

SPATIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IN THE CITY CENTRE RESEARCH, EDUCATION, AND PRACTICE

ORGANISED BY:

Architectural Research Centers Consortium ARCC
Future of the City Centre Network
Council for Research and Innovation in Building and
Construction: Working Commission in Architectural
Design and Management

FACILITATORS:

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SYNOPSIS:

Among present urban dilemmas is the social and cultural integration of diverse populations and responses to the barriers created by limited access to the critical elements of safe, healthy, and dignified lives. The focus of this session is the role of research, education, and practice in inclusiveness and generating spatial equity. The challenge of creating socially and environmentally sustainable places that are accessible to various communities lies at the core of critical research in the design disciplines. Research into spatial equity and inclusiveness in architectural education and practice is manifested in both process and product. In thinking about the

conference theme, this workshop will engage participants in a lively debate around a set of conditions and provocations that will assist the development of a resilient city centre. The concept of universal access to city-centre facilities, regardless of social class, race, gender, or ethnic background, needs to be carried through to practice. Moreover, inclusion for some members of society can represent exclusion for others. Thus, there is a continuum from the producers of urban space in all its scales through to the users. The outcome of the workshop will be to elicit ideas, opinions, and different perspectives from the participants, and lay out a plan of action for a future research agenda.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION:

Environment – healthy places, sustainable spaces, infrastructure
Social Change – lived experiences, capacity building
Economic Challenges – to benefit society rather than capitalists
Movement – equity in transport
Culture – re-use of heritage buildings and spaces

INTRODUCTION TO CITY CENTRES:



Site of proposed Central Library Square, Newcastle Upon Tyne.
Photo by Bob Giddings, 2024.

Newcastle upon Tyne is the regional capital of North East England. Traditionally, land in the city centre has been owned by the citizens and administered on their behalf by the City Council. There has been incremental development, but by the end of the 20th century some areas had become intentionally neglected as leases for small businesses were not renewed, and property emptied. The local authority was setting up these areas for major redevelopment.

Concerned at the lack of public space for community use, researchers and practitioners provided designs for the re-use of this vacated land and property. Shown above is a square at the front of the new City Library. It includes premises for small local businesses and city centre housing. Microclimatic analysis demonstrates that external noise is reduced, as are wind speeds, while temperatures are increased to enable the extended use of the space.



Proposed Central Library Square, Newcastle Upon Tyne.
Rendering by Bob Giddings, 2010.

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are wind speeds, while temperatures are increased to enable the extended use of the space.



Plaça del Poeta Boscà, Barcelona. Photo by Bob Giddings, 2024.

Literature during the COVID-19 period emphasised the significance of green spaces in city centres for people's physical and mental health. Library Square was therefore conceived as part of a network that included green spaces. While there is considerable greenery at the periphery of the city, it is important to bring it into the city centre as places of relaxation and respite. This will require a commitment by the local authority and central government to the community, including ongoing maintenance.



New HMRC Building, site of proposed Central Library Square, Newcastle Upon Tyne.
Photo by Bob Giddings, 2024.

This is what is being constructed at the Library Square location. The building fills the area and will become the largest footprint of any building in the city centre. There will be no open space nor access for the public. Without consultation, the Council sold the land to an international speculator, who is a contributor to the political party of the recent national government. The building is intended for a government department that will move 2.5 miles (4 kilometres) from its existing location. The premises will continue to be owned by the speculator, to whom the government will pay rent.



Urban Bridge, São Paulo.

Rendering by Ihab Elzeyadi based on mass media images.

São Paulo is the largest city in Brazil and South America. The metropolitan area of São Paulo, with its 24 million inhabitants, is one of the most populous in the Americas and the fifth largest in the world. São Paulo's city centre development occurred mainly between 1900 and 1980. Government agencies, office buildings, large shops, cultural spaces, and residential buildings were built, attracting people from all over the country and from abroad.



São Paulo Skyline.

Rendering by Ihab Elzeyadi based on mass media images.

São Paulo's city centre has several heritage buildings, protected by law, most of them from the modernist architecture movement. Famous examples include the Altino Arantes Building, also known as the Banespa Building (in the foreground of the picture above); the Municipal Theatre of São Paulo (1911); the 165-meter tower called Edifício Itália; and the Edifício Copan, one of the most emblematic buildings of São Paulo, designed by Oscar Niemeyer.

The public spaces of the city centre, previously valued and pleasant, have progressively lost their social and economic relevance as well as traditional commercial activities, thus alienating a large part of the population. Homeless people have progressively occupied sidewalks and squares, as well as abandoned buildings. The impact of overtourism, shopping, and cultural activities is enormous, giving rise to other social problems, such as vandalism, looting, violence, and drug dealing.

Social problems observed in São Paulo's city centre include the permanent presence of hundreds of

crack and other drug addicts, in an area known as Crackland. It started during the 1990s and is still ongoing. The existence of Crackland in the city centre has led to a feeling of insecurity and, most importantly, worsened the deterioration of public spaces in the area. Most people pass through only because of transportation needs, as the main public lines originate in the city centre.



GOE Officers, São Paulo.

Rendering by Ihab Elzeyadi based on mass media images.

In recent decades, social and healthcare services have been provided for the addicted population, as well as police interventions attempting to control criminal activity. These approaches have alternated in an attempt to eradicate Cracolândia and return the use of public spaces to the rest of the city's population, although there have not been any effective results. Groups of drug dealers and addicts have moved from one area to another, without ever leaving the city centre.



Jamison Park, Portland, Oregon. Photo by Ihab Elzeyadi.

Moving on to a different setting and place, Portland, Oregon has been known as a rich urban setting with human-centric public spaces that are considered a model of public engagement in the US Pacific Northwest. With several squares, parks, and public playgrounds, Portland provides a multitude of public and accessible urban centres. These range from public places for social gatherings to places for local commerce, such as the Saturday Market, political demonstrations, and holiday celebrations that are relevant to ethnic and diverse cultural groups.

These accessible and affordable public places found new users and uses during the COVID-19 pandemic. They served as socially distanced gathering places, vaccination centres, public health check-up sites, as well as food supply pantries. These examples were great testimonials to the importance of flexible and accessible public spaces in the city centre that provide multiple uses and are open to different groups.



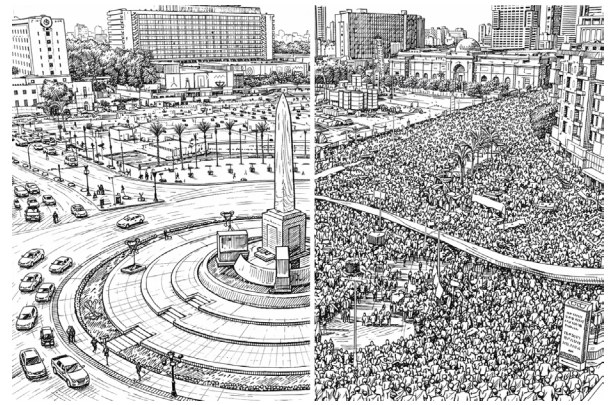
Pioneer Courthouse Square, Portland. COVID-19 Social distancing. Image by Travel Portland Web Documentary.

This open and accessible space can be subject to abuse as well. We have witnessed how commercial activities hijacked such spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic and established outdoor cafés and restaurants in them. This has turned the space – once open and free to public use – into a space that is used for commercial purposes, excluding those who cannot afford to use these commercial establishments.



Piazza della Rotonda, Rome. Photo by Ihab Elzeyadi.

On the other hand, public space that does not belong to a specific group or entity can be left to a government that imposes strict rules and makes infrastructure changes to limit public use. The infamous Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, was the main site of the 25 January 2011 revolution as part of the Arab Spring. It was later barricaded and reduced to a turnaround for vehicles with no pedestrian access, to curb any possibility for public gatherings.



Tahrir Square demonstration (Arab Spring). Rendering based on mass media images by Ihab Elzeyadi.

Similarly, public areas and quadrangles on multiple US college campuses have been sites of demonstrations and political encampments by students and university staff to voice disagreements with US and college-campus policies. These public sites are used as spaces to make some student groups' demands more vocal and visible. They have also been sites of clashes with campus police, college administrators, and political far-right groups.



Columbia University encampment. Rendering by Ihab Elzeyadi based on mass media images.

The above examples were intended to provoke a discussion about the dichotomy and challenge of city centre public space. Who is it for, who owns it, who manages it, and for what purposes? How can we ensure that its flexible and accessible nature is not abused by some groups at the expense of others? What set of rules and regulations can ensure its continuous use and generate spatial equity? These are some opening questions. The group participants were invited to debate them and generate actionable items for follow-up.

THE WORKSHOP IN ACTION:



Spatial Equity and Inclusiveness Workshop at the EAAE-ARCC 2024 Conference.
Photo by Ihab Elzeyadi, 2024

OUTCOMES FROM THE WORKSHOP:

Housing

Hostile architecture

How do people live?

Homeless

In Brazil as an example – houses are viewed as property, buying and selling, not enough housing.

Public Space

Inventory and mapping of city space needed – what proportion is public?

For cultural development, social structures are required alongside public spaces.

If land is sold to developers, it is controlled by developers.

Public ground must offer payback to the public.

Not totally public nor private but hybrid as a reinvention to improve health.

Space needs programmes to generate opportunities for connections.

People interact in parks – meet your neighbours, become involved in multiple uses.

Add trees.

Eat the plants that can be grown in public space

Parks are closed at night for the general public and homeless.

What happens when people colonise public space?

Who is excluded?

Copenhagen – sensing, well-being, park by the Opera, sounds, smells, sensory garden, green city, piazza recreation, bank invests for ordinary people to be active.

Italy – Sunday afternoon walks with family

Streets

They can act as public spaces and outdoor living rooms

Streets are the first element for children, growing up and playing there

Kids are not playing on the streets anymore – accessibility

Streets are now for moving cars not people

Funding

Revenue funding versus capital funding

Must be financially sustainable

City change is based on funding – money driven – who has buy-in?

Changing Demands

Previously argued that there is not enough space – density of use

Information technology – digital revolution

Do not need so much space, some functions are disappearing

Do not base everything on buildings

Invest in rental spaces and add community amenities

Over-tourism in some centres, especially historic cities in Europe

Public transit is increasingly important to reduce numbers of cars, vans and lorries

OBSERVATIONS AFTER THE WORKSHOP:

Isabel Potworowski

We seem to assume that public space is something that we are missing, while taking for granted that people want or need it. Do we need to re-evaluate what people's daily activities / lifestyles are, as we do with the clients of a house, to then determine what kind of public space they would benefit from?

There is a cultural aspect to public space. e.g. in Spain and Greece, people are out much later at night.

We tend only to talk about public space in terms of squares. What about streets, as places of meeting, as a living room for the city?

Who is the public when we speak of public space? Do we include the homeless and the disadvantaged? Is it truly public space if security (or more passively, furniture design) tries to keep them out?

Björn Lundell

To me the workshop opened my eyes to the large number of various aspects shaping the environments of today's cities. The conflict, the economy, the homeless etc. It interests me how local areas, squares, and streets together with local traditions (example: a Sunday afternoon walk with the family in Italy) build atmospheres for the people living there. How the people themselves organize and create the world surrounding them is possible as a way ahead. People can make the architecture live.



Drawing produced during the Spatial Equity and Inclusiveness Workshop at the EAAE-ARCC 2024 Conference by Cathryn John, 2024