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NEW PERIPHERAL CENTRALITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Facts have changed once more and they are about to change again. The expansion of the European Union (E.U.) to 25 member states resulted in the redistribution of cohesion funds. Greece is counting too much on the fact that the E.U. is co-funding a great number of public works. So, it was imminent that these funds should decrease, as well as the share concerning urban renewal projects (Gospodini, 2000). This is due to bad management of cohesion programmes and also to paying off other standard needs that couldn't be afforded. Considering the lack of interest of all local and central authorities for the need of urban renewal projects, the shortage of great events (sports, conventions etc.) and the opportunities for investment and advertisement for tourism, the overcoming economic depression both of the state funds and of citizens (businessmen, constructors etc.), the new taxation of constructions and the blurry image that exists in the relationship between simple civilians and the state authorities, you will come to the conclusion that the future of the Greek cities (especially the middle-sized ones) is more than obscure.

2. PERIPHERY - CENTRALITIES

Nevertheless, all separate facts that occur from the comparison of the various points of view and scales of the space that interacts with the cities should also be considered equally. **This paper stands for the existence of a deeper relationship between several couples of words – meanings, such as the “periphery – center” couple. This kind of relationships stays “locked” and unaffected by the scale of reference always preserving their inbetween ratio, depending on its use (i.e. continental - national – urban) the same way that Architecture does (from urban planning to industrial and detail design). It is an analogy, a steady proportion, which manages to keep the same nature and intensity, regardless the environment, by just coordinating to it.**

So the relationship between the words “Periphery” and “Centralities” preserves its ratio with an admirable and exploitable way. Thus, if we refer to the widest scale (at a continental level) we can see that if Europe – as themselves have acknowledged – wish to remain a healthy and fully operational and competitive organism, they must keep its periphery (meaning all areas outside the

great “banana” shaped center of the E.U.’s economy) the same alive and active as the center of it, and at the same time, give equal opportunities of growth through all of it, thus creating new activity centers, preserving though all peripheral special characteristics. It’s a thin line that gets even thinner because of the differentiability of the people, their languages, traditions and other factors such as the climate, geography and the general socio-economical backgrounds (Image 1).

The disadvantageous position of the middle-sized Greek cities within the European urban network must also be considered. Having to deal with the fact that they lie at the periphery of the E.U. with immense difficulties and obstacles concerning both the geographical distance from the E.U. core (due to the Adriatic sea and the Balcans) and the cohesion within their area (due to lack of main transport networks, lack of infrastructure, low population – market depth and single-oriented production schemes) and also the fact that Athens and Thessaloniki “suck out” most of the projects and investments, the Greek periphery really needs to be stimulated in order to keep on track with all the other main urban centers.

Increasing the scale a little bit to fit a whole country (i.e. Greece), the same pattern appears (Image 2): The centers (Athens and Thessaloniki) prevail over the periphery. It is vital that the periphery should develop new centralities (and upgrade the existing ones) in order to reach sustainability, upraise the living standards, succesfully compete with other peripheral centralities within the E.U. and work together with the centers towards both their interests and growth. This special relationship gets even more apparent when we increase the scale of reference to the extends of a Periphery or a County (Image 3). It is then when the dependance of the central city and its rural periphery become so obvious and powerful.

3. URBAN PERIPHERY – URBAN CENTRALITIES

The next and more crucial - to this paper - scale is the city itself (Image 4). In Greece, the urban environmental standards are extremely low and rarely all function sectors are operational. To be more precise, Greek middle-sized cities hold the advantage of having less traffic (relatively) and keeping better touch with the natural environment (surrounding the city and not entering it), but serious drawbacks remain, such as the lack of infrastructure, the absence of public places in the cities’ centers, the prevailing of an aesthetically indifferent urban stock (at the least) etc.

Two elements must be underlined: first of all, cities should encourage actions that could assist the local growth and the adaptation to present situation and diminish issues of social segregation and economic crisis, with the participation of their productive units, the citizens and the businesses that lie in their field. In addition, they should realise that **investing on urban regeneration projects and avant-garde architecture (which also function as an urban exhibit**

itself) can only upgrade the city image and also attract tourism, new circle of projects and a longterm living standards uplifting.

Combining all these facts and hypotheses concerning the open public spaces, the problematic civic centers and the overaged urban stock, we can **use the theory about the properties of the steady ratio between the notions “periphery” and centralities” within the urban scale**. Thus, middle-sized cities can create new centralities by probing a series of neighbourhood scale projects. These new centralities can stimulate the essence of democracy and participation and lessen several existing social problems. Their function is not against the real urban core – center, but parallel to it. In other words, they could become the new activity centers and new growth “transmitters” in a multi-centered, more “compact” city.

4. CONCERNING NEW CENTRALITIES

There is a special category of urban open spaces, rarely being referred to as a significant part of the “non-built” city space throughout the Greek bibliography and even more rarely being paid any attention to from any of us (since they keep on turning obscure for the last 40 years of cityscape construction), that could easily “host” these new centralities. The most popular and widely used urban regulations for Greek cities’ buildings lead to the known city blocks, containing several buildings (mostly multi-storeyed) at the edge of the block, leaving a respected amount of space at the inside of the block (that with draft calculations can even reach the 30% of the total block area). The Greek cities’ drawback of limited sq.m. private land in which every city block is divided can be overcome by a possible merging of all these backyards into a greater one. This unified backyard can sometimes function as a city’s real open space (Images 9-11).

Today, **these backyards have become “non spaces”**, due to zero usage, difficult or impossible to access, garbage pollution, dangerous facades, abandoned engineering facilities etc.. In fact, this outcomes a variety of other problems, such as lack of connection among public spaces, waste of covered length in pedestrian walk (due to city blocks of great lengths and the absence of diagonal flows within them) and of crucial space and time in the citizens’ routine.

The exploitation of the city block backyards through their merging can result in several positive reactions: all problematic conditions at these backyards are ceased and these spaces turn to be a place of social gathering, playground or just a greenery. A series of adjustments in the surrounding buildings due to direct and indirect causes can lead to upgrading the existing building stock and to the enrichment of the architectural typologies involved. Even more, parking stations could be built right under the merged backyard, avoiding the fragile structural system of the buildings, serving both all local inhabitants and external users.

At a second level, those merged backyards can open to the public beyond each block's inhabitants, leading to the creation of secret but not hidden, discreet and indiscreet at the same time, squares or "**urban atriums**", small bubbles of social activity. Some results could be the boosting of the local market economy and the shortening distances for the pedestrians.

Finally, to fit to the whole city and let these projects come to full extend and power, someone could deal with more than singular usage of city blocks, but with a network of blocks that create new pedestrian flows that could fill in the gap between existing open public places, unifying them and providing them with a whole new dynamics (Image 12). This could also become a milestone, a remembrance of the concept that **cities should be dealt with like a whole, an organism, whose fundamental particles or "urban cells" are the city blocks themselves**. In addition to that, present legislation and bureaucratic procedures work in favour of such wider projects than of singular ones with less influence.

5. LEGISLATION

A. Tritsis' (former Greek Minister of Public Works and Environment) visions of the Greek social city in the 80's were unable to set up an idea that had had many exemplary applications throughout Europe (Images 5-7). The notion was introduced by the 1337/1983 law and came to flesh under the revised in 1985 General Constructive Regulations of Greece (articles 12,13). The so-called "Active City Blocks" (A.C.B.) can cooperate with other laws published ever since, like underground parking lots (laws 960/1979 and 3164/2003), the Housing law (2508/1997) etc. It is almost commonsense to say that all this legislation needed improvement whatsoever.

What was the reason that this endeavouring scheme found limited theoretical analysis and almost no projects were carried out for more than 26 years? The existing laws could support a case, since they showed no resilience or ability to coordinate to its contemporary environment and its constant changes and not enough power within, in order to support such an urban planning tool. These weaknesses remain despite all efforts to improve the law frame. There is also an explanation concerning the intense land market profit and the construction activities in general (on behalf of both the private construction sector and the state government) and the illusion that this kind of projects – investments wouldn't be as efficient (economically speaking) as others (like constant cities' expansions programmes). In real, studies show that a great deal of profit can be achieved (Maratou Komninou, 2004). To conclude this, bureaucratic Himalayas and conflict between state services about jurisdiction areas forbid all other possible efforts.

The most important issue though is the wide public ignorance of such an urban regeneration opportunity and the multiplicity of gains through the use of such tools, providing full and

constitutional cover of their original land ownings (against their fear of land loss due to merging the backyards). Furthermore, people who dwell these blocks strongly protest against any backyard transformed to public space through passages (in housing areas), claiming security and disturbance reasons, that will be answered later on. This tool potential is strange and unknown even to the “microcosmos” of engineers, architects, city planners, state officials and theorists (as an active survey on behalf of the author’s PhD research indicates). So, a vast briefing campaign could serve as much.

6. PROPOSITIONS - SOLUTIONS

On a first attempt to locate the means with which the urban planning tool of Active City Blocks could be encouraged to work with, one could begin from the conclusion that the legal description of this tool blocks it from being flexible (to different environments and possible changes) and reduces both attractiveness and abilities of it. Greek cities were historically developed in such a way that, although some main functional, social and economical differences exist from area to area, the cohesion of the Greek society and the extensive use of multi-storeyed buildings (flats) diminished phenomena of extreme social segregation, zoning and vast morphological diversities (like in the U.S. cities i.e.) (Papamichos, 2002), paying though the price by extracting most of the natural elements (parks, greenery, public spaces etc.) (Sketch 1). So, urban housing, trade, services districts may not have specified limits from one to the other, but still carry their own characteristics. In fact, there are many cases of Greek cities’ urban cores that coincide with the historical centers laying right underneath, with time gaps measuring up to 5000 years! This dead-end clearly indicates the need to be able to choose the different forms of application of this tool.

To be more precise, the application of Active City Blocks within trading and services districts of the city (meaning those districts where trading or services occupy more than the half of the total built area, compared to housing uses) will stimulate the local economy and increase tourism, while land owners can only gain profit from the raise in land values. These districts may be able to extend their operational time range during the 24hour period (mostly at night), keeping themselves far from the risk of deserted civic centers. As a result, criminality rates would drop. In addition, underground parking stations would mean less parked cars on the road (mostly illegal) and improvement of many traffic problems (average car speed increase, more space for pedestrian and bicycle usage etc.). Finally, merged backyards can be fully accessible by the public. Access could come from alleys or passages between shops at ground and 1st floor levels (Sketch 2).

The form and the predictions of the Active City Blocks tool at housing districts with the presence of trading at the ground and 1st floor of the buildings could be much different, as well as

the issues that may arise. At this category lie most of the problems referring to the land-owning and the fear of losing a piece of land property against the neighbour. But, as mentioned before, there are all the technological, legal and controlling means that can guarantee unchangeability of property borders. There is also the issue of sound pollution and disturbance of the peace in general, which could occur from the opening of the merged backyard to public use all around the clock. There are flats that lead all their private spaces to face the backyard, instead of the front facade towards the main road, due to avoidance of traffic noise. Of course, this is not a plan followed massively, but it also depends on other data, like orientation, view etc. An extended morphological study of the urban tissue should provide us with many answers on this. Either way, the solution and the differentiation could be to control the access to these new backyards depending on the time of the day or at worst to completely block public access to the backyards, allowing only users and inhabitants of the specific city block to access them (Sketch 3). This last proposition cannot get evolved to a network of merged backyards in the city, but can become an ideal space for playgrounds and greenery.

There are numerous cases of Greek cities' centers that coincide with the historical towns, from which they became, that lie underneath them. The constant risk (found extensively in Greece) of excavating the foundations of a new building and coming across antiquities changes all facts and can cause a significant delay of the construction process, not to mention extra expenditure of cautious excavation, special treatment of the findings and possible blueprints changes. In those cases, the tool can rule out any underground parking construction, since all other existing buildings and works do not affect the antiquities. In addition, buildings with historical, cultural, architectural interest, could be exploited and become the epicenter of the project masterplans, by being restored and connected to the rest of the irrelevant – up to that moment – modern buildings and of course, to the city life itself.

The permeability to construct an underground parking space (under the merged backyards of whatever district's city's blocks) is a vital matter that could boost (if solved) the application of the Active City Blocks regeneration tool. Its problems have to do with the existing laws and the Greek Constitution concerning the so-called vertical ownership (land) and horizontal ownership (multiple owners – of flats for example – at a single piece of land). Still, this announcement stands for the certainty that there are legal paths and detours with which this obstacle can also be surpassed (Sketch 4).

Legally speaking again, a major step could be done by adjoining the specific urban regeneration tool to the Housing law. But once more, sorrow and surprise prevailed, as this highly promising Housing law failed to deal with any project since its publication in 1997 (almost a decade), due to the absence of a study-blueprints standards and regulations guide, that the Ministry

of Public Works ought to publish. There could also be a gesture of legal and economical “gifts”, special offers and motives to those who decide to use this tool (construction companies, groups of citizens, municipality authorities). Finally, it is essential that we could avoid any misuses of this regeneration tool in the future. It is almost ironic that the sole example of Active City Blocks usage in a Greek city is also the kind of examples we shall definitely try to avoid. It was the municipality of Tauros (adjacent to Athens) in the early 90’s that demolished a major city block of organised low income residential housing to raise a group of 10-storey buildings (with a rather uncertain aesthetic outcome). The local authorities then turned the city block into Active and exploited some provisions of the regeneration tool, with which they could build 2 more storeys up and one more building (due to a notion called “transfer of buildable square area”), with the worst way ever imagined: in order to gain maximum profit from selling these flats, they used the tool just to build more square meters, ignoring the environment, the social and morphological impact and other important issues.

The recently modified Master Plan of the city of Kalamata (image 8) is another example, where applications and tools, that move towards the Active City Block general tool, take place (Aravantinos, 1997). As we can see, the Master Plan proposes the existence of backyard construction lines (opposed to the main construction line at the front facade, in fact the very line that gives shape to the city block), aiming to build up the neighbourhood character and to organise both buildings and traffic – pedestrian flows. Nevertheless, local officials and engineers involved in the Master Plan argue that it was the uninformed (or misinformed) citizens and municipality officials that finally lead to altering and postponing of the Master Plan’s realization, followed by all known aesthetic and practical morphological and architectural results. The also revised and under publication Master Plan of the city of Xanthi is the most recent example of Active City Blocks tool application. Through this, backyard construction lines are proposed to a number of existing city blocks of great density and of course, other blocks are proposed to be handled with the regeneration tool mentioned. In addition, there will be a serious decrease of the buildable square area value, with which all unleashed construction activity shall be controlled and the general urban environment standards will be upgraded.

7. CONCLUSIONS – EPILOGUE

The middle-sized Greek cities can only benefit from the application of a wide range of urban regeneration tools, held by the label “Active City Blocks”. It is an investment – dare say – of the city and its citizens, which can yield fruit at a mid – long term period of time. Those new peripheral centralities shall strengthen the cohesion within the city and the neighbourhoods and restore their special character. It is also certain that the local communities shall find all these lost and safe urban

spaces of leisure, relaxation and playgrounds. Stimulation of the local market and economy will follow, together with a wider aura of investments, land value raise and economic blooming. Architecturally speaking, those gestures don't concern just the ground floor alterations (backyards and accesses) and the beautification of facades (both internal and external), but also changes throughout the housing stock included in a city block, since alterations are to be made in a morphological (facades), urban volumes (options for the position of the last storeys) and floor plan levels. Speaking on an urban scale, this tool shall help recover vast summing spaces without prior existence within the city's life, straighten out the blurred relations between automobile and pedestrian, and create more compact urban tissues (Jenks - Burton - Williams, 1996). Finally, environmentally speaking, and under the simplest possible gestures, a 30% of the total private land within the urban tissue could turn green. Those small fragments of greenery shall work as a whole improving both the psychology of the civilians and the microclimate of the city.

Under that pattern, all peripheral centralities are able to uplift the very urban cores and centers towards a total city upgrading. And continuing to move outwards (this time) within the scale of reference, we shall quote the strengthening of peripheral cities, the decrease of peripheral inequalities, the country's economical growth and the cohesion of all these special parts that make Europe such an interesting, multicultural and beautiful place to be.

APPENDIX

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PICTURES – SKETCHES



Image 1: Satellite image of Europe
Source: NASA World Wind



Image 2: Satellite image of Greece
Source: NASA World Wind

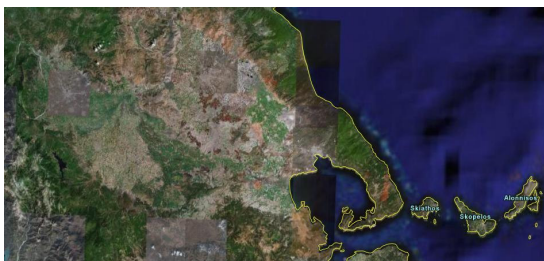


Image 3: Satellite image of Prefecture of Thessaly
Source: Google Earth

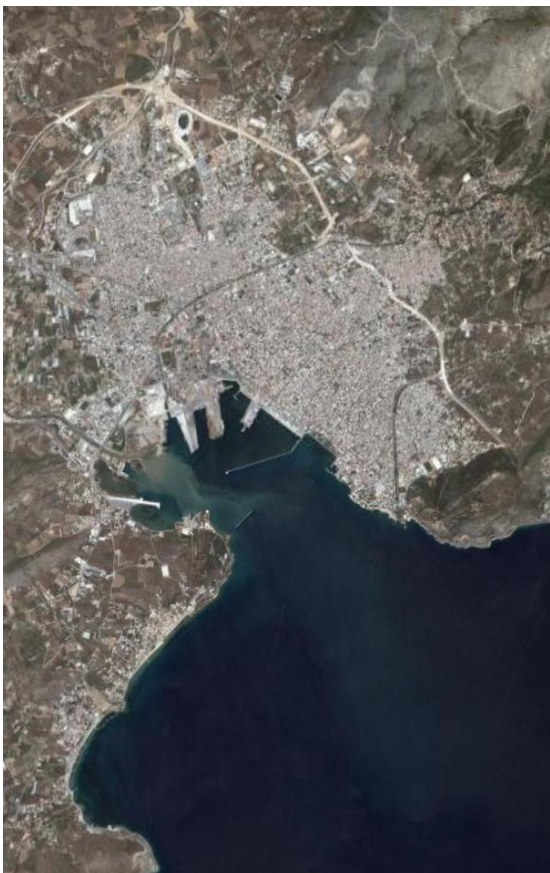


Image 4: Satellite image of Volos
Source: Google Earth



Image 5:
Downtown Barcelona city blocks

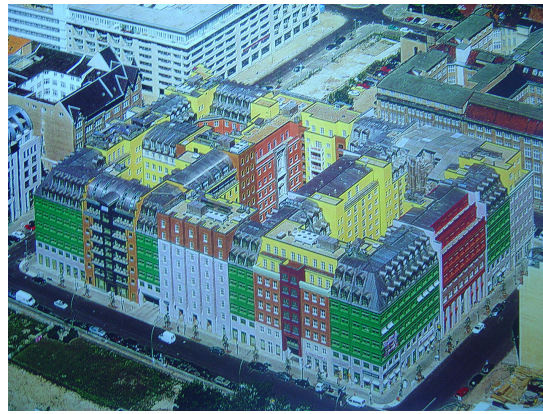


Image 6: Renewal of a city block
in Berlin, Aldo Rossi

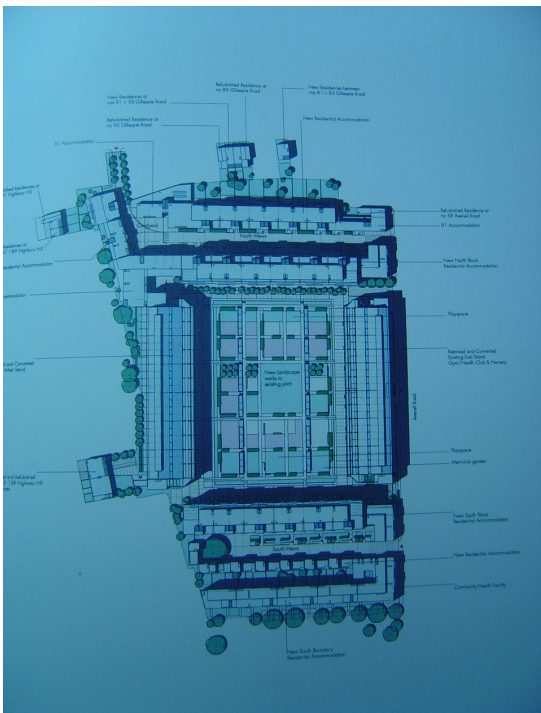


Image 7: Arsenal's Highbury: Master Plan of new
housing project (Powell, 2001, p. 152-153)



Image 8: Backyard construction lines within city
blocks (Aravantinos, 1997)



Image 9: Volos City center: Built areas

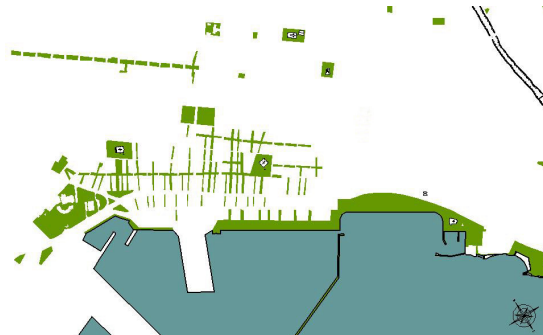


Image 10: Volos city center: today's public spaces



Image 11: Volos city center: Green areas added with merging of backyards

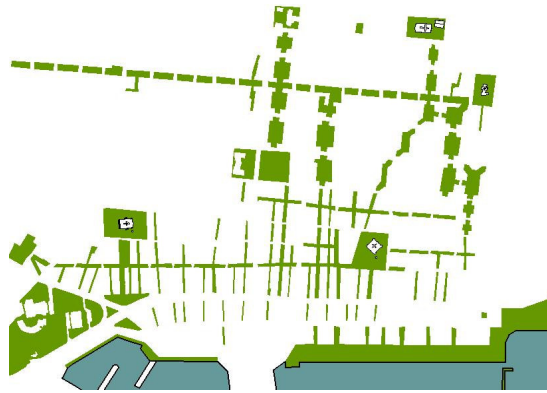
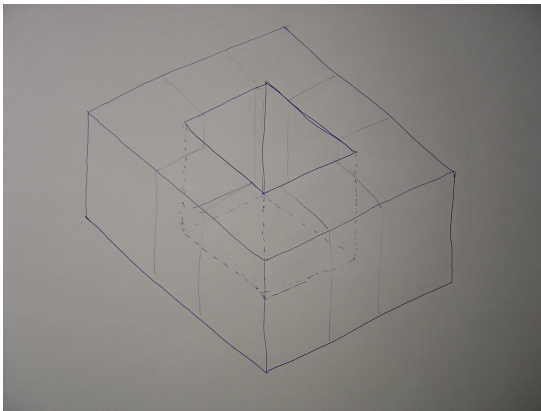
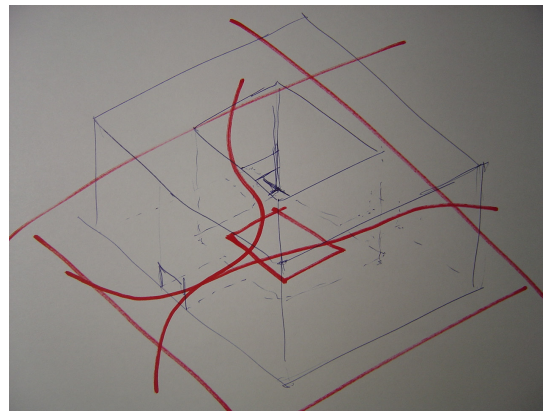


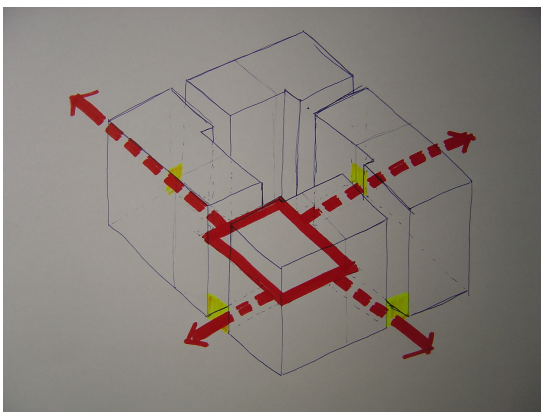
Image 12: Volos city center: possible network of active city blocks



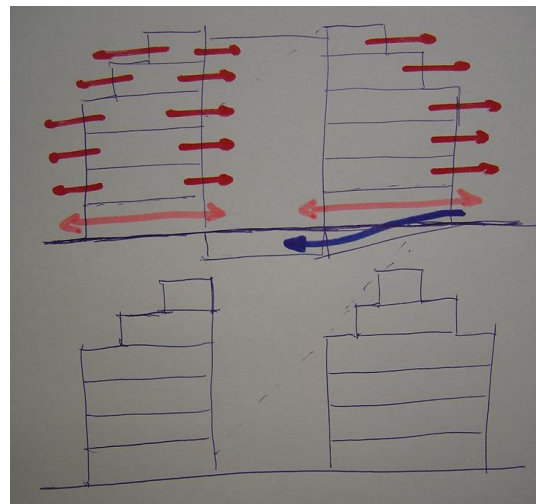
Sketch 1: Ideal city block



Sketch 2: "Open" to public merged backyards and new pedestrian flows



Sketch 3: Semi-open merged backyards



Sketch 4: Section of a city block: Change of view to new backyards and underground parking station.