

# World Building Congress 2025 Purdue University, USA

## W096 Architectural Design and Management Workshop with the American Architectural Research Centers Consortium and Future of the City Centre Network

### Emerging Challenges in City Centres

#### Spatial Equity and Inclusiveness

The objective of this Workshop is to continue the discussion on:

#### SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

- *enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanisation*
- *ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing*
- *provide access to safe, inclusive and accessible, public and green spaces*
- *support least developed countries, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilising local materials.*

#### Perspectives

Environmental and climate change

Social

Economic

Political

Technological digital revolution

Cultural

The Workshop will develop ideas from the Aarhus event in May 2024, set out below:

#### Synopsis:

Among present urban dilemmas is the social and cultural integration of diverse populations and responses to the barriers created by limited access to the critical elements of safe, healthy, and dignified lives. The focus of this session is the role of research, education and practice in inclusiveness and generating spatial equity. The challenge of creating social and environmentally sustainable places that are accessible to various communities, lies at the core of critical research in the built environment disciplines. Research into spatial equity and inclusiveness in education and practice is manifested in both process and product. In thinking about the conference theme, this workshop will engage participants in a lively debate around a set of conditions and provocations that will assist the development of a resilient city centre. The concept of universal access to city centre facilities, regardless of social class, race, gender, and ethnic background needs to be carried through to practice. Moreover, inclusion for some members of society can represent exclusion for others. Thus, there is a continuum from the producers of urban space in all its scales, through to the users. The outcome of the workshop will be to elicit ideas, opinions, and different perspectives from the participants, and lay out a plan of action for a future research agenda.

## Introduction to City Centres:



Newcastle upon Tyne is the regional capital of North East England. Traditionally land in the city centre has been owned by the citizens and administered on their behalf by the City Council. There has been incremental development but by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, areas became intentionally neglected as leases for small businesses were not renewed, and property emptied. The local authority was setting-up these areas for major re-development.



Concerned at the lack of public space for community use, researchers and practitioners provided designs for the re-use of this vacated land and property. Shown above is a square at the front of the new City Library. It includes premises for small local businesses and city centre housing. Microclimatic analysis demonstrates that external noise is reduced, as are wind speeds, while temperatures are increased to enable extended use of the space.



Literature during the covid period emphasised the significance of green spaces to city centres for people's physical and mental health. Library Square was therefore conceived as part of a network that included green spaces. While there is considerable greenery at the periphery of the city, it is important to bring it into the centre as places of relaxation and respite. This will require a commitment by the local authority and central government to the community, including ongoing maintenance.



This is what is being constructed at the Library Square location. The building fills the area and will become the largest footprint of any building in the city centre. There will be no open space nor access for the public. Without consultation, the Council sold the land to an international speculator, who is a contributor to the political party of the recent national government. The building is intended for a government department that will move 2.5 miles (4 kilometres) from its existing location. The premises will continue to be owned by the speculator to whom the government will pay rent.



São Paulo is the largest city in Brazil and South America. The metropolitan area of São Paulo, with its 24 million inhabitants, is one of the most populous in the Americas and the fifth largest in the world. São Paulo's city centre development occurred mainly between 1900 and 1980. Government agencies, office buildings, large shops, cultural spaces and residential buildings were built, attracting people from all the country and from abroad.



São Paulo's city centre has several heritage buildings, protected by law, most of them based in the modernist architecture movement. Famous examples are: The Altino Arantes Building, also known as the Banespa Building (in the foreground of the picture above); the Municipal Theater of São Paulo (1911); the 165-meter tower called Edifício Itália; and the Edifício Copan, one of the most emblematic buildings of São Paulo, designed by Oscar Niemeyer.



The public spaces of the city centre, previously valued and pleasant, have progressively lost their social and economic relevance as well as traditional commercial activities, thus alienating a large part of the population. Homeless people progressively occupied sidewalks and squares, as well as abandoned buildings. The impact of over tourism, shopping and cultural activities is enormous, giving place to other social problems, like vandalism, looting, violence, and drug dealing.



Social problems observed in Sao Paulo's city centre include the permanent presence of hundreds of crack and other drug addicts, in an area known as Crackland. It started during the 1990s and still happening. The existence of the Crackland in the city centre has led to a feeling of insecurity and, most importantly, worsened the deterioration of public spaces in the area. Most of the people pass through, only because of transportation needs, as the main public lines originate in the city centre.



In the last decades, social and health care services have provided for the addicted population, as well as police interventions attempting to control criminal activity. These approaches have alternated in an attempt to eradicate Cracolândia and return the use of public spaces to the rest of the city's population, although there have not been any



effective results. Groups of drug dealers and addicts have moved from one area to another, without ever leaving the city centre.



Moving on to a different setting and place, Portland Oregon has been famous as a rich urban setting with human-centric public spaces that are considered a model public engagement in the US Pacific Northwest. With several squares, parks, and public playgrounds, Portland provides a multitude of public and accessible urban centers. They range from public places for social gatherings, to places for local commerce, such as the Saturday Market, political demonstrations, and holiday celebrations that are relevant to ethnic and diverse cultural groups.



These accessible and affordable public places found new users and uses during the COVID-19 pandemic. They served as social distancing gathering places, vaccination centers, public health check-up sites, as well as food and supplies pantries. These examples were great testimonials to the importance of flexible and accessible public spaces in the city center that provide multiple uses and are open to different groups.



This open and accessible space can be subject to abuse as well. We have witnessed how commercial activities have hijacked such spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic days and established outdoor cafés and restaurants in them. This has turned the space, which was open and free to public use, into a space that is used for commercial purposes, and excluded those who cannot afford to use these commercial establishments.



On the other hand, the public space that does not belong to a certain group or entity can be left to the government to establish strict rules and infrastructure changes to limit public use. In this image is the infamous Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, which was the main site of the 25 January 2011 revolution as part of the Arab Spring. It was barricaded later and reduced to a turnaround for vehicles with no pedestrian use, to curb any options for public gatherings.



Similarly, public areas and quadrangles on multiple US College campuses have been sites of demonstrations and political encampments by students and university staff to voice disagreements with US and College campus policies. These public sites are used as a space to make some student groups' demands more vocal and visible. They were also sites of clashes with campus police, college administrators, and political far-right groups.

The above examples were intended to provoke a discussion about the dichotomy and challenge of city centre public space. Who is it for, who owns it, who manages it, and for what purposes? How to ensure that their flexible and accessible nature is not abused by some groups over others? What set of rules and regulations can ensure its continuous use and generate spatial equity? These are some opening questions. The group participants were invited to debate them and generate actionable items for follow-up.

### The Workshop in action:





Outcomes from the Workshop:



## Summary

### Housing

Hostile architecture

How do people live?

Homeless

In Brazil as an example – houses are viewed as property  
buying and selling  
not enough housing

### Public Space

Inventory and mapping of city space needed – what proportion is public?

For cultural development, social structures are required alongside public spaces

If land is sold to developers, it is controlled by developers

Public ground must offer pay-back to the public

Not totally public nor private but hybrid as a re-invention to improve health

Space needs programmes to generate opportunities for connections

People interact in parks – meet your neighbours, become involved in multiple uses

Add trees

Eat the plants that can be grown in public space

Parks are closed at night for general public and homeless

What happens when people colonise public space?

Who is excluded?

Copenhagen – sensing, well-being, park by Opera

sounds, smells, sensory garden

green city, piazza recreation

bank invests for ordinary people to be active

Italy – Sunday afternoon walk with family

### Streets

They can act as public spaces and outside living rooms

Streets are the first element for children, growing up and playing there

Kids are not playing on the streets anymore – accessibility

Streets are now for moving cars not people

### Funding

Revenue funding versus capital funding

Must be financially sustainable

City change is based on funding – money driven – who has buy-in?

### Changing Demands

Previously argued that there is not enough space – density of use

Information technology – digital revolution

Do not need so much space, some functions are disappearing

Do not base everything on buildings

Invest in rental spaces and add community amenities

Over-tourism in some centres, especially historic cities in Europe

Public Transit is increasingly important to reduce numbers of cars, vans and lorries

**If you have any questions or would like further information,  
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