

A view from the web: telematics of town planners issues and virtual piazzas.

Authors: Pietro Elisei, Giovanni Ginocchini, Tobias Dietrich

Abstract

After a quadrennial experience of working on the web, the editorial board of www.planum.net (the European journal of planning online) is quite sure that Globalization is also a very extraordinary cultural fact!. The Planum network addresses daily issues in town planning and receives feedback from more than 80 countries around the world.

The web truly offers a privileged viewpoint over the panorama of events, policies, urban projects and so on: a sort of telescope pointed straight at the universe of practices.

We would like to explore some issues we encountered in publishing one of the most laborious of Planum's publications (www.planum.net/4bie): the archive of projects of the 4th Biennial of towns and town planners in Europe (Rotterdam, Nov.2001), a virtual exhibition of projects from more than 40 European cities. From projects of "globalization" down to the "street of life" initiatives.

In handling material embodying such different experiences a lot of diverse questions crossed our minds.

A first simple question is: How important is the added value of exchanging experiences for planners on virtual platforms? The easy access to a data bank of practices is probably increasing the number of similar planning processes, but it shows, at the same time, that local answers to global shared issues retain their peculiar features and differences.

Starting from these online publications, and from the practices reported, it could be of interest to present some observations on "where" and "how" local and global short-circuit.

It seems that some of interesting new practices present a strong degree of hybridism that cannot easily be explained with discourses on local capabilities or identities.

How far is the metamorphosis of local practices influenced by the web? What's the new role of the virtual *piazzas*?

Planum from the beginning

About six years ago a restricted circle of town planners, coming from different European countries, made the decision to create a network of planners working online on town planning issues.¹ This was the first step in a project that now hosts on Internet a wide range of high quality information regarding town, regional and environmental planning. Planum (www.planum.net) is the name of this network.

The idea of Planum, the European journal of planning online, came to light on the occasion of the second biennial of town and town planners (Rome, 1997). At that time Planum was conceived as a sort of Journal of Journals online, in part because most of the initial partners were publishers of important town planning reviews²

Implementing the project was made feasible by a co-financing of the European Commission in the ambit of the TenTelecom programme, although these funds covered just the first year of activity. As a result, January 2000 can be considered the date of the start-up.

It is worth remembering the great expectations put on the internet not more than six years ago, but it was also a sort of mystery to be revealed: the Internet was peremptory, you were either in or out, it made all the difference.

At present Planum with its monthly newsletter reaches more than 10,000 planners all around the world; the website receives on average 500 visits daily (about 30,000 hits per day) from

more than 80 countries (65% Europe, 20% North America, 10% South-East Asia, 5% others). These statistics can be considered as good for a website; in addition, the importance of these figures grows even further if you think this is a website dealing with very specific interests and cultural issues.

Getting global

Working on the project we (the Planum editorial board) have noticed a typical tendency of global processes: The research work of our narrow editorial board, cast in a precise way on the web, produces global feedback and interest.

The above figures demonstrate that there is indeed a “global” curiosity among planning practitioners in exchanging opinions, experiences and in learning from practices: a continuous and day-to-day worldwide conversation among planners. This conversation usually consists of an exchange of e-mails on topical town planning issues. This “disciplinary chat” allows us to intercept the main themes of interest “on the air”. As a consequence of this, it becomes possible to adopt an editorial policy close to the real interests of Planum users, so addressing the right issues. By paying attention to this non-stop dialog, the editorial policy is determined almost automatically.

Day after day we were aware of this global dimension present in the project. So we have asked ourselves: is the project itself getting global? And what does being global mean in this specific project?

Unfortunately the word “globalization” is used in everyday speech and commonly understood as a sort of Pandora’s Box. Communicating and being informed through the Internet is probably one of the most positive aspects of globalization.

Another positive aspect of globalization is the possibility to develop well-organized networks. Such networks are nowadays mainly using the Internet for communication, as well as a repository for high quality and complex information. Very often this information is shared even with external users who are not yet part of the network.

However, the concept of “global communication” is older than the Internet. Just think that the most important press agencies were born in the 19th century; furthermore, these had a very global attitude.³

In the field of urban planning, thinking globally and exchanging applied practices throughout different regions and cultures is not based on the Internet at all, but there has always been a remarkable reciprocal stream of ideas among planners. Even though the example is more closely related to architecture than planning, we could look for instance at the church of St. Denis in Paris (especially at the choir) which can be considered the first gothic building in Europe. Some decades later, gothic buildings could be found across much of the continent.

Besides the increased speed of information flow (almost real-time), the Internet empowers planners’ networks and allows information to be communicated in a more complex and complete way. It allows worldwide communication; however, the global dimension of the Internet is still very limited. When we take a look at our statistics we notice that 85% of the Planum users live in Europe or North America. At the same time the countries daily connected are often more than 80: here there is a kind of contradiction that easily explains the potential of Internet but also its pioneering state.

‘Getting global’ for Planum meant and means designing virtual “public spaces” on the web. In these places the scientific community of planners can freely exchange experiences, practices and opinions. The challenge is to understand if these “common territories” - of European or global planning culture - can find in the web a place of reciprocal creative influence.

Creating a virtual *piazza*

From the start the mission of Planum was clearly set: to transform the loose clusters of country-based practitioners into a trans-European cultural and scientific network.

The Planum web portal has therefore opened a virtual space, accessible for free on the web, in which academics, professionals and students can exchange their experiences and their research results.

The portal consists of different sections and provides different services.³ Case studies, articles, reports, movies on town planning issues, coming from different countries, determine a high quality and quantity of information published online.

It is undoubtedly a positive and involving experience to elaborate and publish online planning practices from different countries and cultures. At the same time, it is quite difficult to design a web portal that could satisfy such a “global audience”. Creating a virtual *piazza* as a place of easy interactivity among different planning cultures and traditions is in general not easy. This difficulty demonstrates that working on urban issues still means being strongly “local rooted”. Local planning systems, local procedures of implementing urban policies, urban projects and other planning matters make the profession strictly dependent on local conditions, cultures and interests.

This can be seen, at the same time, as a form of enrichment: local practices normally experiment with new procedures and create new relationships between planners and the established knowledge of the planners’ culture. Conversely, local often also means restricted, closed, not communicating: an unshared local heritage.

The desire to present local practices is also related to the self-image of the corresponding authority: only those proud of their achievements are eager to show their results to European colleagues.

Nevertheless, a virtual *piazza* should be a place globally accessible: this means easily intelligible and uncomplicated for each user. However, finding the right proportions of this *piazza* consists in presenting globally discussed issues while at the same time presenting all the cultural richness of their local components.

Sharing and disseminating at a global level the “lessons learned at a local level” can give a very high added value to the planners’ daily work, above all when there is both the will and the ability to understand what is transferable from the stock of applied practices into the current field of action.

In a virtual *piazza*, that is a virtual public space, local and global are closely juxtaposed and interact. Here it is possible to analyze and compare the local and global aptitudes of practices, to define their “glocality”.

In this sense, being globally accessible doesn’t mean being global. It means looking for a balance between “global shared concepts” and the innovations coming from local experiences of planning.

In pursuing our mission we had to design this virtual place of cultural exchange and make it concrete.

The result is a place accessible to everyone; it is articulated in different sectors that fulfill various functions. Each of these sectors meets the interest of the scientific community and in its specificity is transversal to different global themes. For example, when looking at the section named *topics* (<http://www.planum.net/topics/menu.html>) it is possible to intercept themes of global interest like:

- City and immigration
 - Community planning
 - EU enlargement
 - Landscape planning
 - Urban regeneration policies
 - Urban projects
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It is interesting to notice that the above listed globally shared themes of interest have been drawn from very local case studies. Each of these general expressions has been developed on the web by presenting a set of case studies. These are not published in a conventional way: they are often proposed by using combinations of text, pictures and video: a virtual stratagem that renders more real the comprehension of the case studies.

Another example could be the *web compass* (<http://www.planum.net/webcompass/menu.html>), in particular the section devoted to the *best sites*. A *best site* is a collection of commented links to different web sites dedicated to one specific topic. So this section doesn't offer articles, essays, videos etc., but it shows a practicable route on the web: it orients the net-surfing on a specific argument. These are for instance some of the treated themes:

- City walks: imagining the postmodern, postindustrial urban landscapes.
- Renewable Energy: Buildings, projects, studies and promotions that are characterized by their sustainable energy choices.
- Football stadiums in Europe

Such *best sites* create on the one hand a quick overview of applied solutions to a certain planning issues and at the same time a survey of websites which makes it possible to study the different strategies for presenting the chosen solution online.

The number of web pages devoted to web compass sections (over 5000 sites reviewed) makes it possible to identify certain significant concentrations of "globally shared concepts" concerning the prevalent ways of perceiving and representing the characteristics of "what is topical":

- Sustainability (different meanings progressively identified), Smart growth
- Urban density vs Urban sprawl (or *città consolidata* vs *città diffusa*)
- Governance, e-Governance, multi level Governance, and so on
- Community participation, network empowerment, local partnerships, social polarization
- City marketing
- Defense of the cultural heritage
- New urbanistic issues

A virtual place on the web, easily identifiable and accessible, makes it possible to have nearby, just a click away, local experiences, local projects that are very distant in reality. It could be considered a space where global and local short-circuit. In such a virtual space it is possible to see how global themes acquire in local practices very unambiguous typical characteristics of the "local places" taken into consideration. Probably this equation is not verified:

global = homogenizing = canceling differences

On the other hand, it is possible to notice as local practices are more and more highly hybridized.

Examples of "glocality"

We guess that it is not possible, and maybe also not very useful, to quantify the influence of dedicated virtual platforms, usually managed by professionals or researchers, on planning practices.

We would just try to give some examples of the transformation and hybridization of practices and also try to show their glocal characters. These characters can be perceived and evaluated in handling the material to publish. We are convinced that the web is accelerating the hybridization between different planning cultures and will try to find examples where this hypothesis could be demonstrated.

The web can offer a privileged point of view on the panorama of events, policies, urban projects and so on: a sort of telescope pointing directly on the universe of practices. We would like to take advantage of this special point of view by trying to explore some of the above considerations.

Here below are taken into consideration some examples of planning practices published on Planum. Most of these projects reviewed belong to the archive of the 4th biennial of town and town planners in Europe.⁴

Rotterdam Waterfront: in search of new perspectives

“How can the waterfront in the centre of the city, where there is a 'working port' (the traditional soul of Rotterdam) acquire a new relevance in the urban situation?”

<http://www.planum.net/4bie/main/m-4bie-rotterdam-ci.htm>

The renewal of the Rotterdam Waterfront seems a rather good example of how important the access to implemented practices could be for recent planning processes. First Rotterdam City Hall decided to invite professionals from other cities, namely from London, Baltimore, Hamburg and Barcelona. These cities were chosen because they represent examples of “best practices” (Barcelona – public spaces, Baltimore – tourist attraction, etc). The four projects have been compared with issues expressed by different local actors (investors, communities, stakeholders etc.); the aim of the debate is to find a common strategy which can converge into a development vision for the coming 15 years.

While analyzing the Rotterdam case study in the context of this paper, it might not be seen as a surprise when one question entered our minds: could the Internet be used for facilitating such planning procedures?

The fact is that there are always more cities' websites dedicated primarily to the marketing of urban projects. These sites normally have a short life, just the time to disseminate projects and policies close to the event. They cannot be considered web portals, however, their influence is relevant over the short term in which the event is launched: a sort of spotlight that focuses on the local urban policies promoted, projecting their reflections over a wide arena of people interested in town planning issues.

In addition, independent virtual platforms on the web present even more complete reviews of practices. This could enable “enlightened” city administrations to compare different experiences without needing to travel in real space (e.g., inviting professionals from other towns, as was done in Rotterdam or making field-trips in order to see applied solutions). As the origin of interesting best practices might be anywhere in this world (due to globalization), using the Internet could save resources and at the same time it offers an even vaster selection of different practices.

Vienna Gasometer - Linking 'Old and New' in a Historical Architectural Context - Contemporary use of Industrial Architecture

<http://www.planum.net/4bie/main/m-4bie-vienna-ch.htm>

The Vienna Gasometers were a large gas depot and situated in an urban industrial zone that had been struggling for several decades. Shut down in 1986, the decision to revitalize them by providing flats and commercial areas was taken in the mid-1990s. The result of this

revitalization is quite remarkable in the context of this paper as it implies an interesting relationship between local and global characteristics of a planning project.

As this area of Vienna (called 'Erdberger Mais') is situated precisely between the airport and the old town, it would be the ideal spot to transfer Vienna partly to a global city (and it was once envisaged by Vienna officials as a site for the new economy). The renewed Gasometers can be now seen as a kind of urban landmarks, each of them designed by a different architectural team internationally well-known. The vast surroundings of the Gasometer are expected to be filled soon with other office and housing projects, but it seems they are not likely to fill the void between these buildings. The Gasometers (and their inhabitants) themselves might be already seen as "global": for instance there have been steps to initiate a 24h-Community, which communicates via its own Intranet-Forum. However, the Gasometers are still having serious difficulties in becoming "local": so far they have remained islands in the Vienna city region without an important interchange of people or goods. They even have their own Metro station, there is no considerable flow of people; the cinema and the shopping mall are rather empty, only some major concerts are able to attract masses of people. Instead of an urban identity they offer a promotionally based unreal world: it may be cool to have, for instance, 'Gasometer C' as address, but living there doesn't seem as cool as it was supposed to be. So the Gasometers remain an expensive, semi-alive architectural exhibition, interacting more with the Vienna airport and the Vienna inner city than with its direct surroundings.

The gasometers could well represent the ideal-type of the urban project that probably will remain anchored to its own locality without creating any real connection with the city fabric. It is more architecture than town planning, just an isolated part of the town. It falls down on the idea of a project making the city more global. In this case a balanced meeting between global and local has not happened, or probably is still in progress?!

Train stations: a virtual network from the railway network

Research: Trasport and urban quality - The redevelopment of stations as an occasion for urban renewal

<http://www.planum.net/rer-stations/index.htm>

Train stations are the intersections between towns and rail-based public transport entering these towns. So both municipalities and railway enterprises are eager to present appealing stations. As a result, many train stations in Europe have been or are still in a process of complete renewal, often linked to major urban redevelopment programs.

This large number of study cases called a research program, promoted by the Regione Emilia Romagna, into action. The aim of the research is to collect existing ideas and to develop new ones for the reorganization of the railways stations, planned or now under way, in thirteen medium-sized cities of Emilia Romagna: Cesena, Faenza, Ferrara, Fidenza, Forlì, Imola, Lugo, Modena, Parma, Piacenza, Ravenna, Reggio Emilia, Rimini. The cases examined have been compared with similar European experiences of recognized value.

Large parts of the research on these European case studies were performed using the Internet as source for information as well as a presentation platform for the research results. So once again we are able to confirm: Internet is really a showcase for best practices and is used by professionals, researcher, scholars, etc. Moreover, the Internet is a medium that connects different and distant, also culturally, local experiences. It permits dialogues and networks not easily imagined a few years ago. Of course we must not forget one important fact: The Internet is a mainly independent medium that allows nearly anyone to publish on their own. So there is a certain risk of finding incomplete or wrong information. Quite often even the Planum editorial board commits errors while editing town planning issues. As we consider Planum as common data base, we are more than pleased when our users try to communicate with us pointing out mistakes. However, this kind of cultural responsibility and cooperation still has to grow up; we should remember the mission of Planum, to set up a place where a professional community shares information: so not only the authors and

editors but every single user should be responsible for the quality of this shared information! A living community has to improve itself by minimizing its weaknesses and maximizing its patrimony.

Virtual platforms for town planners

New telecommunication technologies in the form of virtual platforms, huge data banks of practices accessible online, are determining a metamorphosis both of the local and global town planning issues. This is made possible by the union between telecommunications science and computer science (IT).

Telematics, in the field of town planning, probably works as a catalyst for the metamorphosis of local practices, procedures and policies. Ideal-types of the planners' culture, globally discussed and shared, are nearly always the starting point, the benchmark, when a local project starts up.

At the same time very creative local practices, identifiable as best practices, find in the web an opportunity to "escape" from their small scale of action: they transmit a very local feedback to the general audience of the net-surfers. This means that they can present their achievements to a large arena of planners determining new general trends and arguments to consider. The local is more and more imbued with the global; many locals are re-designing the "framework" of the global. The examples have sought to demonstrate how these continuous interactions define a new characteristic of planning practises: their glocality.

As mentioned above, the mission of Planum is to establish an international network that cooperates online. Certainly, Planum is not the only Internet network in the field of urban planning. Below you will find a short index of Planum competitors and partners. Because Planum is first of all a cultural initiative, there is no real competition, but more networking and partnership building: culture is not a good with a limited consumption but it may be aggregated endlessly: the sky's the limit! However, there is always a kind of motivating competition; as soon as one planning community develops an interesting feature, the other communities will try to set up something comparable. So the exchange of best practices is not only limited to 'real' planning processes, but is also inherent to the editing of planning issues. It is usually up to these editors to establish the right frame for the exchange of applied planning practices; the way to achieve this goal might be tracked on different roads.

Taking a superficial look at the town planning web portals, one is tempted to think that there are not very substantial differences. They have normally an archive of contents; they edit and disseminate a newsletter, advertise and review books and so on. It is easy to think that there are no strong differences and there exists a sort of "homogenizing and homogenized framework" to present town planning contents on the web. A sort of global shared way. This is not true and there are many local differences in implementing such web portals.

Most of the communities with a supranational approach rely on English as their common language but as usual there are exceptions to the rule: "Café de las ciudades", for instance, probably one of the most relevant town planning websites for Latin America, therefore prefers Spanish as prime language (it is worth remembering that Spanish is one of the most widely spoken language in the world).

We have chosen English as the main language of the web site, but most articles and other downloadable contents are also in the original language; almost all European languages are available on Planum: this is also something not actually global nor local, but more glocal.

Most of the web communities are using email-based newsletters in order to "tie" the users to their own network, so inviting them frequently to surf on the network's website.

The most distinctive mark of these planning communities is certainly the question if they are accessible for free and for everyone. Planum is rather proud of the fact that every section of its webpage⁵ and as well the subscription to the newsletter are still lacking in any restriction. Thinking of the (un)availability of resources in large parts of this world, free access might be the basic condition for a globally working network.

There are other important distinguishing marks. The number of languages present on a web portal is a rather significant choice and denotes the will of the network to reach also “very local users”.

Several of these web portals have a very commercial look with restricted access, or just the English language; this makes the site really addressed to a niche of “very global planners”. Other web sites have chosen a very local language and address very local issues, but the relevance and the amount of the information put online defines them as web portals. On the other hand, websites in English address issues just on national issues. Another important point is also the choice of the programming language of the web (html, php, asp): behind these languages there are actually different ways of thinking about the www and its role in the “knowledge society”. The last point that makes the difference is also the graphic way to present the web contents to users: it is not so creative to use “standard patterns” for the arena of town planners, normally with relevant experience in graphic issues.

It seems that every network pursues its own idea of being global. Here below is a table that reviews some well-known websites dealing with planning contents:

Name of the web portal	URL	Country of origin	Language	Free access	News-letter	Bookshop and reviews
PLANUM	http://www.planum.net	European Network Italy	English and other European languages	Yes	Yes	Yes
APA	http://www.planning.org/	USA	English	No	Yes	Yes
BauNetz	http://www.baunetz.de/arc h/	Germany	German	Not completely free	Yes	Yes
CAFÉ DE LAS CIUDADES	http://www.cafedelasciudades.com.ar/	Argentina	Spanish	Yes	Yes	No
CYBURBIA	http://www.cyurbia.org/	USA	English	Yes	No	No
ELANEWS	http://www.elanews.com	European network	English French	Yes	Yes	Yes
PLANETIZEN	http://www.planetizen.com	USA	English	Yes	Yes	Yes
RTPI	http://www.rtpi.org.uk/	UK	English	No	Yes for members	Yes
RUDI	http://www.rudi.net/news.cfm	UK	English	No	Yes for members	Yes
URBAN AUDIT	http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/urban2/urban/audit/	EU/DG-regional policy	English and other European languages	Yes	No	No
URBANICITY	http://www.urbanicity.org/	UN-Habitat	English	Yes	Yes	No

Table 1: Review of web portals on town planning issues

We can conclude that the web contributes in different ways to this balance between global trends, with their generalized categories, and local innovation, with its peculiarities. It seems that not all local projects are creators of new globally shared innovation and some local boundaries are not crossed by common global achievements. Cities, regions, places, neighborhoods, spaces, villages and so on are different areas of this dialogue between global and local; these areas are not easy to define because actually in continuous change, they become more and more glocal areas. Probably also the virtual piazzas that we try to build, as public virtual places of contact among different practices and planning cultures, are all dissimilar, having different grades of glocal hybridization.

ENDNOTES

¹ The proposal for an on-line European Journal of Planning was first discussed at the workshop on "Town Planning Journals and Dissemination of the Discipline", organised at the 2nd Biennial of Towns and Planners (Rome, 12th September 1997) by INU (Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica, the Association that groups Italian town planners together).

The workshop was aimed to investigate the feasibility of an electronic journal of planning which would be jointly edited by the numerous journals working today in the field of planning theory and practice. The proposal was discussed by the editors in chief of the main European journals in Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, and Italy.

This meeting had been the starting point for an intensive effort which developed the first release of "Planum" in September 1999.

² Initial and founder members of planum.net are:

1) **Department for the Environment, Networks and the Territory (Dart)** Pescara, department of the Pescara University

2) **Department of Architecture and Planning (Diap)** Milan, department of the Polytechnic of Milan.

3) **Department of Planning and Design (Dipsa)** Rome, department of the Third University of Rome

4) **DISP**, Zurich, journal published by ORL Institute, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology

5) **Federation nationale d'agences d'urbanisme (Fnau)**, Paris, the French association representing 39 public bodies which study and plan the main metropolitan areas;

5) **Geographie - Cité**, Paris, a partnership University Paris I, University Paris VII, CNRS (Scientific Research National Centre)

6) **Informationskreis fur Raumplanung (Ifr e.V.)**, Dortmund, an association of German planners;

7) **Institut d'estudis regional i metropolitans Barcelona (Iermb)**, a consortium of public authorities and public bodies founded by the Metropolitan Authority, the University of Barcelona and the Cambra de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona.

8) **Istituto nazionale di urbanistica** (INU) Rome, the cultural and scientific association of Italian practitioners and public bodies;

9) **Sociedade e territorio**, Lisbon, the first and main planning journal in Portugal;

10) **Institut fur stadt und regional planung, Berlin**, Technische Universität of Berlin (TUB)

11) **Town planning review**, Liverpool, the major, fully-refereed British journals, published by Liverpool University Press.

³ These are the sections of Planum:

ARCHIVE: Planum's archive section constitutes a "virtual museum" of planning and urban actions (plans, designs, blueprints, maps, etc.); the opportunity to deposit material is open to public and private bodies wishing to preserve their "planning heritage" and make it more widely available. Archive is a useful resource for multimedia publishing, for researchers and for practitioners seeking contextual sources and precedents.

JOURNALS: This section provides a storehouse of new and back issues (including those no longer in print) of key European planning journals. A database of new, downloadable issues is also available in electronic format.

TOPICS: Topics focuses mainly on changes in policy issues and models related to the different European countries. Site users will find contributions about selected topics and have the opportunity to participate to ongoing debate and suggest their own topics of interest.

WEB COMPASS: This service reviews existing sites and organises planning information scattered across the net. It draws users' attention to web sites, as classified by their contents and quality. By providing access to valuable information, web compass allows users and organisations to share their views on planning; site users navigate at no cost.

NEWS: Through this planum service, site users can get up-to-date information on forthcoming events, exhibitions, conferences and meetings relating to planning in a variety of European countries and elsewhere.

SHOW SPACE. This section is a window through which public and private planning institutions, publishers and stakeholders can display and publicise their own projects, products, services, events, seminars and exhibitions. Show space provides commercial information services on the basis of licensing agreements to be signed with the producers of specialised information.

⁴ Planum has published from the beginning reports and projects of European town planners biennials: <http://www.planum.net/archive/biennials.htm> .

⁵ Not regarding the testing area on the web site where staff members communicate with each other.

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