

## UrbAging: Space, age, and urban living

Contemporary cities are increasingly facing new challenges, as society ages and the population becomes ever more urban. The research project entitled 'UrbAging: Designing urban space for an ageing society' assesses the adequacy of public space for the elderly. It is conducted by the Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project (i.CUP), of the Academy of Architecture, USI Mendrisio, together with the Institute for Spatial Development (IRAP) of the University of Applied Sciences, Rapperswil. Based on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the survey wants to develop strategies to be implemented during the urban planning and design stages.

The increasing average duration of human life (due to a decline in mortality rates) has led to a progressive ageing of the population. It is a problem which all European nations, including Switzerland, have to face. According to estimates, by 2040, a quarter of the Swiss population will be over the age of 65.

Although some people reach retirement age feeling perfectly self-sufficient and in good health, there are also those who end up with failing health and impaired mobility. It becomes important, in these circumstances, to plan and design a sustainable urban space to satisfy the demands of this 'cohort', the 'third age', which tends to aggregate mostly in the cities.

'UrbAging: Designing urban space for an ageing society' fits precisely into this perspective. Headed by Professor Acebillo of the Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project (i.CUP) at the Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio (USI), this project illustrates the connection between built environment and quality of public space from the standpoint of the elderly. The study is carried out in conjunction with IRAP, the Institute for Spatial Development of the University of Applied Sciences, Rapperswil (HSR). It is included in the National Research Programme 54 'Sustainable development of the built environment' funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The programme establishes the scientific bases from which to achieve a



The research team engaged in the project. From left: Enrico Sassi, Gian Paolo Torricelli, Marcello Martinoni, Joachim Schöffel, Alma Sartoris e Elena Molteni.

good balance between natural resources, favourable economic conditions, and high living standards.

*"Recent studies have shown the importance of restoring public spaces for a better social life. The project aims to assess to what extent the proposals for public space and services meet present and future needs of the elderly. By answering such questions we will then be able to develop strategies and designs which, in a later phase, may be used to plan and reshape urban spaces"*, explains Marcello Martinoni, research coordinator at i.CUP.

The study focuses initially on the analysis of the public spaces and the services provided by two Swiss cities, Lugano and Uster, very different from each other in terms of structure, size, and regional framework. Data collected for each of the two regions are then collated with those on the geographical distribution of the elderly part of the population. The objective is to define accessibility to spaces and services, while also bearing in mind future demographic evolution. Subsequently, groups of elderly people are interviewed to identify their requirements, type of use and degree of satisfaction with public living space. Finally, the results of the interviews will be discussed with city council representatives, town-planners, and members of the project's steering committees.

### Conference on 'The City and the Elderly'

On 16-17 October 2008, Mendrisio will host the international conference 'The City and the Elderly'. Organised jointly by the Laboratorio di Storia delle Alpi (LabiSAIp) and the Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project (i.CUP) of the Academy of Architecture, USI Mendrisio, the conference will apply interdisciplinary methods to a review of past and contemporary models of urban living for the aged, as well as to the (political, town-planning, architectural) strategies for managing demographic ageing in European cities. The debate will cover the following issues: the rise of the category of the aged, criteria applied by the elderly to their choice of residence, the needs of the elderly, psychological perceptions and obstacles, space and quality of life. For further information, please see: [www.arch.unisi.ch/urbaging](http://www.arch.unisi.ch/urbaging)

## Lugano and Uster compared - Some findings

The study, due to be completed by the end of 2008, considers both quantity and quality aspects. The quantitative survey analyses the distribution of the elderly population, public spaces and ease of access, while the qualitative survey is done through a questionnaire designed for a representative sample of elderly people (from Lugano and from Uster), to measure their degree of satisfaction with public spaces.

Lugano, the 'pole' of the agglomerate, turns out to be a 'mature' city, with a high density of inhabitants. On the other hand, Uster, a suburb in the metropolitan area of Zurich, presents a young profile and a more dispersed settlement structure. The analysis of public spaces has centred mainly on open-air spaces (squares/piazas, parks, and footpaths) and on the distribution of services (shops, cafés and restaurants, healthcare and community services, and entertainment – e.g. cinema, theatres or museums). The results of the investigation have brought into relief a strong concentration of services in and around the city centre, though less clearly in Lugano than at Uster. Applying a regional analysis method (GIS), researchers have been able to determine accessibility to public transport: 61.3% of Lugano's elderly and 66.3% of Uster's can board a bus or tram less than 250 metres from where they live.

The (paper-based) survey conducted on Lugano's elderly population was designed to gather data on the use of public living spaces. It has identified, on the one hand, places where the elderly enjoy spending time and their favourite leisure activities; on the other hand, places they prefer to avoid, and why. The evaluation of the questionnaire, distributed to a sample of 950 persons aged 65 and over (return



Lugano and its Parco Ciani, an example of public living space.

rate: 30%), points to *Parco Ciani* as by far the favourite spot in Lugano, where one can stroll and sit on a bench. However, *Parco Ciani* is also seen as the 'haunt' of microcriminals; therefore some will tend to avoid it. Another conclusion to be drawn is that parks are visited in particular by people who declare to be in poor or bad health. No particular differences were observed between age groups. The elderly who were interviewed were keen on walking, especially by the waterside, in green spaces and surrounded by nature. Elderly people declare themselves to prefer moving around on foot, while public transport and a private car rank second- and third-best.

Based on the above information, besides addressing the qualities proper to public spaces, the research wants to explore in some depth how such spaces relate to each other. During the next stages of the project the population will be involved in developing concrete proposals.

### i.CUP

The Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project (i.CUP) was created in 2004. Its core research activity comprises the culture of the region, strategic planning, and the design of systems, infrastructure, and buildings. i.CUP's mission is the promotion of an objective and scientific study of the region based on quantitative parameters, too (mobility, transport, energy consumption, sustainability, re-employment of existing buildings or structures, impact of new infrastructure, and the economic capacity of a region). The scope of the Institute's research is fairly broad; however, attention is paid more especially to Switzerland and the regions of northern Italy and Ticino. A major component of i.CUP initiatives is the training of researchers and knowledge transfer to students. In fact, the Institute is closely involved with the *Accademia's* teaching curriculum.

### Enquiries:

Marcello Martinoni  
 Project coordinator, UrbAging  
 i.CUP - Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project  
 USI - Accademia di architettura  
 Canavée  
 CH-6850 Mendrisio  
 Tel. +41 58 666 5961  
 e-mail: marcello.martinoni@arch.unisi.ch

### Web addresses:

Accademia di architettura: [www.arch.unisi.ch](http://www.arch.unisi.ch)  
 i.CUP: [www.arch.unisi.ch/icup](http://www.arch.unisi.ch/icup)