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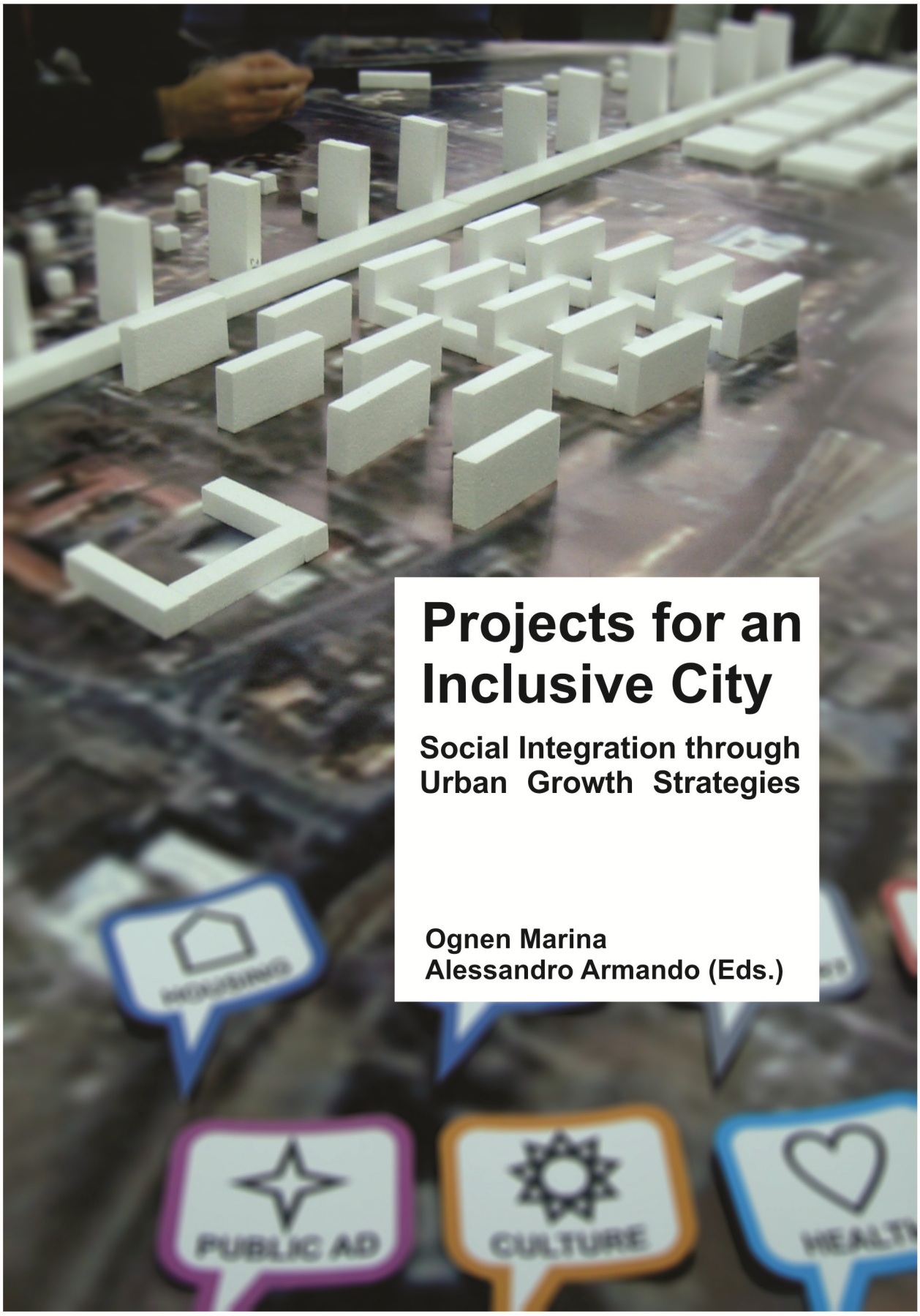
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28 November 2026



Projects for an Inclusive City

Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies

Ognen Marina
Alessandro Armando (Eds.)

SINERGI Project

Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies

The SINERGI Project (Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies) is a network of twinned cities that provides exchange of knowledge, experience and good practices of partner cities, Universities, civic organizations and social groups enabling better social integration through joint development of urban growth strategies. The project has enriched the sense of identity and mutual understanding between European citizens by bringing upfront problems and issues of urban life that are shared among them, but also by sharing common values, history and culture in an open dialog.

The network organized two seminars as a platform for creative and open debate between local authorities, academics, experts, civil activists and citizens from local communities about the problem of social integration in ever-growing cities. The SINERGI Book One: “The Projects for an Inclusive City” is the result of these two seminars. The purpose of this book is to provoke decision-makers and citizens to challenge their perception of the city and, through critical understanding of mutual interests and shared values, to create a sustainable and lasting network of cities and active citizens.

Projects for an Inclusive City

Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies

Edited by
Ognen Marina
Alessandro Armando

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Projects for a city in the time of crisis

Today, in the time of crisis as a continuous global event that still evolves, the state of uncertainty and indeterminacy has become a persistent condition, not only of the financial and economic systems, but, most of all, of the existing social, political and urban paradigms of the cities. The fact is that the financial crisis has not been restrained only to its financial emergences, but has brought to daylight the questions of legitimacy of the political and social systems in the societies. It has transformed the existing political and social system of distribution of power and responsibilities into technocratic urban management that has cleansed the process from its political relevance to the level where new and non-formal practices and organisations have started to emerge as a response to the lack of capacity of the system to cope with the challenges. The visioning of the urban development based on the existing policies and political agendas, has started to fade away, showcasing that the lack of political accountability has had a strong impact on the visioning and constructing of social and spatial orders in the cities, too.

Usually, the first victim at the battlefield of crisis in the cities is the ability of critical analysis of its historical construction as applied to contemporary cities. The lack of political vision, or at least the lack of trust in the political imagery produced within the frame of existing and exhausted conceptual models, has brought to a halt the relevance of the ideology in constructing the meaningful links between society and urban space. This disillusionment with the capacity of politics to provide an ideal, or even an image of the desired future, deconstructs the role of urban planning in constructing the city. The visions and concepts that once have driven the development and changes of the cities nowadays have been substituted with small technical plans for management of parts of cities or their infrastructure. The disappearance of the big visions, even the demission of the urban utopias and grand narratives, make us realize that the existing images and terms that we still use to present the geography and the history of our cities have become useless. So, why was it that cities lost the grace of being visionary endeavor of humanity, or at least condensing the utopian drive of the society for better future over the course of its recent history?

It is important to note that the construction of cities have been increasingly seen as a process that is detached from the ‘political body’ of the cities and societies, displacing the reason for the construction of the cities and its outcome at some other spaces, usually associated with the fragmented and dispersed agents of the urban development. What is often underlying such processes is the idea that the technocratic solutions are able to calm the crisis of cities and to resolve in an impartial manner the antagonism and stark polarisation in the societies leading to the political explosions and conflicts.

The political sphere has been discarded as a valid domain of mobilization of creative force for construction of cities and urban politics is reduced to a technical-practical action of managing the developments that are regarded as an inevitable destiny of the financial and human capital in the cities.

The regression of the urban politics into urban management centred on the distribution of services and taming the natural ambiguities and confrontation in cities discarded also the potential for construction of the cities. The marginalization of political antagonism and the hegemony of the consumerist paradigm installed through technical solutions of our post-political reality are incapable for creation of visions for the city and fail to assume the responsibility for the future of the cities. The inability to understand the importance of the creation of visions for the city and consequently the constructions of the politics of the cities would inevitably lead toward the further de-legitimization of the projects for a city.

It should be clear by now that it is exactly because of the lack of the will to act on the urban form a political perspective and the existing impotent planning practice de-powered of its ability to construct new realities, the projects for a city could become central reference and engine of an urban political project, forcing a radical change of the city as we know it.

This volume contributes to this situation by providing a collection of, rather diverse projects, investigations and readings of the cities. It is an attempt to map the current conditions and to start a debate about the potential of the projects for a city in the time of crisis that will, hopefully, lead us to a better and more inclusive urban future.

Social inclusion, participation and city development in the European cities

One of the main challenges of the SINERGI Project experience is to look at the European cities governance and development through a variety of perspectives, following two main directions of comparison.

The first direction is about the geopolitical aspects of the various urban contexts. The four cities involved show very different histories, identities and problems. Skopje is experiencing years of large urban transformation, in the frame of a powerful (and problematic) effort in redefining its symbolic identity according to a top-down political program. Turin passed a twenty-year period of heavy redevelopment, which now seems to be exhausted. Zagreb is trying to conciliate an almost new strategic plan with the troubles of the urban economic crisis, which makes ineffective most of the public initiatives of development. Lisbon built up an important system of public actions through a network of local plans (Bip/Zip) that are going to face more and more the structural scale problems of growth and development in the city.

The second direction of comparison is about the differences among the various approaches, professional roles and disciplines, which discuss and tackle the issue of the urban project and the future of the cities. During the SINERGI meeting people had to compare their certainties and doubts: academics, public administrators, decision makers, citizens, NGOs representatives, professionals exchanged their perspectives on the set of

problems and operative proposals about the challenge of urban transformation.

Such double comparison of perspectives highlights contrasting positions – strongly rooted to different and concrete experiences of management, governance, planning and design from the various cities – around some emerging questions: what is a “city” in the XXI Century Europe, when it is not a global metropolis? How can we drive its transformation and development, integrating politics and technical expertise? What are the common objectives of a public project of the city and what are the means to achieve them? Who has a right, who has competence, and who has power to make decisions about projects? The many actors vividly discussed on these (and many other) issues during the thematic seminars in Zagreb and Lisbon, and during the workshops in Skopje and Turin. They attempted to answer the questions in many ways, but also they raised many problems. We could even claim that SINERGI meetings defined a common ground mostly by telling unsolved problems each other. Nevertheless, starting from this critical sharing, the partners tried to make affirmative hypotheses, as well as operative proposals to tackle such problems.

A first problem was about citizens’ inclusion in the urban development policies and actions. How can we build a vision of the future collectively, making it effective and feasible? How can we avoid reducing the challenge of the urban project to a technical issue on one side, or to a quarrel of conflicting powers on the other? How can we keep together the expression of collective values with the urgency of concrete actions? The debate around these questions was strong and dialectic – with great frankness and a common trust in the group’s confidence. Furthermore, the definition of what “social inclusion” should refer to has been stressed many times. The inclusion in decision-making processes appeared generally different from the inclusion in urban actions and in the project-development phases, but also from the possibility of including someone passively into a policy or a project, as a beneficiary.

A second problem was the definition of “participation” and its many interpretations. We can participate whether to collective actions, that are institutional, or we can promote self-organized initiatives. We can participate to decision-making phases by voting, by raising consensus through petitions or by opposing and demonstrating. However, in most cases it is unlikely that a participative project or action can modify the conditions of power, as well as its distribution, which can remain opaque and unfair.

A third set of problems was about the uncertain capacity of generating new opportunities for urban development, as well as the difficulties in driving the transformation of a city. Even independently from a good distribution of powers and from the achievable rate of participation, the urban projects often do not achieve any effects. In addition, when a

project succeeds in having any concrete impacts, its effects are usually different from the previous objectives and predictions.

The crisis of the vision and the crisis of the effects

All the four participating cities have experience in designing and forecasting their long-term future by using strategic plans and urban visions. Skopje, Turin, Zagreb and Lisbon built their future collective identity through urban projects and plans, although according to different addresses. In all cases, the strength of those visions seemed to decline progressively, even if there were profound differences of impacts among the four cities. The collective instrument of the urban vision, which always refers to a long-term future (15, 20, 25 years), risks appearing as more and more instrumental to short-term interests and tasks; while the final framework and its feasibility fade out into an impossible promise. The major danger of such ambiguity is that visions are less capable of reaching the necessary amount of collective trust that would be necessary to make them real, at least partially. This lack of trust affects the primary democratic function of the instruments of urban visioning, by reducing their capacity of becoming the primary means of collective intentions and public debates. Rather, visions become “weak” means, which theatralize citizens’ inclusion in decision-making processes, while the real decisions take place elsewhere, sometimes opaquely, without sharing any negotiations. After all, in the present urban crisis the real estate operations and the investments are weaker, bearing less gladly open discussions that can increase uncertainty of results.

The unfavourable economic situation of the last seven-eight years hardly discouraged real estate development, in all the four SINERGI cities, but affected even more negatively the public investments on initiatives of development. The crisis of traditional dynamics of urban growth is depriving public administrations of their primary instruments of action, consisting of conditioning building permits, development impact taxes and other construction fees. Up until a few years ago, public actions and works on the city benefitted from a rate of sources and capitals by the private real estate operations. Moreover, the set of urban plan/design tools and the procedures of technical and bureaucratic management work as resisting elements, since they were conceived and developed on the same paradigm: urban growth (which feeds) building taxation and norms (which enable) public actions. In such condition neither the economic system, nor the administrative one are capable of integrating the new opportunities for development. The present state of the cities could offer, actually, some potential opportunities: such as re-using and recycling the abandoned areas, or redistributing unexploited land sources, buildings, services. A well-known example of this sort of contradiction is the issue of “temporary use” in urban planning practices and rules, which still struggles to be accepted – since it jeopardizes the steadiness of the zoning paradigm, as well as that of the economic accumulation of urban land value.

Conformance and performance in the urban projects

The SINERGI participants come from a number of diverse disciplinary fields. Each of them has in mind a specifc approach to measure the effects of urban projects and policies. Those who deal with planning and public policy making are usually very careful in defining tasks, rules and values, by pursuing actions to be coherent and conform to those premises. On the other side, the ones who work in the design field more technically, as well as those who are more focused on building development and urban design issues, seem to be concerned less with conformance to the initial objectives and more with performing effects of a specific action. In general we could claim that those who plan rules and policies cannot give up the conformance, even at the cost of not producing tangible effects. Moreover, those who design the built environment cannot give up the performance, even when they have to accept heavy modifications to the final effects, being far from the initial tasks and expectations.

Top-down vs. bottom-up. What is participation today?

There is a difficulty in conciliating the effectiveness and the inclusiveness in the actions of city governance. On the one hand, the effective actions seem to be scarcely inclusive in most cases, on the other hand the actions oriented to inclusion appear as less effective. In the case studies showed during the seminars, the public actions of urban development capable of producing tangible effects were mostly conceived as top-down actions (that is the common case of Turin and Skopje). In other cases, for instance in Lisbon, the bottom-up actions risk to reduce their effects to the local scale, without affecting the overall structure of urban development. In general, beyond the specific nature of a project or public action (top-down or bottom-up), there is always an institutional level that operates from the "top", by imposing bureaucratic procedures and enabling economic exchange. The issue of defining what can be considered as "participation" in a context of public policies, with an institutional legitimacy, is still an open challenge.

SINERGI(es). Some experiences in four cities.

This volume has been organized by following a thematic criterion, trying to recover the basic elements of debate, which took place in these last two years during the SINERGI seminars. The first section «From crisis to urban inclusion", is focused on the primary issue of balancing urban democracy with the initiatives of development, also looking at new strategies and opportunities coming from abandoned areas (Mano-Velevski-Marina) or low-cost land availability (Armando and Marenić). The second section «Projects for an inclusive city» collects examples of project proposals that are trying to forecast concrete interventions on marginal neighborhoods, affected by social and economic weakness (Mazza-Moiso and Ramondetti), but also shows real experiences of redevelopment (Roseta-Monteiro-Maurício and Gašparović-Šmit). The

third section «Participation and inclusive actions in the city» faces the problem of participation, both criticizing the notion in paradigmatic terms (Falanga) and proposing cases of public actions and participative projects (Braga-Lages-Veiga, Martins, Louro-Oliveira). «New tools for inclusive cities» is the fourth section, which shows some applications of technical tools oriented to data collecting and sharing (Duarte-Smaniotto Costa-Mateus-Menezes-Bahillo), public registry of brownfield sites (Jakovčić-Buzjak) and decision-making support for strategic planning (Orsi-Fiorito-Beirão-Gil-Colombo-Giachino). The last section «The city as a whole: urban narratives and perspectives» collects a series of theoretical contributions about the possible representations of the city, according to different approaches: urban design didactics (Bakalchev-Hadzi Pulja-Tasic-Bakalchev), geography (Medeiros Santo-Nentwig Silva-Martins Falcão-Braga Fernandes-Aragão), history of architecture (Roseta-Baptista Bastos), urban design theory (Velevski-Velevska-Marina) and literature (Baptista Bastos).

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