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Creating a porous urban connective tissue

Making the city by creating fluid itineraries that can accommodate different kinds of mobility is a priority in today's urban projects. Architects seek to make the urban fabric porous. Buildings, while continuing to play their role in demarcating traditional public spaces (streets, squares, etc.), become permeable to cycleways and footpaths. But how do you build these intermediate spaces and give them a public character, while protecting the private dimension and the security of the transit spaces?

This chapter presents 12 European implementation processes around this issue

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“Welcome Back in My Back Yard”: an exploration of urban porosity

European has become a “WIMBY” (Welcome In My Back Yard) institution, promoting all sorts of urban porosities that run counter to trends towards urban segregation for reasons of security and privacy, in other words to any kind of “NIMBYism” (Not In My Back Yard). Urban porosity could be seen as the ability of an enclave to accommodate public spaces, uses and flows that affect a territory beyond the enclave itself. In fact, such accommodations are achieved by the transformation of border conditions. Richard Sennet talks about the distinction between borders and boundaries in his article in the catalogue of the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale. He sees borders, on the one hand, as devices which allow infiltrations that generate all sorts of urban dynamics between parts of the contemporary city, enhancing the possibilities of coexistence. Boundaries, on the other hand, are impenetrable urban features that segregate entire areas within the city. Another useful reference is David Shayne's, “recombinant urbanism” introduced in 2005. He sees what urbanists do as a perpetual process of redefining the relationships between all kinds of urban enclaves.

In the case of European, urbanists seek to redefine such enclave relations by developing multiscalar patterns of urban porosity. The practice of European reveals all sorts of strategies relating to patterns of urban porosity, not only with regard

to the physical space of the city, but also with regard to “cross-bordering” practices amongst the actors involved. Such strategies are reflected in the winning projects and extensively described in the European Results and Implementation catalogues. For example, the 1999 Catalogue, “From Ideas to Realization”, introduced the notion of the open block (schotsen in Dutch) in a discussion between Didier Rebois and the S333 team for the Groningen project. It was Chris Younès who referred to the crucial role of nature in the in-between spaces of the built environment

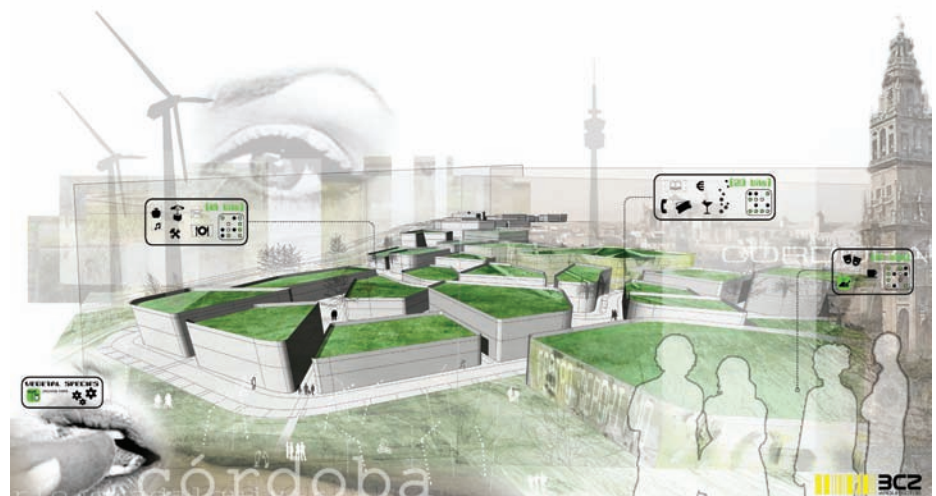


1 – DIETIKON (CH), EUROSPAN 10 > SEE MORE P.70

in the 2004 Catalogue “European 1-6 Negotiated Projects”. In the European 10 Catalogue of Results alone, there are three articles by Bonzani, Franco and Amphoux about agents of urban porosity, such as ground treatment, building morphologies or walking practice. And in addition, there is an article on people’s “cross-bordering” practices by Vlay and the author.

“Welcome back in my back yard” is an “urban porosity friendly” critique of the transition from competition to implementation of 12 winning projects, located on 10 European sites from European 7 to 10 in 7 countries. This critique in fact explores the tolerance to urban porosity of project actors involved in this transition.

2 – CÓRDOBA (ES), EUROSPAN 8 > SEE MORE P.72



The existing sites are mostly urban voids either enclosed between urban development and transport infrastructures (Vienna (AT), Villeurbanne (FR), Montreux (CH), Halle (DE), Dietikon (CH)) or situated mostly at urban peripheries between urban land and agricultural or common land (Córdoba (ES), Isle d'Abeaux (FR), Carouge-Bachet (CH)). In the case of Gembloux (BE) and Augustenborg (DK), the sites are potential interfaces between existing urban fabric and public spaces.

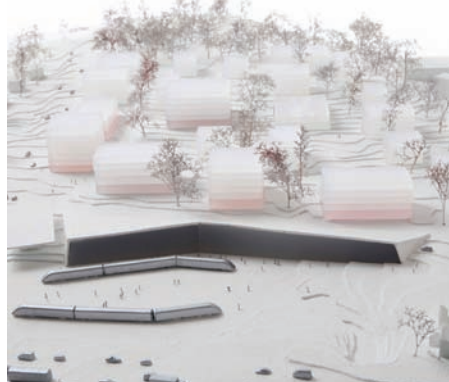
Agents of Urban Porosity

It is by the initial act of introducing new urban development that the processes of urban porosity commence. In the case of Villeurbanne (FR), the three projects under implementation are invited to operate as linking devices between existing isolated enclaves. In the case of Augustenborg (DK), the project operates as filtering device between the city and the river.

There are three major categories of “agents of urban porosity” in the project in question: networks, ground and public programme. It is the capacity of the project actors to create synergies between these agents that generates a rich urban environment.

Networks: they create translocal porosities and their WIMBY opportunities depend on their type.

3 – GENÈVE, CAROUGE-BACHET (CH), EUROSPAN 9 > SEE MORE P.56



Secondary car roads selectively infiltrate most of the project sites, creating access to the building blocks or buildings. In other cases they serve the project peripherally (Isle d'Abeau, E10; Vienna, E9, Montreux, E10). Pedestrian and bike networks are more welcome where high-speed transport such as rail and highways are distanced by parks (Córdoba, E8; Dietikon, E10) or topographic interventions (Carouge-Bachet, E9).

Ground: this infiltrates the project sites in the form of parks with set geometries (Villeurbanne, Isle d'Abeau) or as landscaped fields (Carouge-Bachet, Montreux, Dietikon, Halle). Its 24hr accessibility seems to be an issue during the implementation process.

Public Programme: ground floor public services in fact activate in-between open spaces. They attract the rest of the city into the project site via networks. In most of the projects, such programmes either shrink during the implementation phase because of market restrictions (Montreux, E10; Vienna, E9) or are displaced to the site periphery (Córdoba, E8; Carouge-Bachet, E9). Sometimes the attractiveness of the programme creates another centrality on the project site (e.g. a new municipal hall in Gembloux, E10; an urban centre in Augustenborg, E10).

From ideas to implementation: a rite of passage to reshuffle project actors

The implementation stage has a sort of a liminal character, a rite of passage from one condition to another. The initial condition, the competition phase, is the construction of “images of the possible”, a sort of imaginative enrichment of perceptions of urban living amongst the stakeholders concerned. The final condition, the post-rite stage, is the transformation of the built environment, here in 10 sites across Europe. What we have from the 12 teams are “blueprints” for such a transformation. Both the above conditions ac-



4 – VILLEURBANNE (FR), EUROSPAN 7 – MUJOTO TEAM > SEE MORE P.66

tually operate as devices for reshuffling the project actors, adjusting their relations, shifting them a little and for a while from their everyday routine. Such liminal rituals require support, and in this case it is the existing urban institutions behind city making that play this role. There is undoubtedly an extensive mobilization of actors arising from the project-for-implementation. As we know, European cities are Europan's most important clients and make the implementation of the winning Europan projects part of their modus operandi (municipal urban and planning agencies that are in contact with higher scale territorial administrations). At the scale of the developing site, it is the property developers and building promoters, municipal and/or private. When a residential programme is involved, you get subsidized housing agencies and cooperatives, as well as neighborhood associations. The case of the Vienna, E9 project (fig. 5) is an example, with at least 15 urban agencies involved in the implementation of the UEK studio project (Europan jury, City Real Estate Management, NGO-social services provider). It is quite evident that there is a whole embedded landscape of urban porosity policies are associated with people involved in projects for the

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10 European cities we are talking about. It seems that “urban porosity friendliness” decreases as the territorial scale from which the project actors come gets smaller. Could it be that a “cross-scaling” practice needs to be introduced when the transition from the ideas competition phase to implementation phase takes place?

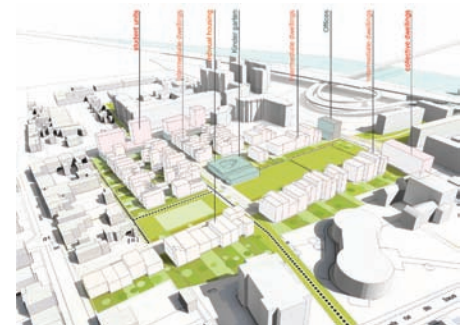
Manipulating the tolerance limit of project actors to open up the project site

Establishing urban porosities means increasing the degree of coexistence in open spaces and the degree of sharing of infrastructures such as mobility networks, parks, public services. So how tolerant are site developers and future users /inhabitants of such an opening up process? *“The constitution and sustainment of a community and its network relations to a larger territory demand a critical mass of future users that enjoy the diverse possibilities the project offers to them...”*(studio UEK, Vienna, E9).

In some interviews, it emerges that the majority of the project actors on these 12 projects were public bodies with a commercial interest in sell-



6 – VILLEURBANNE (FR), EUROPLAN 7 - NAKACHE-ORIHUELA TEAM
> SEE MORE P.69



7 – VILLEURBANNE (FR), EUROPLAN 7 – W14 TEAM > SEE MORE P.68

ing their project. Here are some sample views by project actors cited by Bernd Vlay (European Austria).

“... if porosity helps to sell the site, fine; if we need to shut it in – that’s fine too”; “Porosity as a politically correct quality, but depending on what conflicts actually happen ”

“... accepts porosity which does not affect the privacy of the living units. Depending on typological intelligence: if the type offers porosity without annoying the residents: FINE”

In other words the urban players, protagonists in the implementation of winning European projects, are “urban porosity friendly” provided that it in-

creases the market value of the projects. And provided that incoming translocal flows do not negatively affect the living conditions of the residents. Otherwise, they are ready to shut off any undesirable connections with the surrounding city... This suggests that space has some of the characteristics of an active agent. So the teams behind the winning European projects are very valuable in that they keep proving that such “urban porosity-value-for-money” is possible and the built environment can handle it because of the way it is designed. In addition, such practices bring us to examine the design of the fine grain of the contemporary city, as Thomas Sieverts mentions in his book “Cities without cities: an interpretation of Zwischenstadt” (in English by Spon Press, 2001). If we look at all the projects under consideration, the proposed ideas are indeed based on the multiplication of a sort of a fine-grained urban environment, rather than the choice of a one-off mega gesture to make their mark.

Designing “Urban Porosity Patterns” (U.P.P.)

Borders/interfaces have qualities of both porosity and resistance. In order to establish “urban porosity-value-for-money”, a priority for site developers, “Urban Porosity Patterns” (U.P.P.) embody strategies for opening up the site to public flows and simultaneously strategies for enclosing it to protect the privacy of residents.

5 – VIENNA (AT), EUROPLAN 9 > SEE MORE P.64





8 – ISLE D'ABEAU (FR), EUROPLAN 10 > SEE MORE P.62

Most of the projects become a matrix of multiscalar processes for filtering urban flows, using as their interfaces the perimeter of the project site or of the urban or building blocks or even of the housing unit, and usually all of them. Each project chooses which interface to “fight” for the most. What is always at stake is to keep a critical spread between public and collective spaces to allow fuzziness in the use of open spaces, as a sort of a thick threshold between public and private. It is therefore up to the architecture of the “U.P.P.”, in the way it treats these three interfaces, to increase the level to which the project actors are prepared to tolerate the opening up of the site.

Project site interface. Since many of the sites are close to transport infrastructures such as highways and railways, the first thing to do is to block the noise. This is sometimes done with buffer vegetation (Córdoba, E8, fig. 2) combined with building features such as window gardens (Dietikon E10, fig. 1). In other cases, a noise barrier is created with topographic formations occupied by a public programme (shops and offices – Geneva, Carouge-Bachet E9, fig. 3). Situating a public programme on the edge of the project site encourages connections with the adjacent neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the tendency at the implementation phase is to displace any kind of public programme to the periphery, creating homogeneous residential areas in the rest of the site (Córdoba, E8; Geneva, Carouge-Bachet, E9).

Urban block interface. Choosing the urban block as the main urban porosity interface generates connections with the adjacent context. The three projects at the implementation phase in Villeurbanne, E7 show how, on the one hand, public networks and grounds infiltrate the project site within the framework of a joint masterplan. On the other hand, the treatment of the urban block interface varies in each case. The Muoto team project (fig. 4) achieves the most openness by establishing the relevant urban porosity interface at the level of the building unit and at the same time elevating the collective open spaces. The Nakache-Orihuela team’s urban blocks (fig. 6) complement the existing fabric, introducing a sort of a 3D striation of public passages, private and open built col-

lective spaces. The W14 team’s urban blocks (fig. 7) are more introverted, relying on the diversity of residential and collective spaces. In the case of Córdoba, E8 (fig. 2), it is the interface of the superblocks, made of 6 smaller residential blocks, that resists the porosity of the main car network, allowing public spaces for pedestrians and plantings to thrive. In the case of Dietikon E10 (fig. 1), the loose definition and mosaic like character of the heterogeneous urban blocks accentuates the qualities of urban porosity in the in-between spaces and the ground in the form of a publicly activated field. A “multi-check” strategy sets the long-term framework for staged operations. In the case of Vienna, E9 (fig. 5), a loose block opens up to the rest of the city by creating public spaces at its perimeter with part of the block set back. In addition, introducing public services at ground level by elevating the residential programme encourages connections with the neighboring sites. At the same time, the block operates as an agent to protect communal life within it. During the implementation process, the public programme on the ground was reduced. However, a legal framework was created for “cross-border” use of shared spaces.

Building Unit Interface. Pushing the interface for generating urban porosity down to the level of the building unit creates all sorts of complex

9 – GEMBLOUX (BE), EUROPLAN 10 > SEE MORE P.52



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10 – AUGUSTENBORG (DK), EUROPAN 10 > SEE MORE P.54

building types that incorporate both the private enclosed and the collective open space. In Gembloux, E10 (fig.8), a fragmented municipal programme allowed public passages in the competition phase, but for functional reasons accepted only porosity of a visual kind at implementation. As regards programmes, the “U-house” explicitly mentioned by the Muoto team in Villeurbanne, E7 (fig.4) is one example. As already mentioned, the “U-house” (U-section) becomes an agent that protects communal life by means of elevation. The Isle d’Abeau, E10 (fig.9) project takes a similar approach, but in this case there is more blurring between collective and public space along the planted open backyard spaces. In Augustenborg, E10

(fig. 10), the elevated residential collective spaces form the roof of a 3D programmatic base, allowing public flows to dominate the city level. In the case of the Montreux project, E10 (fig. 11), it is the grouping of three-armed buildings in a shared landscaped space that filters urban porosity. The shrinking of the public programme at ground level during the implementation phase will probably reduce the project’s “urban porosity friendliness”. This also seems to be the case for the project at Carouge-Bachet, E9 (fig. 3). However, the proximity to the new multimodal train station creates a translocal programmatic porosity for this project site, since the catchment area for potential residents will increase significantly. In the project in Halle, E7 (fig. 12), it is the ground

12 – HALLE (DE), EUROPAN 7 > SEE MORE P.60



11 – MONTREUX (CH), EUROPAN 10 > SEE MORE P.58

as sort of a park that infiltrates between the individual houses, with the hedges providing the only interface between public and private. The question by the authors, who seem to have no control over how the project involves, of how public these planting areas really are, is legitimate.

“Welcome Back In My Back Yard” and Again and Again...

Even if the degree of urban porosity decreases between the competition and the implementation phase, it is still clearly present and multifaceted, increasing the critical mass of users who would prefer to live in such urban conditions rather than in “safe”, gated environments. It is true that post-occupancy evaluation of the completed projects will show whether such objectives are met. However, if on completion of each project stage through to implementation, the winning projects succeed in retaining their “urban porosity friendliness”, the WIMBY notion will be consolidated by obtaining an “again” value, meaning that as the project actors are reshuffled at each stage, they continue to adopt it as a value for urban living.