

Planum

Special Issue

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A special issue of *Planum Magazine*: presentation

Planum has had a relatively long life. Conceived in 1997 at a meeting of directors and editors of the main European journals dealing with urban planning at the time and promoted within the II Biennial of European Towns and Town Planners that took place in Rome, the journal released its first issue in 1999 thanks to European financing from DG XIII Ten Telecom. The “About” tab on the website’s home page states that “*Planum* was the first European www and on-line journal entirely devoted to the planners and to the whole community of people involved in city development and the protection of the environment”.

Since then, *Planum*, designed as a free-access portal and initially a review of European journals, was modified in form and structure. This was done, first, to be able to tap into processes that affected digital publishing, and specialized publishing in particular, over this span of time; and second, to represent the substantial change that regarded the disciplinary field in the same time frame. Even its name was changed in 2011, from *Planum - the European Journal of Planning on-line* to *Planum - the Journal of Urbanism*, with a desire to mark the change in the disciplines that deal with cities and territories and their international hybridization, evident in the establishment of a new term such as *urbanism*.

The accelerated dynamics that simultaneously affected the means of communication and its object necessitated flexible publishing activity that was not always aligned with the standards progressively being seen for scientific products and their channels of diffusion.

The editorial choice has always been to favour the substantial role of cultural and scientific exchange, without overindulging in academic rules. This choice was made possible by *Planum*’s ownership (the Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica [the Italian Planners Institute]) and the *ad hoc* constitution of an association for its management. Beside its founding members, the *Planum Association* has included a variety of ordinary members and supporters, maintaining its voluntary nature. The life of *Planum* and its dynamics are also indebted to the work of young editors that have had the capacity to mobilize and motivate many collaborators. Continuity in key roles of editorial coordination and a succession of collaborators and interns, today natives of the web, are essential aspects of its resilient nature.

Over the years, the most important modifications have led to the formation of (*Ibidem*), dedicated to reviewing texts, and *Planum Publisher*, dedicated to publishing and enhancing editorial projects. This special issue completes the path of building a real magazine with the formation of a scientific committee. The sections and an archive of some relevant paper journals (covers and indexes) and contributions that number

in the thousands, some of which are decidedly excellent, still distinguish the portal. The decision to create a scientific committee arose as a response to the need to build a network of exchange that favours a flow of contributions that sufficiently represents the research and study interests cultivated today in the different contexts. For this reason, professors with different scientific profiles have been invited to take part. They are located at numerous European schools of architecture and planning and play important individual roles in international research networks. It seemed useful to present these committee members to the many readers of *Planum* in their role as scholars, researchers, and designers, authors of texts that have marked and still mark important paths of reflection in the numerous disciplinary fields that nowadays are called urbanism. A collection of contributions therefore emerges, defined by Andrea Di Giovanni as “not designed, but not by chance, either”, precisely because they reflect the reasons underlying the formation of the panel of authors. My hope is that this special issue of the *Magazine* attracts our readers’ interest and, perhaps, solicits other contributions. Particular thanks goes to the colleagues that have willingly accepted to take part in the scientific committee and to participate in building this issue.

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On the Tracks of Contemporary European Urbanism

On the nature of the texts and the character of the selection proposed

This issue of *Planum* presents the magazine's Scientific Committee via a selection of texts representing the cultural profile and research activities of its members. For this reason, the texts in the selection were edited by the individual authors according to criteria of meaningfulness and representativeness.

In some cases, the contributions presented in this issue have already been published as chapters (or introductions) in books and articles that have appeared in various international journals. Others contain documents that present research or projects. Finally, others have been written specifically for this occasion.

Overall, the texts gathered here were written at various times between 2011 and 2017 for different purposes. They also differ in their consistency, internal structure, writing style, and discursive slant in relation to their various origins and the objectives therein.

In some cases, they document collective research and, for the texts written by multiple authors, delineate important research customs and shared design practices, as well as systems of consolidated relationships between European structures and research centres. Some texts instead present independent paths of critical reflection regarding important themes in each author's individual research practices.

On the meaningfulness of the texts in relation to the whole and the practices of contemporary urbanism

Due to diversity and inhomogeneity of the topics addressed and the approaches proposed, the set of contributions presented here does not allow for any sort of reduction or synthesis. The set of texts and the sequence of their presentation in this issue of *Planum* does not aim to build a single discourse or a structured reflection based on previously selected themes.

However, some recurrent themes emerge from the various writings which are representative of the main topics discussed in the field of contemporary urbanism.

Once again, however, the contributions collected here do not aim to either delimit or define the field of practices and studies in contemporary urbanism. Rather, the variety of empirical, design, and theoretical research paths in this collection that document the numerous questions expressing the field of urbanism in this phase can only be partially ascribed to differences in geographical or cultural context or, on the other hand, in recognized research traditions.

In this sense, the implicit hypothesis that this collection advances—not by design,

but not by chance, either—is that the research paths, that is, the reflexive and objective practices represented here offer a meaningful cross section of this disciplinary field. A summary of the arguments and important topics addressed in the various contributions allow this hypothesis to be tested.

Topics

A good part of the texts presented in this issue focus on cities (European cities, in particular) and processes that have affected them in recent years.

In this sense, starting with an Italian perspective, Marco Cremaschi investigates the reasons for evident renewed attention on the city and the way in which the dominant rhetoric addresses this question.

“Some well-known yet unresolved issues will be discussed. These include: a) the peculiar institutional and geopolitical position of Europe; b) the configuration of the Italian settlements, and the features of an emergent urban question; c) the lost opportunity of the post-industrial transition and the still immature forms of property development. The conclusion considers the priorities of an urban agenda in Italy. Italy needs to identify the path of development that cities will follow, which will enable them to challenge and exploit the global economy to their benefit. In the pursuit of this goal, the specific characteristics of Italian cities must be kept in mind”.

Other texts describe the particular conditions of urban reality in other geographical contexts. Frank Eckardt concentrates on the unexpected consequences of austerity policies in some German cities. He maintains that

“the austerity politics of the last decades have produced a new line of financial and social division in Europe. Except for few (Northern) countries in the Euro zone like Germany, the impact of the austerity orientation has left the Southern European countries overburdened with social, political and economic difficulties. Nevertheless, the austerity politics have produced a rather unnoticed financial crisis in many German cities as well. [Here], four cities [Bremerhaven, Hagen, Ludwigshafen and Offenbach] will be compared with regard to their political reaction on their debt crisis. [...] These cities represent four different coping mechanism which only loosely are related to political orientations but has to be seen as a product of long lasting local political and economic path dependencies”.

Using some analogies, Marius Grønning reflects on the multiple effects of some integrated sets of urban policies and their effects in terms of reconfiguring the urban and territorial layout. He recognizes that

“at first glance the ‘Fjord City plan’ appears as a collection of international stereotypes, pre-constituted recipes, and reductive models. Through a closer look, however, what is called into our attention is how the Fjord City, as it materializes into a physical reality, represents a complex combination of regulations, active policies, standards, direct and indirect strategies, incentives, and projects; a form of government specific to the cultural context. [...] The process, however, took place under a historical transition from the old form of government to a new. This makes it complex and pervaded with ambiguities. [...] [Therefore] the Fjord City is not a unitary construction; it is a series of operations and intentionalities”.

In the text by Carles Llop, economic, social, and political phenomena in the last thirty years are used as the matrix for territorial transformations that have significantly modified the structures and principles with which the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona operates.

“The Metropolitan Region of Barcelona is characterized by the crisis and the situation after the real estate bubble, where the preceding period of urban explosion that has characterized the post-industrial city generated a series of urban and territorial transformations that define the current state of the region. The objective of the research is therefore twofold. On the one hand, these transformations are viewed as the main challenges to face. This means reflecting on and proposing new models of more sustainable development—both on the environmental level and on the social and economic levels—that allow for greater territorial equality so that this development is produced in balance with natural supporting structures and the dynamics that characterize them. With a multi-disciplinary slant, this project aims to provide an analysis to the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona in terms of territorial science. The view is of the metropolitan project as a tool that allows us to contribute to the efficient transformation of the region as a whole, diagnosing its current state in terms of the territorial conditions that are highlighted as the main challenges to address with the practice of urban planning.”

With reference to specific contexts and processes, this first set of contributions traces a profile of the changes affecting some European urban and metropolitan areas. In general, this is a pervasive change that questions historical settlement structures, consolidated functional relationships, and systems of shared values. In this framework, the relationships among the parts of the city, places in the territory, between urban and rural are redefined.

The contributions by Nick Gallent and Jörg Knieling concentrate in particular on the latter aspect. In his text, Gallent

“explores the evolution of ‘rural planning’ [in England] over the last century. [He] consider[s]: the roots of rural planning; the system’s early priorities; why the rural agenda, post 1947, was highly fragmented; and attempts made, post 1997, to move towards more integrated rural policy delivery; and the degree to which the ‘reinvention’ of a more holistic brand of local governance and planning since 2004 – with planning becoming a potential ‘place shaper’ in rural areas - chimes with the complex realities of modern rural areas. Lastly, [he] considers the strategic dilemmas of sectoral integration and territorial policy contiguity that have reemerged in the wake of recent central government reorganization, a streamlining of the planning system and attempts to empower local communities in local decision making under a Localism agenda”.

Knieling recognizes that

“as a result of globalization, metropolitan areas are forced to constantly strengthen their functions and their position in the international competition for investments, qualified workers, facilities and or services improving the quality of life [while] the role of metropolitan areas as engines of growth [...] is also limited [...]. Therefore, development perspectives can emerge from economically vibrant rural and urban areas. [...] [For this reason he] explore[s] the concept of urban-rural partnerships and provides a set of guidelines developed within the INTERREG IV C project “URMA” in order to encourage the creation of urban-rural partnerships in a wider European context, but also to initiate the scientific discussion on the purpose and character of urban-rural partnerships in Poland”.

The urban fringe also becomes a theme of research and experimentation for Luis Basabe Montalvo (Arenas Basabe Palacios Arquitectos). In this case, however, it is not so much nor only the peripheral location of Wildgarten in the south-west of Vienna that determines the marginal state of this area, which was the object of a EUROPAN-10 competition. On the periphery of Vienna, the border between urban and rural areas is reproduced within the settlement itself, in an area that concentrates different elements of inconsistency and incompleteness. Here

“the competition brief required the development of an entirely new urban fabric on a quite isolated green island [...], between a big municipal cemetery and an amorphous sea of single-family houses and small allotment gardens. The proposal’s primary intention was to carefully reread and re-write the essence of peripheral urbanity [...]. It was not about creating something instead of the suburb but much more about delving deeper into its structuring elements, and about looking for ways to transcend its evident lack of compactness, efficiency, complexity and cohesion through its own logic”.

The modification that affects the sense and role of the territory and its parts is, however, rather pervasive and it requires a reassessment of the approaches and techniques of urban planning. Over time, the latter have formed in relation to problems regarding city conservation and/or transformation, problems usually thought to be uniquely associated with some specific parts.

In this respect, Francesco Bandarin maintains that the city as a whole is—today more so than in the past—a place of change, complexity, and interrelation affecting all of its areas. For this reason, the

“urban heritage can no longer be conceived of as a separate reality, a walled precinct protected from the external forces of change by plans and regulations. It simply does not work this way, if it ever did. [...] The idea of the Historic Urban Landscape is part of a broader reflection on the evolution of urbanism, as a response to the increasingly complex challenges brought by global processes. The historic city is not an island, and all global social, economic and physical transformation processes affect both it and its spaces. The normative ‘barriers’ created by special legislation and programmes aimed at its protection are unable to shield it – if this was ever possible or intended – from the rest of the city”.

The transformation of cities, after all, is expressed first in the change in urban societies and their way of living publicly and privately and, as a consequence, in the relationships that are being redefined between these two areas. The reflection by Ali Madanipour concentrates on these aspects and work around

“three interrelated and overlapping shifts in recent years: technological and economic changes, the shifting relationships between public and private spheres, and the growing diversification of urban society. Together, these changes bring about significant demographic, technological, political, economic, social, and cultural changes, with direct implications for public space, putting forward challenges and causing anxieties that need serious attention. [...] [In this perspective] public spaces are crossroads, where different paths and trajectories meet or collide, the stage on which the public life unfolds, the essential realm of sociability”.

In this framework, the transformation of cities and territories, which often occurs by parts and affects discontinuous areas, demands suitable infrastructure policies capable of redefining connections and junctions and accommodating flows of goods and people developed with significantly different means from the past. In some cases, the spontaneous multiplication of social practices and the stratification of urban activities are deemed to correspond to integrated planning for land and infrastructure use aimed at governing consolidation processes and strengthening some urban areas, reinforcing the connections between them. In Holland, which was studied by Luca Bertolini, the

“intensification of cities has been a planning aim [...] over the last decades. A major reason for this is the expectation that urban intensification leads to better accessibility by sustainable transportation modes and therewith contributes to increasing their share. A positive feedback loop exists between the planning of high-capacity transportation networks and intensification of land uses

around these transportation networks. Urban intensification policies acknowledge this. However, the integration of transport planning and land use planning that one would and should expect as a consequence of this acknowledgement, does not necessarily follow. In the Netherlands, an “implementation gap” in the transport – land use planning process aiming at urban intensification can be identified which prevents the positive feedback loop from happening”.

The framework outlined up to now renders the image of cities and territories undergoing profound change, in which both social/living practices and the technical practices of research and design are being redefined as the contemporary urban area is modified.

For these reasons, as Gabriele Pasqui states, the practices of contemporary planning are faced with the

“need to inhabit the very difficult ridge between universalistic needs and differentiated claims. [...] If difference is a social product, historically determined as the overall outcome of social practices, then we must recognize that any unitary treatment of the concept of difference (something other than inequality and which can play a potentially progressive and innovative role) faces more than one risk. These are not abstract questions. [...] The abandonment of a “unitary” logic defies any simplistic conception of spatial citizenship and requires planning to know how to “think by differences” that are its own but that today must be revisited in a non-identity related or “essentialist” key that can above all think of differences first and foremost in their production and reproduction within social practices situated in time and space. Yet, a difference-based approach alone, even if it is not thoughtless and well-tempered in order to avoid “individualist” and “local” implications, is probably not enough”.

The stratified, multiple dimension of contemporary territories, in their constituent physical and social components, and in the complex relationships between them, lead Paola Viganò to advance an original research hypothesis according to which

“in the field of urban design, urbanism and landscape urbanism, any new investigation should produce an original work of cartography. In other words, there is no invention of a research object without cartographic exploration and innovation. [...] This is a fundamental reason for pursuing and reaffirming the cognitive and projective role of maps: exploring the territory, the thick and complex ground moving surfaces, through the effort of representing its multiple material, conceptual and hypothetical dimensions”.

Perspectives

Despite the obvious diversity of the thematic field proposed by the twelve essays constituting the heart of this issue, the various contributions appear to share a common interest in changed, changing, and changeable forms of the contemporary urban area. Cities and territories are viewed by the authors with interest and curiosity as fields of experimentation in which progressively, pushed by different systems of forces and produced by different phenomena, the sense, operating principles, and spatial configurations of the different sets of places are redefined.

In many cases, we can say that the spaces of the city, the places of the contemporary urban area, are “in movement” (or undergoing change): they are presented with traditional denominations that today only partially correspond to their manifold, shining natures. They are accompanied by representations that are often inadequate for describing their real changed nature today. They are even preceded by their reputation (to say nothing of their “fame”), which often incorporates prejudices and assessments that are too aggregated to be useful for reading the urban transformation. This situation inevitably invokes renewed analytical and interpretational tools, or at

least an innovative use of some traditional tools borrowed from various practices in European urbanism.

It is perhaps necessary to recognize that it could be worthwhile in this phase to suspend the most reassuring uses of interpretational categories, analytical tools, and planning devices inherited from the many traditions that come together in contemporary urbanism. It might be more appropriate—even if riskier—to renounce synoptic representations of reality that look for, first of all, immediate consistency among the different elements. On these premises, an openness to different themes and questions that do not immediately converge, as is attempted in this issue of *Planum*, might also in some way serve as a fertile move to feed a debate on significant issues and methodologies within the European context.

**Outlooks on Contemporary
Urbanism.
Scientific Committee's
Papers**

