From plazas to balconies: counterbalancing the lack of space, contact, action, entertainment

Από τις πλατείες στα μπαλκόνια: εξισορροπώντας την έλλειψη χώρου, επαφής, δράσης, ψυχαγωγίας

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Abstract
Urban landscapes are constantly evolving through interactions of people, time, and space. Global environmental and social changes, climate change, and demographic shifts have a great impact on cities' development. Such changes usually happen gradually over lengthy periods of time; however, the COVID-19 pandemic caused extreme changes worldwide in a very short period of time.

To reduce the spread of the virus for the safety of the citizens, restrictions of free access with temporal and geographical constraints (within each municipality) and a range of permissible behaviors, distances, and relationships between individuals further narrowed the accessibility of public spaces. Hence, pandemic restrictions created a deserted urban landscape worldwide, constituting the canvas for new urban interpretations.

People acknowledge the new condition and enact a set of interactional familiar and unfamiliar practices in the transformation of the international urban landscape. The production of neighborhood and city space through the actions of the users co-shaped the boundaries and the functional values of the designed spaces. Seeking to counterbalance the lack of space, contact, action, entertainment, performative/artistic/cultural events and to enhance the urban experience, impromptu relief mechanisms were invented creating ephemeral heterotopic events (musicians performing on balconies, street performers, etc). The global health crisis showed that cultural participation, creative activity, and access to open, vibrant, and social public spaces are crucial factors for safeguarding citizens' physical, mental, and emotional stability and social well-being.

The paper investigates the temporary transformations that urban landscapes worldwide have undergone during the COVID-19 crisis and particularly in the period March - September 2020 where two crucial phases were identified: i) strict restrictions and ii) less intense restrictions. Through a critical literature review, informed by authorial observations, the paper aims to provide insight into how these user-generated adaptations and temporary transformations impact the functional values of urban spaces, while supporting connections, stimulating contact and social exchanges, affecting social well-being and blurring the limits of public/private, permanent/temporal, legal/illegal, just/unjust. The research is developed on the background of 3 pre-Covid axioms: sustainability, globalization, and culture, and focuses on spaces where shifts in public life have occurred: the urban public space, the urban balcony, the urban rooftop, and the cyberspace.

Keywords: duality, spatial boundaries, social well-being, participatory appropriation, performative appropriation, COVID-19 restrictions.

Περίληψη

Τα αστικά τοπία εξελίσσονται συνεχώς μέσα από τις αλληλεπιδράσεις των ανθρώπων, του χρόνου και του χώρου. Οι παγκόσμιες περιβαλλοντικές, κοινωνικές και δημογραφικές αλλαγές και η κλιματική αλλαγή έχουν μεγάλο αντίκτυπο στην ανάπτυξη των πόλεων. Τέτοιες αλλαγές συνήθως συμβαίνουν σταδιακά και σε μεγάλες χρονικές περιόδους. Η πανδημία COVID-19, όμως, προκάλεσε ακραίες τροποποιήσεις παγκοσμίως σε πολύ σύντομο χρονικό διάστημα.

Προκειμένου να μειωθεί η εξάπλωση του ιού και να προωθηθεί η ασφάλεια των πολιτών, ελήφθησαν, από τις περισσότερες χώρες παγκοσμίως, μια σειρά μέτρων που καθόριζαν τόσο την αλληλεπίδραση των ατόμων μεταξύ τους (διατηρώντας αποστάσεις ασφαλείας), όσο και με τον χώρο, περιορίζοντας - χρονικά και γεωγραφικά - την ελεύθερη πρόσβαση σε εξωτερικούς χώρους, συρρικνώνοντας, ακόμα περισσότερο, τους διαθέσιμους δημόσιους χώρους. Ως αποτέλεσμα των νέων αυτών μέτρων προστασίας ήταν η δημιουργία ενός ερημικού αστικού τοπίου παγκοσμίως, που αποτέλεσε τον καμβά για νέες αστικές ερμηνείες.

Κατά την προσαρμογή στη νέα αυτή συνθήκη αναπτύχθηκε ένα σύνολο από γνώριμες και μη αλληλεπιδραστικές πρακτικές που συνέβαλλαν στον μετασχηματισμό του διεθνούς αστικού τοπίου. Η παραγωγή του χώρου της γειτονιάς και της πόλης μέσα από τις ενέργειες των χρηστών συνδιαμόρφωσε τα όρια και τις λειτουργικές αξίες των υφιστάμενων χώρων (μπαλκόνια, pilotis, ταράτσες, πάρκα κ.λπ.). Επιδιώκοντας την εξισορρόπηση της έλλειψης χώρου, επαφής, δράσης, ψυχαγωγίας, και την ενίσχυση της αστικής εμπειρίας, αναδύθηκαν αυτοσχέδιοι μηχανισμοί ανακούφισης και αποτυπώθηκαν εφήμερα ετεροτοπικά γεγονότα (μουσικοί που παίζουν σε μπαλκόνια, καλλιτέχνες στους δρόμους, κ.λπ). Η παγκόσμια υγειονομική κρίση έδειξε ότι η πολιτιστική συμμετοχή, η δημιουργική δραστηριότητα και η πρόσβαση σε ανοιχτούς, δημόσιους χώρους αποτελούν κρίσιμους παράγοντες για τη διαφύλαξη της σωματικής, ψυχικής και συναισθηματικής σταθερότητας και της κοινωνικής ευημερίας των πολιτών.

Μέσω μιας κριτικής βιβλιογραφικής ανασκόπησης και παρατηρήσεις των συγγραφέων, η εργασία στοχεύει να δώσει μια εικόνα για το πως αυτές οι προσαρμογές και οι προσωρινοί μετασχηματισμοί που δημιουργούνται από τους χρήστες, και λαμβάνουν χώρα σε διάφορες πόλεις παγκοσμίως, επηρεάζουν τις λειτουργικές αξίες των αστικών χώρων διεγείροντας παράλληλα την κοινωνική επαφή, υποστηρίζοντας την κοινωνική ευημερία και θολώνοντας τα όρια δημόσιου/ιδιωτικού, μόνιμου/εφήμερου, νόμιμου/παράνομου, δίκαιου/άδικου. Η εργασία υπογραμμίζει επίσης τη σημασία της αυθόρμητης «πανδημικής αστικοποίησης» ως μια δράση από κάτω προς τα πάνω που μπορεί να οδηγήσει σε πολιτικές από πάνω προς τα κάτω που αναγνωρίζουν την ύπαρξη αυτής της ευέλικτης δυναμικής που επιτρέπει την επαναδιαπραγμάτευση των υφιστάμενων αστικών χώρων σε αντίστοιχες μελλοντικές κρίσεις.

keywords: δυαδικότητα, χωρικά όρια, κοινωνική ευημερία, κοινωνική συμμετοχή, πολιτιστική συμμετοχή, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper investigates the temporary (?) transformations that urban landscapes worldwide have undergone during the COVID-19 crisis and particularly in the period March- September 2020 where two crucial phases were identified: i) strict restrictions and ii) less intense restrictions. How did people enact to this lack of space, contact, action, and entertainment? How was urban space affected by those actions and how did it respond to these new conditions? Which was the role of culture and what kind of cultural expressions were produced? The research focuses on spaces where shifts in public life have occurred: a) the urban public space, b) the urban balcony c) the urban rooftop and d) the cyberspace. The paper aims to provide insight into how these temporary transformations emerged from human/space adaptability resulted in a '*tactical pandemic urbanism*' [1] blurring the limits of public/private, permanent/temporal, legal/illegal, just/unjust.

The research is developed on the background of 3 pre-Covid axioms: i) sustainability, ii) globalization, and iii) culture.

2. PRE-COVID AXIOMS

2.1. Background I: Urban landscapes under threat

Global environmental and social changes, climate change, and demographic shifts have a great impact on cities' development, constituting drivers for the creation of new urban environments and contemporary lifestyles, impacting physical and mental health. The three-dimensional vision, developed during the second half of the 1980s, recognized equality of economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental balance as driving forces for sustainability.

In April 2010, the *Executive Bureau of United Cities and Local Governments* (UCLG) agreed on Culture, as a Fourth Pillar/driving force for Sustainable Development. Henceforth, in 2014 the council of the European Union recognized:

'*that cultural heritage plays an important role in creating and enhancing social capital because it has the capacity to:*
a) inspire and foster citizens' participation in public life;
b) enhance the quality of life and the well-being of individuals and their communities;
c) promote diversity and intercultural dialogue by contributing to a stronger sense of "belonging" to a wider community and a better understanding and respect between peoples;
d) help to reduce social disparities, facilitate social inclusion, cultural and social participation and promote intergenerational dialogue and social cohesion;
e) offer possibilities to develop skills, knowledge, creativity, and innovation;
f) be an effective educational tool for formal, non-formal and informal education, life-long learning and training' [2].

2.2. Background II: The transient nature of urban dwelling

The concept of globalization has challenged the vision of architects and urbanists imagining earth as a place where citizens could be everywhere, setting the begging of a technological concept for nomads.

The improvement of transport and telecommunication infrastructure (internet, virtual communication) affected our domestic and urban rituals, resulting in an increased global interconnectivity, offering great flexibility for moving across the world and blurring spatial limits. According to Yeates globalization can be defined as an extensive network of political, economic, technological, social, and cultural interconnections, interdependencies, and processes that goes beyond national borders [3; 4].

The idea of a more nomadic/transient urban domesticity is reflected, on one hand, on the increasing transient population (refugees, migrants, homeless) and on the other hand, on the "privileged" population that lives, works, travels, and shares domestic places for temporal living (like hotels and

Airbnbs) and urban places for temporal actions (shopping, sitting, eating, resting, sporting, walking, protesting, festivalizing, etc), proving its success [5; 6; 7] and its dynamic to be anything anytime.

2.3. Background III: The urban nature of culture

The globalization process and the concerns for a homogenized world have increased interest in preserving cultural diversity, leading to efforts that highlight local cultures and the value of individuality in the global context.

Urban public spaces provide the needed space for recreation, entertainment, contact, and cultural expression and participation. Culture, in the context of this research, is considered as the set of actions - both planned and unplanned (like music and art festivals, exhibitions, installations, tactical urbanism actions, street musicians and performers, graffiti applications, protestations, parades, etc) - that take place in open urban spaces. Thus, public spaces as receptors of local culture form the cultural identity of a place.

3. COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: DWELLING IN THE CITY _ HUMAN AND SPACE ADAPTABILITY

3.1. Phase A: Strict restrictions _ stay-at-home mandates

On the 30th of January 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared the spread of COVID-19 a pandemic. In order to secure public health, restrictions on movement and free access to public spaces were imposed by most governments around the world. Even though they were not applied simultaneously in the global world (as the *Oxford Government Response Stringency Index7* shows), the influence on people's daily lives and the urban spaces was remarkable, causing extreme changes worldwide in a very short period of time. Regarding cities' sustainability, these restrictions affected all the principles, values, and goals of the four "pillars" of sustainable development: economic, social, cultural, and environmental.

Images of empty city streets, plazas, parks, and promenades of vibrant, social, and lively, pre-COVID-19 cities like New York, Athens, London, or Rome started 'travelling' in cyberspace, echoing the film *28 Days Later*. Confined to their homes, people perceived cities as an extent, as a scenery. Lights in the streets seemed to search for a reason to exist. The *flâneur*, walking in the empty city streets received a totally new perception of any city, any identity, any other culture, the unknown. The definition of *health* according to the World Health Organization is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" [8]. Scientific researches [9; 10; 11; 12], undertaken before and/or during the pandemic have shown that confinement, social distancing, restrictions on access to public spaces, and out-of-home physical activities and recreation have a great impact on physical, psychological, and mental health, provoking emotional disturbance, depression, insomnia, anger, and anxiety.

Nevertheless, people tend to adapt to new circumstances [13] and the apparent constraints have challenged alternative conceptions of social interaction, physical activity, and entertainment, enhancing the urban experience by creating ephemeral heterotopic events.

3.1.1. The Public space

During phase A (strict restrictions), public space played the role of transitional and intermediate space for people to go to work or to the facilities that remained open, (like supermarkets and grocery stores) or to the hospitals searching for healthcare and treatment.

With health systems under pressure, authorities turned to the liberated public space. Large open-air urban spaces were transformed into extensions of existing hospitals, housing temporal health facilities such as testing boxes and isolation rooms (like the Inflatable isolation domes in Colombia and the carbon-health testing clinics popping up in many cities around the world), or welcomed temporary and convertible hospital units (like the Inflatable hospital in the city of Pachuca in Mexico, or the 68-bed makeshift hospital in Central Park of New York), reminding us images of pre-COVID pop-up culture facilities for event installations.

3.1.2. The urban balcony

Henri Lefebvre in *Rhythmanalysis* [14], looks up to this '*marvelous invention of the balcony*' as a liminal place where one can capture the '*fleeting rhythms*' of the urban atmosphere. These transitional, and liminal spaces that balance between private and public remained one of the few places where people could have access to open fresh air, natural light, and contact with the public realm. As Gehl argues in *Life between buildings* [15], these '*soft edges*' placed on the public side of the buildings, having a direct connection to them, create opportunities for communication.

Diverse bottom-up actions found a place on these '*elevated sidewalks*' [16] of the urban landscape, blurring the limits of public/private and turning the city into the house and vice versa [17]. The balcony became a space to eat, to work or to play, a space to express gratitude, solidarity, or protest offering the sense of belonging and sharing, the sense of being part of a larger scene [18]. It was also transformed into a place for prayer, satisfying religious needs, and rituals, or spiritual collectivity against their anguish and fears, in the context of a scenario of elimination. The urban balcony became also the new fitness center for physical exercise and the new stage for artistic expressions and celebrations. Spontaneous events and parties were created in neighborhoods inviting residents to participation and entertainment. In Paris, a two-hour party was organized with people dancing on their balconies.

Top-down initiatives were also launched to counterbalance this lack of entertainment and contact, offering a sense of sharing and commonality by using cultural and artistic means: The *Conservatoires Nationaux Supérieurs* in Lyon and Paris, in order to create public awareness for a common European spirit, established a performance inviting each Friday at 19.00 all musicians to play at their balconies, creating the *Eurobalcony*. Bogota, re-invented a past initiative, *Ruta 90*, created back in 2017, which was part of the *Cine Colombia* program, aiming to bring cinema to distant areas affected by violence and poverty [19]. So, Bogota's residents watched films shown on a traveling giant screen, placed in liberated spaces, from their balconies. In Athens, a famous Greek singer traveled around different neighborhoods using a truck in order to entertain the city's residents who were watching and participating from their balconies.

3.1.3. The urban rooftop

This space on top of the buildings, characteristic of the contemporary urban skyline, usually gathering ancillary uses (such as telecommunication antennas, solar water heaters, and other facilities installations) has, most times, remained a forgotten space, with its general prevailing conditions not welcoming other uses and in many cases, appearing dangerous, even prohibitive.

However, urban rooftops constituted a place of replenishment for the loss of open public spaces. This semi-public space on top, usually at distance from the public realm, became another place to be, to act, to cont(r)act, sometimes, posing a threat to social distancing measures. Similar to balconies' actions took place on the rooftops, such as playing games, exercising to music (in order not to disturb other neighborhoods), taking physical exercise (even playing tennis from one rooftop to another; the video of two girls exercising on rooftops went viral), expressing solidarity, sunbathing during the warm and shiny days, gathering, chatting or celebrating, praying or blessing the city.

3.1.4. The Cyberspace

Even though physical interaction and out-of-home leisure have more positive effects on well-being [20], contemporary technology, social media, and telecommunication systems provided online interaction, social support, cultural participation, and a general spread of solidarity worldwide.

Cultural institutions and independent artists started organizing online concerts, movie festivals, and live streaming events providing a variety of cultural experiences and proving the importance of art and culture for our mental and psychological well-being. It is supposed that about 3,000 people around the world attended *Siranni's* first quarantine concert on 16 March via Facebook Live [21].

In the case of Thessaloniki, the *Cultural Center of the Region of Central Macedonia* and the *State Orchestra of Thessaloniki* organized online concerts to enhance the entertainment of the residents. The team *Thessaloniki Walking Tours* organized a 3-day live streaming seminar that went free online, offering a journey to the greatest stations of European and World poetry of the 20th century. Virtual museums visits were available online from significant museums of the world, presenting exhibit walk-throughs and the opportunity to see the work of some of the most famous painters and sculptors in the world, offering entertainment and education, highlighting the importance of art and culture for our well-being [22; 23; 24; 25; 26; 27; 28].

3.2. Phase B: Less intense restrictions - less public space
With the permission of out-of-home actions, a range of permissible behaviors in the use of public space was set by national authorities to protect public health. It was a common practice to prohibit access to places where people could gather, (such as suburban parks, national parks, forests, botanical and zoological gardens beaches, sports courts, and playgrounds), probably due to fears of virus transmission or authorities' reduced possibility for supervision. Such kind of restrictions further narrowed the accessibility of already limited public spaces in cities and with indoor activities restricted (fitness, sports centers, museums, and cultural entertainment closed and cafes, bars, and restaurants working only as 'take away' areas), cities had to face a new kind of congestion; This time not on their streets but on their sidewalks and pedestrian areas. A remarkable case of overcrowding reportedly took place at the New Waterfront of Thessaloniki, Greece [29]; after reports of the incident surfaced in the news, the authorities decided to ban citizens from this area from 2:00 pm to 8:00 am and throughout the weekend. A similar strategy of banning citizens' access was followed for the coastal zones of Patra's and Volo's.
The *Social Distancing Dashboard* was a project led by scientists from Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), in collaboration with the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions (AMS Institute), '*showing on a street and neighborhood level whether social distancing rules can be respected when moving in public space, offering an overview of different factors, affecting our ability to respect social distancing rules'* [30]. These new conditions, combined with the risk of virus transmission using public transit and the need of reducing traffic injuries changed the transport balance in cities [Figure 1, Figure 2].
To face these new conditions, many local authorities decided to prioritize the movement of transit users, pedestrians' and cyclists' by introducing tactical urban policies: close streets to motor vehicles and to traffic towards walking, bicycling, and active recreation, either by reallocating outer lanes and curb spaces either by creating new cycle lanes, like San Francisco, New York, Lisbon, Tirana, London, Rome, Paris, Athens, etc [31; 32; 33; 34].
Other temporal interventions were also planned in urban public spaces to provide safety and easy physical distancing. New York's *High Line Park* has safely reopened to the public painted by the graphic designer Paula Scher and equipped with 1.000 green dots creating a pattern that invites users to respect the social distancing rules. Czech Republic in collaboration with the HUA Architects, organized the *Gastro Safe Zone* program by regulating a space grid initiative transforming public spaces into safe zones for outside eating. Similar initiatives were taken by Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, and New York City which established a set of outdoor dining strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The architect and director of *Galeria EL Art Center* in Elblag (Poland), Ada Kotynska, transformed the area outside the building into a *social distancing lawn* in order to provide individual isolation zones and safe open-air areas. Myanmar organized its public market called *Kalaw*, in Shan state, practicing social distancing by the use of painted areas, while San Francisco the *Safe Sleeping Village initiative* used the same technic for homeless encampments. A past installation, *mi casa, your casa* (my house, your house) created back in 2014 by *esrawe studio and + cadena*, was reused in the time of physical distancing for a safe and inventive come-back to public spaces.
People met at parks, squares, or pedestrian streets for entertainment, contact, picnicking, or exercising respecting 2 meters 'social distancing rule' using, sometimes, new inventive facilities

created by designers for this scope. They used the existing equipment according to the new norms protecting both themselves and the others, re-learning how to be and act in a public space, while leaving spatial traces that highlight space's adaptability to users and to uses [1].
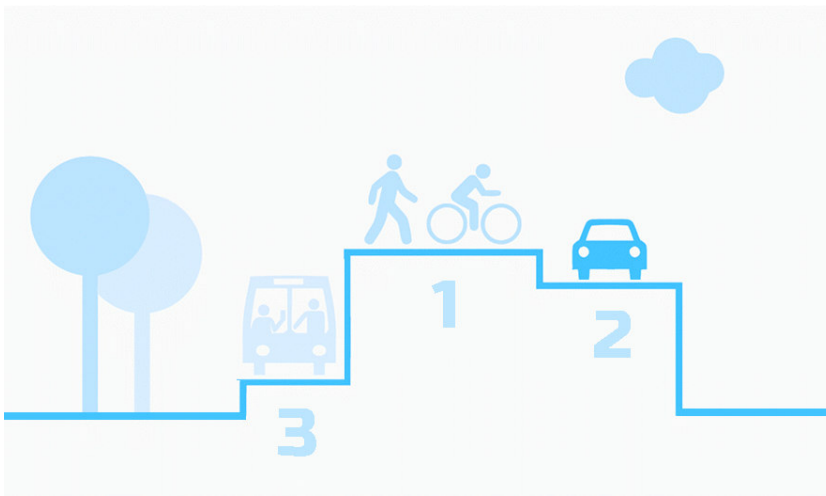

Figure 1. The new transport balance (adaptation of Gehl's diagram in 'Time to reclaim the streets', 2012, https://gehlpeople.com/cities/time-reclaim-streets/)
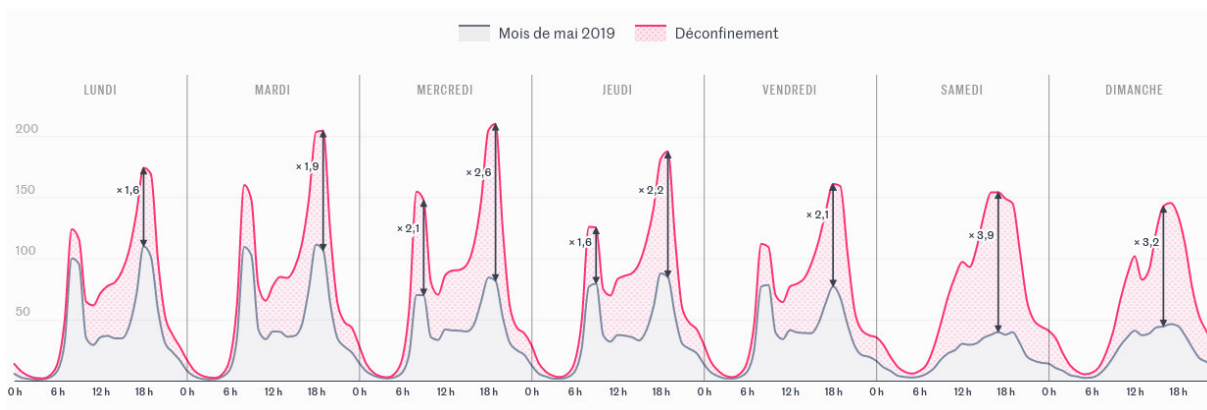

Figure 2. Diagram showing over a typical week the evolution of the average number of bicycle crossings at the various counting points in Paris during May 2019 and May 2020 (from Monday, May 11 to Sunday, June 21), https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2020/05/28/deconfinement-la-forte-hausse-du-trafic-cyclable-a-paris-en-2020-en-trois-graphiques_6041056_4355770.html

3.3. Less Culture in public space
As local events and festivals continue to be postponed, from the side of artists and event industry workers, street and musical protestations were planned to ask for governments' support. These protestations animated in some cases public life offering a performance to observers, underlining, at the same time, the significance of events to contribute to the development of the cultural scheme in cities. In UK's Parliament Square, 400 orchestral players took part in a musical protest changing the landscape of the park, while in Manchester event industry workers remained silent during the process drawing attention to people watching this 'event'. On the other hand, street artists continued to animate public life after the reopening of public spaces, following the new measures and gaining, probably, greater attention from passers-by.

Organized actions welcomed people to use streets, squares, and neglected areas in cities to enhance their experience under these restricted circumstances. *Street Lab's PLAY NYC* program enabled safe activities for children on closed-off streets in high-need neighborhoods. The *Neighborhood Initiative of Alexandrou Svolou*, arranged an alternative meeting, the *Picnic*, in an abandoned space in the city center of Thessaloniki and included a variety of actions for the neighborhood's residents (such as photo exhibitions, workshops, planting, discussions, presentations, screenings, and collective cuisine).

Researches and experimental events have been made to address the frizzing of cultural events looking for inventive and creative solutions. Some experimental events were also organized to test cultural resilience in such circumstances (like *Space Bubbles* and drive-in concerts). In South Australia, the *Summer Sounds Festival* in 2021 used pods suitable for four to six people to realize this social distancing event. Also, previous actions, like the Seine floating open-air cinema in Paris, challenged many waterfront cities to this culture.

4. REFLECTIONS

These old and new processes and the changes they tendered, were interspersed very quickly using the internet, telecommunication systems, and social media. The new rituals and behavioral data emerging during the COVID-19 health crisis affect our experience of both home and the city [17] and illuminate, simultaneously, the coping strategies that effectively reinforced individual and social resilience [28].

In summary, the study of strategies/interventions/performances undertaken during phase A 'strict restrictions' revealed:

- a shift in the use of space with semi-public and semi-private spaces coming to the foreground,
- that public space maintained its transitional role, satisfying only emergency uses,
- the need for size in open public spaces,
- that culture, participation, and the sense of belonging are key elements for individual and social resilience,
- the importance of spatial qualities of semi-public and semi-private spaces in cities,
- new cultures: the culture of the balcony, the culture of the rooftop, and the cyberculture, helping people to stay "in touch" across borders, balconies and rooftops,
- that bottom-up actions can lead to top-down policies.

The study of strategies/interventions/performances undertaken during phase B 'less intense restrictions' revealed:

- a shift in mobility priorities with people using more walk and bike than public transport, making long distant and global transits less evident (the crisis of globalization?),
- a redistribution of activities in public spaces using temporary transformation for creating a more sustainable and livable city,
- the need for public spaces with transformative potentials for future challenges,
- that popular spaces make social distancing rules difficult to respect leading to a conception of decentralized public spaces and more attractive neighborhoods,
- the encounter between public space, culture, and participants made some cities more resilient to crisis,
- the notion of globalization encouraged bottom-up and top-down communication, using more the digital network of connection than the physical global interconnectivity (the triumph of globalization?).

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