



## EUROPAN 13 THEMES CONTRIBUTIONS

Title of the contribution	The Adaptable City – Urban transformation as a process
Contributor	Ana Brandão
Nationality	Portuguese
Profession	Architect, Researcher and PhD Student - Barcelona Un.
Email	<a href="mailto:ana.luisa.brandao@ist.utl.pt">ana.luisa.brandao@ist.utl.pt</a>
Phone	+351 915077272

### CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE E13 THEMES THE ADAPTABLE CITY – URBAN TRANSFORMATION AS A PROCESS

The new unstable characteristics of contemporary urban process, as Ascher (1995, 2001) and many authors since have noticed, are reflected in a variety of contradictory dynamics of urban phenomena, challenging design action. This is especially evident in transition periods as the passage from industrial to post-industrial city when custom tools and "solutions" quickly reveal outdated, while changes occur with a complexity and scale that exceed human readability making uncertainty a dominant feature.



While in previous contexts, it was possible to think about the future as a plan, an action to be determined and executed, in contemporary there are only possible perspectives for an open future. This does not mean that we have to renounce **imagining and designing the future**: on the contrary, we need a **construction process** incorporating the changes that occur. A process that does not contain only certain, defined, measured and determined elements, but that is the reflection of agents, resources and the interaction of their own plans.

For this, I focus **“THE ADAPTABLE CITY” ON “URBAN TRANSFORMATION AS A PROCESS”**, for **European 13** competition theme.

Urban process is the action of physical change that goes together with social, economic and cultural process, over time (Kostof 1999). Contrary to the notion of urban form as something finite and closed, we now can see the city as a living element that reflects the rapid changes of society at its own pace. The challenge to professionals and administrators is to understand and reconcile the competition between rapid economic and social changes and persistence of some physical characteristics.

Rather than a jump to a certain future, change management must be a cumulative process (Lynch 1976). In this perspective, the interpretation on adaptability is more focused on encompassing changes throughout time, addressing current needs and foreseeing possible futures, designing the transformation while dealing with uncertain and unstable features.

## THE CONTEXT OF INSTABILITY

Some aspects that add to our current growing perception of instability in urban realm (Sieverts 2008, Leupen 2005, Ascher, 2001):

- Highly complex systems (in the contemporary city) imply so many different factors and connections that its cause-effect relations, linear links or full range of impacts are difficult to identify and no longer “back” design options credibly.
- Rapid transformation and modernization speed (in physical and social structures) make it impossible to identify stable conditions and frameworks (needs, actors, resources) for intervention.
- Urban diversity aspects in contemporary societies (migration patterns, lifestyles choices, citizenship and empowerment issues) with the rise of different stakeholders increase the potential for new social conflicts, in the process of change.
- While welfare state’s service of major basic needs is still an open field for opportunities, its increasing instability, in political and economic conditions no longer seems possible to manage.

This diversity in aspects and contradictory dynamics, highlights the fragilities of current “design strategies” and the necessity to address them in a more procedural point of view, in this unstable context, with several uncertain aspects.

**Uncertainty** is not a mysterious concept. It’s now used widely in several research areas concerning new or specially complex problems. It can be related to an unknown subject, to a difficulty in a decision making situation, a variable context that does not allow to anticipate a future reality or a problem regarding different perspectives on one situation. A definition is the lack of knowledge, a difficulty in relying in a certain reality or the related incapacity to foresee the consequences of an action. But it is also a relation to both knowledge and ignorance (Tannert C et al. 2007), located in-between these two extremes, sharing aspects known and unknown.

In current urban research investigation some of these aspects are considered, referring to concepts as: risk, resilience or instability. But research and design experimentation acknowledging the uncertain aspects present today on Urban Design processes is still lacking.

Although the present context reinforces these needs for flexibility, there is an undeniable contradiction between design and uncertainty, as the former requires the maximum possible of certainty to be attainable, even when the conquest of certain proceeds in stages. Some **approaches** can be used to **manage this known and unknown aspects** (Brugnach et al. 2008)(Sieverts 2008):

- when dealing with unforeseeable time horizons, establishing precautionary strategies, developing diversity to support better adaptations or act on temporary solutions;
- when managing medium term situations and lack of confidence in present knowledge, explore different scenarios, combining degrees of "imagination" and "information";
- in a well defined problematic, uncertainty can be dealt as a lack of information, empiric data or involvement stakeholders, opening new possibilities for intervention.

## HOW TO FOCUS ON PROCESS

Procedural aspects have different manifestations in the urban realm, that can range from shrinking or decaying dynamics, expanding and growth flows or to recycling or regenerations operations related to a different range of problems and questions of flexibility and adaptability regarding the future of European cities.

We can then identify “typified urban problems” that have manifestation of this problematic:



**HISTORIC AREAS** with issues of preservation and ageing, searching for population and activities diversification while managing heritage features



**DERELICT OR BROWNFIELD AREAS** with lack of activities and investments, but with large land availability, with focus on envisioning new possibilities and identities



**URBAN VOIDS OR FRINGE AREAS** seeking compatibilities between new activities and old surroundings, managing transition or temporary solutions



**PERI-URBAN AREAS IN TRANSFORMATION**, responding to present population needs for facilities and balancing urban and nature in different evolving dynamics



**MONO FUNCTIONAL SPACES** with deficits of urbanity, urban infrastructures and facilities pondering key investments and diversification possibilities



**HUBS, POLES AND NODES** in large accessibility and strategic development areas, require the combination of cores of global attraction and local scale features



**HOUSING AREAS**, residential neighbourhoods in need of “vivacity” and amenities, joining different communities into a cohesive and lasting identity



**LANDSCAPE FEATURES IN URBAN AREAS**, managing leisure and productive activities with sustainable ecosystems, while saving reverse spaces

## WHAT ARE THE VALUES, STRATEGIES AND TOOLS TO BE CONSIDERED?

In the present context, typical approaches and tools of urbanism do not seem to respond to the new conditions. Some of the main difficulties can be identified:

- a determinist approach in urban design instruments withdraws the capacity to deal with change, and rigid rules are less adaptable and flexible in long term;
- the time consuming process of planning and designing does not easily encompass response to new, urgent or temporary needs, or changing in actors decisions;
- urban fabric includes element of rapid change and others of slower transformation, that cannot be designed with the same degree of certainty or managed equally.

The "culture" of urban design and architecture is now increasingly determined by procedural options (Portas 2008): parts that may or may not be implemented, the more uncertain and more imponderable aspects in demands, programs, funding, etc. It also includes situations of project implementation: the relationship between public and private players, negotiation and participation, timing and evaluation of the intervention.

Adaptable possibilities in "designing the process" of changing and evolving futures, requires the consideration for supporting values in a context of crisis and uncertainty:

**DIVERSITY**, as base for interaction, multiple possibilities and complementary actions, acknowledging different solutions to the same problem and overlapping choices for intervention.

**IDENTITY**, as a continuous relation with the past, the persistence of basic elements or as a new goal to be attained and constructed. It is neither static nor perpetual - an identity construction is a temporal process.

**FLEXIBILITY** as a way to accommodate emerging and evolving changes, ensuring degrees of freedom between the parts without losing continuity and readability and allowing implementation strategies with different timeframes.

**Reflection and design** resulting from this approach should enable **design strategies** that can act as:

A **FACTOR OF CONVERGING INTERESTS**, actions and perceptual values, ensuring the continuity on permanent values of physical structure, where intervention does not interfere with the sense of belonging and urban identity.

**DIFFERENT SCENARIOS**, so as to discuss unforeseen aspects of the future, promoting interaction between different existing actors, seeking answers to the needs of the community and encompassing identity features of space.

A **TRANSITION PROCESS**, with several interlinked actions, different decisions points, addressing current issues and ensuring "degrees of liberty" to addressed future needs, possibilities or resources.

A **STRUCTURING MATRIX**, ordering existing elements, creating relations between interventions, enabling new uses and social practices promoting urban regenerations and space appropriation with real social effect.

**DIFFERENT TIME SPAN ACTIONS**, linked to one joint strategy. Temporary occupations may solve specific and urgent needs, long term schemes can provide reserve space for future necessities and manage inconstancy.

**MULTI-SCALE DESIGN**, combining a variable geometry and autonomous parts, allowing implementation of independent solutions in time and space, maintaining coherence both within large system organization and local relations.

**NEW URBAN TIPOLOGIES**, through new space hybridization, multifunctional and “multimeaning”, requiring experimentation practices at simultaneous layers of continuity, through natural or infrastructural systems.

This perspective based on urban transformation process is a contribution to a more flexible and interactive approach to urban design, planning and management in insecure contexts. Besides providing an opportunity for young professional to explore innovative solutions to adaptability of urbanized territories, it also can help cities administration in addressing a period of urban crisis and uncertainty.

—

#### Note

This problematic is a part of my present research, included the Public Space and Urban Regeneration PhD program of Barcelona University, focused on analysing and **understanding uncertainty** and instability aspects related to **contemporary urban transformations** within the Lisbon Metropolitan Area.

—

#### References

- Ascher, F. (1995) *Metapolis ou l'avenir des villes*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Ascher, F. (2001) *Les Nouveaux Principes de l'urbanisme. La fin des villes n'est pas à l'ordre du jour*. Paris: Éditions de l'Aube
- Brugnach M, Dewul A, Pahl-Wostl C, Taillieu T (2008) Toward a relational concept of uncertainty: about knowing too little, knowing too differently, and accepting not to know, *Ecology and Society*, 13(2), 30
- Kostof, Spiro (1999) *The City Shaped*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Lynch, Kevin (1976) *What time is this place?*, Mass. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Leupen, Bernard (2005) *Towards time-based architecture* in B. Leupen, R. Heijne, J. van Zwol (eds.) *Time-based Architecture*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers
- Portas, Nuno (2008) *O projecto como processo in European*, Catálogo European 9 Portugal. Lisboa: European Portugal
- Sieverts T (2008) *Of Uncertainty in Urban Planning*. Portland: The back room
- Tannert C, Elvers H D, Jandrig B (2007) *The ethics of uncertainty*, *EMBO Reports*, 8 (10), 892–896