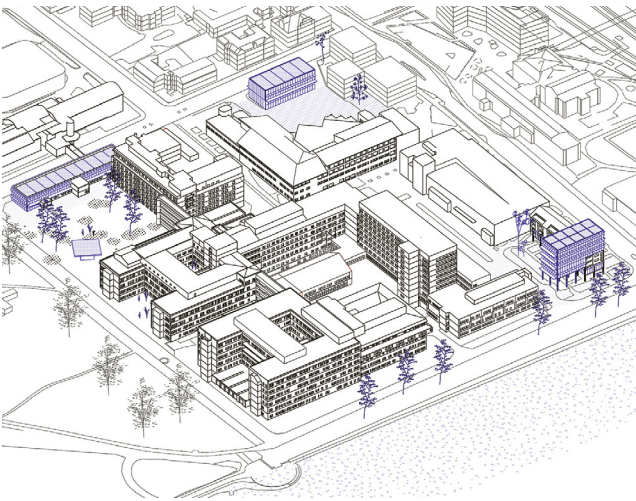# Magic Mountains, Mysterious Islands and Urban Health

By **Socrates Stratis** (CY) — PhD architect, urbanist; associate professor, Dpt. of architecture, Univ. of Cyprus. Co-founder of AA&U. www.aaplusu.com; www.socratestratis.com

5 – Växjö (SE), winner – Generative Care > See more P.169

Quiquendone is an imaginary Flemish town where writer Julius Verne locates his story 'Une fantaisie du Docteur Ox' (1872), a fascinating experiment about instrumentalising the town's life support system, precisely its atmosphere. *L'île Mystérieuse*[1] is the title of another of Verne's fantastic stories and the title of the Europan 17 special mention proposal in Nantes (FR), Verne's native city (fig.1). The special mention team identifies a system of riverine islands and regards the site of the hospital to relocate as part of the river's ecology. The sites in Rennes (FR – fig.2) and Växjö (SE – fig.3) are also about hospital relocations. *Magic Mountain*, the 2030 scenario for Bad Lobenstein (DE[2] – fig.4), exemplifies the therapeutic nature of the Thuringean landscape and aims to regenerate a mud-bath & spa resort. The critical mass of a new territorial collective comprising twenty municipalities around the Thuringian Sea – which is not a sea but a vital water reserve for the region – may catalyse the envisioned regenerative dynamics.

Magic, mysteries and fantasies concern the sites where the Europan 17 winning projects are invited to imagine a second life of former or current healthcare sites. Let's see how they relate to the reinvention of Quiquendone…

Doctor Ox is the protagonist of Verne's story: he wants to design and construct an innovative gas lighting system in Quiquendone. Thanks to his offer for free installation and service, he gains the town's local authorities' and citizens' approval despite their extremely indecisive and procrastinating temperament. The new infrastructure is supposed to provide gas for lighting the town's public buildings, streets and homes. Yet, it is a cover-up of Doctor Ox's experiment. Instead, he pumps up harmless oxygen in the town's outdoor and indoor environment. As a result, the plants grow gigantesque and the hesitant and reserved inhabitants become aggressive, willing to push any argument to its limits. They decide to go to war with the village next door. The factory's destruction due to an accidental mix of oxygen and hydrogen ends the story and saves the peaceful town and its phlegmatic inhabitants.

Through Doctor Ox, Julius Verne tells us that the city is a living lab of instrumentalizing life support systems. How atmospheres, decisive agents for urban health, can be compromised by infrastructures. In other words, he senses – back in 1872 – the not-so-promising role of the Industrial Revolution in compromising the

1• Sentences in quotes are taken from the project's A1-panels and document under study.
2• Competition site brief, p.30.

1 – Nantes (FR) > See more P.152

2 – Rennes (FR) > See more P.160

3 – Växjö (SE) > See more P.168

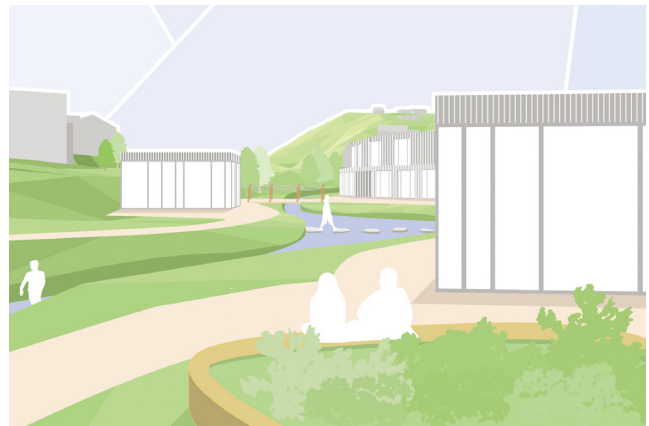4 – Bad Lobenstein (DE)
> See more P.108

health of humans and other-than-humans. Relations between urban processes, health disparities and development planning define urban health. Promoting social justice through sustainable food systems is also crucial to urban health[3].

How can urban health be part of re-imagining a second life for the soon-to-be-obsolete structures of healthcare institutions (like in Nantes, Rennes, Växjö)? How can urban health be enhanced thanks to a second chance given to a declining spa destination (like in Bad Lobenstein)? Both questions concern the 17th session of Europan on Living Cities. Yet, when we dare to imagine, we become aware that such second lives and second chances require radical agents of change. The urban health scholars remind us that it entails a groundbreaking leap of consciousness to change the relations between urban processes and health disparities, as well as to establish sustainable food systems and social justice[4]. How do the winning proposals on the four sites entail radical agents of change?

Radical Agents of Change, Trapped in a Nested Scale?

The Europan 17 Living Cities theme supports the re-use of the existing building stock and urges urban actors to reduce the exploitation of natural resources through new urban expansions. It calls for synergies between humans and other-than-humans to give value to what is already there. Yet, three of the four sites result from the relocation and construction from scratch of immense healthcare infrastructural institutions, often based on medical rather than on urban priorities. How do the Europan 17 winning proposals position themselves on those sites vis-à-vis the bigger picture of the hospitals' relocation?

Generative Care, winning project in Växjö (fig. 5), brings forward the enormous financial burden for the town's hospital relocation. The team creatively incorporates the ongoing public debate for such controversial matters in their strategic design scheme. The first phase of a two-phased intervention, a radical agent of change, is a support structure to enhance a deeper collective consideration for the hospital's relocation. An 'avant-projet' takes place while the hospital is still operational. The first phase comprises three medium-sized wooden structures placed at the edges of the hospital's enclave. Their radicality lies firstly in facilitating the collective reconsideration of the relations between medical and urban projects. The project's radicality lies in the design of typologies of transforming the existing 'self-contained organism' into a potentially welcoming urban entity, as the team calls it. The three wooden structures are urban porosity agents[5], both in the physical and programmatic sense

3• University College London's Master of Health in Urban Development https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/study/health-urban-development-msc (accessed February 10, 2024)
4• Robert Biel, *Sustainable Food Systems. The role of the city*, (London: UCL Press, 2016): 10.
5• Socrates Stratis *Welcome Back In My Back Yard: an urban porosity interrogation,* Rebois, D. (editor) *Ideas Changing. Europan Implementations*, (Paris: Europan Europe editions, 2012): 46-50.

6 – Bad Lobenstein (DE), runner-up – The Green Heart > See more P.110
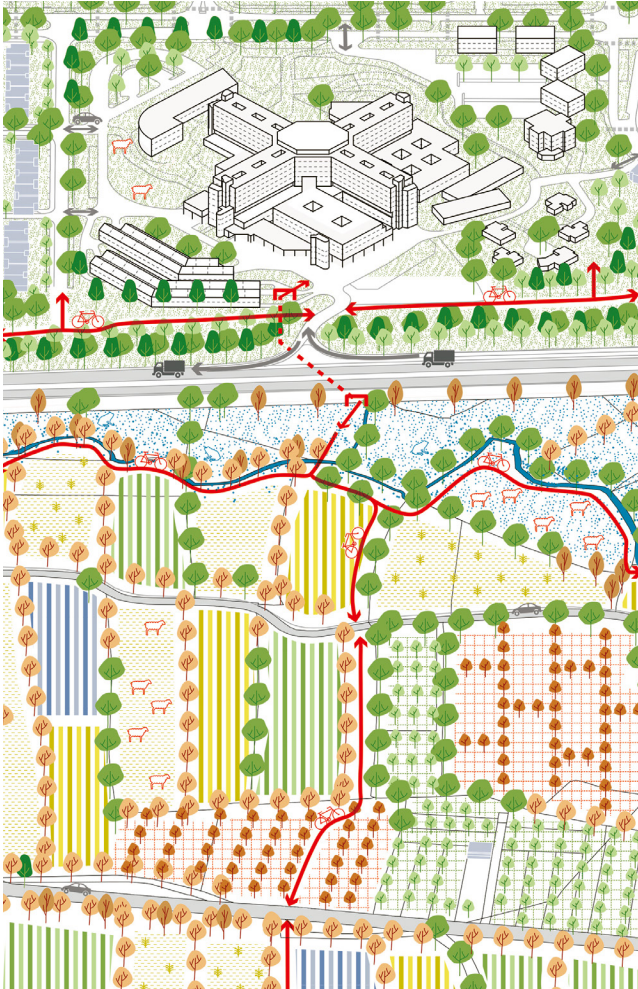
2027

2037 | +1.5 °C

7 – Rennes (FR), runner-up – Champ-Contrechamp > See more P.161

(knowledge production on re-use and citizen engagement). The transformation typologies support a metabolic urban landscape, including a process of matching donors and receptors regarding the re-use of on-site materials.

A metabolic territorial landscape is at the heart of the 'Magic Mountain' project's imaginary in Bad Lobenstein – another genre of healthcare institution that does not depend on hyper-centralised building infrastructures but on networked localities. *The Green Heart*, runner-up proposal takes care of Bad Lobenstein's existing qualities. It transforms the centre into an extensive inhabited park by connecting the dominating forest hill around the castle with the Palace grounds, the therapy campus and the lodging area. Cars are kept out of the inhabited park, giving the possibility to re-naturalise part of the streets. *The Green Heart* aims to be a radical agent for change by breaking away from the town's nested scale, thus preparing the 'Magic Mountain' to play a nodal role in the network of spa facilities around the Thuringian Sea (fig.6).

Why couldn't the *Generative Care* and *The Green Heart* proposals be seen as examples for the sites in Nantes and Rennes? Why couldn't the networked health facilities approach of *The Green Heart* proposal be relevant regarding the site in Växjö? Because urban design is trapped by default in a nested action scale where territorial decision-making and healthcare programme production often happen on other scales. However, the genre of the Europan competition allows competitors to challenge such nested scales of decision-making.

Soils, Grounds and Sustainable Food Systems

The Europan 17 proposals break away from nested scales to celebrate the entanglement of the extra-small with the planetary thanks to the transformation of soils and grounds. They invite us to face another big picture, that of the relationship between urban health and sustainable food systems. They formulate urban design as an active agent in changing the status-quo of current food systems' unsustainability.

A diagram of soil regeneration is drawn on the upper left corner of the first A1 panel of the *Champ-Contrechamp*, runner-up proposal in Rennes. The world map of +4 degrees Celsius, showing water-stressed areas, populates the lower right-hand corner of the same panel. The proposal builds on the rising citizens' movement against intensive agriculture close to the city. The citizens claim the 300-hectare agricultural land controlled by the city to become the city's food production gardens. The proposal introduces the 'Parliament of the Soil' to support sustainable food systems. It turns the former hospital site into a new centrality of such endeavour, linked to a 'Social Security Alimentation'. The team urges Rennes's urban actors to 're-generate the built by the non-built'[6] (fig. 7).

The *Île Mystérieuse* proposal in Nantes introduces 'autophagy' as a metaphor for a regenerative design approach to transform the former hospital site. It creates another kind of centrality to a hospital, a sanctuary of all sorts of humans and other-than-humans, a 'city life shelter'. The former self-contained organism of the hospital is simultaneously insular and a node of many networks, including food production. Food is supposed to be produced on the re-naturalised ground and the building roofs. The ground floor of the existing structures opens up to allow the 'ground city' to take place: a web of soft mobilities and vegetated public spaces (fig.8).

6• Project's Document, ZG 079, p.2.

The *Matière Première*, winning proposal in the same city, departs from the challenge of re-naturalising a ground comprising building debris from World War II. Nurseries, resource centres, and an arboricultural school are programmatic radical agents of change regarding the site's soil. The proposal pushes the river's ecology into the enclave thanks to a landscape armature. The team turns the ground floors of the existing structures into covered public spaces accessible to the city and the upper floors into housing thanks to a second building skin, recessed a couple of metres from the hospital facade. Protecting the integrity of the initial building's architecture, the team adds another landmark to the city's archipelago of landmarks (fig. 9).

Incubators for Radical Change Reinventing Quiquendone

Looking back at the five proposals under study and Doctor Ox's experiment, we may realise that their radicality as agents of change lies in understanding the project both as a field of multiple possibilities and an infrastructural apparatus for making it happen. Unlike Doctor Ox, who tricks the urban actors and puts Quiquendone's health at risk, the young Europan design teams are bluntly honest about the urge to see urban health differently and how to change it. Thanks to their enrolment in the Europan's biennial competition, the sites' urban actors seem to defy Quiquendone's citizens' undecidability and procrastination. They are getting ready to address the challenges of the climate change crisis regarding urban health. Yet, the ground-breaking leap of consciousness is a collective endeavour. It requires them to see the winning teams as equal partners for the sites' transformation and not just a source of inspiration[7].

7• '…A first source of inspiration: … But be careful, none of 'these projects are intended to be carried out', specifies Nantes Métropole, which will also launch citizen participation in parallel with technical studies. The answers provided constitute a first source of inspiration for the city and the metropolis which will fuel the studies and reflections to be carried out.' www.20minutes.fr/nantes/4066176-20231210-nantes-reconversion-site-actuel-chu-commence-dessiner#:~:text=C'est%20l'un%20des,sur%20 l'%C3%AEle%20de%20Nantes (accessed February 10, 2024)
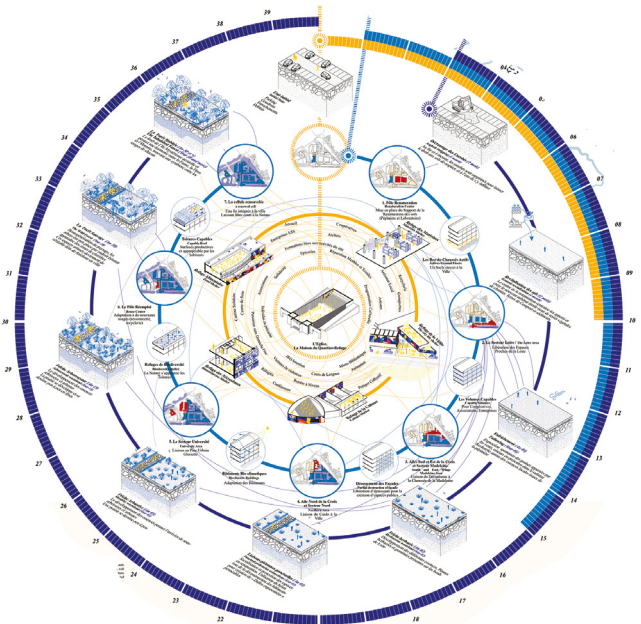
8 – Nantes (FR), special mention – L'île Mystérieuse > See more P.154
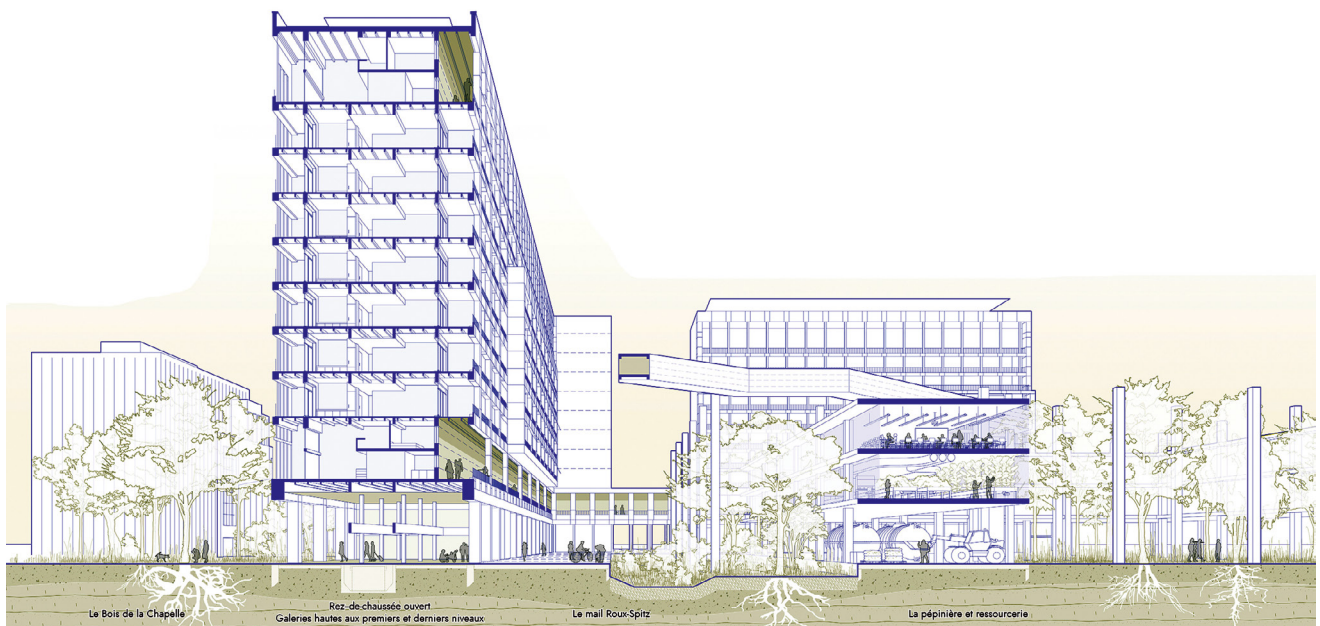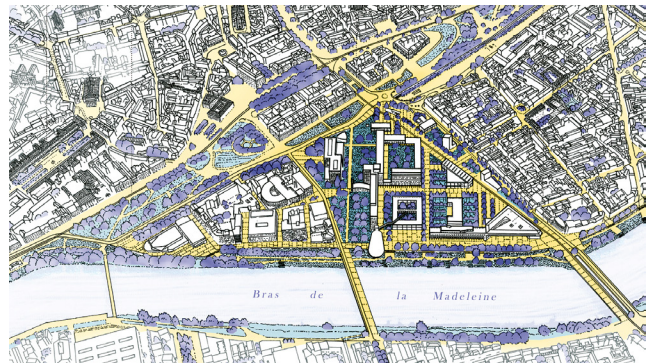
9 – Nantes (FR), winner – Matière Première > See more P.153