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# Planum

## Special Issue

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# Indice

## **A Special Issue of Planum Magazine: Presentation**

Patrizia Gabellini ..... p. 5

## **Planum course through contents, scientific formats, and experimental languages on urbanism**

Giulia Fini ..... p. 9

## **On the Tracks of Contemporary European Urbanism**

Andrea Di Giovanni ..... p. 15

## **Outlooks on Contemporary Urbanism. Scientific Committee's Papers**

Francesco Bandarin ..... p. 23

### **Urban Conservation and the End of Planning**

Luis Manuel Basabe Montalvo ..... p. 39

### **Wildgarten Quartier in Wien. Ten Vectors for a Democratic and Sustainable Urban Development in Southwest Vienna**

Luca Bertolini ..... p. 49

### **From Integrated Aims to Fragmented Outcomes: Urban Intensification and Transportation Planning in the Netherlands**

Marco Cremaschi ..... p. 69

### **Will this Be the Century of the City? Let's not Miss it (Again)**

|   |        |
|---|--------|
| Frank Eckardt .....   | p. 79  |
| <b>Austerity and Urban Crisis: Insights from German Cities</b>  |        |
| Nick Gallent .....  | p. 95  |
| <b>A Century of Rural Planning in England: A Story of Contestation, Fragmentation and Integration</b>   |        |
| Marius Grønning .....   | p. 109 |
| <b>What is the Fjord City?</b>  |        |
| Jörg Knieling .....   | p. 121 |
| <b>Urban-rural partnerships as a Tool of Territorial Cohesion. A Conceptual Approach derived from INTERREG IV C URMA “Urban-Rural Partnerships in Metropolitan Areas”</b>   |        |
| Carlos Llop .....   | p. 135 |
| <b>Ciudades, territorios metropolitanos y regiones urbanas eficientes. Estrategias y propuestas de proyecto para la regeneración de la Ciudad Mosaico Territorial después de la explosión de la ciudad. La Región Metropolitana de Barcelona como laboratorio (Territorial Mosaic City Research Team BARCELONATECH)</b> |        |
| Ali Madanipour .....  | p. 159 |
| <b>Public Space and Urban Transformation</b>  |        |
| Gabriele Pasqui .....   | p. 169 |
| <b>Between Republic and Democracy. Dilemmas and Perspectives in Planning Practices</b>  |        |
| Paola Viganò.....   | p. 179 |
| <b>Maps: the Material and Conceptual Dimensions of the Territory</b>  |        |

# Planum course through contents, scientific formats, and experimental languages on urbanism

*Planum. The Journal of Urbanism*, is an international online scientific journal and represents the main element of a reality structured around a plurality of subjects: the journal, the web platform, Associazione Planum and the publishing brand Planum Publisher.

Owned by the INU–Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica (National Urban Planning Institute), the journal is managed by Associazione Planum, an independent association that promotes its realisation and is concerned with setting up the conditions so that, for over 17 years, the activity can unfold itself on an ongoing basis<sup>1</sup>. In the past, *Planum* has represented an original and pioneering reality in the world of scientific journals: it was one of the first journals in the field of architecture and urban planning to be, since its foundation, entirely online, free of charge and equipped with ISSN code, setting itself apart from both the blogs and the information platforms that were springing up in the same period (the late 90s). Today, it is a known reality entrenched in the academic world, and at the same time open to future challenges on a number of fronts: that of scientific journals, autonomous publishing projects, and more wide-ranging forms of academic dissemination or divulgation.

## The original project and its evolution

Retracing the history of the foundation of *Planum* helps us clarify what were the original aims of the project, in relation to the evolution of the journal and the current diversified scenario of online scientific journals.

The idea behind the foundation of *Planum* arose in Rome in 1997, during the second Biennial Festival of European Town Planners, and crystallised in 1999, pursuant to a grant by the European Community that materially enabled its launch (see, on the topic of the foundation and the first phase of activity: Gabellini 2003, Elisei, Ginocchini, Dietrich 2003; Cimato and Nobili, interview to Elisei, 2004; more recently Fini 2017).

The original name - *Planum. The European Journal of Planning on line* – reflected the cultural mission of the project: establishing a web journal and a digital platform that might act as virtual place of exchange for the different European national cultures of urban studies and planning. A *journal of journals* capable of putting forward original contributions, where it was possible to consult indexes and selected texts of the main sector journals<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting to note that the “Planum project” was not born as extension of a printed journal or of a major newspaper, or in order to use the potential of the web following the crisis of the publishing industry (for example: the moderate costs, the unlimited space, the greater flexibility in managing publications, etc.). At the root, instead, there is a cultural project where the web,

1 The information on Associazione Planum is available on the website of the journal, inside the section headed “Planum Association”. The founding members, the current members and the past members are indicated therein in accordance with a composition that shows the size of the original project and its evolution.

2 The journals belonging to the project were: *Raumplanung*, *Urbanistica*, *Sociedade e Território*, *Town Planning Review* (first group), later joined by *Ciudades*, *Disp*, *Jahrbuch Stadterneuerung*, *Planerin* and *Spazio e Società*. Part of these indexes are still available for perusal in the section marked “Journals”.

in the sense of a “virtual square”, easily accessible, was deemed the tool most suited to its implementation.

In the course of the first 10 years of activity of *Planum*, some important elements of continuity have consisted in the said international character of the project (I) and its dimension of platform of contents (II). These aspects are best attested by the evolution of the institutional subjects that belonged to Associazione Planum over the years, by the 20.600 subscribers to the Newsletters (extremely diversified from a cultural-professional viewpoint and from the viewpoint of the nationalities involved, originally the outcome of a search for the most representative recipients), and, lastly, by the archive of articles and documents, expression of a network of authors and readers extending far beyond the strictly publishing network.

More recently, some factors have brought about the changes of the last years: the changed scenario of technologies and online journals, the rise in places and opportunities for dialogue and debate at international level, and especially the desire to once more clarify the cultural project lying at the root of *Planum*. In 2011, the name changed to *Planum. The Journal of Urbanism*, a switch echoed moreover by a profound restructuring of the original website. The year 2014 saw the creation of Planum Publisher, publishing brand of Associazione Planum, following the growing requests for the creation of publishing products. Lastly, in 2017 we witnessed the establishment of the new international scientific committee and a reorganisation of the editorial staff, once again focused on the publishing project<sup>3</sup>.

The new name, revolving around the word *urbanism*, reflects the current orientation and field of work: offering reflections and materials that combine the approaches and practices associated with “design” (urban design; city design) with those related to “planning” (urban, regional, spatial, etc.), in relation to localisation processes and contexts that raise new and urgent problems. The term, as stressed by Gabellini (2010:54), “attests the cognitive dimension, alongside the operational one, in the study and in the interpretation of urban phenomena”<sup>4</sup>. It is a hybrid term, a neologism, which in its originality had been chosen by the Editor to underline the experimental dimension, at the crossroads of traditions, of the urban planning culture that *Planum* has represented since its foundation. A term that, with a good omen, has subsequently been blessed with growing fortune, asserting itself at last in the international literature.

### Structure of the journal and monitoring of the website

*Planum*, having reached the 17 years of activity, is divided into four distinct sections (that have changed nature or have undergone changes over the years) and two specific projects. First of all, the “Magazine”, the heart of the journal, which hosts new and original scientific contributions. The contributions can be published separately, be part of an online issue with editor, or belong to specific columns, likewise with editor and implemented with a certain deal of regularity<sup>5</sup>. The “News & Call” section presents a selection of news about conferences, seminars, calls for papers, notices and awards, mainly connected with the Association members, though not invariably so. Inside the section called “Books”, you will find short presentations and illustrative materials of national and international volumes, chosen by the Editorial Staff or reported by the authors: the “Journals” section consists in the tables of contents of the journals hosted and in the accessory materials in download, such as the covers or the abstracts in English of the single issues. Likewise available are the complete collections of such important journals as *Urbanistica* and *Spazio e Società*.

The main sections were joined more recently by “Ibidem. Le letture di Planum”, the supple-

- 3 The current editorial staff consists of Patrizia Gabellini (Director), Giulia Fini and Andrea Di Giovanni (Co-Directors), Cecilia Saibene (Editor-in-chief), Laura Infante and Paola Piscitelli (Editorial staff): this group is then joined by collaborators for specific projects and by the apprentices. The composition of past editorial staffs is indicated in the section marked “About” (i.e. the working team of the 2011-2014 period: Marina Reissner, Claudia Botti, and Salvatore Caschetto). “Ibidem. Le letture di Planum” is run by Luca Gaeta, Francesco Curci and Laura Pierantoni. The editorial staff is based at DASTU – Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano.
- 4 “Attesta la dimensione conoscitiva, accanto a quella operativa, nello studio e nell’interpretazione dei fenomeni urbani” (Gabellini, 2010:54).
- 5 Some examples of columns are: “Diary of a Planner”, run by Bernardo Secchi from 2002 to 2005, “Peripheries”, run by Marco Cremaschi, “Una finestra sulle città del Brasile”, run by Marco Mareggi, and “Urban Planning Movies Archive”, run by Leonardo Ciacci, etc. The columns relate to specific projects of the journal.

ment devoted to reviews, and the “Planum Publisher” area, with the production of volumes of the publishing brand of the Association. It is always possible to interlink the materials of the same section, different sections or the archive, thereby constructing novel montages, structured by content relationships, authors or keywords.

Monitoring of the logins and consultation of the materials are tracked through Google Analytics. It is a useful tool widely employed in some phases of the activity in order to understand the readers’ behaviour: knowing which parts of the journal aroused greater interest and watching the activity “from without”, even with some surprises as regards the most widely read and consulted contents. Google Analytics has been used for instance to test the growth or shrinkage of readers during the periods of publishing or seasonal activities or to understand the role of the Newsletters as crucial element, close to which a genuine peak of logins to the website occurs. Currently, the monthly statistics are settling around 5.319 sessions, 4.062 users, and 9.788 page views, with a slight drop compared to the past, dictated by different choices and organisation of the editorial work.

More recently, we have tried out a move from monitoring logins to the website to monitoring interactions on the social networks, which sketch out a partial yet equally significant and dynamic picture of the relationship with readers. The social networks currently seem to represent one of the main showcases for the contents and for the spirit of the journal, with a network of 3.000 followers on Facebook; 460 on Twitter, 700 on Issuu and 100 on Vimeo (the latter being two specific, rather than general, social networks).

### **The model of scientific communication**

The hybrid nature of Planum – scientific journal and structured web platform – amplifies the possibilities of constructing contents beyond the standard timeframes and formats we are accustomed to with printed and academic journals, also in relation to the latest evolutions of scientific publications as per strictly codified formats. If we focus in particular on the “Magazine” section, some peculiarities of the scientific communication model developed by *Planum* are: I) a pronounced hybridisation of verbal-visual languages (text-image); II) the great flexibility in the construction of contents and in the formats of articles, which may be adapted to the language and to the objectives of each contribution or research; III) a constant care promoted on the artwork and on the visual communication, which the Editorial Staff deems essential for an urban planning journal, capable of reflecting experiences and the related illustrating and documentary materials.

More in general, if we observe the presence of differentiated materials in the sections, the following are peculiarities of *Planum* IV) its constant implementation (readers can consult the updated sections at different times, an aspect that proved important for developing loyalty and recognition of the publication within the academic community); V) the possibility of marrying scientific information and divulgation, intercepting a traditionally academic public as well as students, sector technicians, and general readers interested in the topics of transformations of city and territory.

### **The challenges to work on**

The vast expressive and content-related potential of such a tool as *Planum* represents an ongoing challenge for the Editorial Staff, but at the same time presents some frailties that need be supervised. For instance, on some occasions there has been evidence of a certain difficulty on the part of the reader, as well as of the authors, to find their way among the platform materials and to clearly recognise the contents and formats of the “Magazine”: an aspect that is instead crucial if one wishes to attract scientific articles from both mature and young authors with a growing interest in the recognisability and positioning of their contributions. Even the said possibility of ongoing implementation of the platform seems at times to obscure the measured, reflective dimension typical of a scientific journal.

These frailties, arisen and understood more clearly during the development of the

activity, open up to the current challenges faced by the Editorial Staff. After years of experiments – from the viewpoint of the processes of publication, languages and contents - we are faced nowadays with the need for a more exacting simplification and repetition of the formats, and a stricter scheduling of “Magazine” contributions, together with the exhibition of already implemented peer-review processes. Other objectives to pursue are the indexing of articles in international databases and an improved traceability of the archive materials (possibility that opens up to novel montages and second readings of past materials with greater ease).

From the viewpoint of the contents, what is required from us is a more exacting selection of the “Magazine” articles, coming not only from the variegated world making up the already consolidated network of *Planum*, but also through the theme-based choices of the Editorial Staff, the consolidation of columns, the single-topic services and the instrument of the call. The recent establishment of the international scientific committee, which will contribute to fathom the issues of urbanism within differentiated contexts and pursuant to differentiated approaches, is part and parcel of this work perspective.

Within this scenario, the position of *Planum*, like that of other online scientific journals, is the lack of backing from a national or international publisher (think of the current debate about the editorial policies of such international publishers as Routledge, SAGE, Wiley, etc.), and being an independent subject, with some privileged institutional links enjoyed by the Association. It is an objectively delicate condition for sustaining the activity, yet one that at the same time permits a far-reaching expressive freedom and an autonomy of precious value at disciplinary level, which the Editorial Staff has always recognised as a worthy element both in terms of publishing production and in terms of circulation of scientific contents and formats.

After years of important experiments and expansion of the networks, the next goal is to further consolidate the recognisability and the quality of the *Planum* contents within the scientific community, as a high-level journal, without however losing the peculiarity of language and topics built along the intricate path of the journal.

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