R-Urban is an ‘R’ word. It relates directly to the three ‘R’ imperatives discussed in ecological approaches to urban territories—Reduce, Reuse, Recycle—and suggests other iterations: Repair, Re-design, Re-think, Re-assemble etc. In addition, the term indicates explicitly that R-Urban reconnects the urban with the rural through new kinds of relations which are more complementary and less hierarchical. The ‘R’ of R-Urban is a reminder also that the main goal of the strategy is ‘resilience’. Resilience is a key term in the more nuanced discussion on sustainability, which takes place today in the context of current economic crisis and resource scarcity. In contrast with sustainability, which focuses on sustaining the status quo of a system by controlling the balance between its inputs and outputs, without necessarily addressing the factors of change and social dynamics, resilience speaks about how systems can adapt and thrive in changing circumstances. Resilience is a dynamic concept, which does not have a stable definition and identity outside the circumstances that produce it. In contrast to sustainability, which tends to focus on maintaining the environmental balance, resilience is adaptive and transformative, inducing change that offers huge potential to rethink assumptions and build new systems. *R* is this transformative quality that animates R-Urban, which is concerned not only with environmental sustainability but also with societal change and re-invention. The resilience capacity should imply also the preservation of specific democratic principles and cultural values, local histories and traditions, while adapting to more economic and ecological logics. As such, a city can only become resilient with the active involvement of its inhabitants. To stimulate this commitment, we need tools, knowledge and places to test new practices and citizen initiatives, and to showcase the results and boost a resilient transformation of the city.

By concentrating on spatial agencies and pilot projects, R-Urban tries to offer tools and spaces that will make viable the resilience capacity of citizens. Spatial design processes can contribute to the expression of the ecological cycles in physical and virtual space and engage citizens in experiences of making. Democratic governance principles are thus associated with concrete hands-on actions whose consequences are visible and measurable. More than just a method of adaptation, resilient practices are considered within R-Urban as a catalyst for urban innovation and creativity.

MODELS OF RESILIENT CITIES:

GARDEN CITY, REGIONAL CITY

AND TRANSITION TOWN

R-Urban was not conceived in isolation but follows a particular tradition of models of resilient development that started with Howard’s Garden City and Geddes’s Regional City and continues today with the Transition Town movement.

In 1899, Ebenezer Howard published his book Garden City. This was a vision of a utopian city that would combine qualities of urban and rural life. The book intended to provide a solution for the urban crisis that followed the agricultural depression in the 19th Century, and generated a whole movement. The model proposed by Howard supposed a mechanism through which ownership would be transferred gradually from landlords to inhabitants, with the idea that paying rent would translate into the maintenance of a local welfare state. The speculative aspects of the original Garden City model were transposed in community gardens, small local and organic agriculture, culture. A number of pilot architectural projects will be gradually implemented to create a network of locally closed ecological cycles across those fields. Flows, networks and cycles of production-consumption will be formed, closing chains of need and supply as locally as possible To increase the current crisis, we must try, as French philosopher André Gorz states ‘to produce what we consume and consume what we produce’ To Urban interprets this chain of production-consumption broadly; beyond the material aspect, including the cultural, cognitive and affective dimensions. The circulatory changes induced in the social and environmental relations will maintain a socio-ecological metabolism, which without being fixed, will evolve together with the relations themselves. The pilot projects will be collectively run and will strategically introduce collaborative practices and agencies (such as recycling, food production, eco-construction, local culture and economy) that will catalyze existing individual activities and well little by little change current behaviours and lifestyles.

Spatial agencies will make the new organisation visible and sustainable and provide a means of comprehensive control, ensuring that the model has a transformative quality that interests R-Urban, which is concerned not only with environmental sustainability but also with societal change and re-invention. The resilience capacity should imply also the preservation of specific democratic principles and cultural values, local histories and traditions, while adapting to more economic and ecological logics. As such, a city can only become resilient with the active involvement of its inhabitants. To stimulate this commitment, we need tools, knowledge and places to test new practices and citizen initiatives, and to showcase the results and boost a resilient transformation of the city.

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R-Urban
Location of fields of activities following the R-Urban principles

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MICRO-SOCIAL AND MICRO-CULTURAL RESILIENCE

In contrast to other initiatives that deal exclusively with sustainability from a technological and environmental angle, R-Urban states the importance of a general ‘change of culture’, understood as a change in the way we think. The future is culturally shaped as much as in the past and it has to be became culture, as Augus Appadurai says, gives us ‘the capacity to act’. * R-Urban proposes new collective practices through reinventing and regenerating proximity relations based on solidarities (for example ways of being involved and deciding new inputs). In contrast with the Garden City, R-Urban does not propose an ideal model of transformation but deals with the collapse of modern urban ideals and their failure in addressing the future seen for example in the features of monotonous urban fabric; obsolete tower blocks; real estate bankruptcy; segregation, social and economic exclusion; and the pollution of land. R-Urban picks up from the Urban City the idea of regional dynamics, but based in this case on the bottom-up initiatives of inhabitants. It considers big scale processes but also small-scale phenomena. Global concerns are addressed locally, within the current existing conditions. Their transformation is realised throughout successive phases, by investing in temporarily available spaces and creating short-term uses, which can prefigure future urban developments.

R-Urban also incorporates many of the Transition Town principles. However, resilience in R-Urban is not understood as an imperative to maintain the status quo but as a necessity to transform and invent new possibilities as a driver for collective creativity. Through its pilot projects and collective facilities, R-Urban tries to make visible the solidarity networks and ecological cycles that it creates. It does not have a specific scale or size and does not operate necessarily within a ‘town’, but instead it negotiates its own scale (a block, a neighbourhood, a district) depending on the context. There are no specific pre-existing communities that are targeted through the project, but instead new communities are formed that have to agree their own set of rules and principles.

THE ‘RIGHT TO RESILIENCE’

R-Urban claims urban sustainability as a civic right. Sustainability is on the agenda of many urban projects today, but this doesn’t mean that all these projects are politically aware. A political ecology approach, such as R-Urban, not only positively asserts development dynamics but questions also the processes that bring about uneven urban environments and the social consequences of urban sustainability. * David Harvey, among others, argues that the transformation of urban spaces is a common right rather than an individual right because collective power is necessary to reshape urban projects. Following Lefebvre, Harvey speaks of the ‘Right to the City’ as a citizen’s liberty to access urban resources ‘it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city’. * In this sense, R-Urban follows Harvey and enables the exercise of this ‘right through processes of appropriation, transformation, networking and use of the city infrastructure. The difference with him is maybe in scope: it is not so much a slogan to instigate a big global movement against the financial capital which controls urban developments in the world, but a means to empower inhabitants to propose alternative projects where they live. It also aims to foster local and trans-local networks, testing methods of self-management, self-build and self-produce. Here R-Urban is maybe closer to Lefebvre’s more utopian idea of ‘Right to the City’. Lefebvre imagines it as a far more emancipatory project, emphasising the need to freely propose alternative possibilities for urban life. He proposes a new methodology, called ‘transduction’ to encourage the creation of ‘experimental utopias’. Framed by the existing reality, this would ‘introduce rigour in invention and knowledge in utopias’, as a way of avoiding irresponsible idealism. * Lefebvre underscores the key role of urban imaginaries in understanding, challenging and transforming the urban and opening the door to a multiplicity of representations and interventions. From this point of view, R-Urban is a ‘transductive’ project, both rigorous and utopian, popular and experimental. It is a bottom-up approach based on the aggregation of many individual and collective interventions that decide to function together forming metabolic networks which stimulate circulatory changes and simultaneously determine each other. Such networks have the potential to accommodate multiplicity and valorize imaginations at all levels.

DEMOCRATIC WAYS OF WORKING AND DWELLING

The modes of production introduced by Fordism have produced de-subjectified labour relations through progressive accumulation of repetitive tasks, which by their fragmentary and repetitve nature have destroyed the long-term visions of labour goals and results. * The ultra-liberal economy induced social relations empty of symbolic and subjective charge. Under post-Fordist labour conditions, the construction of micro-social subjectivities is realised only in connection with leisure domains (cinema, holidays, sports, parties and more recently all sort of events organised via social networks). This free time sociality is realised only in connection with leisure domains (cinema, holidays, sports, parties and more recently all sort of events organised via social networks). This free time sociality is alienating: it is meant to fill in an existential void, while being implemented insidiously and modifying radically the collective values and behaviours.

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However, R-Urban could be suspected of an opportunistic alignment with the ‘Big Society’ principles recently proposed by the UK Tory prime minister David Cameron to translate the idea of communities taking more control, of more voluntarism, more charitable giving, of social enterprises taking on a bigger role, of people establishing public services themselves. * The essential difference is that R-Urban does not react directly to the financial crisis and does not embrace a programme of economic resilience from which the State is absent: such a programme explicitly promotes unpaid work to mask the disappearance of welfare structures and the massive cuts in public services. The R-Urban strategy doesn’t relegate economic responsibility to the citizen because the State is no longer capable of assuming it, but claims it as a social and political right to question power on its role and responsibility. Municipalities and public authorities are involved as equal partners in the strategy; assuming their roles of enablers, funders and administrators. Public structures are invited to take part in this experimental utopia and challenge their habits. It is not only up to the inhabitants to ‘change themselves by changing the city’, as claimed by Harvey, but to those currently in charge with the city, too14. As such, R-Urban is not only about grassroots innovation to meet social, economic and environmental needs, but also about a political critique and an ideological statement which affirms the necessity of new social and economic agencies based on initiatives to support to the dominant socio-technical regime. Through its self-organised constituency, R-Urban gives the means to all those involved to act locally at their own scale of dwelling and opens up possibilities for actions and activities that could change their future. It affirms its ‘right to resilience’.
R-Urban tries to give back the possibility of re-appropriation and re-subjectivation of labour as fundamental onomological activity, while developing links and transversalization between work and emancipatory social, cultural, political and environmental values.

The diversity of activities developed by R-Urban should allow not only a new assemblage and emerging agencies but also a gradual disassembling of a system in crisis. To slowly escape from the generalized footprint of the neo-liberal economy, which has excluded all other forms of material and symbolic exchange, we must dismantle one by one our ties to the market and go out of the system to make change possible. We must undo, dis-assemble — de-aggae, de-collect and Gattauri might say — and lean out of the neo-liberal logic in order to re-assemble new ethical, environmental and long term ecological agencies.

This re-assemblage is a collective act based on the conviction of each participant. The R-Urban strategy relies on ‘off-market’ elements that can potentially leave the system (for example interstitial spaces, community associations, marginalized or emerging practices) and can be integrated in new agencies and collective processes of re-assemblage.

The accumulation of numerous small changes that will form a large-scale strategy depends on the long-term involvement of individual participants and on the collective dynamics around their initiatives. R-Urban aims for an urban environment which can adapt itself to the aspirations of every city dweller. This should be constituted progressively, by welcoming the most varied range of activities proposed by all kinds of residents, including activities developed in free time. Later these free time activities could evolve into economic, cultural and ecological initiatives that will gradually replace the current productive and reproductive relations and will fundamentally define more democratic and more sustainable ways of working and living.

R-Urban recognises the condition of ‘dweller’ as political and promotes an emancipatory politics of living within populations which are usually limited in their existential choice by their social condition and the spatial, social and cultural experiences they have access to. Democracy, as Rancière says, is first and foremost ‘the place of all these places and texts, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define the commons as a production term, but also it affects and contributes to produce all permanent reconstruction. We try to create conditions for what Rancière called a ‘new sociability based on equality of conditions. This sociability will bring in provisional solutions to the regulatory mechanism between the social and the political. What the most informed politics do not manage to do, the production of a self-regulated sociability (…), the providential movement of equalizing social conditions will achieve’. In the long term, R-Urban could contribute to the reconnection of the political with the social through a more democratic way of dwelling.

**ECOLOGY’ OF COMMONS**

R-Urban participative networks will generate a multitude of micro-social dynamics (bottom-up, local, trans-local, rural and urban). Based on trust and solidarity, these participative networks should increase the capacity of action across different social and cultural milieus and in time structure a new long-term social pact. In his seminal book *Fukylik*, Joseph Stiglitz explains the roots of the current economic crisis and notices that “even within a market economy, trust is the oil that makes a society function”. Destabilised by egocentric behaviours, social trust needs to be reconstructed collectively and on a daily basis. The oil that makes a society function needs regeneration and needs to infiltrate the practices of everyday life.

In this sense we need to replace the obsessive pursuit of ‘purchasing power’, the drive for selling and consuming, by the desire to self-produce locally, to reuse and recycle, to preserve and transmit, to share services and materialise space through collective management. R-Urban proposes a change of mentality and social and economic vision, which will at the same time preserve attention to the other and care for the common future.

As Stiglitz demonstrates, we need to orient ourselves towards a new political economy that will ‘reconstruct the balance between the market and the state, between individual and collective, between man and nature, between means and goals’. The current market economy should quickly evolve into an ecological economy: an eco-lonomy. This is the direction to be taken if we want the economy to be adapted to different territorial scales and developed on a long-term basis under principles of solidarity and sharing. This attitude will not only change the way we manage our economy but also the way we manage our lives.

By introducing a capacity for multiple collective production (green productive spaces, active dwelling, local economy, etc.), R-Urban enables forms of eco-lonomy, understood as a production of commons. The question of the commons is at the heart of discussions about democracy today. In some of their recent texts, Michael Hardt and Antonios Negri define the commons as something which is not discovered but produced: ‘We call “biopolitical production” the current dominant model to underline the fact that it involves not only a material production in straightforward economic terms, but also affects and contributes to produce all
cooperation; it is a city of commons. The resilient city is a city of sharing, empathy and users, including adaptable elements and processes based on open knowledge and skills, and forms of groups and networks. The facilities of commons: from collective self-managed facilities to collective material and virtual. At the same time a re-appropriation and a reinvention. This undertaking is about this capturing, diverting, appropriating what they do with the commons but also on social solidarities understood as commons. Democracy should be based on a long-term politics of the commons, and driven by ethical principles. It is at the same time a re-appropriation and a reinforcement of the commons from collective self-managed facilities to collective knowledge and skills, and forms of groups and networks. The facilities of commons: from collective self-managed facilities to collective material and virtual. It is at the same time a re-appropriation and a reinvention. This undertaking is about this capturing, diverting, appropriating what they do with the commons but also on social solidarities understood as commons. The resilient city is a city of sharing, empathy and users, including adaptable elements and processes based on open knowledge and skills, and forms of groups and networks. The facilities of commons: from collective self-managed facilities to collective material and virtual. At the same time a re-appropriation and a reinvention. This undertaking is about this capturing, diverting, appropriating what they do with the commons but also on social solidarities understood as commons. Democracy should be based on a long-term politics of the commons, and driven by ethical principles.

During the last few years we have developed and built a number of R-Urban prototypes to both anticipate and test ecological devices and locally closed cycles: water, energy, waste, food, skills, practices. We have also initiated social, economic and cultural networks based on emerging and emerging local initiatives. We have identified and encouraged local skills necessary to support such initiatives and have invited specialists to contribute to learning and re-skilling. We have also elaborated forms of knowledge production and skill exchange. These prototypes allowed us to experiment with simple methods of implementation of an ecological approach at the level of everyday life and to generate self-managed collective use and environmental practices. We are preparing the construction of the first R-Urban pilot projects, which will implement resilient practices in a neighbourhood in Colombes. A social economy cluster and organic food market will be initiated in connection with urban agriculture plots. A recycling unit that will process materials will be ready in 2012. Seminars, debates and workshops will disseminate knowledge and skills necessary to the process. R-Urban is on its way.