

Quality of Life in a Changing World

Collection of abstracts

Maribor Summer school 2025

Edited by:

Peter Kumer

Danijel Davidović

University of Maribor

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Peter Kumer, Danijel Davidović

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Foreword

What defines quality of life? Is it health and the absence of illness? Strong relationships with friends and family? Spirituality and faith? A peaceful, prosperous country with a robust welfare system? Or perhaps the environments we inhabit: well-designed homes, green and blue infrastructure, a circular economy, and unpolluted surroundings?

Quality of life is a complex, multifaceted concept that cannot be confined to a single definition. Addressing it holistically calls for a multidisciplinary approach. This summer school focuses on the *spatial dimensions* of quality of life. Scholars from across Europe and the USA have gathered to explore key themes, including:

- Equality and inclusivity (inclusive neighbourhoods, participatory planning, queer mobilities)
- Urban and rural well-being (age-friendly spaces, welfare spaces, measures to overcome spatial isolation)
- Healthy digital environments (emotional experiences in digital landscapes)
- Planning liveable environments (green infrastructure, smart cities, public spaces, sustainability)
- Sense of place (social connectedness, safety, creative environments)
- Technology and climate action (GIS, digital twins)

These themes reflect the changing realities of our world—urban and rural transformations, demographic shifts, digital evolution, and climate change. Each contribution in this collection offers unique insights into how space and place shape our experiences and aspirations for a better life.

In a world of constant change, the quality of life is not a static ideal—but a moving target, shaped by where we are, how we live, and what we value. This volume invites you to reflect, rethink, and reimagine the spaces where life unfolds.

Peter Kumer

Urban regeneration and social inclusion in marginalized housing estates and fragmented neighbourhoods

José Ignacio Vila Vázquez (jose.vila.vazquez@usc.es)
University of Santiago de Compostela

This lecture focus on the impact of urban regeneration programmes in the quality of life of citizens. Both the talk and workshop are addressing the decay of different parts of metropolitan areas, notably in Europe. First, we will discuss how to deal with these issues in terms of physical degradation or the urban fabric and, even more significantly, the growing problems of both increasing urban inequalities and social inclusion. Secondly, we will examine the situation of marginalization in social housing estates across European countries, along with how urban regeneration strategies and programs attempt to address these problems. The discussion will be focused on different strategies, with a comparative approach, to propose solutions for a more inclusive a liveable neighbourhoods composed by marginalised social housing estates.

The workshop will consist in two parts. First, we will discuss in groups the implementation of a methodological approach of different housing estates based on preliminary selected cases in different European metropolis. The second part of the workshop will be coordinated with the lecture on digital media. In this section of the workshop, students will participate in an immersive exploration of a selected neighbourhood in a digital platform in order to gather their perceptions and emotions during a commented pathway while discovering the spaces. Meanwhile, other students will document their classmates' perceptions and emotions by asking questions to their colleagues. The objective is to create an emotional map or a deep map. The product will be a synthetic representation of the atmospheres and emotions related to these digital urban landscapes.

Keywords: inequalities, social housing, urban regeneration, public spaces, immersive emotional exploration

Digital media and our relationships with other (human) beings

Aránzazu Pérez Indaverea (aranzazu.perez@usc.es)
University of Santiago de Compostela

We spend much of our lives in digital environments. This fact impacts the way in which we interact with our environments, other (human) beings and our quality of life. This lecture will reflect on how different digital tools and platforms mediate our everyday spatial practices, emotional networks and the memories associated to different places. The discussion will explore the affective dimensions of individuals and communities on digital platforms, many of which are becoming digital ruins (such as Second Life or the early version of World of Warcraft), and the potential need for their conservation. Finally, participants will be invited to collectively reflect on their personal experiences and emotions related to these synthesized digital urban landscapes. We will also address possible strategies to improve our interactions within digital environments in order to build strong communities and to ensure our places and landscapes of memory sustainability.

Keywords: places of memory, digital worlds, social networks, digital ruins, emotions

Ports, cities and networks: The effects of connectivity on the changing urban quality of life

Giuseppe Borruso (giuseppe.borruso@deams.units.it)
University of Trieste

The lecture aims at providing an overview on the role of transport connectivity within cities and among cities, with a particular reference to the port-cities and the relations they have within them and with their inner territories. It will delve into how evolving transport networks, from traditional port infrastructure to modern multimodal systems, profoundly impact the urban quality of life. We will explore the historical co-evolution of ports and cities, analyzing the challenges and opportunities presented by enhanced connectivity, including congestion, environmental concerns, and economic growth. The lecture will discuss how embracing "Smart City" and "Sustainable City" paradigms can leverage connectivity to foster resilient, livable urban environments, balancing economic prosperity with social well-being and environmental protection in port-urban contexts.

Keywords: Ports; Cities; Transport networks; Urban quality of life; Smart City; Sustainable City

Blue, green, brown, dark and happiness corridors in the city

Serge Schmitz (S.Schmitz@uliege.be)
University of Liège

The lecture encourages students to reflect on the ideas of corridors, green infrastructure, and ecological networks. After briefly introducing the different concepts and their applications, we will examine how the approach has evolved with respect to specific species. Finally, we will discuss the limitations of these approaches.

The workshop engages the participants in adapting the ecological network approach for urban populations, using Maribor as a case study. Can we envision creating happiness corridors within the city? What characteristics should we consider? Which spatial network would be most relevant, and why? How can we account for the diversity of the population? What benefits could this approach offer?

Keywords: green infrastructure, urban planning, well-being, ecological niche

Reflections of Philosophical Anthropology (H. Plessner) on “Well-being” in the city and the countryside

Eberhard Rothfuss (Eberhard.Rothfuss@uni-bayreuth.de)
University of Bayreuth

Central to Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology (1980 [1928]) is the concept of "eccentric positionality", which refers to the unique human capacity to perceive oneself from an external perspective that allows us to reflect on our own cultural & natural existence – in difference to animals and plants. According to Plessner's "The Stages of the Organic and Man" (1980 [1928]), philosophical anthropology provides a unique scenario for countering current debates on ecological urban and rural sustainability and the treatment of nature by moving the discussion beyond fashionable, dramatic platitudes; a scenario that recognises the fundamental problem of being human on earth. Only humankind is distinguished from nature, only human beings have no natural place, no 'logical' habitat on this planet, and, therefore, only humankind is forced to create cultural worlds (society) as a supplement, without which they cannot exist – and this in differentiation from as well as in specific cultural appropriation of nature. Thus, is revealed the fundamental dialectic of being human. This awareness is key to understanding how human beings relate to both urban and rural environments and how their well-being is experienced differently in these spaces.

Keywords: philosophical anthropology, eccentric positionality, human-environment-relation, urban-rural differentiation

“Urban Atmospheres” – Why they matter for planning & and how we can investigate them

Eberhard Rothfuss (Eberhard.Rothfuss@uni-bayreuth.de)
University of Bayreuth

Urban atmospheres refer to the emotional, sensory, and affective qualities of city spaces. They are shaped by the built environment, lighting, noise, crowd dynamics, weather, and even smells. Unlike physical infrastructure, atmospheres are intangible but deeply felt, influencing how people experience urban environments (Hasse 2023). They emerge from the interplay between people, space, and time – a kind of “aura” of the city (“felt space” according to Böhme 2016). Urban atmospheres influence our ‘sense of place’, sense of safety, and social connectivity. A cold, sterile plaza can feel alienating; a lively street market might feel invigorating. Urban Planners who understand atmospheric dynamics can create more human-centered places and spaces of “well-being” (Gehl 2015) in cities.

The workshop is divided in an introductory part, where theoretical and methodological approaches are presented, and an empirical one in Maribor, where we investigate atmospheres in specific places. The collected data (observations, “go-alongs” with oral reflections) will be interpreted by using Bohnsack’s “documentary method” (2020) to reconstruct the frames of orientation of the different urban milieus.

Keywords: atmospheres, felt space, urban life-world, urban planning, reconstructive methodology

Welfare spaces in contemporary city

Maria Chiara Tosi (mnrtso@iuav.it)
Università Iuav di Venezia

The welfare spaces that were constructed in Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries as spaces for socialization, collective life activities, services and infrastructure are the subject of the lecture, that is divided into two parts. In the first, the idea of welfare space will be explained, along with its present significance and application in a current approach to urban design. The spatial outcomes of the welfare policies put in place will be examined in the second part, which will use the core region of Veneto as a laboratory.

During the fieldwork, students will be required to explore and map Maribor's welfare spaces.

Keywords: welfare, space, city

Demographic change and quality of life: the concept of smart ageing

Pavel Ptaček (pavel.ptacek@mendelu.cz)
Mendel University in Brno

During different phases of human life, the perception of various aspects of its quality also changes. A small child looks at important things with different eyes, a young family with different eyes, and then also the elderly with different eyes. Population aging is a phenomenon that already affects and will especially affect the perception of the quality of life of a large part of the population in the future. It will not only affect the elderly themselves, but also their family members, social services and, of course, the physical environment of the settlements in which we live. Are our cities and villages prepared for the phenomenon of population aging? How do demographic changes affect the quality of life at present and how will they affect it especially in the future? The concept of smart aging offers technological integration, social and ecological perspectives and a proactive approach to improving the quality of life of seniors.

Keywords:Demographic ageing, quality of life, smart ageing concept

Serious geogames - How can they contribute to the Quality of Life?

Alenka Poplin (apoplin@iastate.edu)
Iowa State University

In this workshop participants learn basic steps about geogame design. They brainstorm ideas for the implementation of serious geogames. Geogames are defined as games that concentrate on the well-being and regeneration of planet Earth. They are designed with a purpose in mind that is more than just fun and entertainment. They provide opportunities for learning, co-creation and communication. Geogames can be analogue, digital or hybrid mixing analogue and digital principles. Formal and dramatic elements of geogames are discussed that can then be implemented in group work following geogame ideas discussed in the brainstorming session. The workshop ends with short group sharing/presentation of the designed serious geogames ideas.

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Keywords: geography, cultural heritage, health, serious games

Everyday Queer Mobilities

Tilen Kolar (T.Kolar@leeds.ac.uk)
University of Leeds

Human experience is fundamentally an experience of (im)mobilities across different scales. This lecture and workshop invite participants to reimagine the spaces and times of everyday life through the lens of mobility: the lines and environments we navigate when doing everyday life, such as when commuting to work, sharing meals, seeking intimacy, or celebrating at a party.

Everyday mobilities have often been treated as peripheral to social inquiry, seen merely as transitional times and spaces. This lecture instead places mobility at the center of human experience, exploring how, in the act of moving, such as boarding a train or dancing in a club, we actively perform identities, encounter others, and negotiate difference. We will focus particularly on queer mobilities: how might queer movements through space differ from dominant patterns? Is there something distinctive about queer experiences of mobility? Where, when, and why do queer people move? What infrastructures enable or constrain queer mobilities?

Drawing on recent developments in mobilities research and queer theory, as well as empirical examples from ethnographic fieldwork, this lecture and workshop will critically examine how mobility shapes and is shaped by queer lives.

Keywords: mobilities, queer, encounters, everyday spaces, queer mobilities

Coping with spatial isolation in rural areas – Life quality in perforated villages

Éva Máté (mate.eva@pte.hu)
University of Pecs

We generally perceive rural spaces as calm, unchanging, and timeless. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, our rural areas are undergoing numerous transformations, ranging from the economic impacts of globalisation and the indirect effects of urban development to migration trends, as well as the processes of counter urbanisation and rural gentrification. The theory of rural restructuring summarises the differentiation processes affecting the countryside.

Restructuring entails diverse developmental trajectories; however, many of our post-socialist rural areas were already in a deteriorated state when these changes occurred. The shrinkage that began in the second half of the 20th century, the failure of the transition to a market economy after the regime change, and the ageing rural population have created an already marginalised spatial type, which has been further pushed towards spatial isolation by these transformations. This, in turn, has led to the disintegration of inter-settlement connections in rural areas.

In the resulting perforated settlement network, the functionality of local communities, social services, and the maintenance of institutional networks have become critical issues, not to mention the challenges of livelihood opportunities. In my presentation, I will illustrate the everyday challenges and potential solutions to mitigate these problems using the example of Hungary's perforated rural settlements.

Keywords: rural restructuring, perforation, community-based strategies, leading attitude, local organisations

Spatial Analysis of Climate Change Impacts

Danijel Ivajnšič (dani.ivajnsic@um.si)
University of Maribor

In the period of digital transformation of society, information technologies are gaining in importance. This includes geographic information systems that link location data to all types of descriptive information, thus providing a basis for mapping and spatial analysis. The latter is used today in both science and industry. With the help of this type of analysis, it is easier to understand past and present spatial patterns that are the result of the interaction of natural and social conditions. Based on the recognized trends, we can then estimate further spatial development. The ability to predict objectively is one of the key features that further increases the usefulness of spatial analysis in terms of evaluating the consequences of climate or environmental crisis.

Keywords: spatial analysis, climate change, GIS, environmental modeling, location data

Urban public spaces and the quality of life: towards more liveable cities

Jarosław Działek (jarek.dzialek@uj.edu.pl)
Jagiellonian University

The quality of public spaces and the quality of life are deeply interconnected. Public spaces in cities – such as streets and promenades, squares and plazas, parks and green areas, and waterfronts – constitute a vital part of urban quality of life. They can play an important role as places for both planned and spontaneous encounters, providing opportunities for leisure, access to services, physical and mental well-being, and fostering a sense of community, local pride, and belonging.

A range of theoretical perspectives and practical experiences highlight the key factors that support the sociability, accessibility, inclusivity, functionality, availability of amenities, and overall safety and comfort of public spaces. In addition, given the growing challenges posed by climate change, their environmental quality and sustainability must also be considered in both design and management. This includes incorporating nature-based solutions, promoting biodiversity restoration, ensuring thermal comfort, improving retention capacity, and using permeable surfaces.

In this class, we will look at different types of urban public spaces and how they contribute to making cities more liveable.

Keywords: public spaces, placemaking, well-being, identity, sustainability

Museums, social capital, creativity and quality of life

Monika Murzyn-Kupisz (monika.murzyn-kupisz@uj.edu.pl)
Jagiellonian University

The changing definitions of museums, as reflected in the evolving standards of ICOM and contemporary museum practice and research, point to a broader recognition of museum roles beyond their traditional missions of collecting, researching, preserving, and displaying material and immaterial heritage. Today, museums increasingly function as important community hubs—spaces where local identity is defined and expressed, and where social connections are fostered across different social and age groups. They serve not only as educational institutions but also as venues for leisure, community participation, creative endeavours, social inclusion, and meaningful social encounters. This lecture will explore the diverse dimensions of museum functioning and impact, arguing for a greater acknowledgment of their potential as social and creative spaces. As a follow-up to the lecture, a visit to a local institution—specifically the Regional Museum in Maribor—and a meeting with one of its representatives will offer students a practical complement to the theoretical discussion. Observations made during this visit, as well as those from individual explorations (through participatory observation) and digital research (including web and social media analysis), will form the basis of discussion and critical reflection in a post-visit workshop.

Keywords: heritage institutions, museums, social capital, local community, participation, creativity

Geographies of *città della longevità*

Peter Kumer
University of Maribor

Several studies on extreme longevity have shown that many factors play an important role in reaching old age, such as genetic traits that support adaptation to daily stress and disease resistance; diet (eating earlier, overnight fasting, and following a Mediterranean diet); a tendency to avoid conflict; the ability to respond positively to stress; attachment to family and religion; and moderate physical activity. In Europe, the number of centenarians (people aged 100 years or more) is projected to grow fivefold by 2050, reaching close to half a million. Italian society is aging significantly, and the number of centenarians is also increasing. As of 2022 there were an estimated 20,000 centenarians in Italy, of whom 82 % were women.

Although centenarians have been studied in various health-related sciences, they tend to be concentrated in specific regions called “Blue Zones.” Environmental factors such as climate, topography, and other ecological features play an important role in longevity. The environment strongly affects how long people live because it can influence how genes are expressed—without changing the DNA—helping the body function in a healthier way. In Italy, a couple of Blue Zones are often mentioned: Ogliastro in Sardinia and Cilento in Campania. Trieste, a city in northeastern Italy near the Slovenian border with a population of 204,000, also has a high prevalence of centenarians. As of 2020, there were 148 centenarians. About 90% of them are women, but the few men who reach this age are all in excellent health. This presentation focuses on the geographical factors in Trieste that contribute to extreme longevity among its population.

Keywords: longevity, centenarians, Blue Zones, geographic factors, environmental influence