

The time factor in urban regeneration

The regeneration of urban life is a central theme in many European cities that are in need of new and innovative action strategies. The time factor has become a decisive tool, not only in the development and management of such strategies, but also in the design and operation of the relevant interventions in public spaces.

In contrast to the former “solid modernity”¹ stage, the ongoing second stage of modernity, referred to by Zigmunt Bauman as “liquid modernity”, has been especially characterised by the time factor. This analogy to liquids as a state of matter that changes in shape over time, not only graphically portrays our current society’s tremendous capacity for transformation, but also highlights the fast-paced rate at which this transformation occurs.

¹ Bauman, Z. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000

In turn, liquidly modern cities are now more than ever characterised by a constantly evolving social structure, influenced, among other factors, by immigration, economic fluctuations, rising unemployment mainly concentrated in the slums or market pressures, all producing substantial mutations in the social structure of certain districts.

Most often, the rate at which social structures evolve is far greater than the rate of transformation of urban habitats in response to these changes. This leads to situations of conflict that degrade urban life. Such degradation is often aggravated by the lack of quick response mechanisms enabling municipal agencies to respond to new situations.

On the other hand, the degradation of urban and social structures in certain areas of the city has traditionally been countermeasured with urban planning operations aimed at urban regeneration, by demolition of part of the consolidated urban structure followed by construction of new buildings and facilities. These interventions were executed in a context of strong economic activity mobilised by private capital expenditures or alternatively, they were backed by the sound financial condition of municipal agencies capable of promoting government action. But what happens when the private sector is at a standstill as a result of the

economic crisis and the public sector, immobilised by new austerity policies to reduce the spending deficit, is unable to create urban regeneration interventions by itself? What new tools are available to municipal councils for promoting public life and social cohesion within damaged urban settings?

Acupuncture strategies in public spaces

Although most problems relating to urban life degradation are not new, many European cities have shown a growing concern for finding solutions to these issues. On the one hand, such concern is due to increased social instability in towns with high rates of socially maladapted immigrants, unsafe conditions for the people who live in urban centres where public life is disappearing from the streets or the lack of social cohesion latent in new urban developments. On the other hand, it is motivated by the long-lasting European economic crisis, which has alarmingly reduced the ability of traditional urban mechanisms to act as urban regenerating tools in some cities.

Under this new scenario, interesting alternative proposals are being developed in certain European cities to respond effectively to today's new challenges. As such, regeneration is supported by new urban acupuncture strategies developed exclusively in public spaces, based on independent but coordinated spot interventions that could be appropriately termed "public space acupuncture"². These strategies are developed using low-cost interventions that seek to achieve the strongest urban life regenerating impact with the least amount of resources. They combine new tools, such as citizen participation throughout different parts of the process, with other factors, such as the timeliness of interventions or even their ability to mutate over time.

Although these are still pioneering initiatives that have emerged as isolated actions, they do share many things in common and could very well become a new action tool that could be routinely used by European municipal management agencies in the near future. Such initiatives could lead to the creation of a new urbanism discipline that would include its own analysis, strategy creating and process management mechanisms. This is why some of the more interesting strategies recently developed in several European cities have been studied in a research funded by the Dutch government, which we have named *Public Space Acupuncture*³.

In studying these strategies, the time factor has been found to be one of the major elements that determine the success of most of the researched case studies. Following is an overview of three cases analysed, located in Zaragoza, Utrecht and Vienna, as well as three of the main ways to incorporate the time factor into the public space acupuncture strategies analysed.



▲ Zaragoza



▲ gravalosdimonte arquitectos. San Agustín, Zaragoza, 2009. Photo: Patrizia di Monte, Ignacio Grávalos

2 Solà-Morales, M.; Frampton, K.; Ibelings, H. *A Matter of Things*. Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2008

3 Hernández Mayor, J.; Casanova García, H. "The Regeneration of Public Life". *Scape Magazine*, No. 1 (2011), p.18-25



▲ gravalosdimonte arquitectos. San José, Zaragoza, 2010. Photo: Patrizia di Monte, Ignacio Grávalos

Estonoesunsolar strategy in Zaragoza

In the *Estonoesunsolar* (This is not a vacant urban plot) strategy developed in the city of Zaragoza, the convergence of a number of urban and social factors created the need for a specific, unconventional strategy based on quick response times. Rapid urban decay in certain areas of the historic centre of Zaragoza was evidenced by the increasing number of abandoned vacant lots. Also, the disproportionate increase in the number of immigrants living in the most underprivileged areas of the city coincided with the relocation of part of the indigenous population to newly created suburban areas. Rapid social changes produced profound transformations in household composition in historic downtown Zaragoza homes, with considerable increases in the number of families and consequently, in the number of children. Unemployment was also on the rise, coinciding with the onset of the Spanish financial crisis, the early stages of which had a stronger impact on the immigrant population living in these areas. All of these factors combined created an exceptional situation generated by a downward spiral of events that generally foster urban degradation and can eventually lead to serious social problems, something that has already occurred in the historical centres of a number of European cities.

In light of this situation, the city of Zaragoza developed the *Estonoesunsolar* strategy, coordinated by the architect Patrizia Di Monte. This strategy involved the creation of a techni-

▼ gravalosdimonte arquitectos. San Blas, Zaragoza, 2009. Photo: Patrizia di Monte, Ignacio Grávalos



cal office that would firstly devote its efforts to respond quickly and effectively to some of the urban problems identified. This technical office, which is a part of the Zaragoza Housing municipal entity, combined an employment programme to provide jobs to 40 unemployed people in the area, with a plan to clean up the vacant lots. This later became a strategy for making public use of the abandoned plots. As such, many of the abandoned private and public plots in the densely-populated historic centre of Zaragoza became small squares, playgrounds and gardens interwoven into the city's network of urban public spaces.

The time factor played a crucial role in the development of this strategy. Quick responsiveness coupled with the technical office's operational autonomy were some of the keys to its success.

The office, which had a low budget that was mostly used to pay the salaries of employment programme participants and to a lesser extent, to purchase the necessary materials to carry out the interventions, completed 14 interventions in public spaces during its first year and 15 during the second. This means that all the formalities required to get the owner's permission to carry out the intervention – deciding on the use it would be given through a citizen participation process, the design of the space itself and its final construction – were all carried out within less than four weeks on average by intervention. At the same time, the technical office's quick responsiveness in managing and maintaining completed interventions was essential to ensure the success of this strategy, modifying less successful interventions as needed and learning from past experience in order to improve on future interventions.

The very essence of the *Estonoesunsolar* strategy, which is carried out in plots that will eventually be constructed, highlights the temporary nature of the interventions. But regardless of how long each intervention lasts depending on the availability of each plot, the overall strategy might very well become a permanent one, as would happen with the creation of a continuous cycle of vacant lots being constructed, while new empty spaces are being generated and in turn colonised by public space acupuncture interventions.

The *Beyond* strategy in the new town of Leidsche Rijn in Utrecht

Leidsche Rijn is a new, rapidly developing residential neighbourhood in Utrecht. Initially conceived in the nineties as an urban plan for new plant communities, Leidsche Rijn is considered the largest urban development carried out in the Netherlands in recent years, with total inhabitants at 16,000 in 2001 and 25,000 in 2011, and still growing to this day.

This extraordinary and fast-paced growth has been bolstered by strong demand for new housing in the Netherlands in the past few years. The result has been a gigantic mono-functional urban development based on the construction of stand-alone, semi-detached or terraced homes, all of them with private gardens.



▲ Leidsche Rijn in Utrecht

Like many other new urban developments in the Netherlands, in its early stages, it was rapidly colonised by “pioneer” residents who had no connection to the place or amongst one another. At this stage, social relations tend to be almost non-existent and social cohesion is extremely fragile.

The *Beyond*⁴ strategy developed in Leidsche Rijn was named after one of the meanings of “beyond”, i.e., “further-reaching than the usual planning customs”. It is a medium-term action strategy initiated in 2001, which has consisted of a number of actions and artistic interventions in public spaces intended to promote relationships between the citizens and their place of residence, on the one hand, and to strengthen relationships between neighbours and enrich the town's public life, on the other.

The time factor plays an important role in the development and management of the *Beyond* strategy. Firstly, because it was originally designed as a ten-year strategy. And it is during this period – when the new urban development is still in its growth phase and lacks some of the basic facilities – when the strategy can be a more efficient tool to help build cultural and social structures that can keep on growing stronger on their own after this period.

An independent organisation called Bureau Beyond was created to develop and manage the strategy. It was formed by a small team of specialists in charge of creating the complete interventions programme, designating the participating artists, designers and architects and planning the start of each project and its content. This team controlled the strategy's implementation pace by organising, within a short period of time, temporary interventions that were capable of addressing the new needs of Leidsche Rijn's growing population. Apart from the difficulty of this task, the very idea is truly exciting: having a team of experts continuously working on analysing the social consequences of any shortcomings in the development of the plan and creating a complementary programme to balance urban life and generate some kind of cultural and social identity.

The time factor plays a vital role in the development and management of the *Beyond* strategy and also determines the specific nature of the interven-

4 Van Gestel, T.; Heezen, H.; Zonnenberg, N. *Art As Urban Strategy: Beyond Leidsche Rijn*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2010.



▲ Milohnic & Paschke i.s.m. Resonatorcoop. *The Parasol*, Leidsche Rijn, 2001-04. Photo: Misha de Ridder

▼ Bik van der Pol y Korteknie Stuhlmacher Architecten. *Nomads in Residence*, Leidsche Rijn, 2004. Photo: Jos van der Pol



tions themselves, which may be defined as emergency or test interventions.

Sometimes, the interventions were carried out in specific neighbourhood locations due to the lack of basic facilities during the early stages of the urban development. Temporary pavilions were built for this purpose, such as *The Paper Dome*, designed by Shingeru Ban and built in 2004 with 700 cardboard tubes, which serves as a temporary multi-use venue to host all kinds of events such as concerts, dance performances, theatre plays, winter ice skating and art fairs.

Other temporary interventions serve as tests to assess social acceptance of certain programs and the feasibility of future permanent interventions in certain locations. In fact, some of the most successful temporary interventions, such as *Het Gebouw* (The Building), conceived by artist Stanley Brouwn in collaboration with architect Bertus Mulder as a temporary exhibition hall, have now become permanent. *Het Gebouw* (The Building), currently a visual icon and one of the main cultural centres of this town, is formed by two superimposed prisms that are 27.3 metres long, 3.9 metres wide and 3.9 metres high, rotated at a 90-degree angle with respect to one another.

Beyond was originally conceived as a mutant strategy that was intended to evolve and transform over time. Some of the so-called “parasite” interventions were intended as actions that could be relocated to different parts of town in order to implement certain programmes and, in turn, surprise and awaken people’s curiosity. The town’s sense of busyness was thus heightened and activity programmes were spread

across its different areas. The interventions called *The Parasol*, *Site Bazeille* and *Nomads in Residence* are some examples of parasite pavilions where guest artists would live and work, carrying out activity programmes intended to help residents become active agents in the town’s urban life.



▲ Shingeru Ban. *The Paper Dome*, Leidsche Rijn, 2004. Photo: Misha de Ridder



▲ Stanley Brouwn i.s.m. Bertus Mulder. *Het Gebouw*, Leidsche Rijn, 2005. Photo: Misha de Ridder

▼ Museumsquartier, Vienna



A transformable strategy in the public spaces of the MuseumsQuartier in Vienna

After many years of planning, the MuseumsQuartier in Vienna was inaugurated in 2001 without any plans regarding the use of public spaces in its courtyards. High new construction costs, disabled access problems and lifelessness in the museums’ public spaces gave the new cultural complex a negative image, hampering the arrival of visitors and the goal of becoming a new activity centre in both the city and the neighbourhood.

To counteract such motionlessness in its public spaces, the complex’s management held a competition among young architects to design a multi-functional urban furniture system. The winning team was PPAG with the *ENZI* system, which was first exhibited in igloo-shaped form at the MuseumsQuartier in the winter of 2002.

The strategy implemented in MuseumsQuartier aims to encourage public life and transform its empty courtyards into appealing public spaces for the use and enjoyment of Viennese people. It is based on combining an attractive and versatile urban furniture system with a varied programme of carefully planned seasonal activities. The system’s 116 modular elements, built using expanded polystyrene, could be easily relocated within the complex’s courtyards. Also, these modular elements were designed with a number of possible combinations in mind to create different spatial configurations. Soon thereafter, museum visitors responded enthusiastically to this strategy, using the modular elements as a resting place and turning the museum’s courtyards into popular meeting places. At the same time, diverse cultural programmes were developed, including concerts, dance performances, fashion shows and winter games, turning the MuseumsQuartier into a new vibrant public space in the Viennese cultural scene.

The time factor was the central axis that linked the entire strategy, making it a novel and exceptional concept. The strategy was initially conceived this way – not as a series of interventions situated in different points in space, but rather as a series of consecutive interventions that made it turn into a constantly evolving, mutant strategy.

The careful planning of this strategy’s evolution is being coordinated by the MuseumsQuartier E+B – the department responsible for scheduling the centre’s cultural programme – and PPAG architects, who are responsible for the specific design of each intervention. Together they coordinate and design the activity programme and the modular system’s different spatial configurations for the interventions planned throughout the year. They control the pace of urban life transformation in the courtyards. In this

▼ PPAG architects ztgmbh. Museumsquartier, Vienna, 2005–09. Photo: PPAG



specific case, however, this pace is controlled not by reacting quickly to urban and social constraints, but by creating a basic rhythm of transformation that is sufficiently flexible to allow for the steady introduction of new activities or special events to continually invigorate urban life.

The controlled manipulation of public space appearance and activity transform the city into an urban theatre⁵, where citizens concurrently play the roles of actors and spectators. This urban theatre underscores the most public aspect of urban life, as compared to other strategies that enhance its more domestic or collective aspects.

The staging of public life also calls for an appropriate setting. This setting is made up of the Baroque patios of the courtyard's former stables, where the historical identity of the place blends with today's contemporary culture. Cloistered by architecture, in the manner of an Italian *piazza*, the space becomes the ideal setting for impromptu public life performances.

The strategy's thorough temporal planning firstly results in the citizens' heightened sense of curiosity and attraction to the novelty of this idea. Secondly, its ever-changing nature, combined with a well-designed activity programme, captures and maintains citizens' interest, thus encouraging people to make use of this public space into a habit. Eventually, the public space goes from being exceptional to commonplace for many citizens and is used as an improvised gathering, leisure and resting place embedded into the city's public life.

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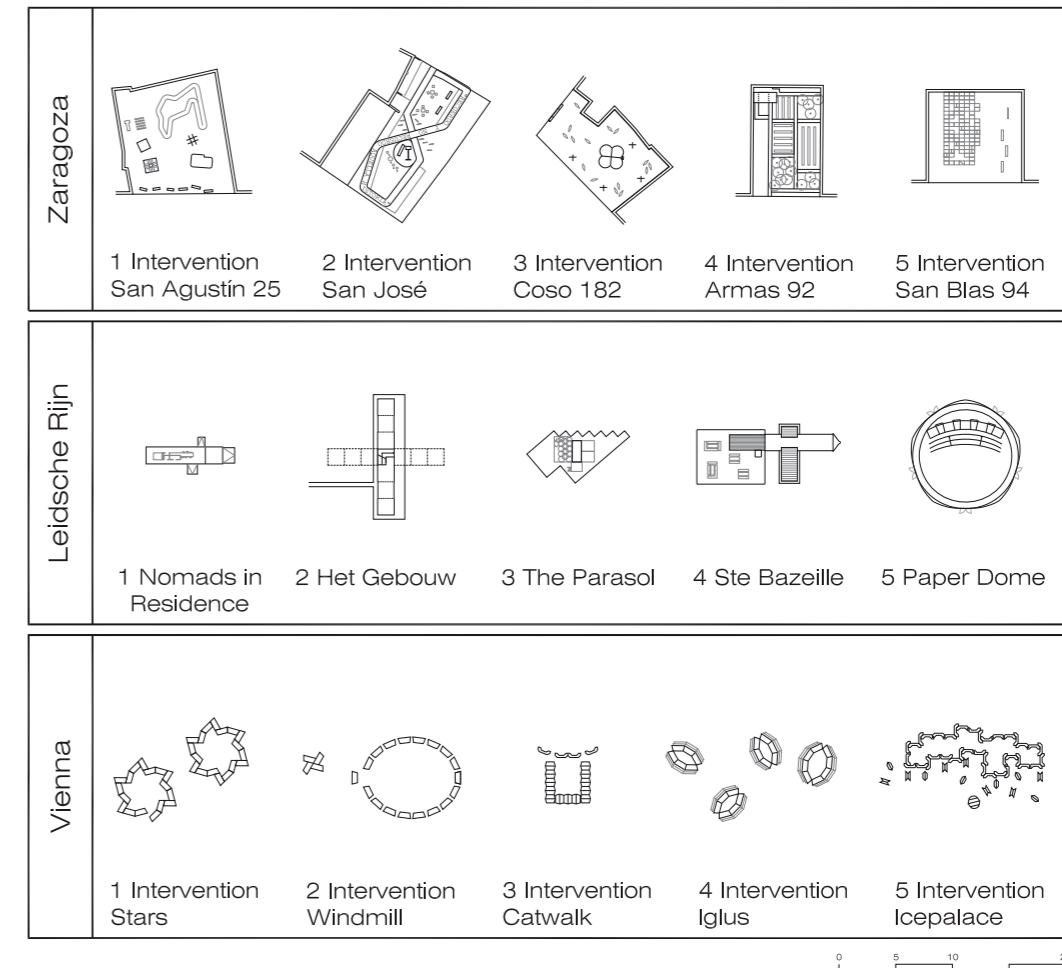
5 Sennet, R. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf, 1977.

The time factor and strategy management process: Interactive management systems

If we view cities as constantly evolving, complex organisms, we can see how urban planning is one of the main mechanisms that control some of their functions, regulating how they grow, dictating how existing urban fabrics need to be transformed and defining the activities that must be developed within different areas.

Each municipality has its own mechanism for controlling the city's proper operation under certain conventional conditions. But at times when certain parts of the city are subject to extraordinary situations, the balance of urban life comes under threat. Under such special circumstances, most of our cities are unprepared for reacting quickly to new challenges, with urban planning mechanisms failing to provide an effective response. These circumstances call for flexible and perhaps unorthodox mechanisms capable of responding quickly to new situations, such as the strategies developed in *Estonoesunsolar* in Zaragoza and *Beyond Leidsche Rijn* in Utrecht.

On the other hand, in most of the cases analysed, specific management offices were created to monitor the development of each strategy. Both the *Estonoesunsolar* technical office, a branch of the Zaragoza Housing Department, and Bureau Beyond in Utrecht, were created to facilitate the execution of interven-



▲ Comparison of the interventions for the three cities

tions, evaluate their results and address any shortcomings either by implementing new interventions or making changes to existing ones. In most cases, these offices are run by small, highly versatile and operationally autonomous teams of experts.

The time factor in temporary interventions: Test and emergency interventions

Interventions implemented in public spaces, such as street renovation or the creation of new squares, typically have a limited life span. Even interventions designed for the long term will need to be modified or completely renovated at some point in time, due to normal wear and tear of materials used, damage re-

sulting from accidents or vandalism or, occasionally, lack of use resulting from changes in urban habits.

With this in mind, new alternative interventions in public spaces need to take greater account of their estimated life span and adapt their design and choice of materials accordingly to obtain a more efficient and sustainable product. Also, careful synchronisation of suitable activity programmes with the intervention's useful life helps foster maximum use of the public space during such periods.

Temporary interventions are generally efficient tools to regenerate urban life, as their short life expectancy allows for synchronisation with a specific use throughout their life span.

Strategies based on temporary interventions have two main purposes: either to serve as emergency solutions that address specific urban problems, as in the case of interventions carried out in the vacant lots of Zaragoza, or to operate as test interventions to later develop more permanent ones, as occurred with some of the temporary pavilions built in Leidsche Rijn or with the first generation of ENZI expanded polystyrene modules, the success of which later evolved into ENZOS modules made with polyethylene for added durability.

A well-known example of emergency interventions carried out in public spaces was the strategy developed by Aldo van Eyck⁶ between 1947 and 1978, which consisted in creating more than 700 interventions that transformed many vacant lots and small interstitial spaces of Amsterdam's public spaces into children's playgrounds, some of which are still in use today. This strategy met a growing need for spaces where children could play, encouraging the use of public spaces and interaction among citizens.

An exemplary case of a test intervention is the strategy developed by New York City's Traffic Department, which banned vehicles in Times Square – one of the city's most congested areas – turning the avenue into a pedestrian area equipped with 376 chaise lounges. This test intervention carried out during the summer of 2009 not only intended to record the behaviour of traffic in the vicinity of the square and the resulting transformation of urban life in this part of the city, but also sought to determine how citizens and public opinion would react to the situation, thus projecting the future consequences of potential, longer-term actions.

Mutant interventions: Strategies that evolve over time

One of the most noteworthy examples of live public space is Paley Park⁷ in New York (1967). One of the reasons for its popularity is that this small public space serves as a quiet island where people can relax, sheltered from the city noise.

Another reason is that its urban furniture, comprising movable chairs, makes it possible to use the space in many different ways, depending on the time of day, the season or the need to be alone or in a group. In such a manner, public space is conceived as a part of the city that undergoes continuous trans-

formation, evolving steadily not only throughout the day, but also throughout the seasons of the year.

This ability to transform public spaces in response to different functional requirements that change over time has huge growth potential within public space acupuncture strategies. The alternative way to traditional, static, unfunctional interventions, which paraphrasing Zigmunt Bauman could be defined as “solid strategies”, are mobile, mutable, transformable interventions that comprise what might be termed “liquid strategies”, such as the strategy developed in the MuseumsQuartier courtyards in Vienna.

Public space acupuncture strategies based on mutant interventions should carefully plan for variations in the different configurations that are going to be developed over time, as with the relocation of “parasite” interventions in Leidsche Rijn or the development of all the configurations that will be created with ENZOS modules during different seasons of the year in the MuseumsQuartier courtyards in Vienna.

At the theatre, a script unfolds along a succession of scenes on stage, with actors playing their roles in front of changing backdrops. Likewise mutant interventions need to be carefully planned out, taking into account factors such as the number and duration of the scenes, the actors involved in the play and the nature of the public space's physical transformation.

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6 Lefaivre, L.; de Roode, I.; Fuchs, R. H. *Aldo van Eyck: The playgrounds and the city*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002.

7 Kayden, J.S. *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000.