

NOTE

Concept Design for the City Center of Elin Pelin And Re-development of the Surrounding Area

*The 2024 Revision of the UN's demographic study, "**World Population to 2300**", shows that by 2050 Bulgaria could experience one of the world's most significant population declines. In fact, the population of the Elin Pelin Municipality, close to 23.000, may be reduced to 19.000 as early as 2030(*). The situation in this town is concerning since population decline equals less taxes, higher prices, reduced income, minimal health services, and gloomier quality of life. Remotely-designed urban redevelopment may miss the issues needed to face for the mandatory and multipronged solution to this problem. The main challenge in this competition, therefore, should be to help stop and even overturn demographic decline. We had our municipal population grow from 64k to 166k in less than 20 years. We can solve this together, but it needs to be done by **Participatory Placemaking Planning**.*

"Mathematical models are good to evaluate quantitative data, but numbers and algorithms cannot dictate Protocols for what ought to be left to emotional appreciation and rational judgment." León Krier

Introduction

Most urban planning best practices taught, and applied during the XX century, have failed: Zoning riveted elitism and discrimination; suburban style forced unsustainable commute that encouraged slums, cars degrade health, and serial production and BIM have killed craftsmanship and beautiful ornaments, leaving an ugly urban environment. Elin Pelin's present situation was already pointed by Dimitar Ivanov Stoyanov in his masterpiece *The Gerak Family*. Researchers topped it in 2023 by issuing a report proving that Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe –pioneers of the Modernist movement– were PTSD victims who were not diagnosed because there were no methods at that time to detect such traumas. Their bunker-like works, sold as beauty worldwide for more than a century, holds many sickening flaws. It has been the impact of Modernist architecture, Modernist working, Modernist living, the main source of stress, boredom, depression, and schizophrenia of most young folks today, and It has been further exacerbated by the Modernist technology of clicking lifeless keyboard devices to misconnect with each other.

These failed "best practices" forced experts in 2024 to deepen **Neuroscience** research to re-evaluate the impact of architecture everywhere, especially after unveiling the nature of "beauty" as **an objective value** against the common view of beauty as **a subjective issue** held until 2024. That is how they discovered the sickening effects that Modernist Architecture has been having on people's physical and mental health¹, affecting the most vulnerable, the elders, and the younger generations. We now face an unavoidable change of paradigm. The spearheads of this change included researchers like Nir Buras, León Kier and Jean Gehl. Even the US President Donald Trump ruled that all official edifices must be built in traditional and classic style, after the results of the **HARRIS 2020 Poll**. Thus, the creation of the UK **Build Better, Build Beautiful Commission** inspired the recent revolution against ugly architecture (<https://www.architecturaluprising.com>), and unleashed the **Beauty and Ugliness in Architecture Conference** www.beautyandugliness.com.

Our Proposal

Our approach to this competition requires thinking "out of the box", to face the competition rules sideways, and to face this challenge on two different paths: A- study the sources of the population decline, and the means for remediation, and B. The actual goal of the Competition, to reach a pivot point and help make Elin Pelin attractive and functional enough to recall gone migrants and overturn its declining population. The proposal will be less about

(*) Bulgaria's population is estimated to fall to near 4.27 million by 2075. The National Statistical Institute (NSI), projection.

¹ *Neuroscience and the Urban Experience*, Alison Hogg, Chairman from the Institute of Classic Planning. CLASSIC PLANNING HERALD INTERNATIONAL 2ND EDITION, 2024.

remodeling physical infrastructure, and more about overcoming the modernist model to improve the present urban spirit. These actions will help restore the traditional village beauty spoiled by the obsolete, dry and inert modernist style. This way, we may reconfigure the present urban image, set a regrowth plan as to make people find motives to stay, fall in love, share their dreams and stand out anew. There are plenty of resources in Elin Pelin to do that.

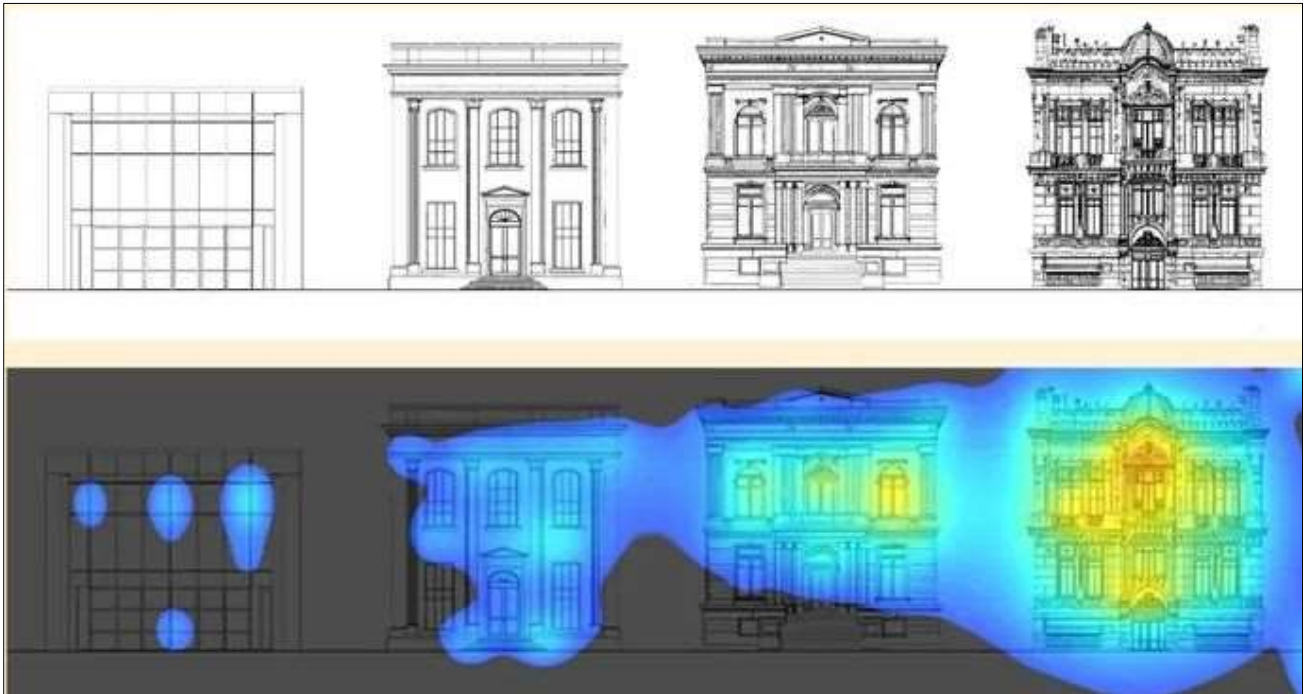


Figure 1. Neuroscience has used the **3M VAS eye-movement capture and i-Motion software** to detect the degree of interest of the observer on architectural and urban infrastructure (Study published in the Journal of Traditional Architecture by Prof. Brandon Ro; Utah Valley University USA). Experiments have managed to detect people's face become stressed and even uglier from living under most Modernist environments.

Our conceptual views to this competition focus on Prof. Vernon Woodworth words: *"Nothing in architecture has any sense, except in the light of Neuroscience"*.² Thus, we shall aim to build a redevelopment plan with our feet on the ground and -based on our former experiences- our head in the data. For such purpose we revised what has been built under the XX Century Codes and Zoning planning methods. We also analyze the impact that automobile have in people and in a city's metabolism that prioritized the car as the primary mode of mobility, in contrast with the most recent discoveries revealed by Neuroscience³.

The Walkable City Concept

Neuroscience reveals that the *"less is more"* Modernist slogan, ended up meaning: *"less ornaments=less work, less time to build, less materials quality, less handicrafts, less craftsmen salaries, less traditions preserved, less History to tell and less legacy to keep."* *"less ...is more: more profit, more density, more despair, more sadness and lifeless squares.* Regarding the Competition goals, Elin Pelin, is one sweet, enchanting little town to be preserved, enhanced and optimized with sweeter dynamics, state-of-the-art high tech, and more people. The issues we found in our site analysis are hardly structural; and for the plan that we have set, most of them are relatively easy to remediate with finely-chosen readjustments. With these goals in mind we have listed a course of actions to revitalize the built

² Vernon Woodworth, FAIA – Secretary of "Human Architecture" Architecture + Planning Institute Inc, (Human Architecture Planning Institute. (www.HAPI.org).

³ *What Happens in Your Brain When You Walk Down the Street? Implications of Architectural Proportions, Biophilia, and Fractal Geometry for Urban Science.* Brielmann, A.A., N.H. Buras, N.A. Salingaros & R.P. Taylor (2022).

environment, as to make of Elin Pelin a delightful **walkable city** and welcome back her younger generations to their refurbished town to strive and enjoy her plentiful benefits.

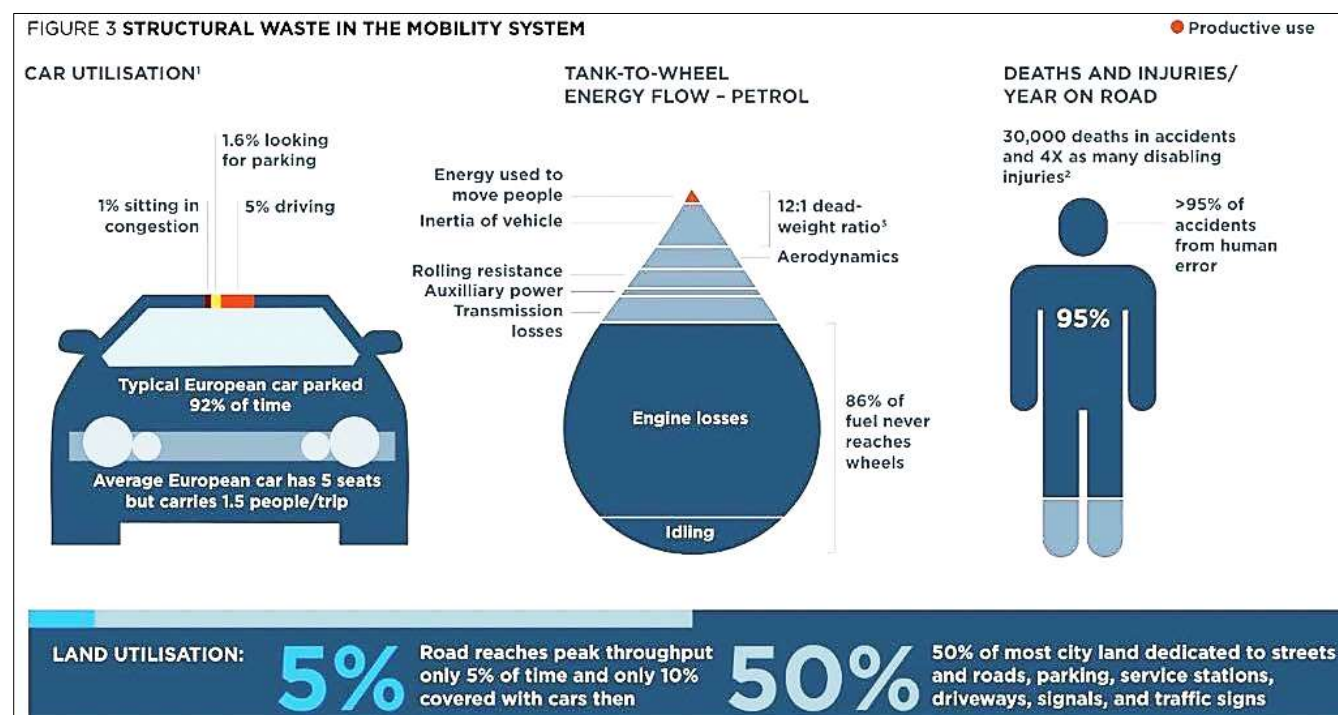


Figure 2. Average car efficiency barely reaches 5%, as inertia (12.1 dead weight ratio) makes it a huge waste of precious resources. Considering that the average car moves only 1.4 persons, the expense for owners, the waste and the environmental impact, the results are extreme.

The push towards *The Walkable City* goes together with the *City Slow* movement that challenges urban frenzy, super cars, fast food, and bullet-trains. The result is already verified in European people's health: at 50 yoa, 64% of males have lost 44% of lower limbs muscle and most of their hand's abilities. Meanwhile the big city kidnaps young folks dazzled by supercars, neon lights, fast food and easy excitement. Daily walking, however, restores health in days!

Remotely-designed plans, also a post-pandemic modernist mode of work, like many plans that will come to answer the competition challenge, disconnected from the local context, frequently miss undetected issues, needs post-production, in-situ readjustment, adaptation and sometimes radical reconstruction. At home, since 1983 we have personally verified the greatest success in municipal growth under the *placemaking* Participatory Planning⁴. In the Habitat Deutschland 2016, as well, with delegates from 105 cities worldwide, one determinant statement came as massive answer to the question "Who owns the city?": "The citizen!" was the reply.

With the risk of overriding some of the competition rules, our proposal consider that to design an overall, holistic plan to overcome a group of municipal issues, we need to arrange at least four, in-person participatory planning meetings with no less than seven public round tables⁵. We must use the historically-proven and highly reliable **walking survey**, have direct exchange of ideas with community leaders, mothers, elders, youngsters and concerned neighbours, and make a **visual revision**, document the surroundings, the pedestrian routes, the landscape, the gaps between buildings, and feel the people's personal and intimate experience of their town. Only that way could we grasp the hidden issues and the overlooked challenges that need to be solved to set a reliable, holistic plan. Elin Pelin is a small area and may be readily turned into a 15-minutes charming City with little expense and fairly good achievements in short time.

⁴ Sherry Arnstein, "The Staircase of People's Participation". www.openspace.com www.thecharreteinsitute.com, <https://planning-by-design.co.uk>

⁵ Economy, Food, Employment, Environment, Community, Culture, Education, Industry&Commerce, and Children 6-16.

The participatory plan covers the following activities:

- Preliminary discussion to stockholders over the strategic issues to be addressed;
- Taking at least 4 walking surveys on the city layout with town Councilors⁶;
- Discussing the issues related to demographic data with local authorities using Ai;
- Conducting 4 preliminary round tables with community members on: land use, mobility, urban image, children playgrounds, entertainment and economic development;
- Discussing measures over urban metabolism remediation goals to 2030 and 2050;
- Drafting the redevelopment plan with planning officers, senior students and local stockholders;
- Planning direct actions to implement. Designing cold play essays; setting preliminary tests.

Deliverables:

- o **Value proposition** and detailed drafted plans towards the competition goals;
- o Drafted script for the student's role and documentary contribution;
- o Drafted, illustrated Case Study Report of the entire operation;
- o Polished, stockholders-approved content for Social Media promotion;
- o Using Ai to choose measures to take towards stopping population decline;
- o Using Ai to choose measures to take towards increasing population growth;
- o Conclusions and Recommendations.

Tentative Plan Structure

Our plan takes three different focuses:

- A- Analyzing the physical issues to solve associated to the city's population decline;
- B- Analyzing the issues to improve on the urban general layout;
- C- Fusing both analyses to structure a holistic Redevelopment Plan for 2030-2050.

For this plan we have created five separate place-making Quarters, on the Elin Pelin area, namely:

- **CQ:** The Central Quarter goes from the roundabout via Sofia Boulevard to Nezavisimost Square and Vitosha Boulevard to the Hristo Botev corner. This is the logical civic and spiritual town's pivot;
- **NQ:** The Northern Quarter, from Sofia Boulevard to Cyril and Methodius Street;
- **WQ:** The Western Quarter from west of the Stoyan Mikhailovsky St, to Nezavisimost Square;
- **EQ:** The Eastern Quarter, from Akatsia St. to Nezavisimost Square;
- **SQ:** The Southern Quarter, from Geo Mylev and Elin Pelin streets to Hristo Botev St.
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Surrounding Area - Urban Environment, Elements and Furniture

● CONCEPTUALIZING A VISION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOUR OUTER QUARTERS;

Housing should not be built in more than 720 units. This many housing units means about 2,000 to 2,500 people. This is the amount of faces normal people can easily store in their memory. These many faces stored in people's mind will get a click of "attention" the minute any new, alien face appears in the neighborhood. This click will automatically trigger a defensive mode which will get relaxed or concerned, according to the attitude of the new face owner. This attention is the primary step to reduce the risks of any abnormal behaviour. Telecom neighbours exchange makes it truly undefeatable. Strangers feel it readily and beware. It is an inexpensive, effective, discrete and easy-to-handle **PPSS**: (Popular Passive Security System). This prevention security system weakens progressively as soon as the population grows beyond 2,500 persons.

⁶ Engineering; Architecture and Urban Design Students can help, learn and train as assistants in these surveys.

- **HOUSING UNITS SHOULD BE CORRELATIVE TO FAMILY GROUPS SIZE;**

Single-family housing units reduce the otherwise tight bond between neighbours. As the population grows you will need more housing, more services and mobility systems expansion. To expand services keeping the limits of the town, buildings should be paired wall to wall proportional to population growth and build vertical. Façades should be different but within a similar style to reflect and sustain the tight bond and the firm identity that must be held in the community. Housing unit's size must be as varied in percentage as the family group shows in the community: one single person and a childless married couple will match single-room family group. Therefore, there should be as many single room units as single persons plus childless couples are in the community, plus the projected population growth. There should be as many two-room's apartments as there are family groups of three persons, and so on, following statistics and projections. A small tolerance should be added to prevent housing unexpected shortages.

- **CREATING A COHERENT AND UNIFIED APPEARANCE FOR THE TOWN'S SURROUNDINGS;**

The familiar nature of a community should avoid huge malls and large horizontal buildings. Small and medium sized shops work best. In cases of having any large horizontal building, it could be pierced by a few galleries for diversified retail shops and ateliers. Ground floors must be kept for non-residential, retail, commerce, and small workshops. Varied housing prices and finishes, mixed income, mixed housing sizes and mixed use are the most successful arrangements ever. One artistic landmark placed in quiet surroundings with furniture, trees and flowers will make a fine meeting point within the quarter and will identify the place people belong to. Neo traditional architectural style with a few entirely traditional will be the best for North, East, South and West quarters. Art Nouveau, monumental, and, even neoclassic style would be the best choice for the Central Quarter. This style will contribute to reaffirm the solid personality required in the administrative, political and religious hub of the City.

- **PROPOSING 5 TYPICAL DETAILS AND SCHEMATIC DESIGN FOR PAVING (STONE), 5 SIDEWALKS LINEAR DESIGNS, 5 STREET DIFFERENT FURNITURE, FOR EACH QUARTER ONE LIGHTING LAMPS, SHELTERS, FENCES, AND FAÇADES, CONSTRUCTION DETAILS.**

Bulgaria has extensive knowledge and masterful use of metals and ceramics, especially the blue-&-white traditional tiles. It has a score of interesting designs that match the traditional embroidery used in folk dresses. Regarding lighting, it should be proper to reserve the most elaborate, detailed and rich designs in forged steel for the Central Quarter, as to reinforce its institutional character. We could choose four different, yet simpler designs, to ornate the remaining four Quarters. I could suggest quite a few, according to my best knowledge. The same goes with fences, façades and construction details. With a team exchanging views the results will be stunning. Light bulbs should be Incandescent filament. LEDs radiate too much blue inducing a gloomy attitude in sensitive people. And I am sure that anyone of the blacksmiths handling this kind of job in Elin Pelin will promptly do these kinds of job.

- **ENSURING ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL USERS - INCLUDING OLDER ADULTS, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, CHILDREN, AND PARENTS WITH STROLLERS; WIDE PAVEMENT WITH PEDESTRIAN EASY ACCESS.**

This issue is pretty easy to accomplish, since we know sufficiently clear norms to this respect.

- **IMPROVING THE QUALITY AND FUNCTIONALITY OF PUBLIC SPACES.**

Intuitive signs, posts color, texture or ornaments should identify each quarter, The method would be to apply all these issues and make a great effort to have these harmonize with each other, for the compound result ought to be better than the sum of its parts. This way each one of the five Quarters will have a characteristic place identity.

- **HOW TO CAPITALIZE FREE PARKING IN THE CITY.**

There is a motion led by France: Paris eliminated 60,000 free parking places a few years ago on zones with frequent traffic/pedestrian conflicts, to install plenty of urban furnishing: The result was huge: Road accidents went down in half, retail sales doubled and people's participation increased significantly.