

Annual Report 2024

Prepared by coordinators (Tihomir Viderman, Matej Nikšič, Evangelia Athanassiou)
with the support of TG PSUC members
31 January 2025

Introduction

The Thematic Group on Urban Cultures and Public Spaces (PSUC) engages with the dynamic relationship between urban development, public spaces, and cultural practices from an interdisciplinary perspective. By bringing together academics, researchers, practitioners, activists, and policymakers from diverse fields and geographies, PSUC fosters innovative approaches to researching, planning, and designing urban spaces in contemporary cities, by bringing lived experiences of public spaces and urban cultures to the centre of attention.

Established in April 2010 through the initiative of Sabine Knierbein (TU Wien, Austria), Ceren Sezer (RWTH Aachen, Germany), and Chiara Tornaghi (Coventry University, UK), for over a decade the Group has contributed to research, planning, and design agendas on public spaces and urban cultures within and beyond the AESOP community. The Group brings together members who engage in peer-to-peer exchange on research and design projects, as well as in Group's events. In addition to the annual AESOP Congress, PSUC has regular meetings spanning academia, practice and activism, which take place in the form of workshops, seminars and conferences, accompanied by field trips.

As of 2024, the Group's membership has grown to 158 professionals, researchers, and activists working on public spaces and urban cultures, both from AESOP institutional members and beyond.

Internal organization of the thematic group

To ensure the long-term pursuit of its goals, PSUC has developed a horizontal collective coordination structure managed by a biannually rotating coordination team, a core working group, and an advisory board. Together, they oversee the key tasks essential to the group's success

The Coordination Team is responsible for:

- managing communication with the thematic group's members, broader audiences and the AESOP Secretary General (AESOP TG blog, Facebook page, mailing list, newsletter);
- preparing meetings and annual reports;
- disseminating scientific results.

Together with the Core Working Group, the Coordination Team:

- uses synergies of group's membership to conduct research, enable exchange and produce publications;
- establishes and promotes the Group's agenda (working topics, calls, publications, events).

Advisory Board closely works with the Coordination Team and the Core Working Group on content and strategy development.



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Group Coordination

At the AESOP congress in Paris, 8-12 July 2024, the PSUC coordination transitioned from the 2022-2024 team, comprised of Christine Mady (main coordinator, Aalto University, Finland), Tihomir Viderman (BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany), and Matej Nikšič (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, Slovenia) to the **2024-2026 team**, which includes Tihomir Viderman (main coordinator, BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany), Matej Nikšič (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, Slovenia), and Evangelia Athanassiou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece).

Core Working Group

Patricia Aelbrecht (University of Cardiff, UK), Chiara Belingardi (independent researcher, Italy), Nadia Charalambous (University of Cyprus, Cyprus), Gabriella Esposito De Vita (CNR-IRISS National Research Council, Italy), Ebba Högström (Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden), Karina Landman (University of Pretoria, South Africa), Sabine Knierbein (TU Wien, Austria), Christine Mady (Aalto University, Finland), Matej Nikšič (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, Slovenia), Stefania Ragozino (CNR-IRISS National Research Council, Italy), Nikolai Roskamm (University of Applied Sciences Erfurt, Germany), Mohamed Saleh (University of Groningen, The Netherlands), Sara Santos Cruz (University of Porto, Portugal), Ceren Sezer (RWTH Aachen, Germany), Socrates Stratis (University of Cyprus, Cyprus), Tihomir Viderman (BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany), Burcu Yigit Turan (Swedish University, Sweden).

Advisory Board

Ali Madanipour (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK); Sophie Watson (Open University, UK); Sabine Knierbein (TU Wien, Austria); Gabriella Esposito De Vita (CNR-IRISS National Research Council of Italy); Ceren Sezer (RWTH Aachen, Germany), Stefania Ragozino (CNR-IRISS National Research Council of Italy), and Christine Mady (Aalto University, Finland).

PSUC's activities 2024

Working Theme 2024-2026 - Public Spaces, Urban Cultures, and Hope

PSUC develops its activities, exchange formats, and collaborative initiatives with a specific thematic focus aligned with the group's biennial working topic.

Following conceptual discussions held during the PSUC event at the AESOP Congress in Paris, a new working theme was developed centred on *hope*, leading to the dissemination of a call for events. By the end of 2024, five dedicated PSUC events—beyond the regular annual AESOP Congresses—have been confirmed for 2025 and 2026.

The biennial event series exploring the theme of *hope* will be hosted in Eindhoven, Naples, Newcastle, Nicosia, and Vienna. They will be organized by Eindhoven University of Technology, CNR-IRISS National Research Council of Italy, University of Newcastle, University of Cyprus, and TU Wien, respectively. These events reflect PSUC's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary exchange and advancing discussions on public spaces and urban cultures within and beyond the AESOP community.

Apart from the AESOP Annual Congress, the PSUC aims to ensure that all its events remain free of charge for members and interested participants. During open calls for hosting an event, group members and other interested parties are invited to submit proposals related to the current working theme. Proposals are



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invited for meetings/workshops/conferences or other formats, bringing together participants from academia (universities and research institutes), civil society, urban policy and practice as well as urban arts and activism, among others. Proposals should indicate what kind of contributions and formats of exchange will engage with the call's theme, to arrive at tangible, synergetic outputs on the potentialities and different roles that the analytical and speculative prism of hope could cast on public spaces and urban cultures. Once an event is accepted and scheduled, local organizers together with PSUC representatives collaborate on drafting the official call for participation.

A description of the biennial theme

A full description of the theme is available at:

<https://aesop-planning.eu/tg-news/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures/call-for-expressions-of-interest-to-host-the-thematic-groups-meeting-2024-2026-public-spaces-urban-cultures-and-hope>

Why hope as a theme?

As today's societies confront multiple challenges, weaving hope into public space and urban cultures debates offers a chance to envision and set pathways for regeneration, rebuilding, reassessment, and reconstruction towards more inclusive shared futures. A prevailing agreement in urban studies is that political, social, and cultural forces, in particular in light of growing environmental and geopolitical risks, often fragment the urban fabric, accelerate commodification, and reinforce asymmetries in power structures, often disproportionately affecting the most disadvantaged social groups. This dynamics exacerbates social inequalities and deepens divides, both within and across borders. Against this backdrop, hope offers an opportunity to extend critical insights into the urban condition—from analysing life as being under constant strain to engaging with the contingent nature of urban space that reveals moments of anticipation and intent. In this sense, hope is where material practices, lived experiences, cultural expressions, and imagined and symbolic spaces converge. It is not merely about individual desires for change, but about collective endeavours to influence the material, imagined, and sensed dynamics that shape urban realities. As an analytical prism, hope also allows us to envision better urban futures, from the micro-scale of often invisible struggles within homes to the global scale of planetary urbanization, from the inventiveness and immediacy of everyday life towards long-term plans and strategies.

Hope and the materiality of (imagined) public spaces

The materiality of public spaces occupies a prominent position in channelling society's hopes. Paradoxically, its value for creating fair and just cities is often overlooked by power structures and broader publics alike. Public space, as many thinkers have highlighted, has never been a given and can never be taken for granted. Hence, it can be seen both as the contingent outcome of past and present social struggles and as an indicator of society's aspirations for the future. Public spaces reflect how society has hoped for future, envisioned change, and negotiated transformative actions, resulting in outcomes that range from prosperous to bleak realities. Nonetheless, public spaces remain manifestations of hopeful actions by diverse groups claiming and redefining the city—whether through material expressions like urban art and barrier-free accessibility or conceptual notions like inclusion and difference.

Hope as a driver of urban cultures

Hope is also central to urban cultures, conceptually and practically opening gaps that challenge established power structures and social norms. Urban cultures often engage with disruptions in the settled foundations

and routines of society, creating conditions for change. They are imbued with hope. They thrive on people's capacity to contest social constraints through improvisation, creativity, and action. By infusing everyday struggles with transformative hope, urban cultures serve as underlying drivers of positive change. This hope is evident in creating moments where people, be they collectivized groups, social non-movements or non-collectivised bodies, can engage with the unfamiliar and interact equitably and non-violently across differences.

The dual nature of hope: Between emancipation and control

Public spaces have frequently been at the centre of struggles over social reordering and grounding, imbued with hopeful visions of emancipation, and even more so of movements striving for liberation. While hope is often perceived as a positive force, the ongoing state of unsettledness worldwide reminds us that hope in the context of public spaces and urban cultures has a dual nature. While it can be a powerful and inspiring force for positive change, hope also risks being reduced to a mere rhetorical tool, used to gain public support for policies and projects without a genuine commitment to addressing structural issues or delivering meaningful change. As seen at radical-right rallies, hope is sometimes also co-opted to legitimize unjust power structures rather than challenge them. The danger lies in the potential instrumentalisation of hope, particularly in constructing hegemonic political, social, cultural, and symbolic spaces that are based on exclusion, dispossession, or, simply, hatred, and perpetuate power disparities. The co-optation of hope against the legacy of past emancipatory and liberatory struggles can conceal or dismiss social realities that do not fit into a one-dimensional understanding of public space and urban culture, draw impermeable boundaries, and construct divided societies.

Within this thematic framework, we want to highlight the emancipatory and liberatory potentials of hope. We emphasize the importance of practices rooted in solidarity, agonistic negotiation, and the pursuit of justice and care in recognition of the plurality of diverse everyday experiences. Hope as a concept stands for an inspiring vision of positive change. Hope as an action embodies the ability to see beyond crisis situations and dead ends, enabling the imagination of different future and enactment of different present. Rather than merely projecting far-off futures, hope is rooted in reshaping today's realities through new possibilities and immediate change. To hope is to persevere, to actively engage in overcoming challenges, despite their growing magnitude, in the pursuit of collective freedom and transformation.

How do we (want to) hope?

Within this thematic framework, we ask:

How do public spaces and urban cultures inspire, nurture, enact, shape, curb, or even extinguish hope?

How do public spaces and urban cultures enable individuals and groups to actively hope—to reimagine and transform their realities through immediate, tangible actions?

How can hope be used to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, and capacities of public spaces and urban cultures in creating fair and just places?

By exploring this question, we aim to understand how we hope, how we want to hope, as well as what we hope for. The potential of hope in urban studies lies in recognizing its multifaceted nature. By embracing the complex interplay between hope as a unifying, positive force and the risks of its instrumentalisation, we aim to better understand the transformative possibilities of public spaces and urban cultures. Hope is not a static condition but is lived in everyday life—constantly redefined through the use of public spaces and urban cultures, as collective actions of individuals and groups strive to shape better urban futures.

Furthermore, we seek to explore how hope manifests in different urban contexts, from grassroots movements to institutional policies. By examining case studies and real-world examples, we can identify the conditions under which hope thrives and the barriers it faces. This approach allows us to not only theorize about hope but also provide actionable insights for urban planners, creative designers, activists, artists, policymakers, and communities. Our goal is to foster a deeper understanding of how hope can contribute to creating more equitable, inclusive, and vibrant urban environments.

Addressing the call for proposals

Proposals are invited that explore the material, social, cultural, political, ecological, economic, symbolic, imagined, and discursive manifestations of hope in public spaces and urban cultures across different scales and disciplines. This theme is open to a broad range of debates, approaches, and perspectives on urban issues, from both contemporary and historical viewpoints. The goal is to examine how diverse fields of knowledge and positionalities manifest and become embedded in public spaces and urban cultures by evoking hope (hope as an idea), by evolving through hopeful thinking (hope as a concept) or by enacting hopeful action (hope as a framework for action) or by caring forms of embodied hope (hope as a bodily sensation). We seek to understand how varied experiences, dominant paradigms, and broader worldviews leave a lasting impact on urban life, showcasing the transformative, situated and embodied potential of hope within public spaces and urban cultures.

Events

The 2024 AESOP Annual Congress

“Game changer? Planning for just and sustainable urban regions”

Paris, Sciences Po, 8-12 July 2024

Track 08 Public space

PSUC was responsible for and co-chaired TRACK 08: “PUBLIC SPACE Planning for cultural diversity, peace and the experience of places”. The track featured a total of nine sessions, covering the following topics:

- Peace and inclusion
- Approaches, age, and gender
- Transformations
- Cultures
- Typology and morphology
- Regeneration and environment
- Infrastructure

The track had in total 51 presentations, attracting strong participation and engagement. Discussions extended beyond the scheduled sessions, continuing informally throughout the congress.

Book of abstracts is available here: <https://eprints.aesop-planning.eu/items/a78f065e-5c3c-4403-b36e-898d579d54bc>

Special Sessions and Roundtables

In addition to Track 08, members of TG PSUC organized and participated in special sessions and roundtables on key themes, including:

- Unlocking the Future of Planning
- Built Environment Education
- (Un)Care and Austerity: Learning from New Urban Care Commoning Practices and Policies – Part I & II
- Doing Justice to Time-Sensitive Urbanism – Part I



TG PSUC Annual Meeting

The annual TG PSUC meeting was held during the congress, with the participation of three Advisory Board members, group members, and congress attendees. The meeting included a presentation about the group's work and update on the group's activities, followed by a brainstorming session, which served as the foundation for the development of the 2024-2026 working theme.

PSUC events to the biennial working theme 2022-2024 - Public Spaces, Urban Cultures, and Constructing Peace

In 2024 PSUC concluded its series of events to the 2022-2024 biennial working theme with two events, in Pretoria and Nicosia.

"Public space and peace building: from degenerative to regenerative environments"

28-30 January 2024, Pretoria, South Africa

Hosted by the University of Pretoria, Department of Town and Regional Planning

This conference with an open call for abstracts aimed to explore the construction of peace in various types of public spaces. This means moving beyond short-term peace construction or peace-making and -keeping, to longer-term efforts that would focus on peace-building. This is critical in spaces of conflict and violence that are not only limited to the Global South, but also growing in the Global North. The intention was to interrogate relationship between safe and unsafe spaces from a transdisciplinary perspective with the aim of moving from degenerative to regenerative environments.

The conference combined conference format of paper presentations accompanied by site visits of public spaces in various parts of Pretoria, and a transdisciplinary workshop involving members from academia, built environment professionals, community organisations and members of the local municipality to discuss the re-imagination of peace construction in public spaces and the role of regenerative sustainability.

Local Organisers: Karina Landman and Kundadi Makakavhule

TG PSUC Representatives: Ceren Sezer (Germany) and Matej Nikšič (Slovenia)

More information is available here: <https://aesop-planning.eu/tg-news/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures/conference-of-the-aesop-thematic-group-public-spaces-and-urban-cultures-public-space-and-peace-building-from-degenerative-to-regenerative-environments>

"Constructing Peace through Public Space: What publics? Whose commons?"

30-31 May 2024, Nicosia, Cyprus

Hosted at the Goethe Institute and Home for Cooperation in the Buffer Zone of Nicosia, Cyprus

The two-day symposium aimed to explore the intricate relationships between urban spaces, conflict transformation, and commoning practices. The event brought together thirty-one scholars, practitioners, and activists from various countries and disciplines to discuss how urban environments can either foster or hinder reconciliation processes, particularly in conflict-prone areas. The symposium was designed to



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facilitate a deep and interactive exchange of ideas, with a format that included keynote lectures, roundtable discussions, and experiential activities such as urban games and walking tours.

Organizers: Socrates Stratis, Sebnem Hoskara, Nadia Charalambous, Sabine Knierbein, Evangelia Athanassiou

The report is available here: <https://aesop-planning.eu/tg-news/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures/aesop-tg-psuc-conference-cyprus-symposium-constructing-peace-through-public-space-what-publics-whose-commons>

The following list provides an overview of all the events related to the 2022-2024 theme:

Public libraries as generators of peace

Aalto University

15-16 May 2023

(Organization: Christine Mady, Hossam Hewidy, Ebba Högström, Matej Nikšič)

AESOP Annual Congress 2023– Integrated Planning in a World of

Track 8: Planning for Culture and Tourism: Public Spaces, Heritage, Identity, Regeneration.

University of Łódź

11-15 July 2023

(Chair: Christine Mady, Monika Murzyn-Kupisz, Syed Hamid Akbar)

Urban Conflicts and Peace: Everyday Politics of Commons

University of Naples, Department of Architecture

5-6 October 2023

(Organization: Stefania Ragozino, Chiara Belingardi, Tihomir Viderman)

Going Public: Framing events as a tool for inquiry in public space

UCLA (online)

6 November 2023

(Organization: Claire Nelischer, Andres Ramirez, Gus Wendel, Stefania Ragozino, Christine Mady)

Public space and peace building: from degenerative to regenerative environments

University of Pretoria

28-30 January 2024

(Organization: Karina Landman, Kundani Makakavhule, Ceren Sezer, Matej Nikšič)

Constructing Peace through Public Space: What Publics? What Commons?

Nicosia

30-31 May 2024

(Organization: Socrates Stratis, Sebnem Hoskara, Nadia Charalambous, Sabine Knierbein, Evangelia Athanassiou)

AESOP Annual Congress 2024 - GameChanger? Planning for just and sustainable urban regions

Track 8: Public space - Planning for cultural diversity, peace and the experience of places

Sciences Po, Paris

8-12 July 2024

(Chair: Christine Mady, Dimitra Kanellopoulou, Margherita Gori Nocentini)

Publications

The list includes publications that involved at least three PSUC members, or directly resulted from PSUC events, or were developed specifically to a PSUC working theme

Special issue

Mapping Urban Injustices in Public Space: Challenges and Opportunities

(edited by Nadia Charalambous and Sabine Knierbein)

Journal of Public Space 8(3)



Special issue is a nuanced exploration into the complex dynamics that shape contemporary cities, particularly focusing on the inequalities and injustices manifesting within public spaces. It seeks to address the intricate question of how urban (in)justices can be effectively mapped. This thematic inquiry navigates the multifaceted challenges inherent in identifying and understanding urban injustices, while concurrently unveiling the opportunities that arise from employing diverse mapping strategies. By visualizing injustices, mapping brings visibility to marginalized communities, fostering a shared understanding of the issues at hand. It becomes a form of civic engagement that empowers communities and informs policymakers, thereby initiating conversations around the need for more inclusive, radically emancipatory, and democratic, and indeed more just urban policies.

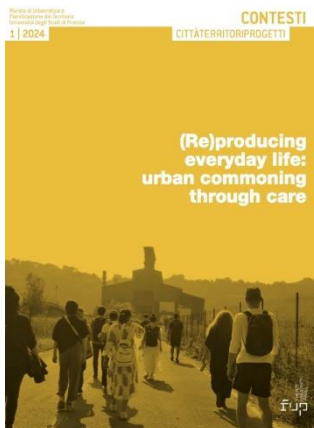
<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/issue/view/79>

Special issue

(Re)producing everyday life: Urban commoning through care

(edited by Chiara Belingardi, Gabriella Esposito De Vita, Stefania Ragozzino, Tihomir Viderman)

Contesti. Città, Territori, Progetti 2024/1



This special issue explores the complex interconnections between everyday life, commoning, and care, drawing on epistemological approaches that highlight the dynamic and non-static nature of urban space. Against the fragmenting tendencies in urban space, and with a focus on everyday life—where lived experiences and material practices merge—this issue suggests that commons can act as the glue that binds urban spaces together. By engaging with the politics of the commons, the production of urban fabric is revealed as an everyday negotiation and care across a wide range of differences, aimed at fostering harmony in shared space and time. The commons illustrate how societies strive for cohesion and seek to address and overcome conflicts, mobilizing both individual and collective resources in everyday life.

<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/contesti/article/view/15663>

Research projects



<https://www.psugo.eu/>

As of 2024 PSUC is involved as an associated partner in Erasmus+ project EDUCATION IN LIVING LABS: PARTICIPATORY SKILLS FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN GOVERNANCE.

The project is coordinated by a PSUC member Nadia Charalambous (Cyprus), with participation of further PSUC members as project partners Stefania Ragozino (Italy) and Tihomir Viderman (Germany).

PS-U-GO stands for Participatory Skills for Sustainable Urban Governance. The project's mission is to create Urban Living Labs (ULLs) in 4 European cities, where students, local residents, urban planners, and policymakers could collaborate to address urban challenges and co-create vibrant, sustainable places of exchange beyond sectoral or disciplinary boundaries.

Within the project PSUC is responsible for monitoring and validation of validation of learning outcomes.