Case Studies for Infrastructural Reconnection:
From "Win-Win" Scenarios Toward the "Right to Stay Put"

RiConnect's model emphasizes spatial analysis, creates useful typologies, generates new vocabularies, and assembles a toolkit for metropolitan public bodies

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When we change the infrastructure of metropolitan areas, we change the fundamental character of social and ecological relations as well. RiConnect responds to one of the key challenges of contemporary urbanization: how to reduce automobile dominance underwritten by expansion-oriented mobility planning, which has tended to create barriers, isolate urban peripheries, and sustain social marginality, while sacrificing urban edges to purely operational logics. RiConnect brings together metropolitan planning bodies from around Europe to address shared challenges by reimagining large-scale transportation infrastructures and planning interventions to promote active mobility, improve accessibility, create new spaces for recreation and social exchange, decrease atmospheric contamination, and knit together urban districts severed by infrastructural networks. Rather than continuing the model of 20th century modernization projects favoring the automobile at all costs, RiConnect analyses infrastructural barriers and how they may be overcome proactively, provides assessment tools and frameworks to help metropolitan planning bodies assess their own unique characteristics, conceives new ways to promote active, safe, and accessible mobilities, and promotes the recuperation of residual spaces for public benefit through repair, reconfiguration, and adaptation. Instead of endlessly outlaying large-scale infrastructural networks, RiConnect implores us to reimagine the mobility infrastructures that already exist. This approach has undeniable environmental and social benefits, presenting the possibility of improving the everyday lives of a broad cross-section of society in a variety of geographical contexts.

RiConnect envisions a more sustainable, equitable, and attractive metropolis for all. This is no easy challenge. Realizing this vision requires a comprehensive analysis of the social risks that regularly arise from regeneration and reconnection projects. Understanding these risks, especially displacement and exclusion, requires sensitivity to different geographical scales (from the immediate to the local, regional, and beyond) and to different levels of social vulnerability at the individual and community levels. In this sense, we must be careful not to take a purely utilitarian approach, avoiding the presumption that environmental and infrastructural improvements provide equal benefits for all. Depending on the political and economic circumstances and governance structures, the broader social impacts of reconnection projects differ significantly, and we cannot simply assume "win-win" scenarios. Planners and designers cannot be expected to solve issues of spatial inequality on their own, but neither can we expect that the results of our practices are someone else's problem. Ensuring the most equitable distribution of the opportunities and benefits that mobility improvements provide requires technical knowledge, but also necessitates proactive collaboration with community organizations and policymakers.

The act of reconnecting implies the acknowledgement of historic disconnections. Therefore, RiConnect aims to enact transformative change, placing emphasis on counteracting historical inequalities and immobilities embedded in European metropolitan areas and working with disadvantaged groups (whether by socio-economic status, gender, race/ethnicity, disability, migration status, religion, etc.) having experienced the greatest negative impacts of the mobility infrastructures that sustain our metropolitan areas, often appreciating fewer of their benefits.

RiConnect's model emphasizes spatial analysis, creates useful typologies, generates new vocabularies, and assembles a toolkit for metropolitan public bodies. It presents clear opportunities to improve mobility options while creating new spaces for sociality and interchange. This is outlined in the Public Report, which provides a framework to help metropolitan planning entities identify which mobility infrastructures should be the focus of intervention, analyze pre-existing metropolitan models, and identify future needs. The report classifies different types of infrastructures and their impacts to help understand local specificities and design the most suitable actions. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all model for metropolitan areas, which have different forms, development patterns, rates of growth, and governance structures. Nevertheless, the Public Report provides a series of generalized questions and pointers with wide applicability.

The companion document to the Public Report is the Case Study Report, where RiConnect team members have identified reconnection projects from around the world that they find exemplary, while showcasing the strongest examples in their own conurbations. The report provides ideas and inspiration. It expands upon terminologies and typologies developed in the Public Report to helping readers visualize different approaches, applied to a wide variety of geographical contexts. It should be noted that, despite their clear benefits, many cases do not demonstrate robust assessments of social impacts. This leaves room for improvement in conceiving and implementing reconnection projects at the policy and planning levels, including proactive anti-displacement strategies, mechanisms ensuring that planning gains are reinvested for the benefit of affected communities, and that private interests are not receiving disproportionate advantages. In other words, when we remove barriers and create new opportunities that stimulate redevelopment, how does this revalorization impact pre-existing communities, and who are new developments being built for?

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Herein lies the key social challenge: ensuring that 21st century infrastructural reconnections prioritize residents and workers in districts historically dominated by, or poorly served by, large-scale infrastructures. In essence, these areas may be too close, too far away from, or cut off by urban infrastructure networks. In the 20th century throughout the Global North, motorways were often placed in districts whose residents had less economic and political power, or used as tools of "slum clearance" and social segregation, while contaminating land uses have typically been located alongside infrastructural corridors. Above-ground infrastructures have served as physical and perceptual barriers between places. The perceived undesirability related to proximity to mobility infrastructures often suppresses land values, keeping such districts relatively affordable. In cities with strong redevelopment pressure, reconnecting divided districts, creating active mobility infrastructures, or creating new public spaces increases land value, creating gentrification threats. These threats are especially acute for tenants. With this in mind, RiConnect has developed a framework for assessing and addressing social displacement risks, prioritizing pre-existing residents—and whenever possible, neighborhood-serving commercial activities—so that they can enjoy their improved surroundings. Steps towards more connected and accessible urban infrastructures must be conceived from the start of projects to ensure that they provide the broadest benefit to all inhabitants, particularly the most vulnerable, who should actively take part in shaping, and benefitting from, improvements to mobility infrastructures and public spaces, exercising what planning scholar Chester Hartman has called the "right to stay put".

I applaud RiConnect for focusing its URBACT action on producing a framework for assessing, and acting upon, European conurbations' mobility and public space needs, offering useful pointers about setting up appropriate governance structures, ensuring public engagement and co-creation, drafting plans and small-scale pilot programs, securing funding, and building a learning network. As I have emphasized, changes in mobility infrastructures have spill-over effects, especially on neighboring communities, whose proximity to large-scale infrastructures has often put them at a disadvantage. If we can combine sensitive mobility planning with policy mechanisms that prevent displacement, European conurbations can ensure that reconnection projects provide the greatest positive social impact, while improving economic, social, environmental, and health conditions for all.