Workshop 2: Public Space Interventions

Public Spaces in Small Cities in a Shrinking Region. Putting Public Interest back into the Agenda

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There is no shortage of technical recommendations and guidelines on public spaces design to enhance public life. But if these guidelines are to be effective, special consideration is required for the stage that precedes design, namely the stage at which public space goals are set. The research presented in this paper analyzes the shifting urban patterns in small cities along Douro corridor (Spain) since 1985. The study of the urban planning instruments developed over the last decades for this region reveals a recurring political strategy that significantly explains the loss of urban vitality: Local and regional governments oriented their efforts to attract business and industry, while goals of public interest and well-being almost vanished from the agenda, or at the very best were secondary to economic growth and competitiveness. The research concludes with a methodological proposal to identify physical environments that improve the quality of life. For that purpose, at different scales public spaces are targeted as what Max Neef described as synergic satisfiers of human needs.

1. Who cares about the public space?

1.1 Rural areas in a context increasing competitiveness

Over the last two decades globalization has emerged as a major driver of economic and social transformation. Globalization is also transforming the role of regions and cities, which are now involved in a quest for competitiveness. In this context European countryside is in a deep restructuring process. Many peripheral –even isolated– rural areas are shrinking; quite often the priority for most of small villages is simply not to disappear. In those areas small and medium cities struggle to be attractive and to stand out of the rest, regaining a role as secondary centre. The strategy is also called for in the European Spatial Development Perspective (SDP) which recommends (EC 1999. pg 25) “strengthening [of] small and medium-sized towns in rural areas as focal points for regional development and promotion of their networking”. Unfortunately, that is easier to say than to achieve.

1.2. Public interest withdrawal from production of space

Given the situation, the prevailing thinking of local public institutions is that becoming competitive in a global context requires focusing efforts on attracting business and industry, so transport and productive systems become the centre of institutional initiatives.
A side effect of this building business and industry friendly environment strategy is that social reproduction and well-being as governments’ public responsibilities are being disregarded (Smith, 2001). These aims are supposed to be achieved as a “natural” consequence of economic growth. But they are not. As a side effect, spatial quality and urban vitality are actually deteriorated. For example, regardless of the shrinking regional tendency, in the cities analyzed artificial land areas have grown by 49 % between 1990 and 2000 (according to Corine Land Cover) while population has practically remained the same (only 3 % growth). The emerging territorial scheme has well-known negative effects on sustainability, on landscapes and on ecosystems.

This is not a minor point. According to The Determinants of relative Economic Performance of Rural Areas rural areas performing well had: “good access to urban employment centres; an innovative economic base serving both national and global markets; physical environments that provided the basis of a high quality of life; and a strong sense of place identity”. Spatial conditions are indeed a key factor for development.

2. A brief characterization of Douro corridor

2.1. Agrarian shrinking region

In this paper we will start by illustrating the issues pointed above with a case study of four small cities located along the middle stretch of River Douro, here after referred to as the Douro corridor. By 1982 the Ribera del Duero wine, received Denomination of Origin (DO) status, and since then viticulture has expanded considerably. Natural environment is an important valuable resource and one of the main attractions of the region, a big potential for leisure and entertainment services. As a result rural areas are managed as places for tourism consumption. In the process identity has been simplified and different areas have been homogenized. In our case “Ribera Douro: Region=good wine, good eating”. This has attracted tourism of short stays (travelers in and out in the same day) oriented to plain consumption.

The Douro corridor remains a peripherical agrarian region, that has hardly the spatial and productive conditions, or the technological and human resources essential to be attractive in an increasingly competitive international context. The territory plays no international role and it still exhibits a weak specialization in tertiary services (basically public administration and trade). Manufacturing has witnessed a reduction in productive activities as a result of business

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1 Defra’s report cited by Thompson and Ward.
acquisition by multinational groups which have later divested and moved production elsewhere.

2.2. Cities, history weighs

Four cities will be analyzed:

- **Toro.** A small town stagnated for decades. Its City center, with an important cultural heritage patrimony, has a Historic Preservation Plan.

- **Tordesillas.** It is located only 30 km away from the provincial capital city Valladolid, the main city of the inner region. With 300,000 inhabitants Valladolid struggles to be the leader of an area larger than 94,000 km2. Albeit Tordesillas lies under its influence, it is not growing as fast as those towns incorporated to the metropolitan area. Valladolid’s power is too big and Tordesillas is not able to regain its previous role as local centre.

- **Peñafiel** saw a considerable development thanks to the railway. In 1984 the train line was discontinued and since then the city’s dynamism slowed down. Today Peñafiel is located in a shrinking area, and tries to get advantage of its position by improving highway infrastructures.

- **Aranda de Duero.** Well communicated and strategically positioned between Madrid and Basque Country (two industrial and economic engines), was historical targeted as a nodal development city.

**Figure 1.** Duero Corridor 2008

Although the four cities share a common space (the valley) and face to the same river Douro, there is not a direct main roadway or highway linking them together. Both their history and their present conditions are quite different.
3. Spanish land use and urban planning system

The next part of the paper will explain the inconsistency of urban policy goals through the analysis of plans at different scales. As long as the study deals with the process of production of public space, first it has to be explained the Spanish town planning system.

The Spanish central government has no jurisdiction over town planning. The 17 regional governments (Comunidades Autonomas) into which Spain is divided are responsible for the development and approval of laws concerning land use in their own territories.

The urban planning system is hierarchical. Sectorial plans (railways, highways, airports, ports...) and laws (mainly environmental) at national level bind the regional and town planning, but essentially Regional governments have autonomy for land and town planning.

Land use laws refer to regional plans. In the Douro corridor right now is the first Regional Plan under approval. So it is at municipal level that town spatial planning has been developed. The most usual tool is Master Plans (Plan General or Normas Subsidiarias), concerning the whole municipality, that draws the general structural lines both for the urban fabric and for the natural land. They establish which land is liable for urban expansion. Master Plans are responsibility of municipal government, and regional government has to give their acquiescence. Once they came into force, the council has to approve Development Plans (initiative might be public or private), where areas to be developed or remodeled are design in detail.

The area under study spans over 90 km and covers an area of about 950km². There are 168 municipalities included, and only 14 have a Master Plan. Master Plans have been mostly concerned about the extension of urban areas and those extensions where concentrated around the main towns. For the rest, each provincial government has approved a “subsidiary norm, which regulates the most frequent urban situations in a generic way, and also regulates human activity in non urbanizable land.

4. Shifting territory, as a result of plans, as a result of life

Over the last decades, the area has experienced shifting urban and territorial patterns. Public spaces are affected in different ways by changes that take place at different scales. Here below there is a brief description of the main recent changes in the Douro corridor

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2 A description of shifting patterns can be found in “Urban expansion in a shrinking region. Changing land and urban patterns in Region Centro (Spain)” (Simon Rojo, M. 2008) http://surcosurbanos.es/docs.html
4.1. Polarized territory. Pressure and abandonment

No regional plan

In the area analyzed there is no regional land use plan. For one of the cities (Aranda de Duero) the ambitious of his major, who believed his city had the potential to grow and reach 90,000 inhabitants, was ultimately to be considered as a node of development. It was around 1965, a time of central planning, and Aranda was targeted as the northern center in a strategic plan for decentralizing Madrid’s industry.

It was an exception. By that time rural areas experienced a radical transformation, traditional agriculture was disappearing and peasant farmers became redundant. Migration movements towards Madrid and coastal regions had a parallel in inside movements from rural areas towards the main city of each province.

Recently the Basic Territorial Scheme for Castilla and Leon has been approved. The previous diagnosis emphasized that, in the cities of our study, there should be an important development of economic sites that should be fostered by a considerable improvement of facilities (so as to offer better and diversified services) and highway infrastructures (accessibility). This way it aims to overcome uneven development, by strengthening the urban system around which the territory would be structured. The region envisions becoming a space able to meet the growing demand of environmental quality, offering attractive nature, premium quality urban spaces, etc.

Towards an empty landscape

By 1900 the Corridor was a territory with a very low population density, about 20 inhab/km². The main city was Valladolid, with almost 69,000 inhabitants -36% of total population at the area-. By that time every 35-40 km along the river there was a big town around which the immediate countryside was organized. That was still the case almost until 1960, but since then the small villages have experienced a constant drainage of population. By 1991 there were 49 inhab/km², and 57 in 2005. But almost all that growth was concentrated in the capital city, Valladolid which accounted for 74% of the area population in 1991 and –lately- its surroundings. If that city is not included in the statistics, demographic density remains basically the same, around 13 inh by 1900 and also by 1991, with people moving away from the smallest villages towards small and medium cities.

As a result the territory is nowadays absolutely polarized between main cities and the rest (emptiness). The ever-increasing concentration of functions in the cities, that strive to become development nodes, results in a growing dependence of the latter, which remain unable to attract people to settle. Small cities tried to prevent decaying by turning into a
pleasant destination for migrants from their hinterland. Because if people were anyway to leave the countryside, at least they might stay in the region. That was, for example, one of the main aims of Toro’s Master Plan in 1989.

Urban –and artificial- land uses have been expanding. In Region Centro, as a whole\(^3\), artificial land areas have grown by 32 \% between 1990 and 2000 while population has practically remained the same (only 0,18\% growth). If we consider the four cities analyzed, at the same period artificial land increased 49\% and population 3\%. The better the highways infrastructures of a city, the larger its demographic growth. A fact widely recognized and that will be determinant to shape local requests for future infrastructure developments.

Nevertheless the main problem is not about land consumption or loss of natural spaces. The environment is considerably anthropized, but basically remains non urbanized. Only 1\% of the territory was covered by urban uses, and 37\% of them were located within Valladolid municipal boundaries\(^4\). The main problem at the region -in urban terms- is the process of abandonment of a large number of villages. Achieving a balanced and dynamic territory remains a challenge and only some of the main cities –mainly Valladolid in this case– and their immediate surroundings attract population and activities. For the shrinking villages the priority is not to disappear.

4.2. Expanding towns

Setting aims for a new agro-industrial town

Master Plans for the cities analyzed aimed to organize urban expansion associated to demographic growth and to increase land offer for industrial uses.

To improve the whole city, new residential areas should contribute to surmount facilities’ deficits in the old city. Some of them recognized the potential of Douro’s river-bank to provide a space for recreation and to bring nature closer to the inhabitants. The 1989 Master Plan of Aranda even advocates bringing back human-scale to the urban environment and preserving local identity.

Figure 2. Master Plan Aranda de Duero. 1983

\(^3\) Region Centro comprises three Regional Governments: Castilla y León, Castilla La Mancha, Extremadura. Figures based on the analysis of CORINE Land Cover and INE databases.

\(^4\) Data processing of 1/10.000 GIS maps from the Junta Castilla y Leon.
As priority was given to attract investors and to satisfy business needs, different areas were developed (logistics, ancillary services, industry), but they do not try to make use of abandoned buildings, areas or brownfields. Degraded areas, abandoned plots, demanded extra efforts to be recovered and therefore were not considered. City grows in a scatter way leaving brownfields behind. Plans tend to design large expansion areas, that hardly ever are developed. As a result, 66% of urban areas remain as empty plots, according to Census Data. Quality of life it is not notably improved and the cities do not turn out to be attractive neither for living, nor for working.

**New developments, poor quality**

Most of the areas included in Master Plans were never developed. But for those exceptions that have became a reality, the final quality of realizations is discouraging. In the development planning instruments necessary to start the urbanizing process, any memory of quality objectives stated in Master Plans vanished away. As a result in new areas developed there are roads with pavements narrower than 1.20 meters, green spaces where no tree or plant has been planted, central “squares” lacking of any sense of place.

Besides those extensions, there are specific policies and plans to preserve historical areas. There has been also a considerable effort –though often with a strong face-lifting bias– to revitalize city centers and to promote commerce at neighbourhood level, but peripheries and new developments are not considered in those strategies.
5. Proposed approach key features

The situation of the cities analyzed and their countryside does not differ considerably from many other cities in many other similar regions. There are, of course, local peculiarities, but the underlying trends and drivers repeat themselves. That is why the proposed key features described below might be of interest for other interventions. As in any other case study the key question prevails, how can the findings be useful beyond the specific area analyzed? By making explicitly the context background and by identifying the context factors with a higher incidence it can be deduced what can be replicated in other situations, even if they are not identical.

We suggest a method to overcome fragmented views that typically arise in sectorial and urban plans. This method arises from the application of “synergic satisfiers” concepts to urban requalification of peripherical spaces.

5.1. Planning towns for the people

Designing Plans on the basis of incorrect assumption like “what is needed is to increase land offer, then companies and industries will arrive, making the city grow prosperous and vital” is not just wishful thinking. It has pernicious effects, as has already been explained. Town planning, by its own, is not capable of solving shrinking cities’ problems, but does have an important role in making them alive. Town planning deals with the overall quality of urban environment and urban design with making places for people.

To make this desirable scenario possible expectations towards urbanism have to be readjusted. The prevalent conception gives priority to competitiveness and growth, assuming that once when they are achieved, people’s life will improve as a natural consequence. Urban policy should go beyond its bias towards building business and industry friendly environment to compete in a globalized world. It is not a viable strategy for all cities and regions. It is time to bring back Schumacher and plan and design “as if people mattered”. It is not evident that authorities, politicians, technicians and general public would agree with the motto putting people first. But there are strong arguments to reorientate urbanism goals, learning lessons from the recent past:

1. It is better to concentrate efforts where they might have larger effects. And as long as economic forces are beyond the scope of town planning, it is more effective to orientate it towards spatial and urban quality. Proposals will be more realistic if they assume also that it in the context of small cities in shrinking regions public institutions should leader the process and prove that initiatives are feasible.
2. Equity was a common goal in general planning documents two decades ago, and quality appears almost always in nowadays plans. But those general goals loose strength when coming to development plans and projects. It is necessary to link town planning and urban design with the wide goals expressed in high-level documents. It should be done on the understanding that resources and management/control capacity of different stakeholders, of administration and local government, of citizens as individuals or associated in groups of interest are scarce at local level.

A criterion to orientate plan’s goals is to what extent they contribute to increase quality of life. Quality of life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs.

5.2. Fundamental human needs

This paper aligns itself with the school of “Human Scale Development” and works on the assumption that human needs do exist. Need is what must be had to live a satisfactory life. Human needs exist and are universal; they do not change with culture or across history. What changes over time and between cultures is the way these needs are satisfied. It is a position contrary to subjectivist and cultural relativist approaches.

Human needs -according once again to Max-Neef, Elizalde et al. - few, finite and classifiable. A standpoint opposite to economic rationalists, who affirm that human beings have a limitless desire for material possessions.

There is no hierarchy of human needs, no need is per se more important than any other\(^5\) (MAX NEEF, ELIZALDE AND HOPENHAYN, 1991) contrary to the well-known Maslow theory:

In Max-Neef Model of Human-Scale Development, fundamental human needs are:

\(^5\) “This means that, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that there is no fixed order of precedence in the actualization of needs (that need B, for instance, can only be met after need A has been satisfied). Simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristic of the system's behavior. A pre-systemic threshold must be recognized, below which the feeling of a certain deprivation may be so severe, that the urge to satisfy the given need may paralyze and overshadow any other impulse or alternative.

The case of subsistence may serve to illustrate this clearly. When the possibilities of satisfying this need are severely impaired, all other needs remain blocked and a single and intense drive prevails. But such a situation does not hold true only in the case of subsistence. It is equally relevant in the case of other needs. Suffice it to say, that total lack of affection, or the loss of identity, may lead people to extremes of self-destruction”. (Max Neef, Elizalde and Hopenhayn, 1991)
Human needs are considered from four different categories, or four different aspects of activity –being, having, doing and interacting-. Interacting implies a spatial frame, where the activity takes place and the need is satisfied. With other names needs have been already related to spatial quality and to the urban condition by different urbanists, sociologists and other theorists. The character and quality of public space is of particular relevance to fulfill some of the fundamental human needs. They will be examined in detail, considering their interaction scope in the public realm. For example, creation can be experienced privately, through individual initiative, even at work; but here we are concern to creation in the public space, emphasizing interaction with others.

6. Public spaces, making public action possible

Local authorities have in public space a singular arena to provide and to construct together with the citizens synergic satisfiers, accomplishing different needs at the same time. Needs are a system, and can not be considered independently, for example you would hardly even participate in a space where you feel unsafe. On the contrary an event like “dancing on the street” understood as one of Alexander’s pattern languages, is an example of synergic satisfier of creation, affection, participation and leisure.

6.1. Human needs in the public space

Is public space a satisfier of human needs? The relationship between public space and human needs is not as straight forward, as if we are talking as food as a satisfier of subsistence. However, at least six human needs have a strong connection to public spatial conditions. Given its ability to configure these spatial conditions, it seems very clear that town planning
has the potential to provide effective levers to fulfill a significant portion of fundamental human needs. Focusing on interaction, between people (social environment) and with the built environment. Here it will be analyzed considering three aspects:

- Physical conditions
- Regulatory frame
- Cognitive\textsuperscript{6} environment

As a synthesis, in the chart below the fundamental needs are classified according to the scale in which they are mainly satisfied. Different scales of intervention and most of the decisions impact beyond the specific scale at which they are set. Broad scale decisions are essential for what might happen at public space in a local level. The ones to be developed at neighbourhood or town level are the ones more closely related to the public spaces analyzed in this paper. Figure 3 shows which aspects affect each need more directly.

Figure 3. Scale and character of public space as a satisfier of human needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL CONDITIONS</th>
<th>REGULATORY FRAME\textsuperscript{6}</th>
<th>COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTIMATE SPACES</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td></td>
<td>Affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TOWN LEVEL</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
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<tr>
<td>TERRITORIAL LEVEL</td>
<td></td>
<td>Subsistence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{6} Cognition: The process involved in knowing, or the act of knowing, which in its completeness includes perception and judgment. Cognition includes all processes of consciousness by which knowledge is accumulated, such as perceiving, recognizing, conceiving, and reasoning. Put differently, cognition is an experience of knowing that can be distinguished from an experience of feeling or willing. It is one of the only words that refer to the brain as well as to the mind. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

\textsuperscript{7} Regulatory frame, usually it is established at town level
Three of those needs (subsistence, freedom and affection) will not be further studied, as public spaces do not play a key role in their fulfillment. Affection is related mainly to intimate spaces, while freedom is a need that should be satisfied anywhere, as Max-Neef himself asserts. Certainly closed communities, go against this need, both for those who cannot get in, and for those who—afraid from the others—can not get out and remain in their ghettos.

**Subsistence** brings to mind food, shelter, clothing… those satisfiers are nowadays mainly related to territories (globalized) where raw materials are obtained, or to those spaces (buildings) where they are manufactured and sold. There was a time when those activities shaped public urban spaces (market plaza), and private spaces (vegetable gardens), but nowadays they have little influence on them. Of course territorial and urban patterns affect subsistence; the increasing land consumption by urban and artificial uses per inhabitant implies a reduction of land available for other uses. Urban environment also has an impact on diversity: under specific conditions and if it’s correctly managed, it might even enhance diversity. (DE JONG, 2002).

If public spaces are to ensure protection for the people, they should keep them safe from uncomfortable weather conditions, from noise and air pollution. Also at public spaces fear (mainly from the others, outsiders) should be left aside. Climate considerations in urban design have been object of study since long time ago, and there are useful tools, like Givoni’s or Olgyay’s climate comfort psychometric charts. There are plenty of indicators, many related to energy efficiency, but also to the potential use of public spaces (see Figure 4) or to measure the microclimatic benefits of trees. There are also models computerized energy simulations, like Envi-met or Townscope. Safety in streets and public spaces has also extensively been studied, from generic and specific groups (women, elderly...). It is not unusual that in the name of security and safety, local governments take measures for vandalism and crime prevention based on forbidding. They should be considered careful within the whole system, to avoid measures that inhibit the possibility of satisfying other needs.

**Participation** implies people interacting in the public space in such a way that it becomes a political space. Participation leads to collective decision making and sets the foundations to overcome isolation and marginalisation. A question to be asked is to what extent spatial conditions facilitate or even foster participation. Of course in spaces where people feel good, comfortable, probabilities of meeting other people increase and meeting helps to interact. Both spatial conditions and regulations are decisive to allow participation. involved, taking part and by, can be enhance or inhibit. Democracy->interact, comfort, encounter (activity) spatial conditions, mobiliario. Involve in the process in the appropriation. Living together. There are methodologies for participatory process in the design of public spaces,
The “social construction of identity always take place in a context marked by power relationships” (CASTELLS, 1997). Identity as a human –individual- need has also a collective character which, when dealing with spatial context, has been object of extensive study. Lynch (LYNCH, 1981) defines identity as “the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places”. Within the frame of human needs identity refers to people, not to places, however a place one belongs to is posted as satisfier of this need (see Matrix). Therefore places can enhance personal identity, with the help of preexistences, representative elements –natural and built- and morphological characteristics.

**Creation** and understanding deal with cognition process, although public spaces affect them in a different way. Creating, doing, manipulating and playing get us ready for comprehensive understanding, and the possibility for those actions depends mostly on the regulatory frame, if they are allowed or not. The way in which public spaces are conceived and built might make creation easier, for example providing materials and space for intervention. Places where creative activities are allowed are decisive against alienation. It helps to people’s appropriation and engagement with the public space. Creation is not synonymous of transferring maintenance works to the users.

**Understanding** follows the experience of creation, but also of perception and symbolization. Public spaces may contribute considerably to understanding of processes and cycles. Spaces where it is possible to establish relationships, allow us to make mental connections. In this case the scope of satisfiers suits better with a larger scale, the whole city could be considered to show how the water cycle works, for example, making it visible.

### 6.2. People

Goals have to be set taking into account the space that is being designed. Not every public space should be targeted to fulfill all the human needs. There is a wide range of squares and especially, of streets, from pedestrian to urban roads full of vehicles. Physical conditions that trigger use intensity like density, level of occupation, variety of uses and activities are determinant to identify the potential of each place. That is the kind of work technicians are used to deal with, nevertheless to move from analysis and descriptions to prescriptions and proposals, neighbours are the main characters of the story.

A methodology that helps incorporating human needs framework is just sketched here. Depending on which kind of actions are being considered, the effect on some human needs will be stronger. When dealing with design, concentrate on how new physical conditions will impact on protection, but also on participation, understanding and creation. If what is under discussion is the norms and regulations, then do not be blind to anything but protection, better move focus to the “side” effects on participation and creation.
7. Conclusions

In the Region analyzed Master Plans have been mostly concerned about the extension of urban areas and those extensions where concentrated around the main towns. City grows in a scatter way leaving brownfields behind. Plans tend to design large expansion areas that hardly ever are developed. As a result, 66% of urban areas remain as empty plots, according to Census Data. Quality of life it is not notably improved and the cities do not turn out to be attractive neither for living, nor for working.

So far urban policy has a strong bias towards building business and industry friendly environment to compete in a globalized world. It is not a viable strategy for all cities and regions. It is time to bring back Schumacher and plan and design “as if people mattered”.

A criterion to orientate plan’s goals is to what extent they contribute to increase quality of life. Quality of life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs: affection, protection, participation, creation, identity, understanding, leisure and freedom. At least six of these human needs have a strong connection to public spatial conditions. Given its ability to configure these spatial conditions, it seems very clear that town planning has the potential to provide effective levers to fulfill a significant portion of fundamental human needs. Protection, participation, creation, identity are mainly satisfied at neighbourhood level, while leisure and understanding are strongly affected by the town level conditions. Physical conditions, regulatory frame and cognitive environment should be considered careful within the whole system of human needs, to avoid measures that inhibit the possibility of satisfying other needs.

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