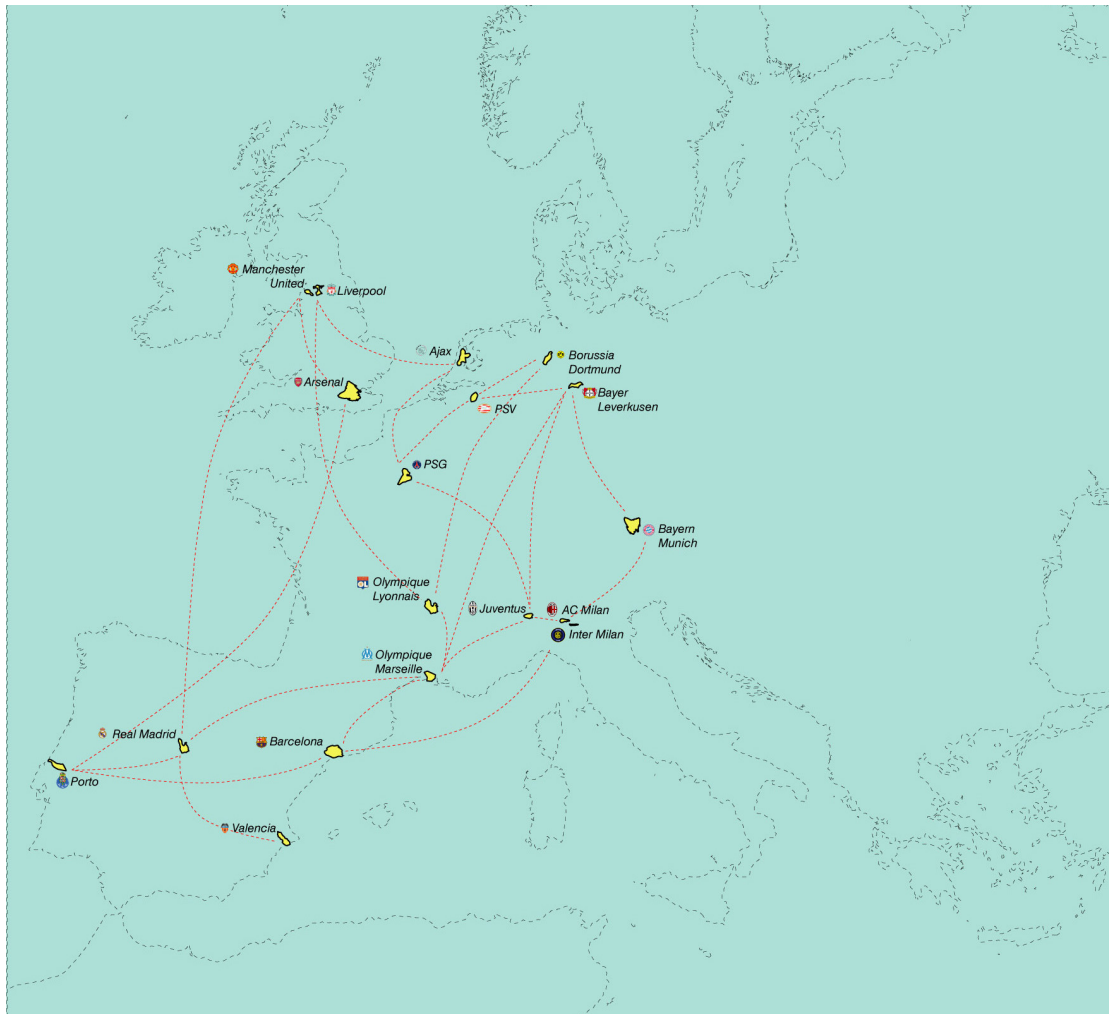


**ISLANDS: The spatial politics of soccer.**  
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**Introduction: a tale of global times**

The last two decades have made abundantly clear that the challenge of urbanism is no longer about the physical image of cities but rather about the immense effect that invisible forces have on actual territories. In dissecting this shift, the definitions of territory, media, and representation of these phenomena will all have to be questioned.

Paradoxically the urgency of these questions is more evident when we look at urbanism through less obvious fields; for instance, sport – more precisely soccer – can turn out to be a surprisingly effective device to understand the present condition.

This piece recounts the short-lived trajectory of G14 – a private lobby of prestigious European soccer clubs operating between 2000 and 2008 – as a metaphor of the transformation Europe is undergoing.

## **Urbanism**

Urbanism as we know it has come to an end; the definition of what constitute urban agglomerates is an increasingly more slippery and vaguer enterprise. For instance, whether these spaces exist in the physical or digital realm – think of Second Life – bears little consequences over their legitimacy. As urban environments manifest in unconventional forms, their architecture is no longer just made of buildings and roads, but also include protocols and action plans. This type of urbanism is mostly invisible but no less powerful. Its tools are law, economy, and politics; it organises vast regions without ever being visible.

In these territories architects have far more to learn than teach. They have been tremendously slow in recording these mutations and do not really have adequate tools to grasp them either. The current disciplinary toolbox is destined to radically change; urbanism will be less in the hand of so-called experts and become a more diffuse practice, a sort of condition or attitude towards the built environment.

## **Media**

Similarly, the role of the media in this transformation will be essential.

The point of reference here is the crisis newspapers are traversing. Faster and portable digital media guarantee real-time access to events regardless of their geographical scale; something newspapers simply cannot keep up with. However this insurmountable gap between the two media should not be perceived as a limitation but rather as an opportunity to operate more as curators. Newspapers and urbanists' role can thus be more about decoding information, filtering it, and shift the pace at which events are consumed. This slowness can be instrumental in unravelling the latent network of connections contained in actual events; thus, building a bridge between the physical presence and the invisible network of forces shaping it.

## **Invisible**

The kind of research on networks we advocate often presents to the observer like icebergs do: only an infinitesimal portion of their shape is actually visible; what at first glance appears trivial can actually unearth substantial discoveries. Thus, sport too can be a source of exploration and learning for urbanists. Particularly, the way in which soccer has been expanding on and altering the European territory outlines some interesting paradigms for our contemporary condition.

The fact that high-profile architects have been commissioned large stadiums and sport arenas is perhaps just the final effect of a phenomenon of much more radical and broader implications. It is the political and economic network supporting soccer that has changed and enabled such grandiose speculations. Disentangling this complex web is one of the objectives of this article.

## **Soccer**

Why should we then focus on soccer in Europe rather than other sports? The relation between sport and market economy is certainly nothing new and has been a core tenet of the global popularity of disciplines such as golf and Formula 1 racing.

These sport events and their media circus are travelling machines that move from place to place without integrating with or understanding local conditions; art biennales and G8/G20 summits are analogue examples in other fields. As such, these are typically contemporary phenomena; they materialise the economical and political consequences of technological developments of digital capitalism. They act as indicators of the strengths, weaknesses, and peculiarities of capital.

European soccer, though, provides a more complex and, at times, less successful story; its position is still trapped between its deeply rooted history and the more recent promise of world-wide expansion. Similar to the recent economic crisis, G14 – like banks – sought expansion through other types of currencies, whose flexibility could easily be manipulated by various, and often dubious, agendas. However, the actual football community –let's call it 'the real' – constituted a form of friction that constantly interfered with the G14's smooth plans. It is by now a well-known cliché that for European fans soccer is far more than 'just' a sport and actually represents a platform through which history, geography, and social classes can manifest themselves. If the marketing gurus behind the major European clubs considered this situation an old-fashion burden to supplant, the tension between traditional values (history, place, etc.) and emerging ones (globalisation, image-based culture, etc.) was indicative of the politics at stake. In fact, this friction was instrumental to unmask some of the

rhetoric behind the arguments of both those who stubbornly protect local interests and those who think that globalisation is a sort of wax to lubricate contradictions.

### Islands

Between 2000 and 2008 G14 produced its own version of Europe<sup>1</sup>. Rather than a complex continent formed by fifty countries and characterised by great cultural diversity, the organisations' version was a rather simpler but perhaps a more contemporary one. Fourteen soccer clubs<sup>2</sup> self-proclaimed to be the voice of the entire continent and turned thus Europe into a constellation formed by only fourteen networked dots. Reminiscent of political organisations such as the G8, G14 relied on the idea that few powerful clubs could represent the many not-so-powerful ones.

Among other things, the association aimed at replacing old, superseded organisations – such as UEFA was in G14's vision – to provide a more agile, up-to-date model suitable to the raise of global soccer. Like European uber-capitals such as London or Paris, these clubs were in close dialogue with each other – regardless of the actual geographical position – but had no actual relation with the territory that was immediately surrounding them. They were *de facto* islands as they had adopted the typical double movement characterising the constitution of archipelagos: first separation from whatever culture in place on the mainland, and then redefinition of new rules (whether authoritarian or libertarian).

### Finale

The story of the G14 is a typical one in pre-crisis Europe. The widening schism between actual territories and their forms of governance allowed pliable and deregulated organisations to prosper. Digital technology played a part in this process: its pervasiveness and extreme flexibility well supported the laissez-faire attitude toward societal structures. The gap between those represented and organs supposed to represent them also produced puzzling results: what mechanism legitimated G14 to self-proclaimed to be 'The Voice of the Clubs'?<sup>3</sup>

It is not a coincidence that journalists had troubles to detect a rationale behind the choice of clubs: in fact the richest – Chelsea – and the most popular – Benfica – were both absent. Moreover, PSG, Marseille, and Bayern Leverkusen – also part of the group – had only sporadically been at the top of European ranks.

In August 2002, four new members extended the organisation to eighteen clubs: despite numerous speculations about a further increase in the number of adhering members, G14 remained unaltered until its dissolution on 15 February 2008. The admission process was also at odds with supposed inclusiveness of the group; new clubs could only join by unanimous invitation of the members.

The ultimate G14's plan was in fact to supersede Uefa and start an independent league only comprising its members. It is at this point that the organisation's frictionless vision of Europe was muddled and ultimately brought on its knees by supposedly old-fashion concerns.

A league with a fixed number of teams implied the same matches every year: the expectations created by games that could potentially only happen once a decade would have been spoiled by uninterrupted availability. The fans themselves decreed the end of the project: G14 could not fully disentangle itself from geography or history to enter the hyper-world of techno-capital.

Founded to increase spectacle in the football, G14 achieved the opposite result: it was deemed predictable and boring. Also, the G14's positivistic claims to be more flexible and malleable than

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<sup>1</sup> for further information of the G14, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G-14>

<sup>2</sup> The list of the founding members is: Barcelona (Spain), Real Madrid (Spain), Liverpool (England), Manchester United (England), Juventus (Italy), Milan (Italy), Internazionale (Italy), Marseille (France), Paris Saint-Germain (France), Bayern Munich (Germany), Borussia Dortmund (Germany), Ajax (Netherlands), PSV (Netherlands), Porto (Portugal). In 2002 Arsenal (England), Lyon (France), Bayer Leverkusen (Germany), Valencia (Spain) also joined G14.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Voice of the Clubs' was the organisation's motto.

existing organisations turned out to actually tame difference through generic and repetitive formats. Like in Dubai's urbanism, relentless difference actually gives rise to its opposite: sameness.

In times of crisis and structural re-thinking, storytelling can be a fruitful approach to urbanism. Rather than focusing on disciplinary problems, narrative accounts can concentrate on peripheral, seemingly meaningless facts; whether describing ordinary or extreme conditions, these facts do require architects and urbanists to learn how to detect and decipher them before any action is taken.