

# HUMAN CITIES

*Symposium: Civil society reclaims public space.  
Cross perspectives based on research.*

**HUMAN CITIES SYMPOSIUM  
2012**

**CALL FOR PAPERS**

15-16 MARCH 2012  
BRUSSELS, BE

## GENERAL CONTEXT

This symposium is organized as part of the second festival of the Human Cities network called: "Reclaiming public space", to be held in Brussels from 15 until 31 March 2012. Human Cities is a European network that groups scientific and cultural partners involved in research and information on spatial, social and political innovation related to the production of public space in contemporary cities. The partners in this network are: ULB, Faculty of Architecture La Cambre-Horta, Brussels, BE – Pro Materia, Brussels, BE – Strategic Design Scenarios, Brussels, BE – Politecnico di Milano, Faculty of design, Department INDACO, Milan, IT – Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (UIRS), Ljubljana, SLO – L a Cité du Design, Saint-Etienne, FR – Time Circus, Antwerp, BE – Esterni, Milan, IT – Prostoroz, Ljubljana, SLO – Clearvillage, London, UK.

For further information, please consult the site: [www.humancities.eu](http://www.humancities.eu)

The symposium is organized with the collaboration of the Association of European School of planning (AESOP) - Thematic Group "Public spaces and urban cultures".

See: <http://publicspaces-urbancultures.wikispaces.com/Home>

**RECLAIMING  
PUBLIC  
SPACE**

## PROCEDURES

This international, multidisciplinary call for papers is addressed to researchers from Europe and elsewhere whose work is directly related to civil society initiatives that target "reclaiming" public space in contemporary cities. The disciplines concerned are urbanism, design, architecture, sociology, anthropology, political sciences, philosophy, history, geography, law, etc. The call for papers looks for significant contributions from the academic world as well as contributions from independent research groups, networks or institutions. The concept of "research" should be understood broadly. It includes theoretical works but also other types of research grounded in the field, in which the participatory and experimental dimensions are more significant, such as "action" research, "by design" research, etc.

Proposals should respond to one of the highlights described below, which should be mentioned explicitly. They should not exceed 2,000 characters (spaces included, see the template) and should be sent by 14 October 2011 at the latest to the following e-mail address: [symposium@humancities.eu](mailto:symposium@humancities.eu)

In case of validation by the scientific board, a final text (maximum 30,000 characters, spaces included) will also be requested.

The proposals and the final texts should be drafted in *English*, the official language of the symposium. They should be drafted in a clear, accessible language, potentially adapted to a non-specialized audience.

## THEME

Many of those who think about contemporary cities have stressed the shrinking or metamorphosis of public spaces in their common acceptance. Public space as a spatial entity presumably accessible to all, has been standardized, readapted, secured, museumified, privatized and no longer supports a diversity of presence, particularly due to the takeover of public space by the State or by the market, as people have drawn back into the private sphere, and as a result of the decline of public discussion and common action.

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Nevertheless, contemporary movements worldwide and within Europe empirically show the contrary. Every day, new individuals, new creative communities, new collaborative networks get organized to "reclaim" public space, spatially, physically and politically. This symposium will take a look in a general way at these "bottom-up" initiatives (originated by citizens, artists, associations etc.). These initiatives, which can be material (facilities, installations, furniture, ...) and/or immaterial (mobilizations, exchange of know-how and services, ...), lasting or short-lived, have one thing in common – they are backed by players who have little to do with institutions, who are trying to invent, experiment, stimulate or relay certain objects, processes, programmes, usages or social interactions within public space. They also seem to be (at least partially) detached from other forms of activism that sprang up in urban movements in the 60s and 70s, both because of the justifications underlying them, and in their formalization. Yesterday, urban activism seemed to be based on an unshakable belief in ambitious ideals and to be structured vertically with intensive commitments; today, it seems that the civil society initiatives that are trying to reclaim public space result from a feeling of urgency, a need for immediate effectiveness in dealing with local problems and are mostly structured horizontally, in accordance with personalized commitments.

These initiatives, scattered all over Europe and the world, are broadly publicized by various types of media and often inspire urban professionals, public authorities and even private actors in their interventions in public space. However, despite the broad movement of empathy they inspire, it is still hard to apprehend their real power to transform space, the way we live together, and collective discussion and action. For this symposium, we would like to show how researchers in a wide variety of disciplines (ranging from urban planning to design, via architecture, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, geography, law, etc.) contribute to observing, describing, theorizing, assessing and even spreading these initiatives.

The symposium will be structured along three different, but concomitant lines:

## I. Analytical highlight

This line will focus on the content and the results of research projects using civil society initiatives as case studies. Generally speaking, the idea is to consider the projects by means of the approaches they use to describe (typology, genealogy, ...), assess and criticize these initiatives. More particularly, this line will explore the following questions:

- **From the material standpoint**, what incidence can this type of initiative have on the production of public space? What are the varieties of forms adopted? To what extent can they contribute to aesthetic, semantic, functional, ecological innovation in the way cities develop?

- **As concerns living together**, in what ways do these initiatives integrate or reshape concepts such as mixed neighbourhoods, hospitality or conviviality? How can they intervene de facto on the initial capacity of a place to accept multiple usages? How do these initiatives integrate the existing context in their re-adaptations, what is their position as concerns existing usages? How can they create new means of appropriation, new networks? Do these experiences target a diversity of players or a particular category? Do they redefine relations between public and private ownership of the space?

- **For common discussions and actions**, what is the capacity of these initiatives to formulate new types of participation? What is their incidence on the exercise of citizenship? What type of commitment do they entail from those involved? To what extent can they enable so-called "weak" actors to have an influence on and visibility in public space? Do they maintain ties with other older forms of urban activism, or do they challenge them? In a world governed by uncertainty, what are their ideological backdrops, what is their critical potential, what forms of common good do they defend?

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## II. Methodological highlight

This line will focus on methods as well as epistemological stances and theoretical frameworks mobilized by researchers to observe, describe, understand, assess, theorize and/or spread civil society initiatives. In fact, the multiple facets, the spontaneity and the relatively informal nature of these initiatives make it hard to do an overview and seem to demand, if not an entirely new approach from researchers, at least a real adjustment to apprehend their study subjects. Moreover, in the particular case of action research or "by design" research, there is an additional difficulty: finding how to get from the scientific field of knowledge to the field of the intervention.

This line will consequently explore the following:

- **As concerns the methods**, how do researchers create or adapt their tools? What place is left for empirical studies and work in situ? Do researchers adopt a distance with regard to the objects of their study or, on the contrary, do they actively approve the ordinary experience, or even take inspiration or act as stakeholders in experimentation by the actors? How do they analyze and make models of the data collected? In the case of "action" research or "by design" research, how do researchers carry out a reflexive process, how do they analyze the transformations enacted by the experiments they carry out? How do they combine action and reflexivity?

- **With regard to the theoretical and epistemological level**, what position do researchers take? How do they integrate the various dimensions of these civil society initiatives in terms of their intentions and the issues they draw attention to at spatial, social and political levels? Do they combine dissociated fields of knowledge or do they opt for a mono-dimensional understanding? Are they looking for the causes or the determination of these initiatives by placing them in a global perspective, or do they look specifically at the conditions, forms and procedures of their emergence? Are they backed up by theoretical reflection on which urban activism has long been based (such as Marxist or domination theories) or do they use new intellectual configurations (particularly by taking the actors' skills seriously)?

## III. Operational highlight

This line will focus on "action" research or "by design" research that are inspired by the conditions of emergence of civil society initiatives, the processes that underlie them, the resources they draw and their effective reception. This type of research often proposes prospective scenarios, design processes or toolboxes to improve or inspire the production of public space within contemporary cities. These various schemes can be made available to other persons in civil society, urban professionals, public authorities and/or private actors.

This line will explore the following issues:

- **As concerns questions upstream**, is it pertinent to propose the transfer of initiatives created in a particular context elsewhere? If so, what are the criteria, the forms and the extent of their adaptability? To whom is this type of tools made available? What responsibility do researchers have in these processes?

- **For questions downstream**, what happens when this type of initiative is transposed outside the context in which it emerged? What are the results, spatially, socially and politically? Does trying to generalize "good practices" contribute to a certain standardization of public space? Does this type of scheme contribute to institutionalization or recovery of citizen movements, or, on the contrary, does it empower them and increase their numbers and visibility?

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## TIMETABLE

14 October 2011:	Deadline for sending proposals (max. 2,000 characters, spaces included)
18 November 2011:	Final selection of proposals and response to authors
13 January 2012:	Deadline for sending the final texts (max. 30,000 characters, spaces included)
17 February 2012:	Feedback to authors and potential re-orientation
15-16 March 2012:	Symposium
Late May:	Publication of the proceedings

## SCIENTIFIC BOARD

Mathieu Berger	Sociologist, PhD in Political and Social Sciences. UCL, Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires "Démocratie, Institutions, Subjectivités" (Cri-Dis), Louvain-La-Neuve, BE/ EHESS, Centre d'Étude des Mouvements Sociaux, (CEMS), Paris, FR.
Vincent Calay	Sociologist and Geographer, Master Degree in Human Geography, PhD in Political and Social Sciences. ULB, Groupe de Recherche sur l'Action Publique (GRAP), Brussels, BE/ SciencesPo Paris, Center for History, Paris (FR).
Isabelle Doucet	Architect, PhD in Architecture. University of Manchester, Architecture Research Centre (MARC) and Manchester School of Architecture (MSA), Manchester, UK.
Barbara Goličnik-Marušič	Landscape Architect, PhD in Landscape Architecture. Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (UIRS), Ljubljana, SLO.
Sabine Knierbein	Landscape Architect, PhD in Urban Studies. Vienna University of Technology, Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space (SKuOR), Vienna, AUT.
Matej Nikšič	Architect, MA in Urban Planning, PhD in Architecture. Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (UIRS), Ljubljana, SLO.
Paola Trapani	Architect, PhD in Industrial Design. Politecnico di Milano, Faculty of Design, Department INDACO, Milan, IT.

## ORGANIZATION BOARD

For the Human Cities network:

Rafaella Houlstan-Hasaerts	Architect, PhD candidate in Architecture. ULB, Faculty of Architecture La Cambre-Horta, Brussels, BE.
Biba Tominc	Geographer and Pedagogue, master student in Philosophy and Theory of Visual Culture, Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (UIRS), Ljubljana, SLO.

## DEADLINE

14 October 2011 *proposal max. 2.000 characters spaces included (see template)*

## CONTACT

[symposium@humancities.eu](mailto:symposium@humancities.eu) | [www.humancities.eu](http://www.humancities.eu)

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