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of the

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

on

CHANGING CITIES III

Spatial, Design, Landscape & Socio-economic Dimensions

Under the aegis of

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TABLE of CONTENTS

Organizing Committee	iii
Scientific Board	iv
Forward	ix
Table of Contents	xi

KEYNOTE SPEECHES

- **Prof. Taner Oc**, Editor of Journal of Urban Design
Honorary Professor, The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL
Faculty of the Built Environment, London, UK
and **Elisabete Cidre**, UCL, Bartlett School of Planning
Heritage and Regeneration in Changing London..... 3

PRE-ORGANIZED SPECIAL SESSIONS

URBAN NATURES FOR CHANGING CITIES

organized by Prof. A. Ippolito, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Italy

- **Temporary public landscape. Potential and risks of the public spaces in the Italian provincial town**
M. Aprile..... 25
- **Fair natures in emerging minor urbanities. A green guide for seven categories**
R. Belibani, A. Capanna..... 34
- **Patterns of Participative Governance in Planning and Management of Urban Green Spaces. Initial Assessments through the European and Greek experience**
S. Chaldezou, Y. Theodora..... 45
- **Natural spaces river land in the urban context area**
D. Cialdea, N. Quercio..... 62
- **New performances in urban nature. Recovery examples for the city crossing green pathways**
D. Cialdea..... 79
- **Green infrastructures and biodiverse urban gardens for regenerating urban spaces**
M. Clemente, F. Bianconi, M. Filippucci, L. Salvati..... 94

Proceedings **xi**
of the International Conference on **Changing Cities III:**
Spatial, Design, Landscape & Socio-economic Dimensions
Syros, Delos, Mykonos Islands, Greece • June 26-30, 2017
ISBN: 978-618-5271-12-1

● Urban natures for public spaces <i>M. Clemente</i>	103
● Urban natures as a new model of interaction between city and environment: a political and normative interpretation <i>D.S. Damiano</i>	114
● Models of knowledge and development of the urban vegetal architecture. Villa Celimontana in Rome <i>L. D. Carlo, M.F. Mancini, L. Paris, F. Pierdominici, W. Wahbeh</i>	119
● Urban natures for changing cities <i>A. M. Ippolito</i>	131
● Urban natures for urban resilience. Time-phases design for Changing Cities <i>M. Marino</i>	145
● Landscape by people: The landscape as glocalized resource <i>C. Stivali</i>	156
● Neither urban nor rural: landscape composition and land-use changes in the Mediterranean fringe <i>I. Tombolini, S. Pili, L. Salvati</i>	164
● Modern management of nature in the city <i>A. Veisz</i>	172

PUBLIC SPACE AND SUSTAINABLE REGENERATION

Organized and chaired by Prof. M. Sepe, CNR-Università di Napoli Federico II, Italy

● Public space and sustainability: achieving livability through multimedia and urban design <i>M. Sepe</i>	181
● Issues on urban design of public space: social and spatial identifications in the case of 4 central squares in Athens <i>K. Advelidi, A. Vitopoulou, G. Gemenetzi, K. Gortsos, F. Vlastou, E. Massou</i>	194
● A critical overview on the outcomes of mending of the suburbs. Case studies and experiments G124. <i>R. Belibani, A. Capanna</i>	208
● DiverCity – intercultural perception for space <i>K. Lehmann</i>	219
● Incremental housing strategy. A possible approach for social and urban development <i>M. Plastina</i>	230
● A sequence of urban rooms. Public space as a regenerative structure <i>L. A. Pezzetti</i>	236
● Sustainable regeneration of academic public spaces. A choice of case studies <i>E. D. Rynska, U. Kozminska, A. Tofiluk, K. Zinowiec-Cieplik</i>	249
● Strategies for urban regeneration in Brazil <i>C. Sanna, R. Secchi, P. Pineschi, E. Paez, M. Colazza, M. S. Ristruccia</i>	260

- **Studies for a precise intervention – public spaces in a central area in Brasilia, Brazil**
G. Tenorio, B. Kronenberger..... 268
- **Sport and leisure as elements for the regeneration of public spaces in the Catalan region**
S. G. Troncone..... 278

WATERFRONTS FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

*Organized and chaired by Prof. T. Townshend, Newcastle University UK
and Prof. D. Babalis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy*

- **Safeguarding old barracks and influencing positively nearby waterfront environment**
D. Babalis..... 291
- **Re-designing urban waterfronts preserving heritage and improving urban environment. The case of Plomari**
E. Maistrou, K. Moraitis, D. Anastasiadis, E. Ioannatou, A. Konidi, G. Koussoulos, V. Malkakis, A. Benetou, G. Nikas, X. Xanthopoulou..... 299
- **Waterfronts and Cultural Heritage. Questions and Challenges. The Case of Hydra**
E. Maistrou..... 311
- **Urban landscape transformations through waterfronts' redesign. A new field to develop design tools and research approaches in architectural education**
D. Polychronopoulos, M. Grigoriadou..... 321

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, CULTURAL HERITAGE AND SPATIAL PLANNING IN SYROS, GREECE

Organized and chaired by Prof. J. Stephanou, Honorary professor of NTUA, President of Syros Institute, Prof. G. Pozoukidou and Dr. E. Linaki, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

- **Tangible and intangible cultural assets as means for sustainable urban planning and place making. The case of Ano Syros, Greece**
G. Pozoukidou, E. Linaki 333
- **Cultural heritage management and development strategy: the case of Ermoupolis-Syros**
Z. Paparsenou..... 345
- **Protection and heritage management of the historical centre of Thessaloniki, Greece: the designation of 199 buildings of the early 20th century**
M. Selevista, M.M. Vyzantiadou 356

SOCIAL AND URBAN INFORMALITY: MIGRATION, MULTINATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

*Organized and chaired by Prof. K. Moraitis and E. Konstantinidou,
National Technical University of Athens, Greece*

- **Planning «Informality»**
K. Moretti 373
- **Occupation of an Urban Territory - the Duality of Nature and the Human**
A. Swiny, Y. Hadjichristou..... 380
- **Absurd: the significative role of informality**
K.-O. Yenias..... 392
- **Institutionalized Informal Urbanism on the Fringes of Mount Parnitha**
A. Zomas, M. Papavasileiou..... 399

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CHALLENGES OF TOURISM

Organized and chaired by Prof. Z. Enlil, Yildiz Technical University, Turkey

- **Discontent and resentment in tourist-historic sites: Re-thinking tourism via the perspectives and attitudes of local residents and local businesses**
A. Altanlar, Z. Enlil, D. Kalkan Acikkapi 411
- **A new approach for sustainable tourism as a driver of conservation of the cultural heritage: Oleo tourism**
K. Manisa, B. Yerliyurt..... 422
- **Space of craftsmen: A case study of tourism effects on Şişhane**
O. H. Yeğenağa, Y.S. Özer..... 433

RESILIENT CITY – GOVERNANCE, NATURE, FORM, PEOPLE AND ECONOMY

Organized and chaired by Prof. T. Mrđenović, University of Beograd, Serbia

- **Resilience and Sustainability: The Mutual Relations**
T. Mrđenović 447

NEW APPROACHES IN HISTORIC CENTERS PRESERVATION

Organized and chaired by Prof. D. Dimelli, Technical University of Crete, Greece

- **Ancient city gates and modern checkpoints of Nicosia for the morphological theory of attractors**
A. Camiz 455
- **Revitalizing the urban archaeological palimpsest - infilling the city fabric**
K. Demiri..... 466
- **How would you design your home? A research in collective design**
K. Varvatou, K. Sakantamis..... 476

URBAN PRESSURE IN COASTAL AND ISLAND AREAS: THE CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION OF MARITIME SPATIAL PLANNING IN GREECE

Organized and chaired by Prof. S. Avgerinou-Kolonia,
National Technical University of Athens, Greece

- **Coastal urbanization as a result of the absence
of an integrated maritime spatial planning approach**
S. Avgerinou-Kolonia, M. Rampavila..... 2135
- **Current attitudes and lessons learnt in Maritime Spatial Planning:
a focus on governance issues in Europe**
S. Kyvelou-Chiotini..... 489
- **Privatization of public land, spatial planning and *natural capital***
D. Litsardou, R. Klabatsea 501
- **Urban pressure in coastal areas of Greece: the case of Corinthiakos Gulf**
M. Papageorgiou, O. Christopoulou, T. Kostopoulou..... 515
- **Coastal space as a means for urban development.
The case of Faliron Bay in Athens**
E. Spanogianni, Y. Theodora..... 526

'SAILING CITIES': SEASCAPE IDENTITY AND AEGEAN TOURISTIC PORT'S NETWORK

Prof. K. Moraitis, A. Mentekidou, National Technical University of Athens, Greece

- **Establishment of networks between the islands of Northeastern Aegean Sea,
in order to promote their seascape identity**
A. D. Mentekidou..... 539
- **Combined use of port facilities to host international sailing events
as well operate as terminals of high capacity amphibious aircraft**
S. Bouzeas, S. M. Gouloumis 549
- **Santorini, down and across how access re-frames insular identity**
R. Lava..... 556
- **Tourism and tragedy: the case of Lesbos**
T. S. Terkenli..... 560
- **Nodes of a Networked Seascape**
A. Zomas, M. Papavasileiou..... 568

METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS OF ANALYSIS FOR CREATING STRATEGIES OF INTERNAL URBAN TECHNOLOGIES

Organized and chaired by Prof. N. Marda & Prof. G. Parmenidis,
National Technical University of Athens, Greece

- **Mapping connections in online learning communities:
architectural knowledge creation in the 'connectivist' paradigm**
O. Ioannou..... 579

Proceedings

of the International Conference on **Changing Cities III:**
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ISBN: 978-618-5271-12-1

- **Crisis Control and Provisional Evacuation Management Scheme in Sana'a City**
H. Nafa, M. Saeed..... 590
- **Sensing the urban landscape: The challenge of data visualization and multisensory mapping**
T. Petras 599
- **Design by mapping the relational city**
A. Stamatopoulou..... 606
- **Using Expanded Cinema design principles as an urban intervention tool**
O. Venetsianou..... 618

**BOTTOM UP PLANNING INITIATIVES IN THE URBAN SPACE.
A VEHICLE FOR A FURTHER DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE URBAN
PLANNING PROCEDURE?**

Organized and chaired by Prof. K. Serraos, National Technical University of Athens, Greece

- **Civil society and institutional practices towards democratization of urban planning: case studies on three German cities**
K. Serraos, E. Asprogerakas, A. Chazapis, G. Gkoumopoulou, P. Voulelis 629
- **Athens revisited: Bottom up initiatives and organizational terms**
N. Anastasopoulos 640
- **For a civic-familial Athens: Exploring the cultural background of participatory initiatives**
M. Kiourti 649
- **A systematic correlation of public participation procedures with characteristics of areas addressed: The case of Athens metropolitan area**
A. Vassi, K. Athanasopoulos, F. Vlastou 658

UNDER COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION

Organized and chaired by Prof. C. Siddi, University of Calgari, Italy

- **“Under Collective Construction”. About the participatory and social potential in city-making**
C. Siddi 673
- **Current trends and future prospect to develop a multi-scale landscape identity**
S. Mocci 684
- **Creative spaces. The landscape design as an experimental laboratory**
C. Sciarrone, M. Pasquali 694

INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE ENERGY SPATIAL PLANNING

Organized and chaired by Dr. N. Koutsoumarkos, Hellenic Association of Urban and Regional Planners (SEMPXPA), Greece

- **A Co-planning Approach for Area-Based Holistic Energy Planning: The Experience of INTENSSS-PA project**
I. Giannouli, C. Zuidema, K. Salemik, K. Gugerell, S. Cantero-Celada, S. Blathra, C. Christidou, K. Leonhart-Petersen, A. M. Marinero-Peral, A. Tasopoulou, A. Papaioannou, N. Koutsoumarkos..... 699
- **Defining sustainability-aimed urban metabolism indicators**
Y. Song, A. Timmeren, A. Wandl..... 711

INTEGRATED URBAN INTERVENTIONS, RESILIENT CITIES AND METROPOLITAN AREAS: CHALLENGES AND POLICIES

Organized and chaired by Prof. E. Thoidou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

- **From factory to symbol of identity: the resilience process of disused economic sites**
J. Cenci..... 725
- **Changing approaches to urban intervention in Greece: The Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) as a tool for sustainable urban development**
G. Katsavounidou..... 734
- **Designing buildings for increasing the urban resilience**
A. Krstic-Furundzic..... 740

ORIGIN OF METROPOLISES AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF ARCHITECTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY

Organized and chaired by Prof. A. Giacumacatos, Athens School of Fine Arts, Greece

- **The impact of capital flows on urban growth in transition periods: Athens urban transformation (1875-1909)**
A. Ntonou Efstratiadi, P. Dragonas..... 755
- **Induced stratification**
A. Castagnaro, F. Izzo..... 766

MAIN THEME SESSION

EUROPEAN CITIES AND MIGRATION: SPATIAL IMPACTS OF OUT-MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION

- **Naples Historic Center Formation and Management: The Influence of Socio-Economic Mobility on the City Spatial Features and Urban Planning**
M. Al Gammal..... 773

Proceedings

of the International Conference on **Changing Cities III: Spatial, Design, Landscape & Socio-economic Dimensions**
Syros, Delos, Mykonos Islands, Greece • June 26-30, 2017
ISBN: 978-618-5271-12-1

● Morphogenesis and social structure in modern Mediterranean cities: the case of Athens <i>C. Bakalis, S. Chtouris</i>	784
● The historic abandoned settlement as a potential strategic resource for a sustainable reception of immigrants <i>C. C. Falasca, A. Gigante</i>	794
● Welcoming cities: new strategies for contemporary urban requalification in the migration era <i>F. Ficcadenti, R. Belibani</i>	805
● Spatial aspects of housing policy developed in the aftermath of the recent refugee crisis in Greece <i>G. Gemenetzi, M. Papageorgiou</i>	813
● Introvert Boundaries and Vulnerable Cities: the design of Public Space as an Opportunity for the Managing of Migratory Flows and the Affirmation of Multiculturalism <i>A. Gritti, G. Setti</i>	825
● Diffusion of suburbanisation. Theoretical approach <i>M. Mayer-Wydra</i>	837
● Housing emergency and minimum requirements for reception: contribution to the strategy of resilience <i>I. Montella, C. Tonelli</i>	850
● Impact of population dynamics on spatial development of Belgrade urban region <i>T. Nikolić, J. Petrić, T. Bajić</i>	861
● The Impact of Migrations on the Spatial Characteristics of the City of Gdańsk <i>L. Nyka, J. Szczepanski</i>	872
● A guideline for intercultural city <i>B. Petrella</i>	882
● Ancienne; fragile; transitoire. The Panier case study; Marseille <i>N. Suraci, G. La Delfa, A. Geuna</i>	893
● An examination a relationship between migration-place attachment in refugee camps in the context of the image of the city and its components <i>S. Tapki</i>	901
● Refugees; migration and inclusive communities through design: an ‘urban interior’ approach to resilient cities <i>C. Vains</i>	912
● An evaluation of social impacts of spatial and functional changes in a historical urban site: Kuzguncuk <i>N.Z. Gülersoy, S. Seçmen, G. Kuzey, O. Kargül</i>	927
● Unravelling the urban challenge of ethnic and cultural diversity <i>E. Zippelius</i>	939

THEMATIC SESSIONS

URBAN DESIGN IN PLANNING

● Menteşe In History: Four Different Period; Four Different Urban Texture <i>M. Aktaş, A. Sakarya</i>	953
● Urban transformations in a coastal city and movement of people in public open spaces <i>F. Antocheviz, C. Arsego, A.C. Braga, A.T. Reis, F. Zampieri</i>	965
● Assessment of social and spatial effects of urban design in Athens: insights for a methodological approach <i>K. Avdelidi, G. Gemenetzi, A. Vitopoulou, E. Massou, F. Vlastou, K. Gortsos</i>	977
● Urban densification and daylighting: Existing daylight levels in Swedish multi-family housing as a base for future daylight requirement <i>I. Bournas, M. Lundgren, M. Alenius, M.C. Dubois</i>	987
● Neighborhood: different perceptions of the meaning by natives and immigrants in Athens during economic crisis: Examining the case of Kypseli <i>M. Charalampidi, C. Desi-Louka, S. Yiannoudes</i>	998
● Transforming a small city through urban planning by integrating urban green spaces. Case Study: City of Nafpaktos <i>S. Ch. Fouseki, K. Sotiropoulou, V. Protopapa, D. Karvelas, E. Bakogiannis, I. Kyriazi</i>	1008
● Residential choices and preferences in Athens: Implications for city planning <i>G. Gemenetzi, V. Mourati, E. Zervas</i>	1014
● Environmental Interiorities: Design through real-time data collection and analysis <i>V. Geropanta, A. Karagianni, P. Parthenios</i>	1024
● Examining the Role of Architectural Technology in Future Cities <i>S. Habibi</i>	1032
● Supports; patterns and infrastructural processes in open-ended design <i>G. Kalnis</i>	1042
● Prison and city: Reintegration of the “Korydallos” prison in Athens, Greece <i>A. Kalymniou, K.A. Liapi, V. Petridou</i>	1051
● Connected yet private: the design of multi-household housing in Japan <i>J. McIntosh, Y. Kuboshima,</i>	1060
● An Analytical Culture-led Approach to the Urban Revitalization of Historical Center and Walled Cities <i>X. Lu, L. Pezzetti</i>	1071
● The Ghost Town of Famagusta, Cyprus <i>R. Makhoul Vassiliou</i>	1083
● Urban interfaces and aesthetic evaluations <i>A.T. Reis, A. F. Panzenhagen, V. L. Gerson, F. Bonoldi</i>	1092

- **Evaluation of urban waterfronts as public spaces**
S. Seçmen, H. Türkoğlu 1103
- **Gentrification and urban design in the urban fabric of Rotterdam**
P. Stouten..... 1116
- **Towards a form for transgression: Civil disobedience in urban milieu**
A. Tsarouchi..... 1127

CITIES AND HEALTH

- **Ecology and Design in Developing Ecosystem Services in Urban Regeneration Processes**
M. L. Delendi..... 1139
- **Industrial city and health: first industrial cities in early 1819 to modern industrial cities**
S. Ch. Fouseki, D. Karvelas, E. Bakogiannis, I. Kyriazi 1147
- **The preliminary works of a study on the design of healing gardens for patients with mental disorders**
E. Kamperi, A. Paraskevopoulou, C. Papageorgiou, M. Papafotiou, N. Demiris, M. Economou, C. Theleritis, M. Kitsonas 1157
- **Therapeutic landscape design for older persons health and well-being**
C. Kershaw, J. Cornwall, J. McIntosh, B. Marques 1163
- **Smart systems for rehabilitation and independence**
J. Lim, J. McIntosh, B. Marques, J. Cornwall, E. R. Rodriguez-Ramirez 1171
- **Primary school pupils' perceptions of a typical urban school ground**
A. Paraskevopoulou, M. Panou 1182

SUSTAINABLE URBAN LANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- **Transformation of the city identity: Causes and Effects**
M. Aboutorabi, B. Zalloom..... 1191
- **GIS; VGI and open data during emergency: an experimental approach towards the resilient city**
L. Barbieri, D. De Ioris 1201
- **Physical landscape and social diversity: a study of Australian cities**
I. D. Bishop..... 1209
- **The strategic role of Universities for the sustainable regional and urban planning**
G. Calvano, G. Mangialardi, N. Martinelli, A. Tursi 1217
- **Waterfront Development Management in Greece? The Case of “Lipasmata” in Piraeus**
T. A. Daamen, T. Papadopoulos..... 1228
- **Well thought-out compactness at infra-local scale: determining the qualitative criteria linked to the limits of objective compactness when creating a predominantly residential block**
I. de Smet, D. Laplume 1242

● Eco-cities: Strategies of Rebuilding Communities for Resilient and Sustainable development in Egypt with Particular Emphasis on Aswan <i>A. Elnokaly, A. Elseragy</i>	1253
● Urban Space Living in a changing city: sidewalks of Curitiba <i>H. M. Faria, c. de A. Lima</i>	1264
● The Vacant City: is there anything that we can do? The Land of València; a case study <i>G. i. Diaz, Fernando</i>	1274
● A novel local development model paradigm: The case of Ippokratios race <i>A. Goulas, M. Pappa, G. Theodosiou</i>	1287
● Climate governance in Cape Town and Oslo: Moving towards co-creational leadership? <i>T. Vedeld, H. Hofstad</i>	1294
● Configurational analysis of the city of Sines: contributions to the sustainability of urban planning <i>B. Lopes, R. Guerreiro</i>	1315
● Urban morphology of Western military architecture in the urban development of Vietnam: the case study of Hue City <i>V. N. Duc, A. Alici</i>	1326
● Sustainable landscape design; key ideas for effective implementation <i>A. Nikologianni, K. Moore, P. Larkham</i>	1338
● Urban network of 'green' and 'blue' corridors as a tool of metropolitan and environmental planning. Case study research: the northeastern part of Athens <i>E. Ntafa</i>	1347
● The renaissance of tramway as a challenge for Transit Oriented Development: A pilot project in the city of Thessaloniki <i>A. Papagiannakis, A. Yiannakou, D. Pateraki</i>	1357
● Assessing local stakeholders' perceptions of the urban waterfront through the use of Q methodology <i>T. Papatheochari, S. Niavis, H. Coccossis</i>	1371
● Visual impact: The case of wind turbines in Samos presentation of potential sites under specific context <i>F. Skalidi, D. Tsakou</i>	1382
● Assessing the effect of Resilient Green Infrastructure on land values at the neighborhood level in the city of Cali, Colombia <i>S. Grafakos, A. Tsatsou, L. D' Acci, N.E. Ramirez Aranda</i>	1389
● Evaluating the effect of cool materials on microclimatic parameters under different climatic conditions. Application in the city of Thessaloniki <i>S. Tsoka, E. Litserinou, K. Tsikaloudaki</i>	1401
● Evaluation of nuclear power plants in respect to sustainability: Mersin City example <i>S. Turgut, H. Berkmen</i>	1412
● The role of Carrying capacity as a Quantitative method for Urban Sustainable Development <i>P. Voulellis, K. Serraos</i>	1420

- **Actor Analysis in Decision Making Process of Urban Renewal in China: The Way to Achieve Sustainability**
T. Zhuang, Q. K. Qian, H. J. Visscher, M. G. Elsinga..... 1432

URBAN LANDSCAPES; LANDSCAPE PLANNING AND DESIGN

- **Types and representations of terrain vague in the cinematic city**
E. Asimakopoulou..... 1445
- **Increase security by recreating urban rivers in Tehran**
E. Bigdeli, O.R. Rahimi 1455
- **Intercultural narratives beyond borders**
L. Crespi, B. Di Prete, A. Rebaglio, R. Trocchianesi 1459
- **A map, thousand cities**
U. Domblás..... 1471
- **Comparative approach of Izmir and Thessaloniki’s eco-landscape**
A. Chavrali, T. Sidiropoulou, C. Petropoulou..... 1481
- **Therapeutic Landscapes: the role of culture**
W. Hatton, B. Marques, J. McIntosh 1495
- **The “urban sprawl” effect on the out-of-town real estate market**
A. Kiakou..... 1504
- **Palmscaping. Tracing the multiple journey of the Palm tree
The case of Mesolonghi; Greece**
C. Makedonopoulou..... 1516
- **Recipro-city: synergistic processes from informal actions...**
A. Manca, C. Salaris..... 1528
- **Removing disability: the restorative powers of landscape design**
J. McIntosh, B. Marques, M. McKone 1540
- **Water-potential-mapping for urban flood/drought resilience:
A holistic approach to sustainable spatial planning and design by augmenting
use; reuse and storage capacity of storm water in South East Queensland**
K. Ozgun, A. Moulis, P. Leardini 1549
- **Landscape changes: Quantitative representation of structure and spatial
distribution of land uses in the Larger Urban Zones of Heraklion**
N. Rempis, G. Tsilimigkas 1562
- **The impact of the coastal development projects in the urban landscape
of Heraklion**
N. Rempis, G. Alexandrakis..... 1570
- **Athens - unauthorized: Unplanned but more planning than you would believe**
B. Röe 1581
- **Small city and a bridge. Landscape perspective**
A. Sas-Bojarska 1591

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

- **Theoretical Outlines for a Complex Approach to Architecture**
F. Alves, V. Rato 1605
- **At school as in the city: spaces of imagination**
F. Bonfante 1615
- **What about commons in higher education?**
E. Frangedaki 1625
- **The innovative materials and technologies use as a means
of architectural expression in urban lighting**
E. Skafida..... 1633

URBAN CULTURES AND PUBLIC OPEN SPACES

- **Morphological analysis of squares in Europe’s common cultural context**
I. Alistratovaite-Kurtinaitiene 1645
- **Ladies who do ‘unboxing’ of their groceries. From Internet anecdote
to contemporary material feminism applied to urban thinking**
A. Alonso Albarracin 1656
- **Human behavior and activity in public spaces**
The case of Monastiraki square in Athens
C. Charalampaki, M. Kourouvani, D. Nikolaou..... 1664
- **Autobiographical urbanities and design regression:**
Effrontery towards the urban; or the city as a game
A. Dimitrakopoulos..... 1675
- **Tactical Urbanism and the production of the common**
- an approach to emerging urban practices
A. Farias, A. Gonçalves..... 1685
- **Disputes for memory’s place and artistic action against urban intervention:**
a Brazilian case
E. Marzulo, R. Capelato 1696
- **Narrating migration. Mnemonic traces connecting here and there
and feeling “at home” away from home**
S. Moulara 1704
- **Interconnected realities: Transforming public space through digital networks**
K. Ntampiza 1716
- **Resource characteristics of architecture in Open House initiatives**
Y. Okamura, T. Nohara, A. Tanaka 1723
- **Inclusive playground for Children with Disabilities**
B. Sah, S. Z. Sadri..... 1730
- **Palimpsest industry: industrial heritage and intangible cultural heritage
in the creative city. A comparative study of the Old Truman Brewery
in London and Technopolis in Athens**
S. Sarri..... 1741

- **The city as a model for spatial design: museums; the new town squares**
K. Tzortzi, D. Monioudi-Gavala 1754

HISTORICAL CENTERS AND BUILT HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

- **Comparative Remarks on Design Principles; Concepts and Terms used in Urban Conservation**
N. Apostolopoulou, A. Rodi 1765
- **The Recreation of an Urban Centre: The Case of the Abdullah Gul University Sümer Campus in Kayseri; Turkey**
N. Baturayoğlu Yöney, B. Asiliskender* 1775
- **Reloading 21st century cities with cultural energy. The transformation of gas factories into cultural hotspots in Amsterdam and Athens**
T. Chatzi-Rodopoulou..... 1786
- **Place-identity and urban tourism: a galaxy of social representations of places in capital cities**
A. S. de Rosa, L. Dryjanska, E. Bocci..... 1797
- **Towards the preservation of visual identity of small historical towns**
D. Dijokiene, A. Vete 1808
- **Revitalizing Alexandria through its symbolic significance of heritage; urban form; and the distinctive spirit of place**
A. Elseragy, A. Elnokaly, M. Sabbagh..... 1819
- **Landscape Conservation Policy and Tourism Developments in the Traditional Settlement of Oia; Santorini Island; Greece**
T. Ishimoto, Y. Okamura, K. Eguchi..... 1835
- **The Aegean vernacular as vacant signifier: projections of meaning by modernist and post-modern architects**
N. Magouliotis 1847
- **Showcasing the heritage of historic towns as a vehicle for development planning. Case study: Langadía; Gortynia; Greece**
E. Maravelia, A. Koumpouli, M. Pateraki, V. Daskalakis, E. Kamontou, V. Katsimpoulas, I. Kavvada, M. Kilia, M. Kostagianni, I. Kourouni, D. Mpartzis, N. Papailiou, M. Vasila, E. Vasileiou, E. Maistrou, E. Konstantinidou 1858
- **Residents' perceptions about participation in cultural heritage displaying**
V. D. Spanos, O. Christopoulou 1869
- **When city branding meets ...geology**
V. D. Spanos 1879
- **Social and Spatial Changes In Urban Historic Neighbourhoods: Case of Cihangir District - Istanbul**
M. Ö. Kınacı, N. Z. Gülersoy..... 1885

ENVIRONMENTAL URBAN PLANNING

- **Waterscapes in transformation: insights on landscape accessibility challenged by new infrastructures for climate resilience: The case of the Flemish Coastal area: Uitkerkse Polders**
S. Pillen, K. Scheerlinck, E. Van Daele 1903
- **The proposed Park Road between Itatiaia main center and Penedo township: reflections upon the interests of the county administration and the communities involved**
I. Silveira, J. Rodrigues 1913
- **Climate Adaptation Strategies in Mediterranean Metropolises**
S. Tsoumalakos, O. Christopoulou 1923

GREEN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING

- **Deep renovation in changing cities: Densification and real-estate value for cost-effective energy targets in the ABRACADABRA strategy**
A. Ferrante, A. Fotopoulou, E. Cattani, G. Semprini 1935
- **The importance of green infrastructure planning in urban sustainability: Case study Ankara-Turkey**
N. Shakouri, M. Güneş 1947

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING AND POLICY IN CITIES

- **Niterói; RJ; Brazil; The Waterwais crisis and the “boalt revolt”**
M. Azevedo 1957
- **The notion of “sustainable intelligence” in a “smart” road network. The case of Tsimiski str; a most important commercial axis in the center of Thessaloniki**
S. Vougias, K. Anastasiadou 1968

URBAN PLANNING LAWS; REAL ESTATE AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

- **Spatial planning system’s structure. Focus on urban development: Urban layout planning, plot arrangement – compensation acts, urban planning implementation acts**
T. Gkegkas, E. Stylianidis, P. Farmaki 1981

URBAN ECONOMIES AND SPATIAL IMPACTS

- **Spatial configuration of industrial development corridors: configurational impacts of the road expansion in urban industrial sites of Porto Alegre – Brazil**
D. Altafini, A. Braga, F. Zampieri 2001
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- **Urban metabolism under pressure three major Greek cities transforming through 20th century**
K. Christoforaki..... 2024
- **Changing local urban spaces: the case of housing projects**
M. Corrêa; M. L. Silva 2036
- **Cyclades Archipelago: Regenerating productive landscapes**
F. Pitoglou..... 2045
- **Expanding cities through summer residential suburban development**
M. Stenou..... 2057

PLACE MARKETING AND CITY BRANDING

- **Space; identity and memory policies for the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki: a diachronic approach**
I. Frangopoulos, G. Kazantzi, M. Evdou, N. Karanikolas..... 2067
- **Branding areas in transition: Balkan cities**
E. G. Gavra, K. Gkioufi..... 2080

SHRINKING CITIES AND DIVIDED CITIES

- **The housing emergency in Palermo between rights and legality**
F. Lo Piccolo, A. Giampino, V. Todaro..... 2089
- **Urban regeneration policies against spatial impacts of economic crisis**
S. Manika, E. Anastasiou, K. Manika..... 2098

MIGRATION, MULTINATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

- **The development of a landscape: a *Little India* in the Pontine Plain**
S. Boca..... 2109
- **Sociospatial integration of Haitian immigrants in *Lajeado*; Brazil: a configurational study**
F. Braun-Spinelli, A. Braga..... 2118
- **The effects of higher education students on the housing market from the Studentification Perspective**
T. Tuncer..... 2128

Author Index..... 2149

Subject Index..... 2155

Sponsors 2165

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A critical overview on the outcomes of mending of the suburbs. Case studies and experiments G124.

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Abstract

The G124 project, the working group created by Renzo Piano, the senator of the Italian Republic, had as its objective the recovery of abandoned areas of the suburbs through small mending interventions that could trigger regeneration through new jobs, micro enterprises and start up, light construction sites and widespread, thus creating new jobs.

The G124 was based on the great urban challenge of the coming decades: the fertilization of the areas that the Anglo-Saxons called brownfields, areas rich in humanity and energy, inhabited by young people full of hopes and desire to change.

In 2013, for this purpose, Renzo Piano apprenticed young architects who have worked to identify and redesign the city edges, selected on proposals from the young people themselves, in particular areas abandoned in Rome, Turin, Catania and Milan.

In this paper we outline the crucial characters of the G124 proposals, on which the projects of regeneration are based. Although beneficial, those projects should not be only a superficial indiscriminate “green injection”. We must not forget, in fact, that the green areas within the city, in close relationship with the whole urban landscape, assume both an aesthetic-architectural and a social-recreational function, contributing to psychological well-being of the inhabitants, which was actually one of the main goals of the G124 workshop.

So, if the redemption of the suburbs begins from the recovery of residual open spaces, because the growth of the city wants to be implosive rather than explosive, it is important to assess today the transaction effective as a whole. The requirement that the critical reading instead assumed, specifically, is to test the effect of various interventions on the territory, where they were made.

In particular, our research focuses on the project in Rome, Under the Viaduct of Presidents, in the north-east periphery, on the boundary of the city and discuss about the outcome as a product incubator in the territory.

Keywords: mending the suburbs; green areas; brownfield; project; regeneration

1. INTRODUCTION

The suburbs are urban masses, far from the political and social centers of the city, often of poor architectural quality which, even if not originally, now have bad maintenance conditions. The basic element, which is the cause and effect resulting in these conditions, from a strategic point of view is their position in apparently insignificant territories, where exactly the undefined characteristics of the sites offer great design possibilities [1].

With rare exception, the current situation shows areas inhabited only during the night, with a lack of social services and spaces, clusters that could be defined as *cultural deserts*. [2,3].

Peripheries are the result of sprawl. In Europe¹ this has been attributed to the Second Industrial Revolution, starting in England, and lasting up to the Fifties and Sixties of the Twentieth century. The industrialization and modernization of the factory-towns gave rise to a huge demand for land.

Starting in the 1960's the industrial crisis and the consequential shift of production activities outside of the cities generated the phenomena of contraction, disuse and abandonment.

The neighborhoods for labor housing today are suffering a progressive depletion, and different productive urban centers have undergone a total evident stretch-mark in their building textures.

"Industrial divestments, the review of the center-periphery relationship, the phenomenon of shrinking cities have highlighted the voids, the residual spaces, the interstices between buildings as strategic locations for a more complex view of the organic city".² Towards a similar fate the districts proceed, lacking complex projects as well as social spaces.

2. G124 PROJECT

To address this issue, albeit partially, the G124 working group was created by Renzo Piano, a senator of the Italian Republic, in Italy in 2013, with the intention of using small mending interventions in abandoned suburban areas. The objective of these interventions, not reached in our opinion, had as a goal to trigger regeneration through new forms of employment, micro-enterprises, start-ups and widespread light construction sites, thus creating new jobs. The G124 project was based on the great urban challenge of future decades, the fertilization of the areas that the Anglo-Saxons called brownfields, areas rich in humanity and energy, inhabited by young people full of hopes and desire to change. Renzo Piano employed young architects to work on their proposals to identify and redesign edges of the city, particularly abandoned areas in Rome, Turin and Catania.

Rome

The mending project in Rome³ concerned the recovery of the Presidents' Viaduct for the part that, in the initial project, would have linked peripheral areas to the northeast of the Montesacro district and served an area of 2500 hectares. The abandonment of an entirely built viaduct highlighted the need for its reuse for the social and physical reconnection of local residents, the regeneration of the structure and the reactivation of a connecting line between neighbours, even with different ways of life. The initial intention was to recover the nearly 2 km viaduct with a pedestrian and cycle path, build small squares, garages for bicycles and district laboratories where ideas grow; re-create a direct physical flow and a human cross flow of the many ethnic groups that represent the enormous wealth of the place ensuring, thanks to this relationship, a level of security. The "*Under the Viaduct*" project reached in part the

¹ The 17.2% of the European population lives in overcrowded dwellings and 11% of the population (ca 20 million) live in poor areas.

² Cfr. Fulvio Irace, *Dateci spazio, ma che sia pubblico*, Periferie, 2014.

³ Since 1995 only one third of the Roman suburbs has been affected by five urban renewal programs and eleven retraining programs.

initial objectives. This was achieved by involving citizens, architects, street artists in collaboration with the Town Hall, thus creating for a period of time the idea of regenerating in order to incubate new ideas for the progressive transformation of areas.



Figure 1. Under the Viaduct, Rome

Turin

The case study of Turin concerned Borgata Vittoria, a densely populated residential area, located between the degradation of Barriera di Milano, Rebaudengo and Basse di Stura and Lucento with its issues of new immigration. The two elementary schools in the area, destined to become community centers and civic places of sharing, were the focus of the project and the students were the first spokesmen for the district's expectations. The obvious and easy to answer requests, suggested also by the parish priest and the Dean, concerned the livability of spaces for leisure and the requalification of mobility with bicycle paths and safe walkways. The project proposal involved the construction of a roof garden on top of an underground parking in front of the church and the school, that looked like a semi-deserted area which would eventually fall into a serious state of disrepair. The area involved in the project easily gained better usability with small wooden structures, re-cycling objects and fabrics for City information panels used to create a path having meeting points. The simple design of a small park was a target on which to converge the activation of the energy of the place giving identity to space and to return to the area a dignified character.

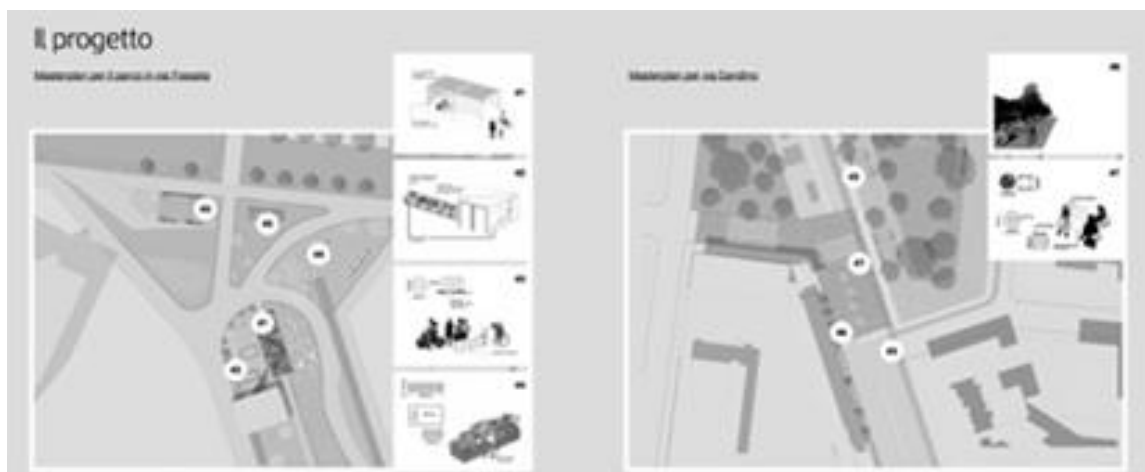


Figure 2. Borgata Vittoria projects, Turin

Catania

Another object of the G124's for mending project is Librino in Catania. Librino represents the ambition of the seventies and its failure to build a New Town, the utopia that saw in modernity the redemption for a better future. More than 70,000 people now live in an area built physically near the town but socially far away, because it lacks the necessary quality of public space and essential services. This area is not far away in space but in the minds of the people, who consider this a remote place. The project starting from this premise, foresaw a humble and simple work, which involved listening, awareness and friendship. Within this district town hidden hope was discovered by young daredevils, the Brigands, who by their resilience remained and worked with young people, to teach the art of the sport, loyalty and friendship. The mending work began with these Brigands and with the Brancati school to identify the problems to be solved through creativity. Within a few months the mending work, almost invisible, facilitated the reconstruction of a dialogue amongst the municipality, the Briganti, the gardeners, the school, the Ance and other actors. The G124 results have activated a network of dialogue resulting in the resolution of some problems: planning together they come to share a plan, realized thanks to the generosity of many.

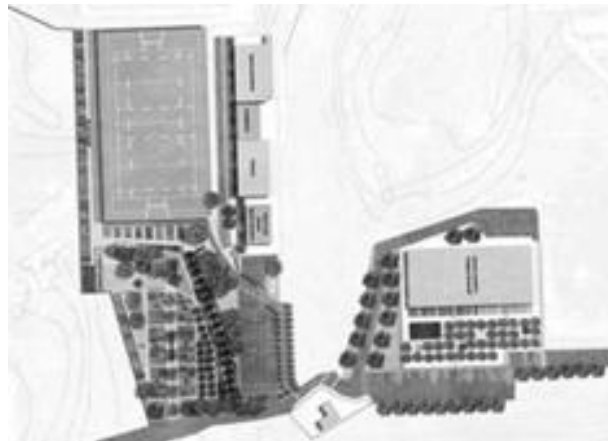


Figure 3. Librino Parks project, Catania

3. EXEMPLAR CASE STUDIES

To rehabilitate the concept of periphery it is necessary to do away with the prejudice that the periphery is an eccentric place, not only because it is outside the city center, but above all it is an open space, and an unconditioned experimental laboratory¹. From the political and economic point of view, in the last decades the major changes in progress at the global level are subverting any prejudice on the center-periphery relationship. In fact, in emerging countries, the periphery is taking the leading role for growth and a positive transition.

As a matter of fact in 1979, Renzo Piano already indicated the operating strategies in his

¹ The word laboratory concerns very different experiences: Renzo Piano and Giancarlo De Carlo have complementary approaches and common issues such as the active participation of the inhabitants in the design stage and in the following construction phase; the full integration among analysis, plan and project; the concept of recovery as a great opportunity for urban redesign; the holistic approach to physical knowledge of the city. Otherwise the two experiences differ even in their name: in De Carlo's perspective, the laboratory had a semantic connotation and was founded on the relationship between the city and the community that over time expressed it, between "Spazio e Società", between the inner hierarchies that govern this system of relations and the urban morphology resulting from it; for Piano is instead a workshop, a place of collective job that investigates the physical signs imprinted in the history of the place but also in its collective knowledge, maybe only latent, in which the culture of doing it is expressed.

preservation project for the center of Otranto, realized with the active participation of the inhabitants, who remained in the area near their work places. One of the crucial policies was to give attention to the problems and needs emerging directly from the environment.

To rehabilitate suburban areas new conceptual and operational trends are required, but beyond mending projects few successful experiences have been achieved in run-down urban areas.

The issue is at the origin. This can be partly attributable to the loss of identity of the buildings due to the repetition and modularity required for large-scale design, and partly due to the urban model, incoherent with the individual choices. New interventions in environments already completed are both necessary and challenging.

The initiative by the G124, however, arose from the observation of a condition of extreme suffering of many suburbs of major Italian cities. On several occasions, the complete analysis of those districts led to drastic design research proposals concerning the demolition of parts or of entire groups of buildings, as though the only solution to social and physical decay of the suburbs was to remove the problem at its root. In most cases the great dimension model showed its shortcomings for two main reasons: first of all because of an excessive concentration of people, in poverty and minority conditions; and secondly because of the lack of services and the geographic isolation, in respect to main central urban places, where work, culture and leisure facilities are found, and there by increasing the marginal condition [20].



Figure 4. Corviale building, Rome

In Rome, Corviale¹ is a typical example of what was supposed to embody the utopia of the city in a single building. A sort of social machine that over the years testified to the negative outcome of this model. In particular, for this visionary project, the criticism arose from the very first allocation of the housing, followed by illegal occupation of the fourth floor that was supposed to host all the essential services, an indispensable component for residential use.

Consequently, missing schools, commercial shops, cultural and recreational spaces, the inhabitants (about 8500 people) of this one kilometer long town are suffering isolation from the city, without the advantages of country life.

¹ Corviale (1972-1982) has long been the most ambitious architectural project of Istituto Case Popolari, that with it had to give shape to of Le Corbusier's rationalist utopia. Mario Fiorentino, author of this intervention with a large group of Italian valued architects and engineers, including Federico Gorio, Pietro Maria Lugli, Giulio Sterbini, Michele Valori and Riccardo Morandi who coordinated the structural project, stated that Viennese Karl Marx-Hof was one of his references for Corviale. After two decades during which Corviale represented the degradation of the metropolitan suburbs, it is now the topic of international projects and cultural initiatives for the solution of the social problem that sets it apart. (ref. <http://corviale.it/>).

Before ATER's¹ project to regenerate Corviale and the Green Kilometer project for the rehabilitation of the 4th floor, several design proposals had been put forward and in some instances even proposed the possibility of demolition and replacement of the building with eight apartment houses.



Figure 5. Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis, Missouri, before and after

The issue of the demolition contrasts with the difficult economic sustainability of the intervention in itself, especially for the disposal of waste material derived from the demolition.

Among the best known demolition of public housing interventions we can recall the US experience that determined the end of the Modern, as declared Charles Jencks², namely the demolition of 33 housing blocks that made up the Pruitt-Igoe district³, one of many suburban building complexes characterized by a large dimension and social degradation, built above all in the decades of the Seventies and Eighties in various parts of the Western world [5, 10, 12].



Figure 6. Laurentino 38 neighborhood, Rome

¹ ATER is the acronym of Azienda territoriale per l'edilizia residenziale (Territorial public company for residential buildings).

² Jencks, C., 2002, *New Paradigm in Architecture: The Language of Post-Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

³ Minoru Yamasaki designed Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis Missouri, in 1954 – 1955. The demolition began less than 20 years later, in 1972.

For example, some of the bridges connecting different blocks of the residential complex of Laurentino 38¹ in Rome, places of violence and crime, have already been demolished.

The decision to demolish constructions also corresponds to defeat of the cities, which assumed the responsibility for not being able to find a sustainable solution to the problem.

The so-called Vele di Scampia² (Naples) suffered the same destiny. In the project concerning their gradual demolition only one construction will be maintained and undergo a massive recovery program to be use for public offices.



Figure 7. Scampia, Naples. General view of the remaining “sails”. Photo by Federica Zappalà

A crucial reflection concerns the reasons for the decline in the quality of public spaces rather than private ones, and the difficulty for public property to keep alive a sense of belonging in marginal communities located there.

As in the American situation, even in the Roman and Neapolitan examples, the marginal conditions of the inhabitants, placed at the edge of the town, do not seem to allow for effective and long-lasting regeneration. Therefore the settlement model seems inappropriate, if to give a degree of decorum in interventions on the peripheries it is necessary to find an alternative use rather than that of public housing [2,3].

In Scampia, an office district, and in St. Louis a large urban park, these are experiments to come to the proposal for an Anglo-Saxon urban model that characterized the project of the demolition for the problematic Roman district of Tor Bella Monaca³ and its reconfiguration according to the New Urbanism model⁴.

The urban renewal program for Tor Bella Monaca dates back to 2010 and was supported by the mayor of the city who requested Leon Krier to submit a proposal for this neighborhood. Tor Bella Monaca took inspiration from the previous renowned English experience of New Urbanism by Leon Krier, the creator of the suburb of Poundbury, promoted by the Prince of Wales. Poundbury, however, adopted the New Urbanist model without having to deal with the restoration of a place characterized by social deprivation.

¹ built between 1974 and 1984 by a design team led by Pietro Barucci, the neighborhood is organized around a ring road of about 4km and is characterized by so-called "bridges", originally 11, pedestrian bridges constructions that allow the crossing of the main road ring linking the housing units and the green areas and where it was thought to arrange shops and services. Below, the cars were kept away from pedestrians.

² The seven Vele (sails) of Scampia are big-city buildings with sloping floors, designed by the architect Franz Di Salvo and built between 1962 and 1975.

³ Tor Bella Monaca was born as a workers village on an ancient site characterized by many sight towers of the fourteenth-century, to be hit by a huge amount of unlicensed constructions in the years after World War II and in the Sixties.

⁴ New Urbanism movement calls for redesigning neighborhoods so that they were less dense, closer to a classic contextualization as that of the garden cities, less oriented toward automobile travel and more conducive to walking and bicycling, and a smooth transition between urban allotments and the surrounding countryside. New Urbanism calls for involving people in shaping their own community.



Figure 8. Tor Bella Monaca neighborhood, Rome

The proposal to replace the problematic system of Tor Bella Monaca, characterized by high-rise buildings with considerable housing density, and few residential buildings with gardens, implicates a massive extension of the new hypothesized district, with significant land use and which is partly in conflict with the basic issues of the New Urbanist movement that tends to favor the pedestrian prevalence of the system.

Other projects for Tor Bella Monaca aimed to regenerate the whole neighborhood through soil project strategies, such as greenery and open public spaces. The studies start from a careful reading of the *status quo* and offer punctual and sustainable intervention proposals with the objective of restoring the urban identity to the neighborhood [8, 9].

Even in the US, where the movement has taken on a certain importance, creating suburbs characterized by low residential units with urban gardens and public green areas spread uniformly, the residential system is a mix of housing and services that increase the quality of everyday life.



Figure 9. Tor Bella Monaca, Rome, soil project strategies [8, p. 254]

The successful aspect is the involvement of local communities, much the same as in any social class or culture [22].

4. BEST PRACTICES

“To not die architecture must involve those who are directly or indirectly users of it. It will not be easy, because the society is more and more intricate. But this is the beauty of the period we are living” [22]. In essence, the democratic involvement of stakeholders in the design of its territory is according to Giancarlo De Carlo key to undertake a journey to the sense of belonging to contemporary places [7]. In suburbs characterized by youth unemployment leading to social problems, designing bottom up with self-construction tools is a good practice that makes for sustainable redevelopment efforts and ensures a long service life because a community that builds its place feels good about it and has an interest in maintaining it.

The therapy of repairing the wounds of habitation and mending the separation within the suburbs starts from the nurturing of human relationships in our communities. Through awareness policies it is possible to block the strong inhomogeneity that grips the spontaneous architecture of the suburbs, which is not polymorphic architecture, but no architecture.

Architecture can reduce individualism by eliminating the small scale and sometimes unnecessary privacy barriers that make neighbors unknown to one another. The space culture must be measured with the scale of the geography. Architecture rediscovers the need to act on collective places to regenerate society by reviewing some of the assumptions that have roots in the origin of the Modern [21].

Possible best practice actions are:

#1. Streamlining the decision-making processes

- Involving service users through focus groups and consultations with stakeholders.
- Using methods such as Planning for real and Multicriteria Evaluation suggesting targeted interventions on a single objective and on specific areas.
- Giving particular attention should be paid to the goals achievable in the short term.

#2. Sustainable redevelopment

The sustainable design and performance of materials is an important aspect in the construction sector for production and transport, a major cause of environmental impact.

In Europe, the choice of high ecological efficiency materials, preferably locally produced, is a fundamental prerogative, with particular attention to the reuse of materials (strategy from construction to demolition DFR - Design For Recycling and DFD - Design For Deconstruction / Dismanteling).

#3. Involvement and Participatory planning

- Education and active citizen involvement in events sponsored by local interests.
- Creating Events bottom-up and development of joint projects.
- Participation of local communities in the process of redevelopment. The process of building and/or retraining must be characterized by interoperability between the various sectors involved [16].

#4. New forms of living

Co-housing is an approach that permits experimentation with new forms of partnerships between public and private entities, resulting in different solution from the mechanical

approach of *Unité d'habitation*. Planning working spaces and services are run directly by users [4, 11, 16].

#5. Policies for agricultural production and use of productive land

- Consuming products in the local food chain Km 0, reusing structures and urban voids for the production and distribution of products.
- Giving preference to local markets and attend fairs organized by farmers.
- Mapping and sharing via hi-tech platforms a ranking of the soils affected by *land degradation* phenomenon and encouraging the development of local agricultural production not only to timely and independent level but integrated into synergistic systems of land management.
- Transferring the know-how and the results in order to promote the spread of *best practices* among the population [18].

#6. New lifestyles and daily habits

The use of parks, gardens and green areas of the city, making them accessible and safe, even in the evening hours must allow and facilitate, also for the morale and welfare of the citizen [19].

#7. Activation of micro-economies and start up

"Locating a suburb with a strong youth unemployment means redesigning places and directing physical situations to the creation of start-ups, or activities and crafts related to technology. The use of a model of small workshops (*craft and technology*) in metropolitan areas, especially if associated with universities, have had great innovational effects. " [1].

4. CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen from the illustration of some good practices, all aimed at the physical and social regeneration of peripheral neighborhoods, the mending projects are not enough to regenerate parts of the suburbs having severe deprivation conditions and, like all patch-ups, sooner or later show new injuries. This is because mending projects are only small projects aimed at solving some problems, partiality for those related to maintenance. Due to economic and political difficulties, the majority of the urban populations still live in suburbs with marginalization and social exclusion. This is the result of a development process that did not take into account the social quality of the settlements, and so far has not been able to find concrete answers to fill the gaps, since mending projects cannot solve persistent problems.

The adoption of best practices, while reactivating the participation of local communities which is essential for a correct long-term perspective approach to the project, may be insufficient and incomplete for the need to give a clear identity and sense of belonging for the inhabitants, as well as participatory decision-making power and quality and comfort concerning the interventions.

This latter objective, unfortunately, does not belong to the people and it is not derived from the social actions that they undertake (participatory decision-making power), but is highly dependent on the political will of dedicating funds to directly targeted interventions.

While there is an increasingly widespread awareness that it is not necessary to occupy virgin soil nor to densify the building fabric, i.e. manufacture where it is possible and retrain where it is required, between drastic solutions one must be reconsider selective demolition.

In order to facilitate to the extent possible integration and interaction amongst people it may be useful to construct housing dedicated to people from different cultural backgrounds, with different multicultural targets and financial resources so not to create new ghettos.

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Author Index

A

Aboutorabi M., 1191
 Aktaş M., 953
 Al Gammal M., 773
 Alenius M., 987
 Alexandrakis G., 1570
 Alici A., 1326
 Alistratovaite-Kurtinaitiene I., 1645
 Alonso Albarracín A., 1656
 Altafini D., 2001
 Altanlar A., 411
 Alves F., 1605
 Anastasiadis D., 299
 Anastasiadou K., 1968
 Anastasiou E., 2012, 2098
 Anastasopoulos N., 640
 Antochviz F., 965
 Apostolopoulou N., 1765
 Aprile M., 25
 Arsego C., 965
 Asiliskender B., 1775
 Asimakopoulou E., 1445
 Asprogerakas E., 629
 Athanasopoulos K., 658
 Avgerinou Kolonia S., 2135
 Avdelidi K., 194, 977
 Azevedo M., 1957

B

Babalis D., 291
 Bajić T., 861
 Bakalis C., 784
 Bakogiannis E., 1008, 1147
 Barbieri L., 1201
 Baturayoglu Yöney N., 1775
 Belibani R., 34, 208, 805
 Benetou A., 299
 Berkmen H., 1412
 Bianconi F., 94
 Bigdeli E., 1455
 Bishop I.D., 1209
 Blathra S., 699

Boca S., 2109
 Bocci E., 1797
 Bonfante F., 1615
 Bonoldi F., 1092
 Bournas I., 987
 Bouzeas S., 549
 Braga A.C., 965, 2001, 2118
 Braun F., 2118

C

Calvano G., 1217
 Camiz A., 455
 Cantero Celada S., 699
 Capanna A., 34, 208
 Capelato R., 1696
 Castagnaro A., 766
 Cattani E., 1935
 Cenci J., 725
 Chaldezou S., 45
 Charalampaki C., 1664
 Charalampidi M., 998
 Chatzi Rodopoulou T., 1786
 Chazapis A., 629
 Christidou C., 699
 Christoforaki K., 2024
 Christopoulou O., 515, 1869, 1923
 Chtouris S., 784
 Cialdea D., 62, 79
 Cidre E., 3
 Clemente M., 94, 103
 Coccossis H., 1371
 Colazza M., 260
 Cornwall J., 1163, 1171
 Corrêa M., 2036
 Costopoulou T., 515
 Crespi L., 1459

D

D' Acci L., 1389
 Daamen T.A., 1228
 Damiano D.S., 114
 Daskalakis V., 1858

Proceedings

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De Ioris D., 1201
de Rosa A.S., 1797
de Smet I., 1242
Delendi M.L., 1139
Demiri K., 466
Demiris N., 1157
Desi-Louka C., 998
Di Prete B., 1459
Dijokiene D., 1808
Dimitrakopoulos A., 1675
Domblás U., 1471
Dryjanska L., 1797
Dubois M.C., 987
Duc V.N., 1326

E

Economou M., 1157
Eguchi K., 1835
Elnokaly A., 1253, 1819
Elseragy A., 1253, 1819
Elsinga M.G., 1432
Enlin Z., 411
Evdou M., 2067

F

Falasca C.C., 794
Faria H.M., 1264
Farias A., 1685
Farmaki P., 1981
Ferrante A., 1935
Ficcadenti F., 805
Filippucci M., 94
Fotopoulou A., 1935
Fouseki S. Ch., 1008, 1147
Frangedaki E., 1625
Frangopoulos I., 2067

G

Gaja i Díaz F., 1274
Gavra E.G., 2080
Gemenetzi G., 194, 813, 977, 1014
Geropanta V., 1024
Gerson V.L., 1092
Geuna A., 893
Giampino A., 2089
Giannouli I., 699
Gigante A., 794
Gkegkas T., 1981

Gkioufi K., 2080
Gkoumopoulou G., 629
Gonçalves A., 1685
Gortsos K., 194, 977
Goulas A., 1287
Gouloumis S.M., 549
Grafakos S., 1389
Grigoriadou M., 321
Gritti A., 825
Guerreiro R., 1315
Gugerell K., 699
Gülersoy N.Z., 927, 1885
Güneş M., 1947

H

Habibi S., 1032
Hadjichristou Y., 380
Hatton W., 1495
Havrali A., 1481
Hofstad H., 1294

I

Ioannatou E., 299
Ioannou O., 579
Ippolito A.M., 131
Ishimoto T., 1835
Izzo F., 766

K

Kalkan Açikkapi D., 411
Kalnis G., 1042
Kalymniou A., 1051
Kamontou E., 1858
Kamperi E., 1157
Karagianni A., 1024
Karanikolas N., 2067
Kargül O., 927
Karvelas D., 1008, 1147
Katsavounidou G., 734
Katsimpoulas V., 1858
Kavvada I., 1858
Kazantzi G., 2067
Kershaw C., 1163
Kiakou A., 1504
Kilia M., 1858
Kiourti M., 649
Kitsonas M., 1157
Klabatsea R., 501

- Konidi A., 299
 Konstantinidou E., 1858
 Kostagianni M., 1858
 Koumpouli A., 1858
 Kourouni I., 1858
 Kourouvani M., 1664
 Koussoulos G., 299
 Koutsomarkos N., 699
 Kozminska U., 249
 Kronenberger B., 268
 Kuboshima Y., 1060
 Kuzey G., 927
 Kyriazi I., 1008, 1147
 Kyvelou-Chiotini S., 489
- L**
- La Delfa G., 893
 Laplume D., 1242
 Larkham P., 1338
 Leardini P., 1549
 Lehmann K., 219
 Leonhart Petersen K., 699
 Liapi K.A., 1051
 Lim J., 1171
 Linaki E., 333
 Litsardou D., 501
 Litserinou E., 1401
 Lo Piccolo F., 2089
 Lopes B., 1315
 Lu X., 1071
 Lundgren M., 987
- M**
- Magouliotis N., 1847
 Maistrou E., 299, 311, 1858
 Makedonopoulou C., 1516
 Makhoul Vassiliou R., 1083
 Malkakis V., 299
 Manca A., 1528
 Mangialardi G., 1217
 Manika K., 2098
 Manika S., 2012, 2098
 Manisa K., 422
 Maravelia E., 1858
 Marinero Peral A.M., 699
 Marino M., 145
 Marques B., 1163, 1171, 1495, 1540
 Martinelli N., 1217
- Marzulo E., 1696
 Massou E., 194, 977
 Mayer-Wydra M., 837
 McIntosh J., 1163, 1171, 1495, 1540
 McKone M., 1540
 Mentekidou A.D., 539
 Mocci S., 684
 Monioudi-Gavala D., 1754
 Montella I., 850
 Moore K., 1338
 Moretti K., 373
 Moulara S., 1704
 Moulis A., 1549
 Mourati V., 1014
 Mpartzis D., 1858
 Mrdjenović T., 447
- N**
- Nafa H., 590
 Niavis S., 1371
 Nikas G., 299
 Nikolaou D., 1664
 Nikolić T., 861
 Nikologgianni A., 1338
 Nohara T., 1723
 Ntafa E., 1347
 Ntampiza K., 1716
 Nyka L., 872
- O**
- Oc T., 3
 Okamura Y., 1723, 1835
 Özbay Kınacı M., 1885
 Özer Y.S., 433
 Ozgun K., 1549
- P**
- Paez E., 260
 Panou M., 1182
 Panzenhagen A.F., 1092
 Papadopoulos T., 1228
 Papafotiou M., 1157
 Papageorgiou C., 1157
 Papageorgiou M., 515, 813
 Papagiannakis A., 1357
 Papailiou N., 1858
 Papaioannou A., 699
 Paparsenou Z., 345

Papatheochari T., 1371
Papavasileiou M., 399, 568
Pappa M., 1287
Paraskevopoulou A., 1157, 1182
Parthenios P., 1024
Pasquali M., 694
Pateraki D., 1357
Pateraki M., 1858
Petras T., 599
Petrella B., 882
Petrić J., 861
Petridou V., 1051
Petropoulou C., 1481
Pezzetti L.A., 236, 1071
Pili S., 164
Pillen S., 1903
Pineschi P., 260
Pitoglou F., 2045
Plastina M., 230
Polychronopoulos D., 321
Pozoukidou G., 333
Protopapa V., 1008

Q

Qian Q.K., 1432
Quercio N., 62

R

Ramirez Aranda N.E., 1389
Rampavila M., 2149
Rato V., 1605
Rebaglio A., 1459
Reis A.T., 965, 1092
Rempis N., 1562, 1570
Ristuccia M.S., 260
Rodi A., 1765
Rodrigues J., 1913
Rodriguez-Ramirez E., 1171
Röe B., 1581
Rynska E.D., 249

S

Sabbagh M., 1819
Sadri S., 1730
Saeed M., 590
Sah B., 1730
Sakantamis K., 476
Sakarya A., 953

Salaris C., 1528
Salemik K., 699
Salvati L., 94, 164
Sanna C., 260
Sarri S., 1741
Sas-Bojarska A., 1591
Scheerlinck K., 1903
Sciarrone C., 694
Secchi R., 260
Seçmen S., 927, 1103
Selevista M., 356
Semprini G., 1935
Sepe M., 181
Serraos K., 629, 1420
Setti G., 825
Shakouri N., 1947
Siddi C., 673
Sidiropoulou T., 1481
Silva M.L., 2036
Silveira I., 1913
Skafida E., 1633
Skalidi F., 1382
Song Y., 711
Sotiropoulou K., 1008
Spanogianni E., 526
Spanos V.D., 1869, 1879
Stamatopoulou A., 606
Stenou M., 2057
Stivali C., 156
Stouten P., 1116
Stylianidis E., 1981
Suraci N., 893
Swiny A., 380
Szczepański J., 872

T

Tanaka A., 1723
Tapkı S., 901
Tasopoulou A., 699
Tenorio G., 268
Terkenli T.S., 560
Theleritis C., 1157
Theodora Y., 45, 526
Theodosiou G., 1287
Thomas G., 1060
Timmeren A., 711
Todaro V., 2089
Tofiluk A., 249

- Tombolini I., 164
Tonelli C., 850
Trocchianesi R., 1459
Troncone S.G., 278
Tsakou D., 1382
Tsarouchi A., 1127
Tsatsou A., 1389
Tsilimigkas G., 1562
Tsoka S., 1401
Tsoumalakos S., 1923
Tuncer T., 2128
Türkoğlu H., 1103
Tursi A., 1217
Tzortzi K., 1754
- V**
Vains C., 912
Van Daele E., 1903
Varvatou K., 476
Vasila M., 1858
Vasileiou E., 1858
Vassi A., 658
Vedeld T., 1294
Veisz A., 172
Venetsianou O., 618
Vete A., 1808
Visscher H. J., 1432
- Vitopoulou A., 194, 977
Vlastou F., 194, 658, 977
Vougiass S., 1968
Voulelis P., 629, 1420
Vyzantiadou M.M., 356
- W**
Wandl A., 711
- X**
Xanthopoulou X., 299
- Y**
Yeğenağa O.H., 433
Yenias K.-O., 392
Yerliyurt B., 422
Yiannakou A., 1357
Yiannoudes S., 998
- Z**
Zalloom B., 1191
Zampieri F., 965, 2001
Zhuang T., 1432
Zinowiec-Cieplik K., 249
Zippelius E., 939
Zomas A., 399, 568
Zuidema C., 699

Subject Index

A

Abdullah Gül University Sumer Campus, 1775
 absurd, 392
 access, 556
 accessibility as socio-economic value for waterscapes, 1903
 activism, 1998
 actor analysis, 1432
 actual residence, 1014
 adaptation strategy, 1923
 add-ons, 1935
 adoption of a public space, 1528
 Aegean, 1847
 Aegean open sea, 568
 aesthetic evaluations, 1092
 Afthereta-unauthorized, 1581
 agro-forest systems, 164
 air corridors, 1455
 alternative tourism, 422
 America's Cup, 549
 amphibian aircraft, 549
 analytics, 579
 anthropology, 649
 archaeological remains, 466
 architectural education, 321
 architectural heritage, 356
 architectural identity, 1819
 architectural lighting, 1633
 architectural overwriting, 236
 architectural projections, 618
 architectural technology, 1032
 architecture, 649, 1605, 1615, 1847
 arrangement and compensation acts due to urban layout, 1981
 artistic against-intervention, 1696
 Aswan, 1253
 Athens, 784
 attractors, 455
 Australian cities, 1209
 autobiography, 1675

B

balkans, 2080
 barren lands, 1455
 Belgrade, 861
 borders, 1459
 Bosphorus, 411
 bottom up, 373
 bottom-up participation, 1528
 boundaries, 1083
 Brasilia, 268
 bridge, 1591
 brownfield site, 725
 brownfield, 208
 buffer zone, 380
 building design, 740
 building information modeling, 172
 built environment, 1032
 built heritage management, 773
 built heritage, 345

C

carrying capacity, 1420
 CartoDb visual program, 590
 case study, 1051
 Catalan region, 278
 cement canals, 1455
 central Athens, 194
 central part of the city, 1645
 changes in local urban space, 2036
 children with disabilities, 1730
 Cihangir neighborhood, 1900
 cinematic city, 1445
 citizen and governance, 684
 citizen science, 156
 city, 219, 1591, 1730
 city branding, 1879
 city brochures, 1797
 city center development, 1819
 city formations, 2024
 city making, 673
 city planning, 1147
 city planning, 526
 civil disobedience, 1127

civil society, 629
climate adaptation, 1338
climate change, 452, 1201, 1923
climate change and landscape resilience, 1903
climate transformation, 1294
coastal area, 1562, 1570
coastal city, 965
coastal landscape, 62
coastal urban space, 526
coastal urbanization, 2135
coastal zone, 515
co-creational leadership, 1294
co-existence, 998
co-habitation, 476
collaborative design of homes, 476
collaborative processes, 1480
collective design, 476
collective memories, 1459
collective self-build, 1528
commons, 156, 1625
commons standards, 1625
commonwealth, 1685
communities, 805
compact city, 1935
compact growth, 164
comparative approach, 1481
complexity, 1605
concepts-terms in urban conservation, 1765
conflict, 590
connectivity, 579, 1060
conservation, 927
contemporary architecture, 766
contemporary public spaces, 1696
cool materials, 1401
Corinthiakos gulf, 515
craftsmen, 433
creative economy, 1858
creativity, 1741
criteria of reasonable compactness, 1242
cultural, 927
cultural heritage, 321, 345, 422, 1869
cultural identity, 2080
cultural impacts, 556
cultural landscape, 1495
cultural tourism, 411
culture, 1287
culture's preservation; seasonality, 2056

culture-led approaches, 1071
cultures of participation, 640
Curitiba-Brazil, 1264
Cyclades Archipelago, 2045
cycle network, 1008

D

data contextualization, 579
data visualization, 599
daylight factor, 987
daylighting, 987
decision making process, 1432
democratization of planning, 629
densification, 987, 1242, 1935
design, 766, 1163
design strategies, 1024
design studio course, 321
desire of place, 556
Deskati, 1879
development, 766
development corridors, 2001
development projects, 1570
development strategy, 345
diffusion model, 837
digital commons, 1625
digital survey, 119
digital technologies, 1171
digitally expanded cinema, 618
disability, 1540
dispersed urbanization, 164
diversity, 219, 939
domestic, 1656
dwellers appropriation of space, 2036

E

East-West, 1516
eco-cities, 1253
eco-landscape approach, 1481
economic crisis, 2098
economic growth, 1287
economic reinforcement, 2045
economic sustainability, 1060
ecosystem services, 156, 1139
ecosystem-based management, 489
education, 1217
eHealth, 1171
elderly, 1163, 1171
emergency, 1201

- emotion, 684
 employed by economic activity, 2012
 enhance the quality, 1455
 Envimet, 1401
 environment, 1455, 1947
 environmental impact assessment, 1591
 environmental parameters, 1024
 environmental planning, 1913
 environmental policy, 1347
 environmental tools, 1347
 equipment, 278
 Ermoupolis, 345
 escapism, 2057
 essential housing models, 850
 ethnic groups, 872
 ethnicities, 939
 Europe, 1645
 European heritage days, 1723
 European Union, 734
 evaluation, 590
 expandable housing, 230
 expanded cinema, 618
 experimentation, 694
- F**
- family, 649
 feedback systems, 1171
 feminism, 1656
 feral cities, 380
 first-time visitors, 1797
 fishing boat harbor, 568
 fitness equipment, 1163
 flexible, 373
 flexible models to contrast marginalization, 260
 flood management, 1139
 flood risk, 1389
 form, 1127
 formal, 373
 fragmentary archaeological sites, 466
 fringes, 1504
 functional change, 927
- G**
- game, 1675
 gasworks, 1786
 Gdańsk, 872
 gemeinschaft/gessellschaft, 640
 gentrification, 1116, 1471, 1885
 gentrification projects, 433
 geodatabase, 684
 geographical variables, 670
 geology, 1879
 German cities, 629
 GIS, 1201
 GIS mapping, 1549
 globalisation, 156, 1191, 1471, 1696
 Greater Athens, 977
 Greece, 515, 536, 813, 1228
 Greek cities, 734
 Greek landscape, 1516
 green areas, 208, 249
 green categories, 34
 green corridors and public spaces, 260
 green guide, 34
 green infrastructure, 94, 103
 green infrastructure benefits, 1389
 green network, 1347
 green pathways, 79
 green/blue corridors, 1347
 groundwater, 1455
- H**
- hacktivism, 1716
 haitian immigrants, 2118
 Hamburg, 229
 health, 1163
 health planning – methods, 1147
 healthy cities, 1147
 hedonic pricing model, 1389
 Heraklion, 1562, 1570
 heritage, 893
 heritage buildings, 1819
 heritage designation and management, 356
 heritage urban landscape, 236
 high street, 1819
 higher education, 2128
 historic environment, 291
 historic garden, 119
 historic memory, 1083
 historic settlement, 794
 historical center, 1071, 1808
 historical city center, 25
 holistic energy planning, 699
 hospitality, 825
 housing, 805

housing emergency, 2089
housing market, 2128
housing policies, 813, 2089
housing projects in Rio de Janeiro, 2036
housing rehabilitation, 813
human behavior, 1157, 1664
human topographies, 380
human urban environments, 1116

I

ideal residence, 1014
identity, 556, 765, 893, 902, 1326, 1459,
1471
image, 2080
immigrants, 794
impairment, 1540
improving urban environment, 299
inclusive design, 1540
inclusive playground, 1730
incremental housing strategies, 230
independent living, 1060
indigenous knowledge, 1495
industrial cities, 1147
industrial heritage, 432, 1741, 1786
infill architecture, 466
informal, 373, 1581
informal actions, 1528
informal cities, 850
informal settlements, 825
informality, 392, 399
inner city regenerations, 1071
institutional/participatory planning, 629
insular, 556
intangible cultural heritage, 1741
intangible heritage, 1858
integrated and objective compactness, 1242
integrated coastal zone management, 1371,
2135
integrated urban & transport planning, 1357
interactive and digital media, 618
interactivity, 579
interconnection, 1716
intercultural city, 882
intercultural potential, 1459
interdisciplinary, 1605
interpersonal communication, 1797
intersensoriality, 599, 606
inventory, 987

Itatiaia county, 1913
Izmir, 1481

J

Japan, 1060
Jews, 2067
journey, 1516

K

Kayseri, 1775
Kuzguncuk, 927

L

Lajeado / RS, 2118
land use, 1562
land use changes, 194
land values, 1389
landscape, 132, 1591, 1947
landscape architecture, 1163, 1540
landscape conservation, 1835
landscape design, 103, 1182, 1338
landscape identity, 684
landscape metrics, 1562
landscape planning, 2109
landscape preservation, 79
landscaping, 1455
land-sea interaction, 489
Larissa, 1504
latent conflicts, 2089
law, 1127
learning community, 579
learning patterns, 589
legal system, 2135
legislation, 114, 1382
leisure, 278
Lesvos, 560
light management, 1633
lighting applications, 1633
limit, 1127
listed buildings, 356
liveability, 939
Living Labs, 699
local development, 1287
local identity, 1858
local media, 1716
localisation, 1191
Location Quotient (LQ), 2012
long-term change, 673

low carbon, 1338
 Lower Silesian Voivodeship, 837
 Lüneburg, 219

M
 management and planning of territory, 114
 manufacture, 433
 Maori, 1495
 mapping, 606, 1445
 marine spatial planning, 515
 maritime governance, 489
 Maritime Spatial Planning, 489, 2135
 mature as ethics, 156
 meaning, 392
 Mediterranean, 1923
 Mediterranean basin, 164
 medium sized cities, 1371
 memory, 466
 memory policies, 2067
 mending the suburbs, 208
 mental healthcare facilities, 1157
 mental maps, 998, 1741
 Metropolis, 1455
 Metropolitan areas, 1923
 microclimate simulation, 1401
 migrant, 784, 882
 migrants' routes, 825
 migration, 219, 805, 872, 893, 902, 912, 2109
 military architecture; landscape, 1326
 minimum requirement, 850
 minor urbanity, 34
 mobility, 1913
 models, 805
 modernism, 1847
 monumental buildings, 345
 morphogenesis, 784
 morphological transformations, 965
 morphology, 1242, 1645
 mountainous settlement, 1858
 movement of people and vehicles, 965
 multiculturalism, 766, 825
 multi-family housing, 987
 multi-household, 1060
 multinational, 998
 multiscale identity, 684
 multitude, 1685
 museum space, 1754

N

natural heritage, 501
 natural resources, 114
 natural structure, 1412
 nature as method, 156
 nearly zero energy, 1935
 need, 392
 neighbourhood, 998
 neoliberal capitalism, 1685
 network, 568
 network, 1217, 1716
 new technology, 1615
 New Zealand, 1495
 Nicopolis, 1869
 non-planning, 1581
 northeastern Aegean, 539
 North-South, 1294
 nuclear energy, 1412

O
 observation tools, 1664
 Oia, 1835
 old barracks, 291
 oleo tourism, 422
 open green spaces, 45, 1008
 Open House London, 1723
 open space, 694
 open street maps, 599
 open-ended design, 1042
 Opole Voivodeship, 837
 other, 1516
 overproduction, 1274

P
 palm tree, 1516
 Park Road, 1913
 participation, 476, 673, 1371, 1581, 1869
 participatory culture, 649
 participatory decision making, 699
 participatory planning, 45, 373, 526
 patterns, 1042
 pedestrians, 1264
 perception of tourism, 411
 PGIS, 684
 physical landscape, 1209
 place attachment, 902
 place branding, 539, 1858
 place identity, 1797
 place memory, 1696

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 Syros, Delos, Mykonos Islands, Greece • June 26-30, 2017
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planetary urbanization, 399
planning, 658, 1581
planning adaptive methodology, 850
planning Green Infrastructure, 1947
planning strategies, 1116
playground equipment, 1171
political and scientific discourse, 194
pontine plain, 2109
popular uprising presence, 1957
population dynamics, 861
port-city interface, 1228
position, 1412
post-modernism, 1847
post-occupancy, 1605
post-socialist city, 1645
PPS, 1136
preserving heritage, 299, 311
prime city plan, 684
prison-city, 1051
privacy, 1060
private and public, 1723
proactive vs retroactive, 640
process, 1042
production of ethnicity, 2118
productive landscapes, 399
Profitopolis, 1642
project, 208
property price, 1504
protection of the environment, 1420
prototyping, 1042
psychopathology, 1675
public access, 1723
public design, 45
public dialogue, 45
public good, 501
public land, 501
public open space, 25, 103, 965
public participation, 658
public space, 45, 94, 194, 268, 278, 752, 836,
998, 1103, 1459, 1664, 1716, 1730
public spaces and buildings, 236
publicness, 1103
pupil participation, 1182

Q
Q methodology, 1371
quality of life, 181, 526
questionnaire survey, 1182

R

real estate bubble, 1274
real estate value, 1935
real-time data, 1024
rebuilding communities, 1253
reception, 794
reconstruction, 1083
reconversion, 725
recovery, 794
recycle, 694
rediscovery, 1103
reduction of CO2 emissions, 740
reduction of energy consumption, 740
ree software, 1625
refugee camp, 902
refugee crisis, 560, 813
refugees, 912
regeneration, 62, 208
regeneration strategies, 1228
regional development, 699
relational city, 606
renewable energy sources, 1382
renewable energy technologies, 740
repellers, 455
requalification, 805
residential satisfaction, 1014
residents, 1869
resilience, 62, 447, 640, 850, 1389
resilient city, 882, 912, 1201, 1253
resource, 156
resource characteristics, 1723
restoration and adaptive reuse of industrial
buildings, 1775
reuse, 291
revitalization, 1819
Rio de Janeiro-Niterói connection, 1957
river valleys, 1455
riverbeds, 1455
Rome, 164
rural landscape, 2109

S

safeguard, 114
sailing, 549
Samos, 1382
Santorini, 556, 1835
school, 1615

- school planting, 1182
 seacoast, 2057
 seascape, 568
 seascape network branding, 539
 segregation, 939
 self-construction, 694
 sensory mapping, 599
 Serbia, 861
 sewer, 1455
 shared housing, 1060
 sharing, 694
 short-term actions, 673
 sidewalks, 1264
 significant, 392
 Şiřhane, 433
 small town, 1808
 smart city, 1008, 1024, 1032, 1968
 smart street, 1968
 social and human approach, 673
 social and spatial effects, 977
 social change, 927
 social conflicts, 1957
 social diversity, 1209
 social exclusion, 1445
 social housing, 230
 social identifications, 194
 social integration, 784
 social methodologies, 640
 social regeneration, 684
 social representations, 1797
 social space, 640
 social structure, 784
 social sustainability, 1060
 social variables, 658
 socientize, 156
 socio-cartography, 2067
 socio-cultural identity, 1191
 socio-cultural sustainability, 1060
 socio-economic crisis, 560
 socio-economic mobility, 773
 software in higher education, 1625
 South-European countries, 2089
 space syntax, 1315, 2118
 spaces of the urban collective, 156
 spatial analysis, 1315
 spatial autocorrelation, 2012
 spatial changes, 773
 spatial configuration, 2001
 spatial design, 1754
 spatial division, 1083
 spatial effects, 813
 spatial governance, 45
 spatial impact, 2001
 spatial impacts of migration, 872
 spatial planning systems, 1981
 spatial planning, 501, 699, 1504, 1981
 spatial quality, 1338
 spatial statistics, 2012
 sport even, 1287
 sport-for-all, 278
 square, 1645
 strategic planning, 489
 strategies, 447, 490
 student lifestyle, 2128
 student mobility, 2128
 studentification, 2128
 suburban development, 2057
 suburbanization, 837
 Sümerbank, 1775
 supports, 1042
 surface temperature, 1401
 sustainability, 34, 114, 156, 181, 447, 711,
 794, 977, 1217, 1294, 1325, 1326,
 1338, 1389, 1412, 1947
 sustainable, 1432
 sustainable city development, 1008
 sustainable design, 132
 sustainable development, 311, 501, 1032
 sustainable industrial cities, 1147
 sustainable intelligence, 1968
 sustainable masterplanning, 291
 sustainable mobility, 1968
 sustainable planning, 1968
 sustainable regeneration of public spaces,
 249
 sustainable regeneration, 773
 sustainable strategies, 1253
 sustainable tourism, 422
 sustainable transportation, 1008
 sustainable urban development, 734, 1765
 Syros Island, 333, 345
 system, 1605
 system approach, 447
 systematic correlation, 658

T
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tactical urbanism, 1685
tag cloud, 684
taxonomy, 1754
Technopolis, 1786
temporary urban spaces, 912
temporary use, 893
terminals, 555
terrain vague, 1445
territory-city, 399
Tethys, 1879
therapeutic garden design, 1157
therapeutic landscapes, 1495
therapy, 1675
Thessaloniki, 207, 1481, 2067
third place, 1516
threats, 1591
time-phases design, 145
to rethink the existing city, 260
top down, 373
tourism, 560, 2045, 2057
tourism development, 411, 1835
tourism support, 411
town squares, 1754
townscape, 1808
traditional local expertise, 1858
traditional settlement, 333, 1835
tramway, 1357
transformation, 1786
transgression, 1127
transit oriented development, 1357
transitory, 893
transplantation, 1516
transport accessibility, 1357
transport crisis, 1957
TripAdvisor, 1797
Twentieth century, 2024

U

universal design, 1730
universities, 249
university and city, 766, 1217
urban, 1389
urban adaptation, 1201
urban and regional planning, 882
urban area, 1947
urban Atlas, 1562
urban centers, 268
urban change, 373

urban competitiveness, 526
urban conservation, 1885
urban culture, 1754
urban design, 25, 103, 181, 321, 526, 953,
977, 1014, 1092, 1116, 1139, 1664, 1675
urban design assessment tools, 977
urban design processes, 606
urban design strategies, 1765
urban development, 45, 526, 953, 1287
urban ecology, 1549
urban economics, 2001
urban ecosystem, 172
urban form, 164, 861, 939, 1326, 1357
urban gardens, 94
urban governance, 1294
urban governance and planning, 1228
urban green, 103
urban green spaces, 1008
urban happiness, 181
urban health, 1147
urban heritage, 773, 927, 1326, 1808
urban historic neighbourhood, 1885
urban history, 455
urban hydrological cycle, 1549
urban identity, 1191
urban interfaces, 1092
urban interiors, 912
urban interpretative tools, 236
urban intervention, 734, 1765
urban justice, 1685
urban landscape, 25, 172, 1471, 1481,
1570, 1633
urban layout planning, 1981
urban legislation, 1913
urban life, 1051, 1664
urban lighting, 1633
urban livability, 181
urban marketing, 25
urban metabolism indicator, 711
urban metabolism set, 711
urban morphology, 455, 1741
urban nature, 34, 79, 103, 114, 132, 145
urban nature management, 172
urban palimpsest, 466
urban pattern, 953
urban planning, 333, 1008, 1315, 1347, 2109
urban planning implementation acts, 1981
urban policies, 433

urban politics, 953
urban pressure, 515
urban regeneration, 45, 94, 236, 2681071,
1116, 1274, 1528
urban regeneration policies, 2098
urban region, 861
urban reintegration, 1051
urban renewal, 1432
urban requalification, 1696
urban resilience, 145, 725, 740
urban rivers, 1455
urban safety, 882
urban screens, 618
urban shape, 1083
urban shrinkage, 2098
urban space, 599, 953, 1103, 1264
urban sprawl, 1504
urban structure, 872
urban sustainability, 977, 1264
urban texture, 1455
urban thermal, 1401
urban tissue continuity, 1051
urban transformation, 1191, 2024
urban transitions, 1445
urban waterfronts, 299, 311, 1103
urban wildlife and ecology, 380
urbanism, 1656
urbanity, 268

user-driven methods, 1024
ustainable development, 1420

V

vacant city, 1274
vacation home, 2057
vegetal architecture, 119
vernacular, 1847
VGI and open data, 1201
villa Celimontana, 119
visibility analysis, 1382
visual identity, 1808
visual impact, 1382

W

walled cities, 1071
waterfront, 321, 1371
waterfront development, 1228
waterfront urban space, 291
wellbeing, 1163
Westergasfabriek, 1786
wheelchair athletes, 1540
wilderness, 1540
WSUD, 1549

Y

YouTube, 1656

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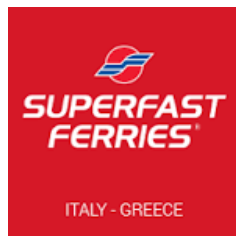
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