may allow for the transfer of know-how in areas such as UX design, digital marketing, or data analytics—skills often lacking in traditional sectors. However, this requires a deliberate shift from a passive model of attraction toward one of structured engagement, in which nomads are invited to contribute to local innovation agendas rather than remain in parallel enclaves. As Saxenian (2006) demonstrates in her work on transnational communities, even temporary flows of human capital can produce enduring institutional effects when relational ties are fostered.

In this sense, remote work migration—when framed within broader strategies of territorial cohesion—can serve as a vector for **socioeconomic regeneration**, rather than merely a new form of elite mobility.

5.6 Positive impacts: Requalifying Territories through Remote Work

Beyond measurable GDP contributions, the presence of remote professionals—especially those with high digital capital—can foster medium-term structural change in local economies. As noted by Annamalah & Paraman (2023), the so-called economic multiplier of remote work

lies not only in increased consumption, but in its capacity to introduce new economic behaviors, promote digital transformation in traditional sectors, and contribute to the requalification of low-density regions.

Recent research has shown that rural or semi-urban areas receiving remote workers tend to invest more in digital infrastructure, public transport connectivity, and cultural amenities—resources that also benefit the local population (Gallardo & Whitacre, 2018; Ozimek, 2021). This can initiate a virtuous cycle, where small municipalities strengthen their institutional attractiveness, diversify their economic base, and reduce outmigration among younger populations. These transformations, while gradual, echo what Rodríguez-Pose (2018) calls the “revenge of the places that don’t matter”—a process in which previously marginal regions leverage new flows of people and capital to reposition themselves on the national or even global economic map.

Furthermore, the growing visibility of “remote work destinations” has prompted the creation of dedicated public policies and incentive programs. From tax incentives to co-working vouchers and housing support, such instruments—when well-designed—can foster balanced territorial development and contribute to the polycentric redistribution of economic opportunities (Sardinha et al., 2023; OECD, 2021). The key challenge, as emphasized by López et al. (2024), lies in ensuring that these benefits are not captured exclusively by mobile professionals, but rather shared with local populations through inclusive planning mechanisms.

In this sense, remote work migration—when framed within broader strategies of territorial cohesion—can serve as a vector for socioeconomic regeneration, rather than merely a new form of elite mobility.

6. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the phenomenon of digital geoarbitrage as a structurally embedded form of selective mobility in the context of remote work migration. Through the case studies of Lisbon, Madeira, and Las Palmas, we demonstrated that digital nomadism—often numerically marginal—generates relevant socio-spatial consequences due to its economic asymmetries, symbolic visibility, and political legitimization.

As theorized by Toffler (1980) and Touraine (1998), the emergence of post-industrial knowledge workers has reshaped labor geographies, weakening the traditional coupling of work and place. The contemporary figure of the digital nomad builds on this shift, further decoupling income from physical location and embedding labor mobility within global systems of inequality and spatial optimization (Merriman, 2024; López et al., 2024).

The case studies reaffirm the insight from Penn (2007): small, economically differentiated groups can catalyze systemic transformations, especially when promoted by government policies and institutional discourse. While Lisbon has leveraged fiscal and branding incentives to attract high-income mobile workers, Madeira and Las Palmas implemented structured programs that lacked mechanisms for local participation or social protection. The result is a model of urban development that privileges the visible and mobile while marginalizing the rooted and precarious (König & Schultz, 2023; Shore & Wright, 1997).

This conclusion calls for a rethinking of migration categories, urban development logics, and the metrics by which "success" is evaluated in policy. Rather than focusing solely on growth and attractiveness, future frameworks must engage critically with the distributive effects of mobility and incorporate the voices of those most impacted by urban restructuring.

Further research should address the lived experiences of local communities, the potential of redistributive governance tools, and comparative perspectives between global South and North urban responses to remote work migration.

7. Policy Frameworks and Governance Implications

The governance of remote work migration in the Iberian Peninsula reveals a persistent misalignment between economic attraction strategies and inclusive policymaking. National and local actors have actively promoted digital nomadism as a lever for innovation and post-pandemic recovery, yet they have lacked anticipatory capacity regarding its socio-spatial consequences (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; Braesemann, 2022).

7.1 The Democratic Deficit and Governance by Discourse

One of the most acute gaps is the lack of participatory governance frameworks. As Shore and Wright (1997) argue, policymaking often becomes a discursive exercise legitimized by expert narratives rather than public engagement. In this context, digital nomads are not merely economic agents but symbolic figures—embodying cosmopolitanism, innovation, and future-readiness—used to justify urban and national branding strategies (König & Schultz, 2023).

However, few municipalities in Portugal or Spain have developed robust impact monitoring tools. Data on rent inflation, displacement, or service-sector substitution, connected to the main topic here, is rarely available in official reports, which tend to emphasize visa numbers and tax revenue (Bozzi, 2024; Sardinha et al., 2023). This asymmetry distorts public debate and hinders redistributive planning.

7.2 Fragmented Urban Cohabitation

The absence of integration policies has created new forms of spatial enclavement. Digital nomads frequently inhabit culturally autonomous and economically privileged spheres that operate in parallel to local life (Edwards, 2021; Bozzi, 2024). These enclaves reproduce not just physical segregation but differentiated access to services and political representation, echoing older patterns of urban fragmentation.

To move beyond this, scholars like Aroles et al. (2022) and López et al. (2024) propose a shift in evaluation criteria. Success must not be measured solely in growth or global visibility, but in housing justice, labor inclusion, and democratic accountability. Cities such as Amsterdam and Barcelona have piloted new tools—zoning restrictions, quotas, and data transparency platforms—that could inspire similar efforts across the Iberian context (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023).

7.3 Economic Opportunities and Structural Risks

At the same time, remote work migration has shown potential for economic revitalization, particularly in regions affected by depopulation or low investment. Tourism also plays a key role there. As Gallardo & Whitacre (2018) and Ozimek (2021) demonstrate, remote workers bring new income streams, stimulate local businesses, and reduce dependency on traditional industrial sectors. INE Portugal (2025) recorded 29 million foreign arrivals in 2024, with the lowest seasonality rate since 2013—signs of more stable, year-round demand across housing, mobility, and services.

Nevertheless, this growth also places pressure on public infrastructure and exacerbates regional disparities. The geographic redistribution of talent and capital—while promising in theory—can reproduce new core-periphery dynamics unless accompanied by targeted investment and inclusive regulation (Oshioste et al., 2023; Gillette, 2023).

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