

Geographical Urbanism

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The evolution of the European projects in recent years, from their initial focus on housing to the current wide panoply of urban and landscape scales and problems, allows us to identify a series of prevalent trends among the new generations of European architects, urban planners and landscape architects. The most attractive aspect of this analysis is to observe the creativity and intuitions of these generations, expressing their concerns, the issues they consider most relevant and worth addressing, and the action principles to face these dilemmas.

At the urban and territorial level in this group of priorities and criteria for action there is a collage of recent trends in continuous reinterpretation: 'Landscape Urbanism', 'Water Urbanism' or 'Forest Urbanism'. These design approaches can be grouped under the broader concept of 'Geographical Urbanism', which I have been working on for the last 30 years. The project for the Recovery of the Gállego Riverbanks in Zuera, by *aldajover*^{1,2} is internationally known for being the first design of a flood in public space and architecture in the contemporary Western world. However, this project is fundamentally a proposal of geographical urbanism: to reconnect the town, give it a façade, generate public space on an urban scale, and identify a new area of growth to the south, all structured by the river as the main geographical element, until then mistreated and forgotten at the back of the urban area (fig. 1).

This sensibility has spread in different ways across all continents: branding in North America with the term 'Landscape Urbanism'³, large-scale execution in Asia with tens or hundreds of built projects, and general

professional and public opinion awareness in Europe⁴. The idea of 'Geographical Urbanism' is not so much another attempt at a novel trend as a vindication of pre-industrial thought and the basic concepts that we can identify throughout history in human settlements concepts that until recently seemed distant, well known and not very exciting. The contemporary proposals, and in particular the European 18 winner and runner-up proposals, connect this pre-industrial approach with new contemporary concerns. What happens when the concepts of 'Decentralised City', 'Isotropic City', 'Polycentric City' or '15-Minute City' are superimposed on the idea of 'Geographical Urbanism'? What are the impacts of communication networks and other apparently non-material systems of the digital society on the logic of the territory? How are the multi-scale systems of urban metabolism incorporated into geographical logics – drinking water and sewage, waste, energy, transport of goods and people, etc.?

When analysing a group of European 18 prize-winning projects at least three main lines of work emerge within a geographical approach to urban planning: Ecology; Water and Topography; and Built Scale.

The winning project in Eslöv (SE) articulates the masterplan through a powerful transversal corridor that, in the absence of territorial connections, experiments with the creation of a local ecological system (fig. 2). It presents the interesting attempt to create a geographical element on a neighbourhood scale, perpendicular to the north-south promenade that divides the plot in two. In Karlstad (SE), the runner-up proposal 'stretches', in both sides of the plot, the existing north forest, trying to



Fig. 1 – Zuera (ES)
Recovery of the Gállego
Riverbanks



Fig. 2 – Eslöv (SE)
Winner
Life in Progress
Reincarnation of Bruksstaden
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Fig. 3 – Karlstad (SE)
Runner-up
Visions for Våxnäs
→ See more p.100

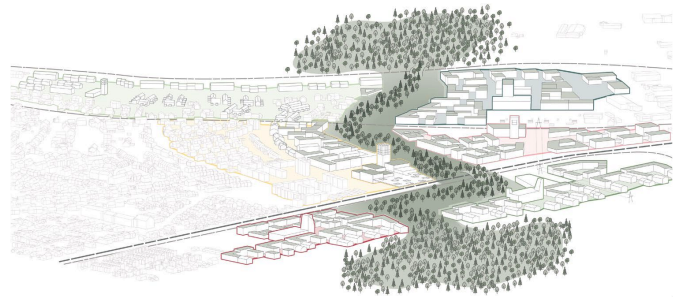


Fig. 4 – Regensburg (DE)
Winner
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→ See more p.104

Fig. 5 – Regensburg (DE)
Special mention
Regensburger Nordstern
→ See more p.108



Fig. 6 – St. Gallen (CH)
Winner
Abbey in RE major
→ See more p.116

reach the river that runs south, close to the project area (fig. 3). The Høglødet Park runs between the housing area, the cultural and educational facilities and the sports area. The west Park (Laglandet Park) acts as a buffer space between the new neighbourhood and the existing city. It is worth asking whether this standard solution – the transition zone between the existing and the new – should be put into crisis in favour of a 'building transition' and an ecological and geographical corridor more intimately connected to new urban forms and their housing and facilities. The winning project in Regensburg (DE) is surely the clearest of those that use the ecological corridor as an articulating element of new urban growth, connecting forests to the east and west, and turning it into the main public space. This project develops a bright urban form that complements the idea of the corridor. Its low-rise blocks – three or four storeys – are articulated by public spaces on a neighbourhood scale and small towers that anchor them as visual references, offering an excellent counterpoint to the horizontality of the buildings and the urban forest that crosses the neighbourhood (fig. 4).

Water and topography are not as essential in urban articulation as might have been expected in the group of the prize-winning projects analysed. The proposal most focused on these two intertwined themes is the special mention in Regensburg (DE). Instead of the forested corridor of the winning proposal described above, and which incorporates small ponds, the special mention identifies two drainage lines that are also transversal and a third north-south that converge in a retention lagoon. The proposal repeats the same strategy on the other side of the rail tracks (fig. 5). It is interesting to compare the landscape sophistication of the special mention, which develops the built form less elaborately, with the rotundity of the green corridor of the winning proposal, enriched with the very interesting urban morphology described above.

The third line of work to highlight in this group of prize-winning projects is the geographical scale of the architectural element.

The site of St. Gallen (CH) presents a significant topographical complexity at the foot of the adjacent mountain. The winning proposal makes a daring exercise in macrostructure, continuous and permeable at the same time, with a geometry fragmented enough to be integrated into the place (fig. 6). It extends horizontally, parallel to the slope, or descends in steps perpendicular to it, depending on the needs of this trace of a geographical scale. A stream runs through the building on the west side and another surrounds it on the east. The structure is anchored to the ground or raised on it with piles, offering multiple entry points, partially surrounding public spaces or completely enclosing an agora.

In conclusion, it is worth noting the interest of most of the prize-winning designers on the Eslöv (SE), Karlstad (SE), Regensburg (DE) and St. Gallen (CH) sites in approaching the design of new neighbourhoods using geography and its main elements as a key to articulating new forms of urban life, connected to their territories. The result has large-scale ecological and water management implications that are a planetary urgency. And for their inhabitants they offer an experience of great richness at multiple scales, from the tree and the bench – in the corridor or in small ramifications or frayed greens between the buildings – to the ability to access the mountain, the river or the lagoons that help manage storms. What thirty years ago was little less than an eccentricity is today a way of understanding how to inhabit the planet.

1. K. Shannon, *From Theory to Resistance: Landscape Urbanism in Europe*, in Ch. Waldheim ed., *Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press 2006, 150-153.

2. I. Alday, *Floods, River Dynamics, and Climate Change in Urban Public Space*, in I. Alday, M. Jover, J. Arcos, F. Mesonero, *Cities and Rivers*, ACTAR 2023, 14-23.

3. Ch. Waldheim, *Landscape as Urbanism*, in Ch. Waldheim ed., *Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press 2006, 35-53.

4. K. Shannon, *From Theory to Resistance: Landscape Urbanism in Europe*, in Ch. Waldheim ed., *Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press 2006, 141-161.