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Embracing Urban complexity: The experience of the AESOP Thematic Group Public Spaces and Urban Cultures

Gabriella Esposito De Vita, Stefania Ragozino, Christine Mady

The complexity of capturing the multiple, overlapping, and interconnected aspects that animate a city is well known. This is true if we think for instance of cities' morphological evolution, numerous networks and diverse actors participating or being systematically excluded from urban decision-making processes. Another relevant issue is the co-existence in our cities of innovative forms of spaces' liberation, reclaiming public spaces from underused or abandoned places, with market-led and extractive initiatives of privatisation of public spaces. Additionally, there are the direct and indirect impacts of health, environmental and geopolitical crises that the world is facing by undergoing continuous and increasingly complex transformations. At the urban scale, the binomial public spaces – urban cultures combines various interrelated perspectives that could address and explain this complexity, and explore relational dynamics between spaces within urban transformations, cultural phenomena, and interactions with those who inhabit the spaces. This article is a reflection on AESOP's Thematic Group on Public Spaces and Urban Cultures (TG PSUC), its development since 2010, modus operandi, and the events organised within working themes, which considered the binomial both as subject and method, to explore, and actively engage with current and future perspectives on public spaces.

KEYWORDS:

AESOP, public spaces, urban cultures, thematic group



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Affrontare la complessità urbana: l'esperienza dell'AESOP Thematic Group Public Spaces and Urban Cultures

La complessità che si manifesta nel cogliere i molteplici, sovrapposti e interconnessi aspetti che animano una città è ben nota. Tale complessità si esprime, in particolare, quando si pensa all'evoluzione morfologica delle città, così come alle numerose reti e ai diversi attori che partecipano o sono sistematicamente esclusi dai processi decisionali urbani. Un'altra questione rilevante è la coesistenza nelle nostre città di forme innovative di liberazione degli spazi, attraverso il recupero da parte delle comunità di luoghi sottoutilizzati o abbandonati per trasformarli in spazi d'uso civico, con iniziative di privatizzazione degli spazi pubblici guidate dal mercato ed estrattive. A ciò si aggiungono gli impatti diretti e indiretti delle crisi sanitarie, ambientali e geopolitiche che il mondo sta affrontando, subendo trasformazioni continue e sempre più complesse. Alla scala urbana, il binomio spazio pubblico - culture urbane combina diverse prospettive interconnesse che potrebbero affrontare e spiegare questa complessità, ed esplorare le dinamiche relazionali tra gli spazi all'interno delle trasformazioni urbane, i fenomeni culturali e le interazioni con coloro che abitano gli spazi. Questo articolo è una riflessione sul Gruppo Tematico AESOP Public Spaces and Urban Cultures (TG PSUC), sul suo sviluppo dal 2010, sul suo modus operandi e sugli eventi organizzati nell'ambito di temi selezionati, che hanno considerato il binomio sia come oggetto di discussione che come metodo di lavoro, per esplorare e impegnarsi attivamente con le prospettive attuali e future sugli spazi pubblici.

PAROLE CHIAVE:

AESOP, spazi pubblici, culture urbane, gruppo tematico

Embracing Urban complexity: The experience of the AESOP Thematic Group Public Spaces and Urban Cultures

di Gabriella Esposito, Christine Mady, Stefania Ragozino,

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the built environment has been the tangible expression of multicultural and multifaceted needs of a transforming society (Sassen, 1991), offering the stage to the evolving notion of public realm and the multiplicity of codes for everyday life in public spaces (Sennett, 1996, 2011). The built environment, crossed by the vibrancy of human and non-human life, comes from the notion of a situated interdependence among the cultural dimensions of urban materiality in relation to publics in what Ash Amin calls the “situated surplus” of the material environment that predisposes relations in public spaces (Amin, 2008; Amin & Thrift, 2002). Public spaces – material expression of changing concepts of the public realm, especially after the phases of the post-Fordist transition – are suffering from pressures and challenges to their role as places for integration and democracy, within the dynamics of globalisation and market-led privatisation leading to social exclusion. Public spaces play a relevant role in urban transformation, being under the spotlight of the political, economic, social, environmental and cultural strategies of cities, as catalysts for redevelopment programmes and as expressions of common goods. Their role and relevance requires exploring them from perspectives of planning, policy design, political roles played, expressions of everyday life, needs and expectations, to preserve their historical role as the glue that keeps society together rather than tearing it apart.

The need to grasp the complex relationships among public spaces and urban life, by focusing on urban studies, urban planning and urban design approaches and tools, has been the driver of the initiative to establish a debate arena on these topics within the Association of European School of Planning’s (AESOP). This latter was established in 1987 in Belgium as an international association with scientific, artistic, and educational purposes and operates according to its Charter. With over 150 members, AESOP is the only representative of the planning schools in Europe, and beyond. Within the AESOP, throughout conferences and events, a continuous debate on spatial or planning phenomena, planning, design and policies challenges has been developed¹. Under the motto of “promoting excellence in planning education and research”, AESOP hosts 18 thematic groups focusing on specific topics and scientific stances².

In this framework, the thematic group focusing on exchanging research and practices among different dimensions of public spaces in urban design was established: the so-called Thematic Group Public Spaces and Urban Cultures (TG PSUC)³. In 2010 at AESOP following a fruitful debate, a question arose about distinguishing the role of public spaces in urban design as the separate discourse. On this note, three researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds and countries, Sabine Knierbein (TU Vienna, Austria), Ceren Sezer (RWTH Aachen Universi-

ty, Germany) and Chiara Tornaghi (Coventry University, UK), took the initiative to establish the AESOP TG PSUC by writing a position paper that set the Group's aims and basic premises. It included various perspectives on public spaces and urban cultures manifested within the European planning schools. With the mentorship and support by Ali Madanipour (Newcastle University) and Sophie Watson (The Open University), the newly established AESOP TG PSUC organised the launching event during the Annual Conference in Helsinki, Finland, in June 2010⁴. This starting point led to a growing community of scholars, decision makers and practitioners to building networks and mutual learning experiences across European countries and abroad. It was a game changer for young participants and renewed energy for those who were already experienced researchers.

The TRIA special issue “Embracing Public Space and Urban Cultures: Understanding and Acting on Complexity of Contemporary Cities”⁵ was launched under the umbrella of the working theme 2022-2024 of the TG PSUC titled “Public Spaces, Urban Cultures and Constructing Peace”⁶. This special issue invited researchers at various stages and within different contexts to explore the binomial public spaces – urban cultures, and contextualise socio-spatial contestations, conflicts, and inequalities, along with self-determination and social innovations leading to transformative actions within contemporary cities. This article by former and current coordinators of the AESOP TG PSUC shares its experiences and reports on changing working dynamics following the global crises since 2020.

Following this introduction, and to reflect on TG PSUC's itinerary, the next section presents the group's foundation and *raison d'être*, which were mirrored in the working themes until the year 2020. With rising planetary challenges, the group assessed and revised its broader societal role and operations during the COVID-19 pandemic as explained in the next section. This adjustment was accompanied by themes that resonated with current realities, gaps in collaboration across education, research, and practice, arriving at the globally compelling need for peace and the corresponding theme. The last section uses the TG PSUC reflections as a springboard to draw possible paths towards alternative futures, which combine the group's aspirations for just, inclusive and caring urban spaces.

2. Public realm in urban studies and the need for spatialisation and cross-pollination: the AESOP TG PSUC at a glance

The public realm's paramount role in urban design and spatial practices is testified by the intense interdisciplinary debate and multiplicity of planning experiences developed under different cultural and scientific perspectives on processes of neoliberalisation, economic globalisation and competition among territories, growing inequalities in cities, institutional opacity and post-political reactions (Brenner & Theodore, 2003; Low & Smith, 2013; Moulaert et al., 2005; Peck et al., 2010). Public spaces are the arena of struggles and resistance and of formal and informal initiatives for improving everyday life and social inclusion (Healey, 2017; Hou & Knierbein, 2017; Merrifield, 2014; Ragozino et al., 2024; Viderman & Knierbein, 2020).

In 2010, with much enthusiasm, considering public spaces as arenas of social interaction,

a group of scholars gathered as members of the newly formed AESOP TG PSUC started discussing their vital role in bringing together people from different cultural backgrounds, filling social, cultural, gender, age, and experience gaps. The group is rooted in an open and dynamic conceptual framework combining the spatial dimension of public realm, with the recognition of multiple urban everyday cultures that affect planning processes. The binomial public (lived) spaces - urban cultures represents both the richness of the scientific debate, the institutional and social innovation experiences developed throughout cities in different continents. TG PSUC's original focus was threefold: "Artistic and intellectual practices and urban planning", in terms of arts-led urban regeneration related to public space, "Emerging urban cultures and socio-spatial practices in public spaces", discussing how to inform a culturally inspired governance of public spaces, and "Post-disciplinary planning education regarding urban cultures and public spaces", to explore creative learning tools and methodologies and enhance toolkits for planning practice (Knierbein & Sezer, 2015). Since the beginning, the group's aim has been to introduce the research, policy and design focus on public spaces - urban cultures in planning-related disciplines, by bringing together people from diverse disciplines: Art, Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Urban Planning, Urban Design, Policy, Urban Sociology, Urban Geography, Urban Ethnography, among others. The two pillars of this exchange include the self-organised management approach with continuous dialogue, and the co-design of umbrella themes with related events.

Self-organised management

To join the group, new members need to present a statement of interest, regarding their research interests on the relations between public spaces and urban cultures, focusing on one of the following aspects: theory, concepts, speculation; methodology, methods combination, method reflection; empirical field research and related ethics; education and learning; policy, regulation, and planning; civic design, co-production and collective meaning-making. Each participant brings in competences to the group, sharing reflections and inspirations to be channelled into curriculum development in planning schools as to include and centre new programs, curricula and structures around our themes. The group has been a platform that encourages curiosity-driven research, enhances applications to EU and national project calls, cross-pollinates research topics, promotes mentorship programmes across countries and institutions, and disseminates findings through publications. Despite professional commitments within their own institutions, workplaces, and the personal life changes, the group's active members developed collaborative working approaches. In 2024, the group has 147 members affiliated with institutions globally (Figure 1).

Throughout the initial period, the management organisation was tuned and formalised during meetings and AESOP's annual conferences. Until 2017, the core managing group included Sabine Knierbein, Chiara Tornaghi, Ceren Sezer and Gabriella Esposito, benefiting from the institutional office support from TU Wien. During the AESOP TG Meeting in Porto the self-organized governance structure was discussed, giving the group a new collective spin. In this period, the coordination of TG PSUC was handled in pairs, with one main coordinator and a co-coordinator for the span of two years in mutual dialogue and active horizontal



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exchange with all contributors⁷. The reason was to have an overlap in the last year when the co-coordinator steps in as a main one, while a new TG PSUC member joins for co-coordination, and the previous coordinator joins the advisory board. The multidisciplinary and different perspectives expressed by the TG PSUC's active members, due to diverse geo-political contexts and professional backgrounds, required to define a co-working methodology to embrace this rich diversity and enable synergetic collaborations. The decision for this self-organised management approach was taken during the AESOP TG 2015 meeting in Oporto and applied until 2018 in different places and changing political conditions (Knierbein & Sezer, 2015). This two-year coordination period corresponds to preparing TG's biannual working theme. The group provides peer-to-peer exchange on urban research, planning and design projects, participates in AESOP's annual conferences (co-chairing tracks, special sessions, roundtables, TG meetings), and its members voluntarily develop activities and topics under the biannual umbrella themes with self-organised meetings spanning academia, praxis, and activism (workshops, seminars, and conferences, accompanied by field trips). Since the beginning, group members and other interested parties could submit a proposal for hosting a TG event (conference/call for abstract/call for paper/workshop/meeting).

Fig. 1 - AESOP TG PSUC members from different continents

Some of the coordinators' and core group's tasks include establishing the group's content-wise agenda (working topics, calls, meetings); managing communication via various media (homepage, blog, Facebook, mailing list, newsletter) among the TG's members; preparing meetings, annual reports and communicating with the AESOP Secretary General; disseminating scientific results; promoting a strong involvement in research, publications and with a broader audience. Participation in events offered by the AESOP TG PSUC steadily increased, dealing with issues, disrupting boundaries, and opening minds and bringing new perspectives that encouraged internal debate and public exchange with TG PSUC.

Umbrella topics and related events

The initial active members of the group established a collaborative, horizontal working model to build an accessible and open debate arena for developing the biannual themes. This process refined a way of working to enhance dialogue and mutual learning experiences. To do so, a double step program was enacted: discussing topics of interest for the community of scholars in the field of public spaces and urban cultures, as well as capturing the political, cultural, environmental, economic and social changing dynamics. Open and spontaneous discussions served as the seed for drafting the biannual theme, developing it collaboratively online across members, launching it during AESOP conferences and approving it during group meetings.

Regarding the events, TG PSUC members of the selected location figured as the event's local organisers and were supported by TG representatives. At times, these events were combined with local conferences, excursions, workshops, symposia, or other related activities within the host city. This allowed for establishing bridges with other organisations and territorial players to capture diversities, promote inclusion and open dialogues. These events highlighted relations across topics, scientific debates about them, geo-political dynamics, and local specificities. These events are organised free of charge, to facilitate participation from a broad range of students, researchers, and practitioners, and to highlight open accessibility as a key aspect for understanding public spaces and urban cultures.

The first moment to discuss the topics and to welcome new active participants was the TG PSUC meeting held in Vienna in November 2010 within the framework of the Conference "Public Space and the Challenges of Urban Transformation in Europe. Politics and Culture"⁸. By discussing issues, strategies, and tactics for dealing with public spaces, actors and their roles in socio-spatial practices, people's everyday needs addressed in or by public spaces, the three TG PSUC founders alimented a vibrant debate, and welcomed participants from diverse backgrounds. In Vienna a new community of thinking was born, to critically inquire into the nature of urban cultures and public spaces, through an inclusive way of working and open discussion. Part of the debate that started in Vienna was included in an edited book, on theoretical frameworks and case studies from different continents (Madanipour et al., 2014). This publication is a testament to the collaborations among several TG PSUC members as part of a series of publications (edited books, special issues, papers, and proceedings).

Under the first umbrella topic 2011-2013 "Conviviality", a significant cycle of events star-



Fig. 2 - Some AESOP TG PSUC's events under the "Conviviality" working theme: Naples, Porto, and Ljubljana.

ted, offering possibilities to confront and weave networks with the AESOP Planning Community, other scientific communities engaged with these topics, European research networks, policymakers, local communities, and urban activists among other (Figure 2). This topic, launched by the founders and collectively defined, aimed to investigate the conditions in which public spaces accommodate or limit the initiatives organised on streets as convivial moments of interaction among local communities and other urban players (Knierbein & Sezer, 2015). Conviviality is a term that originates from the Latin "convivium" (living with, coexisting): the concept evokes sharing a living space, in which meals and banquets used to have an important role for the cohesion of the community⁹.

This first working theme – as developed throughout events organised in Vienna, Ljubljana, Naples, Brussels, Ankara, and Lisbon – has been paramount in setting the context and defining the approach of the voluntary-based group. Other meetings were organised as side events within broad conferences, giving the opportunity to engage a large audience and enhancing the discussion. This combination of formal and informal activities, along with the constant involvement in teaching and mentoring experiences, guaranteed inclusion, and broad dissemination.

Over time, the TG topics evolved along with the societal challenges, setting a biannual turnover of the umbrella topics, to follow the scientific and institutional debate. The cycle of developing biannual working themes continued to become a *modus operandi* for TG PSUC. Under each theme and during every event, there was diversity and specificity in how they were organised, and hosted, bringing together formal academic events with informal stakeholders' initiatives, including communities and territorial players. Frequently, unlike in regular conferences, participants were actively involved in field activities and workshops. Rising societal challenges and uncertainties necessitated revisiting TG PSUC's position to contribute to addressing them. At this point, it is important to explain how the working themes were collectively chosen.

After closing the cycle dedicated to the Conviviality theme, the willingness of exploring the multifaceted aspects of public spaces is one of the pivotal features of the thematic group

and it is a declared objective that the TG approached within the working theme 2013-2015 “Becoming Local”. Specifically, it observed the dynamics of migration and mobility fluxes at international level, the impacts of the global financial crisis, as well as the changes in labour markets. Public space is approached as arenas of conflicts, negotiation and consensus among different actors who shape the city.

It is with the working theme 2016-2019 “Unstable Geographies – Dislocated Publics” that the recognition of public space as the manifestation of cities’ different everyday cultures, as valuable social and cultural capital of urban societies, and, also, a bleak backdrop of fear and constant uncertainty and unsettlement is consolidated. This working theme emerged at a historical moment in which even the hitherto privileged part of the world has touched upon the crisis of capitalism and social reproduction, and in which the huge journeys of refugees and migrants have also made public space a place for humanitarian aid and the protection of human rights. In this framework, a strong call for strengthening dialogue and mutual learning between cities and regions of the Global South and of the Global North gained momentum in urban research and practice (Knierbein & Sezer, 2015).

The topics so far anticipated forthcoming disruptions, mainly the COVID-19 pandemic and the following war crises, events that changed geographic perceptions of peace, and roles of public spaces globally.

3. TG’s response to societal local and global challenges

The climatic and pandemic planetary crises imposed a multitude of adaptations and adjustments to the way we live in cities and beyond (Knierbein & Pfeifer, 2023). First, the need to support climate change through ethical behaviour both at the personal and professional level. Second, the need to adjust everyday life habits in relation to the upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Like so many small or large organisations, TG PSUC had to respond to the new demands that the geopolitical scenario presented. It continued the endeavours to involve practitioners, academics, governmental and non-governmental and civil society actors in its activities and facilitate knowledge exchange across disciplines and domains of action through meetings, workshops, conferences, and roundtables mainly conducted online.

Beyond that, TG PSUC specifically answered to this complex scenario by delineating working themes and the way it approached self-organised management. Following, firstly the adjustment to the working method will be explained, and then we show how that related to defining the themes starting in the year 2020.

In this complex and dynamic context, the group felt the need to broaden and strengthen dialogue between practitioners and policymakers, also in the light of the guidelines of the New Urban Agenda (UN-Habitat, 2016), which focuses on public space as a promoter of “inclusive, connected, safe and accessible” cities. An ample participation of TG member to the debate around the New Leipzig Charter “The transformative power of cities for the common good” signed by EU Countries ministers responsible for urban development, led to fruitful discussions on how to support the development of cities reflecting democratic rights and

values, as well as cities as “laboratories for new forms of problem-solving and test beds for social innovation”¹⁰.

According to this, TG PSUC is pursuing two objectives, the first one regarding the need to deepen public space provision going beyond state actors to include panoply of residents, activists and different combinations of interest groups, and the second one affecting the multitude of facets that exist between those who claim public space for social, cultural, environmental and political reasons and those who celebrate market-led approaches for the attractiveness and political/populist manipulation of the public realm. It is with the working theme 2020-2022 “Public Spaces: Knowledge transition between Research, Policy and Practice”, that the group explored a relational perspective to analyse the places of public space with transdisciplinary methods and approaches and promoted a transformative logic that directly influenced public space policies and practices towards inclusive, connected, safe and accessible cities.

In terms of events within the themes, the main impact in 2020 was the disruption of in-person meetings due to the pandemic. Instead, three online events were held in the form of webinars, and e-roundtables in online conferences. This was also the year when the next theme was being prepared and was moderated through online discussions with the TG PSUC members. Online events continued through 2021 and 2022, except for one organised by TG PSUC members based in Thessaloniki in 2021, and partly the AESOP conference in 2022 Tartu, though online sessions were ongoing. As explained in the previous section, the building of biannual themes happens during the TG PSUC’s meeting at AESOP Annual Congresses, where ideas are openly brainstormed and developed in relation to ongoing issues related to the public spaces and urban cultures.

With the limitation of being confined to dispersed physical locations and communicating only online, TG PSUC utilised online tools to scientifically and socially gather its members, and launched a survey to see where our members are, what they would be interested to do in the TG (roles), what type of research they do and how they benefited from the TG opportunities of networking. AESOP’s uplifting of their website was another opportunity to highlight organisational changes and engage more members. One major change was switching from the format of main coordinator and co-coordinator to a coordination team of three members (Figure 3). The reason was to provide a smooth transition – given the constraints of meeting in-person – to the next coordination team, enable younger members to assume TG PSUC’s coordination while being supported by more established ones, and ensure synergies within the coordination team due to different competencies, career stages and backgrounds. The coordination team then engaged with the rest of TG PSUC in brainstorming in preparation of the collective draft of the next working theme, prepared annual reports to the AESOP, and presentations about the TG that were used in different events.

In the geopolitical conditions of 2022, it was rather complicated to prioritize the focuses to channel the group’s energies towards constructive topics. On the one hand, there was the need to continue to critically observe and interact with the complex urban phenomenology, on the other hand, fatigued by the hectic rhythms and isolation of post-COVID, the group felt the need for a vision that spans the present scenario. For these reasons, the TG decided

Fig. 3 - The AESOP TG PSUC's current self-organised management

Coordination team 2023-2024

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Core Working Group

Patricia Aelbrecht (UK), **Nadia Charalambous** (Cyprus), **Gabriella Esposito De Vita** (Italy), **Sabine Knierbein** (Austria), **Christine Mady** (Finland), **Matej Nikšič** (Slovenia), **Stefania Ragozino** (Italy), **Nikolai Roskamm** (Germany), **Mohamed Saleh** (The Netherlands), **Sara Santos Cruz** (Portugal), **Ceren Sezer** (Germany), **Socrates Stratis** (Cyprus), **Tihomir Viderman** (Germany), **Burcu Yigit Turan** (Sweden)

Advisory Board

Ali Madanipour (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK), **Sophie Watson** (Open University, UK), **Sabine Knierbein** (TU Vienna, Austria), **Gabriella Esposito De Vita** (CNR-IRISS National Research Council of Italy), **Ceren Sezer** (RWTH Aachen University, Germany), **Stefania Ragozino** (CNR-IRISS National Research Council of Italy)



to critically work on the construction of peace as a pivotal theme to assure better urban futures. The working theme 2022-2024 “Public Spaces, Urban Cultures and Constructing Peace” copes with health, ecological and economic crises, coupled with conflicts across multiple scales – from acquiring geo-political dominion to often invisible struggles that permeate spaces of homes. In unsettled and neo-authoritarian times, post-political reactions and movements counteracting human rights reflects struggles and crises of (urban) democracy, encouraging at enhancing open-minded urban studies to accompany next generations protests and activism.

While debates on divides and conflicts in urban societies often shift focus in the range from social polarisation and political exclusion (e.g. political economy or post-foundational theories), over the negotiation of the private-public boundary in everyday life struggles (e.g. feminist critique), struggles over appropriation of public space (urban activism and literature on insurgencies), to insights into spaces of enduring conflicts and divides (Belfast, Baghdad, Istanbul, Nicosia, Jerusalem, Beirut and others), they introduce the ‘securing of peace as a normative goal. However, the institutionalisation of peace across the binary of peace and conflict creates a conceptual gap, in which conflicts across the world are described as increasingly pervasive and complex, while peace is offered as rather a one-dimensional goal. Such an abstraction of a complex set of values, symbols, experiences, and practices that amalgamate into peace, carries the danger of instrumentalising peace in the construction of hegemonic social, cultural, and symbolic spaces.

Achieving peace through political and other peace-making processes, too often preserves and produces disparities in power relations, be it at the level of global peace-making or at the level of the home. The projected image of peace must conform with certain imaginaries of peace and peaceful living together, even when this means casting a veil of silence over

past injustices, daily struggles, and potential paths of change. Each day individuals, collectives and societies go about their lives, often unaware that the choices they make, while continuously negotiating between peace and conflict, and, moreover, deciphering/understanding/co-defining what kind of peace is desired. This is why we ask how peace is constructed. The main question is: how do we arrive at peace in everyday life, and how does urban space mould the understanding of what kind of peace we aim to arrive at? The working theme, in the first instance, has the objective to understand peace. From a broader perspective, one might challenge the very understanding of peace, starting with the dialectics between what is perceived as peace and the invisible struggles that such an image might disguise. We ask if urbanisation processes ever aimed at peace. As post-colonial debates or debates on settler colonialism indicate, even within settings, which are perceived as peaceful, (histories) of violence might be permeated. This raises the question of not only peace as a normative goal, but rather how we arrive at peace. The second step is to move the focus from a conflictual dimension to one related to everyday life. The TG is interested in how peace is negotiated daily, on which is the price of everyday peace constructed in the urban context. It does not come at the same price for everyone and does not have the same impact on everyone's daily life. Think of poverty, discrimination across differences, heritage of violent pasts and how these struggles are passed onto later generations. Moreover, negotiating peace could include actions or non-actions, the decision to be in place, or avoid that place; the acceptance to abide by norms (such as COVID-19 health and safety measures) or not. These choices could lead to inclusion or exclusion from what is considered as the expected norm/behaviour.

This perspective confirmed the observation of the binomial public spaces – urban cultures, to which TG PSUC is related for more than ten years, focusing on everyday construction of peace, and making operative an iterative process from the personal to public sphere. The 'construction of peace' or being at peace comes at different scales of experiencing peace. Focus on peace is simultaneously a personal and social endeavour. It includes different scales, from personal space to groups with close bonds, over city, society to global normative goals. It also transgresses the boundary between (industrialised) societies and nature, as humans seek peace in connection to nature, and declaratively seek to resolve the lost peace with nature and the planet. It starts with the individual feeling at peace with oneself and extends to the environment. One could feel at peace when surrounded by crowds, or when isolated in their private dwelling. Peace facilitates inclusion, also for vulnerable groups who feel at peace in public space (gender, age, special needs, cultural and other backgrounds...). This is relevant because public spaces reflect the discourses and practices of tolerance towards differences and display or disguise the tensions immanent in encounters and exchange across diverse urban cultures. From the mundane acts of conviviality to demonstrations, public space accommodates different expressions of demands and claims for spatial and social justice. These struggles can materialise in various forms, from peaceful to violent in a panoply of endeavours that try to belong and partake in democracy. As usual, after collectively defining the working theme, a call for events was launched to all the TG PSUC members. The manifestations of interest were highly relevant, inspiring and representative of a common need to deepen the theme of peace and alternative ways of perceiving, negotiating and



Fig. 4 - AESOP TG PSUC's events under the "Public Spaces, Urban Cultures and Constructing Peace" working theme: Naples, Helsinki, Pretoria, UCLA, Cyprus, Pretoria

constructing everyday peace through a multitude of topics that in different ways testify an urgent debate on collective resources: public libraries, urban commons, un-commoning, regenerative public spaces, social infrastructures and publics (Figure 4). The culmination of this theme was to reveal the dire need for proactive, and urgent responses regarding public spaces in diverse urban cultures. This last theme opened new avenues for reflection, reassessment and re-questioning as presented in the last section.

4. Future perspectives

On 10 July 2024 at the AESOP conference in Paris¹¹, TG PSUC will celebrate 14 years of initiatives, activities and collective scientific outputs (Figure 5) (Gabauer et al., 2022; Hou & Knierbein, 2017; Kamalipour et al., 2023; Knierbein & Viderman, 2018; Landman & Mady, 2022; Madanipour et al., 2013; Nikšič et al., 2018; Nikšič & Sezer, 2017; Tornaghi & Knierbein, 2015; Viderman et al., 2023).

During the conference and in its meeting, the TG PSUC coordination team will welcome a new member who will actively participate in preparing the working theme for 2024-2026. Also, the group welcomes interested colleagues and new members who can contact us throughout the conference (and beyond) and particularly during the next TG Meetings will be hosted under the next umbrella theme. The AESOP annual conferences after 2019 did not have the usual full attendance as per usual, due to the mentioned crises adaptation processes. However, the Paris conference promises to have higher participation, which gives the opportunity to jointly reflect on the way forward and regain the taste for friendly and professional relationships to be spent face-to-face.

Critically reflecting on TG PSUC's activities, its modes of working went through multiple challenges, some general regarding the setting of informal and free of charge meetings, some

Fig. 5 - AESOP TG PSUC biannual working themes



specific to the themes, places, players, and types of events involved. The engagement the TG representatives in collaborating with the organising committee of conferences, symposia, workshops and other events has been a game changer in guaranteeing both inclusion and the respect of TG PSUC's founding principles. Even more, the bond among group members meant that they shared the joys and sorrows of the ups and downs of geopolitical events, creating a welcomed and needed solidarity. It is also necessary to highlight the difficulties faced in conducting this process (e.g. organisational, material and emotional commitment), including the direct and indirect risks (e.g. self-exclusion processes, indirect discrimination, protection of researchers-at-risk) that were seized as opportunities to develop TG PSUC's working approach, usually open, sometimes covert. This sometimes tortuous and at other times smooth process of brainstorming, meeting (online and personally), discussing and constructively arguing, exploring new frontiers of the public realm, spatialisation and cross-pollinating cultures, has become a familiar, safe, caring and stimulating curiosity driven research arena. Numerous topics have emerged from the last working theme's events, for example, inclusion of youth, non-academics, transdisciplinary approaches, geographic coverage, 'informal' and 'bottom-up' initiative, 'de-colonising' work on public spaces and urban cultures, away from the conventional, academic approaches, the challenge of technological development, AI and implications for public spaces and urban cultures, among others.

The AESOP TG PSUC is considered as one of the most active groups within AESOP in terms of events engaging also non-academics, publications, proposing topics to challenge the traditional ways of thinking public spaces and urban cultures. This TRIA special issue, and an edited book related to public space and constructing peace will serve as drivers for further research on public spaces and urban cultures in the contemporary but also future cities' emerging challenges.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://aesop-planning.eu/>
- 2 <https://aesop-planning.eu/thematic-groups>
- 3 <https://aesop-planning.eu/thematic-groups/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures>
- 4 <https://aesoptgpsuc.wordpress.com/2013/05/24/invitation-the-thematic-group-launching-event-aesop-helsinki-conference-finland/>
- 5 Guest co-editors: Gabriella Esposito (CNR-IRISS, Italy), Christine Mady (Aalto University, Finland) and Stefania Ragozino (CNR-IRISS, Italy)
- 6 <https://aesop-planning.eu/tg-news/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures/call-for-expressions-of-interest-to-host-the-thematic-group-s-meetings-2022-2024>
- 7 <https://aesop-planning.eu/resources/news-archive/thematic-groups/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures/annual-report-for-2016>
- 8 It was hosted by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space, Institute of Spatial Planning, Faculty for Architecture and Planning, TU Wien in Vienna, Austria.
- 9 <https://aesoptgpsuc.wordpress.com/2013/05/24/announcement-aesop-thematic-group-public-spaces-and-urban-cultures-annual-meeting-112011/>
- 10 https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2020/new-leipzig-charter-the-transformative-power-of-cities-for-the-common-good
- 11 <https://aesop-planning.eu/paris>

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