

BRINGING PEOPLE BACK INTO THE PICTURE: DE-EMPHASIZING BUSINESS FRIENDLINESS IN URBAN PLANNING

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ABSTRACT: Over the last two decades globalization has emerged as a major driver of economic and social transformation. Globalization is also transforming the role of regions and cities, which are now involved in a quest for competitiveness.

City rankings are published, and local and regional governments are engaged in city branding strategies, in order to appear high on the hierarchy. The prevailing thinking of local public institutions is that becoming competitive in a globalized world requires focusing efforts on building business and industry friendly environments. Nevertheless this is not a viable strategy for all cities and regions, irrespective of their size, locations or endowments. In order to attract investors plans tend to design large expansion areas that, in shrinking regions, hardly ever get developed. Cities grow in a scattered way. Just as an example in small cities at the Spanish inner region Douro Corridor, 66% of urban areas remain as empty plots. Sustainability and quality of life suffer in the process. But, what do habitants have to say about?

In a context of shifting urban patterns, changing life styles and a political and technical bias towards competitiveness, it is hard for people to make themselves heard. Within this context, planning with the people and “as if people mattered” becomes a real challenge. Nevertheless it is by putting public interest and collective decision making back into the political agenda, that urban conviviality will be strengthened and ecological sustainability enhanced.

In order to achieve these aims we suggest a method to overcome fragmented views that typically arise in sectorial and urban plans, through the application of “synergic satisfiers”. It is done adapting the concepts of fundamental human needs - affection, protection, participation, creation, identity, understanding, leisure and freedom - developed by Max-Neef and Elizalde.

Given its ability to configure public spaces and spatial systems, town planning and urban design might provide effective levers to meet those fundamental human needs closely related to urban spatial conditions. The proposed method focuses on interaction between people (social environment) and the built environment, considering three key aspects: physical conditions, regulatory framework and cognitive environment. The paper concludes with some examples of the possibilities to apply the method to urban requalification of peripheral spaces in a participatory process that enhance public life and sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Planning Culture, Governance; Public participation, Synergic satisfiers, Fundamental human needs, Sustainable development, Top-down and bottom-up urban strategies

1 COMPETITIVENESS, WINNERS AND LOSERS?

Over the last two decades globalization has emerged as a major driver of economic and social transformation. Globalization is also transforming the role of regions and cities, which are now involved in a quest for competitiveness.

1.1 Cities to compete

Nowadays cities appear to be engaged in a race, chasing public investment resources and competing against each other for their inclusion in strategic infrastructure plans, to attract private investments and economic activities. “Governments and private capital often determine which cities will grow and which will not by deciding on the location of key investments, such as roads, airports, universities, communications, or

capital, which influence a range of economic activities that lead to population growth or in-migration. (...) In many countries, urban growth is initially driven by national governments, and then further propelled by local authorities and other actors, such as the private sector. The growth of cities through local initiatives reflects a rising trend towards greater urban entrepreneurialism and more intense city competition". [1]

1.2. Oversimplificacion: city rankings

Viewing the relationship between cities as a competition turns them into winners and losers. And this view leads to city rankings. These rankings are published, and local and regional governments are engaged in city branding strategies, in order to appear high on the hierarchy. The prevailing thinking of local public institutions is that becoming competitive in a globalized world requires focusing efforts on building business and industry friendly environments. Nevertheless this is not a viable strategy for all cities and regions, irrespective of their size, locations or endowments.

2 URBAN WORLD, POLARIZED TERRITORY

Since 2008, for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population lives in cities. What happens in cities is becoming more and more relevant as we now live in an urbanized world. As Serrano points out [2], both at global and at European scale, there is a trend that consolidates the concentration of wealth, population, and political and economic control in a reduced number of metropolitan, highly urbanized spaces.

This process also takes place at country level. As an example, the following map reflects how population is increasingly concentrating in coastal areas¹ and around the capital city of Spain.

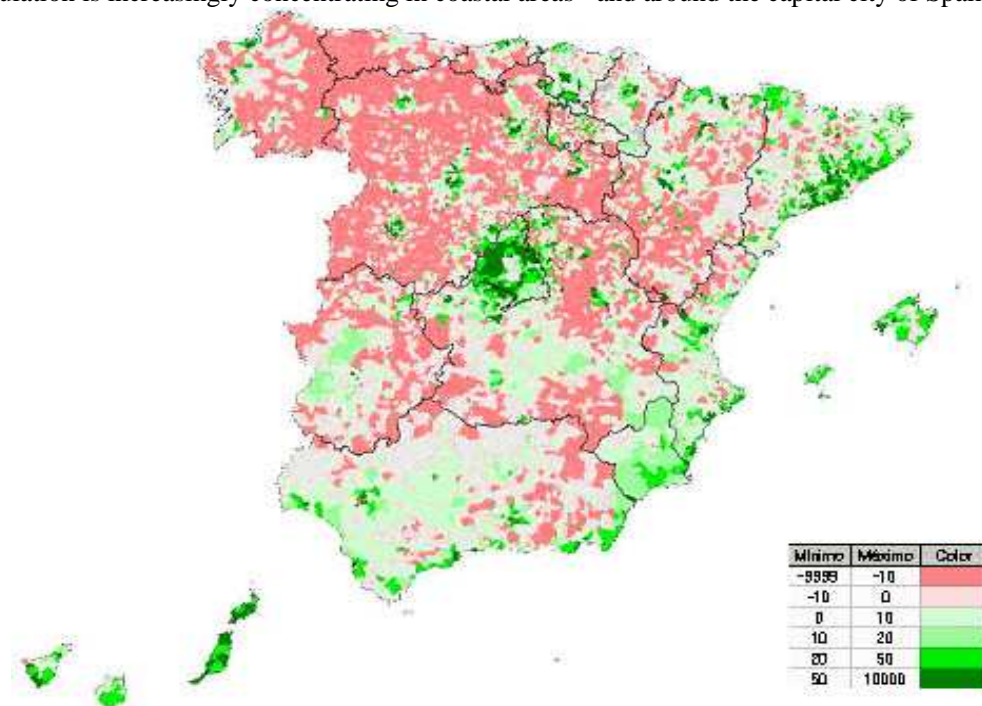


Figure 1. Demographic polarization in Spain. 1990-2000 evolution (in %)²

¹ Coastal areas have always been preferred locations for human settlements, both in ancient times and today....`

Europe, North America, Oceania, and Latin America have the most urbanized coastal areas, with more than 80 per cent of the population along coastlines living in cities. (pg4)#

² Map from Proyecto AUDES <http://alarcos.inf-cr.uclm.es/per/fruiz/pobesp/dat/munic.htm>

2.1 European territorial policies aim at closing the gap

The European Union has solved, at least theoretically, the dilemma between competitiveness and equity, between socio-economic planning and spatial planning. Europe, as envisioned by its leaders, could become the most competitive region in the world if it is able to overcome the current concentration of productive activity around the major urban zones –particularly around the central space of the continent-. The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion [3] endorses the approach that “promoting territorial cohesion is part of the effort required so that the whole European territory has a chance to contribute to the program of growth and employment”.

3. CITIES THAT DON'T MATTER

3.1. An inner uncertain region

Studies and reports rarely look into cities with population below 10,000 inhabitants; nevertheless it is worth looking at small towns. Polarizing processes are replicated at regional level, and the region of Douro Valley illustrates it perfectly. In demographic terms, it is a shrinking region, despite its recent economic prosperity due to wine industry. In 1982 its wine, Ribera del Duero, received Denomination of Origin (DO) status, and since then viticulture has expanded considerably. Even so, the territory is nowadays absolutely polarized between main cities and the rest (emptiness). The ever-increasing concentration of functions in the cities, that strive to become development nodes, results in a growing dependence of the latter, which remain unable to attract people to settle. Small cities tried to prevent decaying by turning into a pleasant destination for migrants from their hinterland.

Many peripheral –even isolated– rural areas are shrinking; quite often the priority for most of small villages is simply not to disappear. Local authorities at small towns along the middle stretch of Douro Valley have been struggling to be attractive and to stand out of the rest, regaining a role as secondary center, hence focusing efforts on attracting business and industry.

The strategy is also called for in the European Spatial Development Perspective (SDP) which recommends [4] “strengthening [of] small and medium-sized towns in rural areas as focal points for regional development and promotion of their networking”. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done.

3.2. Emphasis on offering land for productive activities and new residential types

In order to attract investors, plans tend to design large expansion areas that, in shrinking regions, hardly ever get developed. Cities grow in a scattered way. A sequence of maps reflecting the demographic and urban area's evolution of Peñafiel, a small city in the Douro Valley will help to understand and visualize the progressive dispersion of uses and population. Other small towns in the area experienced similar processes. Based on De Jong's method [5] dispersion within a municipality is quite accurately determined by the position of the built-up area (in green) on the map. Population statistics per municipality are drawn as red circles of 120 and 36 m radius of 1.000 and 100 inhabitants (42m²/inhabitant). These circles represent the built-up area such a population needs at average in Spain (it does not take into account secondary and empty houses). Their location is roughly determined by the urban topography read from the map.

Spots overlapping implies a higher demographic density than the current average in Spain, on the contrary when spots density is lower it reflects larger built areas per capita, usually due to empty houses or large percentage of other uses. Industrial sites and non residential built areas are left uncovered by red circles.

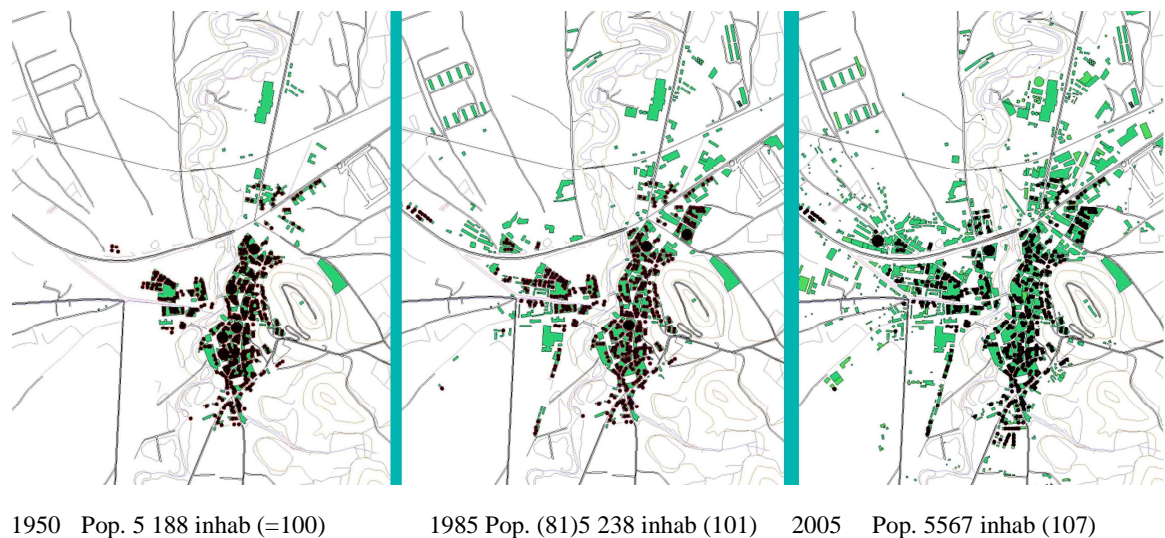


Figure 2 Peñafiel. Demographic and urban evolution. 1950-2005

The maps above show how built areas were confined and closely linked to population until the mid 50s. For centuries physical barriers –both natural as the stream and the hill and artificial as the railway– had constrained urban expansion and only in the 40s urban uses have started to jump over those barriers. Afterwards built areas expansion beyond the city historical center has accelerated. Industrial areas accounted for an important rate of this expansion. Residential developments and demographic growth were not correlated, and it has induced the abandonment and progressive drainage of habitants from the center of the town into the surroundings.

3.3. Alternative to an unsustainable process: putting people first

Over an interval of 55 years, Peñafiel increased its population by around 400 inhabitants. During that same period of time, the occupied surface multiplied by 2, and urban areas grew at an even higher rate. Along the way, spatial quality and urban vitality diminished.

Peñafiel is not an exceptional case: in small cities at the Spanish inner region Douro Corridor, 66% of urban areas remain as empty plots. Sustainability and quality of life suffer in the process [6]. Most of the areas included in Master Plans were never developed. But for those exceptions that have become a reality, the final quality of realizations is discouraging. In the development planning instruments necessary to start the urbanizing process, any memory of quality objectives stated in Master Plans vanished away. As a result in new areas developed there are roads with pavements narrower than 1.20 meters, green spaces where no tree or plant has been planted, central “squares” lacking of any sense of place.

Besides those extensions, there are specific policies and plans to preserve historical areas. There has been also a considerable effort –though often with a strong face-lifting bias– to revitalize city centers and to promote commerce at neighbourhood level, but peripheries and new developments are not considered in those strategies. What do habitants have to say about this?

4. TOWN PLANNING. START FROM AND FOR THE PEOPLE

In a context of shifting urban patterns, changing life styles and a political and technical bias towards competitiveness, it is hard for people to make themselves heard. Within this context, planning WITH the people and “as if people mattered” becomes a real challenge. Only by putting public interest and collective decision making back into the political agenda, urban conviviality will be strengthened and ecological sustainability enhanced.

To make this desirable scenario possible, expectations towards urban planning should be readjusted. The prevalent conception gives priority to competitiveness and growth, assuming that once when they are achieved, people’s life will improve as a natural consequence. Urban policy should go beyond its bias

towards building business and industry friendly environment to compete in a globalized world. It is not a viable strategy for all cities and regions. It is time to bring back Schumacher and plan and design “as if people mattered”. It is time to reorientate urbanism goals, learning lessons from the recent past.

4.1. Cities for Citizens

Cities for citizens should provide: [7]

- **Individual freedom**, so that each person takes control of time and space,
- **Social responsibility** gives access to complex network of facilities, relationships, activities and stimuli, in a comfortable and recognizable space. Legibility and recognition, allow inhabitants to be part of different social networks, (not only virtual, physical contact linked to the space, to appropriate it and make it appropriated).
- **Ecological responsibility**, linking personal and current experiences to the future, in a respectful way.

4.2. Role of urban planning. A good place for living

A liveable city has to be able to host a variety of uses and social classes. It also needs to offer well-balanced areas with an adequate connection between urban public facilities, green areas and public spaces for citizens to encounter and play their role. Urbanism should be a key enabler to achieve these conditions, based on its social role and leveraging the social function of property. In short, we need to use public spaces and collective facilities as places that allow us to fulfill ourselves, developing human potentials.

Social function of property is –supposedly—firmly established in Spanish urban tradition. When it comes to set policies and design urban plans many interests are likely to conflict. And not all interests are backed by the same amount of power and ability to prevail. The way in which this social function is interpreted is in many cases dubious. As an example, take a small village in the mountains, where its inhabitants are not allowed to change the look nor the volume of their houses. What public interest is supposed to be protected here? The attractive contribution of rural architecture to landscape. How can this contribution be assessed? Looking at these houses from the road. This way the “visual recreation” of the drivers prevails over the inhabitants’ opportunity to transform their house.

This is just an example, but it reveals the importance of specifying who decides and under what criteria when the social function of property is considered and urban proposal are put forward.

A criterion to orientate plan’s goals is to what extent they contribute to increase quality of life. Quality of life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs. That can only be clarified in a collective process.

4.3. Human needs approach

This paper endorses the concept of “Human Scale Development” developed by Max-Neef, Elizalde and Hopenayn [8] and works on the assumption that human needs do exist and are universal³. They do not change with culture or across history. What changes over time and between cultures is the way these needs are satisfied. It is a position contrary to subjectivist and cultural relativist approaches.

In Max-Neef Model of Human-Scale Development, fundamental human needs are:

³ Human needs -according to these authors are few, finite and classifiable. A standpoint opposite to economic rationalists, who affirm that human beings have a limitless desire for material possessions. There is no hierarchy of human needs, no need is per se more important than any other contrary to the well-known Maslow theory: “Simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristic of the system's behavior. A pre-systemic threshold must be recognized, below which the feeling of a certain deprivation may be so severe, that the urge to satisfy the given need may paralyze and overshadow any other impulse or alternative. The case of subsistence may serve to illustrate this clearly. When the possibilities of satisfying this need are severely impaired, all other needs remain blocked and a single and intense drive prevails. But such a situation does not hold true only in the case of subsistence. It is equally relevant in the case of other needs. Suffice it to say, that total lack of affection, or the loss of identity, may lead people to extremes of self-destruction”. (Max Neef, Elizalde and Hopenayn, 1991)

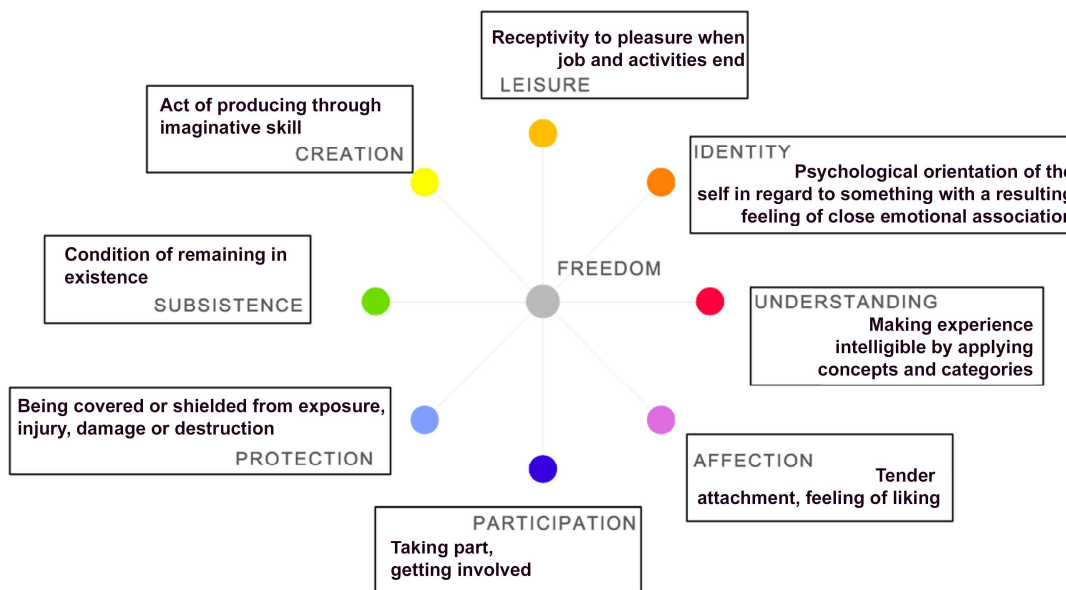


Figure 3 Fundamental Human Needs

Given its ability to configure public spaces, public facilities' networks, and spatial systems, town planning and urban design might provide effective levers to meet those fundamental human needs closely related to urban spatial conditions. The proposed method focuses on interaction between people (social environment) and the built environment, considering three key aspects: physical conditions, regulatory framework and cognitive environment.

4.4. Physical conditions

Town planning and urban design shape public spaces and make key decisions that might structure the city (with public facilities, housing typologies, road networks...). And the pattern of activities will be strongly influenced by those conditions. For example: do streets give priority to four-wheeled traffic? Are streets sunny in winter and do trees provide shadow in summer time? Is there collective place for joining, sitting, creating or celebrating?

Protection is probably one of the human needs more narrowly linked to physical conditions determined by urban planning. People should be kept from uncomfortable weather conditions, from noise and air pollution. Climate considerations in urban design have been object of study since long time ago, and there are useful tools, like Givoni's or Olgyay's climate comfort psychometric charts. There are plenty of indicators, many related to energy efficiency, but also to the potential use of public spaces or to measure the microclimatic benefits of trees. There are also computer models for energy simulations, like Envi-met or Townscope. Safety in streets and public spaces has also extensively been studied, from generic and specific groups (women, elderly...).

4.5. Regulatory frame

Urban planners are also involved in normative and regulations of the use of public space. Some times those prescriptions are part of Master Plans; usually they are independent municipal ordinances or decrees. Regulations establish what can be done, where and when and who can do it.

For example, let us consider **creation**. Do people use the public space for creating, doing, manipulating and playing? Those activities get us ready for comprehensive understanding, and the possibility for those actions depends mostly on the regulatory frame, if they are allowed or not. Places where creative activities are allowed are decisive against alienation. It helps to people's appropriation and engagement with the public space. Creation is not synonymous of transferring maintenance works to the users.

Interacting in the public space turns it into a political space. **Participation** leads to collective decision

making and sets the foundations to overcome isolation and marginalisation. Of course in spaces where people feel good, comfortable, probabilities of meeting other people increase and meeting helps to interact. Both spatial conditions and regulations are decisive to allow participation.

4.6. Cognitive environment

Cognition is the process involved in knowing, or the act of knowing, which in its completeness includes perception and judgment. Cognition includes all processes of consciousness by which knowledge is accumulated, such as perceiving, recognizing, conceiving, and reasoning.

Understanding and **identity** might certainly be encouraged by the cognitive environment. In this sense identity is defined by Lynch [9] as “the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places”. Places can enhance personal identity, with the help of preexistences, representative elements –natural and built- and morphological characteristics. But identity as a human –individual- need has also a collective character. The “social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships” [10].

As a synthesis, in the chart below the Human Needs flower is overlaid with these three key aspects, indicating which human need is under the influence of each one.

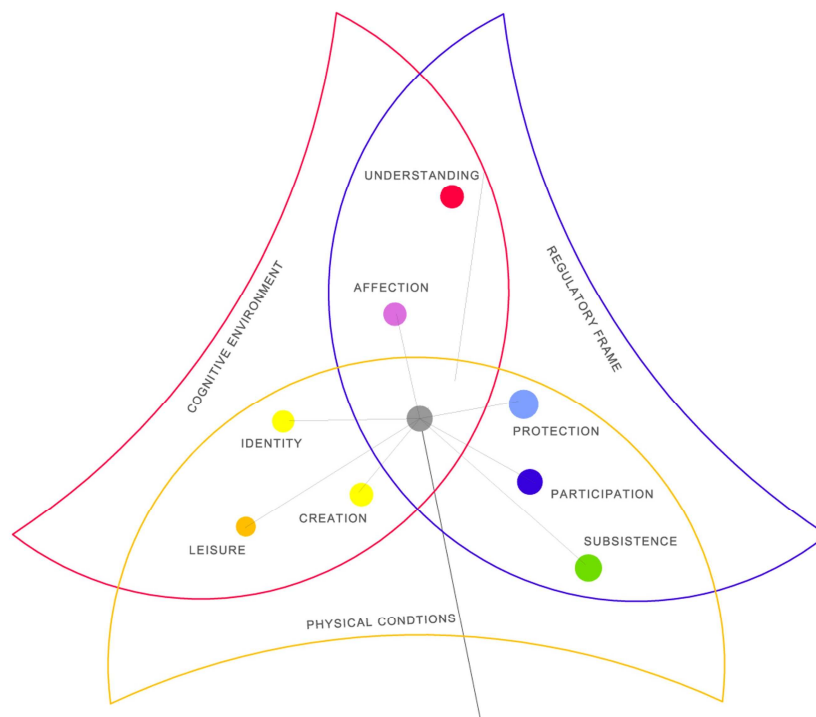


Figure 4. Physical conditions, regulatory framework and cognitive environment affect Human Needs fulfillment

Needs are a system, and can not be considered independently, for example you would hardly even participate in a space where you feel unsafe. On the contrary an event like “dancing on the street” understood as one of Alexander’s pattern languages, is an example of synergic satisfier of creation, affection, participation and leisure.

5. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY AND CONVIVIALITY. A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

The paper concludes with some examples of the possibilities to apply the method in urban requalification of peripheral spaces in a participatory process that enhance public life and sustainability. It tries overcome fragmented views that typically arise in sectorial and urban plans, through the application of “synergic satisfiers”.

5.1. Participation, keystone for a successful process

A development oriented towards the satisfaction of human needs cannot, by definition, follow a top-down approach. It cannot be imposed through laws or rules. It can only stem directly from the actions, aspirations and creative and critical conscience of social players themselves. These players then change their traditional role as object of development to become the subjects of development. [11]

A question to be asked to urban designers is to what extent spatial conditions facilitate or even foster participation. Because there is no lack of design guidance and recommendations to enhance public life, but they would only succeed if technicians, politicians, social agents and the community involved is committed to that goal. If enhancing public life is also their goal.

When dealing with small towns, the whole town is a neighborhood. It offers a promising frame to recover or improve conviviality and collective decision-making

5.2. Urban requalification

An example serves us to explain how a participatory process can be applied to urban requalification of peripheral spaces, to enhance public life and sustainability.

Not every public space should be targeted to fulfill all the human needs. Physical conditions that trigger use intensity like density, level of occupation, variety of uses and activities are determinant to identify the potential of each place.

Through the analysis of the site and the surroundings, the main opportunities and problems have been identified. First: working with the people, to translate their conclusions about quality of life into new uses and conditions for the public space and collective facilities. And, to make sure that the nodal interventions are well communicated to other nodes of learning and interacting and to the green corridors nearby. Second, identifying the spaces that would fulfill easily different human needs at a time; Third: Recognizing where landmarks, references and new street layout are needed. Fourth, reconsidering urban design to get those spaces ready for public life.

Therefore to make interaction possible a systematic study of current conditions has been conducted. And the specific issues on which the discussions focused were mapped. Here below there is an example of a legend to apply in a confusing area with orientation problems, unnecessary space devoted to vehicles, and underused public spaces reflecting a vanishing community life that once did exist.



Figure 5 Example of legend to work with neighbours. Analysis of current situation

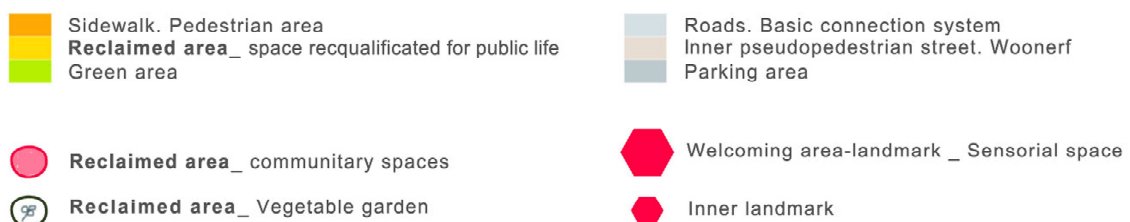


Figure 6 Example of legend to work with neighbours. Proposed requalified areas, reclaimed areas

6. FINAL REMARKS

In our ever-increasing urbanized world, cities compete to attract public and private investments and economic activities. Viewing the relationship between cities as a competition turns them into winners and losers. Wealth, population, and political and economic control are being increasingly concentrated in a reduced number of metropolitan, highly urbanized spaces. Polarizing processes have sharpened and small cities struggle to prevent –or revert– decay. Many peripheral –even isolated– rural areas are shrinking; quite often the priority for most of small villages is simply not to disappear. The most common strategy small towns adopt consists in attracting investors. For that reason plans tend to design large expansion areas that, in shrinking regions, hardly ever get developed. Cities grow in a scattered way.

Expectations towards urbanism have to be readjusted. Urban policy should go beyond its bias towards building business and industry friendly environment to compete in a globalized world. It is not a viable strategy for all cities and regions. It is time to bring back Schumacher and plan and design “as if people mattered”. It is time to reconsider towns as the places where individual freedom, social and ecological responsibilities are met. Urbanism should be a key enabler to achieve these goals, based on its social role and leveraging the social function of property. In short, we need to use public spaces and collective facilities as places that allow us to fulfill ourselves, developing human potentials.

Urban planning efforts should contribute to increase quality of life. Quality of life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs. That will be better clarified in a collective process.

Participatory processes should be applied to urban requalification of peripheral spaces, to enhance public life and sustainability. Not every public space should be targeted to fulfill all the human needs. Physical conditions that trigger use intensity like density, level of occupation, variety of uses and activities are determinant to identify the potential of each place.

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