



AESOP Thematic Groups: Public Spaces and Urban Cultures

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AESOP Section

AESOP Thematic Groups: Public Spaces and Urban Cultures

Introduction

Public Spaces and Urban Cultures (PSUC) is a thematic group established in April 2010 under the umbrella organisation of the Association of the European Schools of Planning (AESOP) as an initiative of Sabine Knierbein (Assistant Professor, TU Vienna, Austria), Ceren Sezer (Architect and Urban planner, TU Delft, Urban 4, Netherlands) and Chiara Tornaghi (Reader, University of Leeds and Coventry University, United Kingdom). The main aim of the group is to generate an international and interdisciplinary exchange between the research and practices on public spaces and urban cultures. By doing so, it aims to support research, planning and a design agenda within and beyond the AESOP community.

In this paper, we present the members, organisation, working themes, meetings and publications of the PSUC.

Members and Organisation

The PSUC invites practitioners, academics, governmental and non-governmental professionals, and further interest groups to join the Group's activities in several ways: by hosting or participating in the Group's annual meetings, workshops, conferences and roundtables; by initiating new research projects, publications or other types of work (e.g. participation in international expert commissions, consultancies and as such; becoming active innovators of academic curricula in urban studies and related fields on the issues of public spaces and urban cultures and being active in the online forums and discussions held by the Group).

Currently, the PSUC consists of 45 members, who are both researchers and practitioners working with public spaces that are located mainly in Europe, but also in Bangladesh, Canada, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine and the United States.¹

A collective made up of group members organises the activities of the PSUC. Some of the tasks of the core group are: to establish the Group's agenda (working topics, calls, meetings); to manage communications via various media (homepage, blog, Facebook, mailing list, newsletter) between the Group's members, as well as to wider interest groups and the AESOP Secretary General.

The members who are currently managing the Group's activities are (in alphabetical order): Gabriella Esposito de Vita (Italy), Celia Ghyka (Romania), Sabine Knierbein (Austria/Germany), Matej Niksic (Slovenia), Ceren Sezer (Netherlands/Turkey), Burcu Yigit Turan (Turkey), Georgiana Varna (Scotland/Romania) and Tihomir Viderman (Austria/Croatia). This core team very much

welcomes the newcomers to contribute to the organisation of the Group's activities.

The members who have in the past been or are currently involved in organising PSUC events are (in alphabetical order): Fernando Brandão Alves (Portugal), Massimo Clemente (Italy), Aglaée Degros (Netherlands/Belgium), Federica Gatta (France), Ines Lopes Moreira (Portugal), Sofia Morgado (Portugal), Marianita Palumbo (France/Italy), Gabriel Pascariu (Romania), Joao Rafael Santos (Portugal), Nikolai Roskamm (Germany), Chiara Tornaghi (United Kingdom/Italy), Sara Santos Cruz (Portugal) and Biba Tominc (Slovenia).

In addition to the organisation team, the PSUC would like to mention Professor Ali Madanipour (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK) and Professor Sophie Watson (Open University, UK), who have both generously contributed to the group's meetings with their wide expertise in the fields of public spaces and urban cultures.

Working Themes and Meetings

The members of the PSUC meet annually to discuss and develop various approaches proposed under the group's working topic. These meetings mostly take the form of combined workshops, seminars and conferences, along with a field trip, including meetings with the local NGOs, public servants, politicians and other colleagues from academia. They also provide an environment for engaging in peer-to-peer discussion on the participants' research and design projects.

The meetings are organised by the various institutions, which submit their declaration of interest in hosting an event based on the respective theme. The organisation of the meetings is undertaken by the local hosts in collaboration with (usually) two Group members, who function as PSUC representatives.

Since 2010, the Group has proposed three working themes for three different periods, each of which has been followed by a series of events hosted by the different institutions: *Public Spaces and Urban Cultures* (2010); *Conviviality* (2011–2013); *Becoming Local* (2013–2015).

Theme 'Public Spaces and Urban Cultures' (2010)

In 2010, Sabine Knierbein, Ceren Sezer and Chiara Tornaghi wrote a position paper in order to set the basic premises of the Group and present the various perspectives on public spaces and urban cultures within the European planning schools. This paper intended to initiate a discussion with the other members of the Group in order to shape the main interests and the objectives of the PSUC's

future activities. The paper highlighted three themes of interest:

- Artistic and intellectual practices and urban planning;
- Emerging urban cultures and socio-spatial practices in public spaces;
- Post-disciplinary planning education regarding urban cultures and public spaces.

The first theme *Artistic and Intellectual Practices and Urban Planning* relates to the nexus between culture-led urban regeneration and public space, where “culture” is generally defined as the ensemble of artistic and intellectual practices. When it comes to debates on immaterial aspects in urban planning, scholars usually point to the role of culture-led regeneration policies and to a new emphasis on public spaces as strategic spheres of intervention to foster prospective urban development. Urban development issues regarding cultural practices and interventions aiming at enhancing life quality in public spaces characterise more frequently the agendas of economic, cultural and public relations boards in urban politics. Planning practitioners, therefore, face a whole new set of crucial challenges between city marketing, city branding, and rather traditional approaches to steer spatial development.

Cultural strategies, on the one hand, are used to foster social cohesion by developing strategies for participation and empowerment. The recent impetus on culture in planning, on the other hand, has been interpreted as a competition-oriented process to embed new economic strategies of value creation into urban development processes. “As culture has become more braided and contested, so too has planning”, adjudge Freestone and Gibson (2006, p. 22), who point to new challenges as well as to new dilemmas that the planning discipline is currently being confronted with. Planning practitioners, therefore, find themselves more and more often in the position of disjuncture between a social-cohesion-oriented approach to placemaking and the rhetoric of the entrepreneurial cities.

“Simultaneously, planning has to deal with culture not only as an integral part of urban economies but as a framework for community development and societal engagement. It has to negotiate and better bridge between the [...] property focus of physical planning and the more insurgent demands of social planning in the search for more inclusionary methodologies.” (Freestone, Gibson 2006: 41).

This situation raises a set of crucial questions including: How do urban practitioners deal with the dilemmas addressed above? How do they negotiate their ethical position between culture-led, highly profit-oriented urban development strategies on the one hand and grassroots initiatives characterising urban life on the other?

The second theme *Emerging urban cultures and socio-spatial practices in public spaces* is based

on an understanding of “culture”, which does not refer solely to arts and intellectual production. Rather, it takes into account socio-spatial practices and the emerging urban cultures that change and challenge contemporary cities. A new environmental culture, a more diversified and mobile urban society, (non)consumption cultures, new cultural conflicts, urban social movements and so forth, contribute to a wide range of differentiated practices shaping public spaces.

In some cases, these changes push policy makers to put pressure on the planning community: for example, demanding a new conceptualisation of public spaces to be able to foster communities facing the challenges of different types of risks (resilient communities). This pressure raises crucial questions both in planning practice and theory, especially in regards to normativity, positionality and professional ethics.

In this framework, the second theme suggests that, first, a single disciplinary approach to public space does not seem appropriate, and second, there is a need to address public spaces beyond the dichotomy between relational and absolute conceptions of space. Further, it poses the following question: How can social and spatial theory and research, urban planners, local activists and community groups engage in fruitful and constructive debates and practices to inform a culturally inspired governance of public spaces?

The third theme *Post-disciplinary planning education: Urban cultures and public spaces* aims at addressing planning cultures, particularly planning education, in an increasingly globalised job market for graduates. Considering the growing need for rather systematic discussions on the nexus between urban cultures and public spaces in planning education, it is essential to explore creative methodologies to enlarge the range of learning tools as well as instruments for planning practice. Simultaneous interventions into the design of virtual, social and physical spaces – for example, by integrating serious virtual games, spatial filming or action research techniques into the set of planning tools – might be just a few of the new challenges that planning students will be likely to work with in the near future in order to show the scale and scope of their creativity and self-reflection. Some of the questions leading this inquiry are: What kind of innovative approaches in planning education can support the understanding of the previously addressed issues on urban culture and public space? How can instruments, and their bases, be reconsidered without merely replacing them with new ones? What might be the ways of enhancing the contribution of urban planners and urban researchers to play a more decisive role in political decision-making processes?

These three themes, highlighted above, were further developed in a series of debates and conferences held in 2010 (see Table 1).

Date	Title	Type	Hosting institution(s)
Jul 2010	AESOP Conference Helsinki	Group's Official Launch	Association of European Schools of Planning
Nov 2010	Public Space and the Challenges of Urban Transformation in Europe. Politics and Culture	International Conference including AESOP TG workshop	Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space, Department for Spatial Planning, Faculty for Architecture and Planning, Vienna University of Technology, Austria

Tab. 1: Timeline of Activities in 2010.

Theme 'Conviviality' (2011–2013)

After setting the basic premises and principles of the thematic group with the other group members, a new working topic, 'Conviviality', was developed by Sabine Knierbein, Ceren Sezer and Chiara Tornaghi in 2011.

Conviviality, originating from the Latin word "convivium", refers to a shared place, for example for communal meals, which play an important role in community cohesion. The term also means "banquet", usually hosted as a celebration of a community event. In more recent times, the term has also been used to refer to meal sharing, dinner parties or other jovial and merry moments among friends or communities of interest. Convivial moments can be identified either during local festivals or markets with social purposes (e.g. fundraising for local charitable programmes, such as the Milanese Convivio) or related to grassroots initiatives organised in the streets (e.g. The Big Lunch, Lunch in the street).

The Group's working theme *Conviviality* aims to raise a discussion on the discourses on safe and clean public spaces in order to provide security and avoid any risk of danger in the city's public life. Such a perspective considers any kind of unexpected social encounter in the public space to be suspicious and associates it with the feelings of fear and anxiety. This approach, very often addressed in neoliberal debates, undermines the notion of public spaces as places of collective memory, strife and action, and ignores their importance in social, cultural, ecological, political and economic dimensions of city life. Given this, the theme of *Conviviality* aims to generate a discussion on the inclusive design and planning approaches to public spaces in order to strengthen their roles in supporting the city's public life, which allows unexpected social contacts, performances and activities that are essential in the city.

Recently, there has been growing interest in the topic of conviviality among urban scholars. This is not only because spontaneous social activities in public space are under pressure as a result of privatisation processes, but also due to highly regulative strategies for the management of public space, which tend to replace convivial practices with the organised uses of urban spaces (e.g. the banning

of drinking in parks outside a very expensive café's premises in Italy). The limitation of convivial action also contributes to the reduction in spontaneous community gathering, meaning groups larger than the family (e.g. in the UK), or the broad privatisation of streets and squares and their embedding into shopping centres, which introduces new forms of ownership and diminishes tolerated non-consumption activities.

Nonetheless, we can also observe a rising number of spontaneous forms of re-appropriation of public spaces around convivial activities, such as food growing, food sharing and food selling. Guerrilla gardeners, spontaneous ethnic gathering for food cooking and selling, or communities gathering around food markets are becoming more frequent, and a wide range of convivial practices are becoming part of everyday life on the street. Thus, the theme *Conviviality* calls for attention on several issues relating to public life in the city:

First, it suggests analysis, interpretation and development of methods to study the tensions between the struggles for and opportunities in public spaces, which might emerge in relation to the organisation of convivial practices. Convivial practices opens up a reflection on who has the right to contribute to planning and designing public spaces, and how these processes are settled within urban societies.

Second, it opens up a new window for a critical perspective on the current modes of privatisation of public spaces and regulation of convivial activities, including enclosures, new forms of social exclusion and the further erosion of citizenship rights in the city.

Finally, it urges urban planners and designers to use "convivial practices in public spaces" as a way to improve their professional knowledge and skills by taking the paths of participatory action research, where they can integrate their expertise on the potentials and pitfalls of convivial practices through new methods, tools, tactics and strategies.

Given this, the PSUC poses the following questions under the theme of *Conviviality*:

Who organises convivial practices (actors, institutions, the public)? Where do convivial practices take place? Which resources are mobilised during these processes? How do local authorities

or competing groups react to this? The Group is, in particular, interested in the agency-structure dynamics that unfold in public spaces and involve urban cultures, analysed through a focus on convivial practices.

How is “conviviality” approached and understood in these projects? Which type of social meanings are embedded in these practices? What forms of sharing come along with convivial practices? Are these site-specific (built around a specific public space, or type of space) or can they rather be described as temporary and relatively mobile practices?

How can a reflection on research and practice (in planning, architecture, cultural studies, critical geography and further related disciplines) add new insight into the trajectories of these convivial projects?

With the aim of stimulating an international debate about conviviality in several urban contexts, the Group generated a series of mobile debates during the period 2011–2013 (See Table 2).

Theme ‘Becoming Local’ (2013–2015)

The theme *Becoming Local* was developed by Sabine Knierbein and Ceren Sezer in 2013 with the new members of the core organisation team: Matej Niksic (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia), Nikolai Roskamm (Technical University of Berlin) and Tihomir Videman (Vienna University of Technology).

The underlying rationale of the theme is the multifaceted aspects of public spaces, in which the processes of urban transformation are the most visible. Yet, these processes are not static or fixed in character, but present a plethora of permanent dynamics and flows. This is particularly the case in the context of international mobility and migration, accompanied and impacted by the global financial crisis and changes in the labour markets. In this context, public spaces perform more and more as

a platform for changing cultural values and rituals that are displayed, contested, managed and commodified.

From this standpoint, *Becoming Local* approaches public spaces as arenas of conflict, negotiation and consensus among different actors who shape the city. It also suggests that there is an increasing need for creative approaches and strategies to allow vulnerable and marginalised urban groups (beyond so-called mainstream society) to take part in this process, either through individual or collective strategies.

For this reason, the PSUC calls for exploring and rethinking relations between the concepts, meanings and people related to construction of (local) spaces and places, policies and practices, and everyday life. Three perspectives are suggested here to set up a dynamic framework to explore these issues in a dialectical manner:

- Public space as an interface of both local and global processes
- The social production of meaningful places
- Material and immaterial dimensions of post-Fordist restructuring

The first perspective, *Public space as an interface of both local and global processes*, approaches the theme *Becoming Local* as a series of manifold enquiries into the set of practices and values that intermingle at the urban scale as facets of both global and local processes. The focus rests on the hypothesis that in urban public space empirical enquiries into the palpable materiality of everyday life can be productively connected to the insights of abstract theory, thus rendering the latter relevant for practical endeavour. In this sense the palpable local scale itself is considered as a ‘relational space’ where global tendencies ‘sediment’ and are ‘translated’ and ‘transformed’ in a particular local cultural, social and political context.

The second perspective, *The social production of meaningful places*, understands *Becoming Local*

Tab. 2: Timeline of Activities in 2011–2013.

Date	Title	Type	Hosting institution(s)
May 2011	Reclaiming Public Space and Human Cities Group Meeting	Preparatory Workshop	Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Nov 2011	Group meeting	Group Meeting	Istituto di Ricerche sulle Attività Terziarie, National Research Council Italy and University Federico II, Naples, Italy
Mar 2012	EU Human Cities Festival Brussels	Conference Cooperation	Faculté d’Architecture La Cambre Horta and ProMateria, Brussels, Belgium via Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Jul 2012	AESOP Conference Ankara	Group Meeting	Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey (via the Association of European Schools of Planning)
Sep 2012	EURO Conference Vienna, Austria	Group Meeting	Vienna University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Department of Spatial Planning, Austria (via the European Urban Research Association)
Dec 2012	Ambivalent Landscapes Conference	International AESOP TG Conference	Faculty of Architecture, Technical University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

as the process of constructing a meaningful ‘place’, which can be empirically observed, analysed and mapped in the public spaces of the city. Yet globalised design trends – accompanied by neoliberal ‘safe and clean’ policies – often seek to provide sanitised and controlled urban spaces that lack any deeper notion of history, political struggle and social conflict. In this framework, the theme *Becoming Local* suggests a plea against such trends and stands in support of a critical investigation of the socio-historic ‘patina’ of relational public space as a very important mirror of changing patterns of everyday life, collective memory and processes of shaping local identities.

The third perspective, *Material and Immaterial dimensions of post-Fordist restructuring* suggests that the theme *Becoming Local* implies material and immaterial dimensions of public spaces from a critical understanding and an interpretation of post-Fordist commodification strategies and their actors.

Accordingly, the process of placemaking is challenged by new rationales of post-Fordist transformations, where symbolic, cultural and social capital is embraced by newly emerging economies. These changes carry certain impacts and call for revisiting the role of state, market and civil society actors, as well as the changing role of ‘experts’ involved in placemaking and in shaping the design and planning of public space.

The Group held meetings relating to the theme of *Becoming Local* aimed at addressing these issues in the period 2013–2015 (See Table 3).

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Tab. 3: Timeline of Activities in 2013–2015.

Date	Title	Type	Hosting institution(s)
Nov 2013	Becoming Local Istanbul. Public space as an imaginary of alternative urban futures	International AESOP TG Conference	Faculty of Architecture and Design, Ozyegin University, Istanbul, Turkey http://www.becominglocalistanbul.org
April 2014	Becoming Local Medellin. UN Habitat World Urban Forum 2014 in Medellín, Colombia	Global Conference including AESOP TG networking event	Vienna University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space (via the United Nations, UN Habitat Section)
June 2014	Becoming Local Bucharest. The atomizing society. Public space and post socialist territories	Group Meeting	Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest, Romania http://becominglocalbucharest.ro
July 2014	AESOP Conference Delft/Utrecht	Group Meeting	Delft University of Technology and Utrecht University (via the Association of European Schools of Planning)
Aug 2014	Becoming Local Vienna. Designing places of emancipation?	Networking Meeting, in combination with WWTF Summer School	Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space in cooperation with Centre for Local Planning, Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Vienna University of Technology, Austria
Oct 2014	Becoming Local Paris. Transforming Spaces, Redefining Localities	International AESOP TG Conference	Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie of La Villette School of Architecture https://becominglocalparis.wordpress.com
Forthcoming:			
May 2015	Becoming Local Rome	Networking Meeting	Public Space Biennale Rome, 2015 (Biennale Spazio Pubblico Rome, 2015)
June 2015	Becoming Local Glasgow. The power of places & the places of power	Group Meeting	Scottish Cities Knowledge Centre, University of Glasgow Adam Smith Business School https://becominglocalglasgow.wordpress.com
July 2015	Becoming Local Prague	Group Meeting	Czech Technical University, Faculty of Architecture (via the Association of European Schools of Planning)
Sep 2015	Becoming Local Oporto. Generative places, smart approaches, happy people	International AESOP TG Conference	Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Notes

- 1 The contact e-mail for applications to be a member of the PSUC is PSUCnetwork@gmail.com. The group kindly requires the applicants to send a letter of interest and a short CV to this e-mail address. For more information about group members, go to:
http://www.aesop-planning.eu/blogs/en_GB/urban-cultures-and-public-spaces.

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