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Keywords (separated by '-')	Blended Intensive Program - Unequal Cities - Collaborative Education Process - Communication Design Education	



The Unequal City: A Critical Reflection Through a Collaborative Project

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Abstract. This paper follows a methodology of literature review about cities and education and presents a report concerning the work developed as part of a Blended Intensive Program—BIP, which took place this academic year at the Escola d’Art i Superior de Disseny de Castelló in Valença, Spain, in collaboration with the Communication Design course of the Instituto Superior Miguel Torga, Coimbra, Portugal and the Illustration Course of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Catania, Italy. In developing the BIP, a methodological teaching approach was used, inspired by Freire’s thought and based on Heidegger’s thought. This article aims to reflect on 1) what the intervention of citizens should be in building more equitable cities, which we have drawn on the thinking of Heidegger, Lefebvre, Harvey, and Bachelard; 2) how the methodological practices used, based on Freire’s thinking, contribute to the development of critical thinking in students about today’s cities and provide them with the tools to play a more active role in society and in building a future with more equitable and sustainable cities, following the eleventh Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords: Blended Intensive Program · Unequal Cities · Collaborative Education Process · Communication Design Education

1 Introduction

The project presented in this article derives from the project “The Unequal City, a critical approach to reflection and intervention in the city” developed within the framework of the Erasmus + Combined Intensive Program (BIP) during the 2023/2024 academic year. Coordinated by the Escola d’Art i Superior de Disseny de Castelló (EASD) as part of the Official Master’s Degree in Printmaking and Screen Printing and in collaboration with the Communication Design course at the Miguel Torga Institute in Coimbra and the Accademia di Belle Arti di Catania. With the support of the teachers involved from the participating institutions, the students collaborated and worked as a team, holding online work sessions to develop activities around the theme of the Unequal City. This process culminated in implementing the project locally, using the methodological teaching approach inspired by Freire’s thinking. This methodology aims to engage students

in critical reflection and dialogue, encouraging them to analyze reality constructively and preparing them to be agents of social transformation.

The project explores fundamental concepts of “dwelling” and “the right to the city” through Martin Heidegger’s philosophical lens.

Inspired by his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” which examines the concept of “dwelling” as the use of cities to satisfy both material and emotional needs, the project seeks a broader understanding of the urban environment and what citizens’ intervention in its construction should be, so in this article, we have not only drawn on Heidegger’s thinking but also analyzed the proposals of Lefebvre, Harvey, and Bachelard.

In this article, we followed a methodology of literature review about cities and education, which we applied to BIP, presented here as a case study. The aim was to identify collaborative educational practices that can be practically applied in the context of design processes and projects. These practices, anchored in the real challenges faced by contemporary cities and in the reflections of authors who have discussed the city and the role of citizens in its construction, aim to provide students with tangible tools to contribute to building more equal cities in line with the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda, in particular, Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

2 Unequal Cities

According to data presented in the United Nations 2023 report [1], more than half of the world’s population lives in urban areas, with around 1.1 billion people living in slum-like conditions. This number is expected to increase by more than 2 billion over the next 30 years.

This document shows that uncontrolled urban growth is still a reality and that the UN’s 2015 goals are far from being achieved.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the UN in 2015 [2] and aims to guide global policies until 2030. It presents 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to eradicate poverty, promote prosperity and well-being for all, protect the environment, and tackle climate change. This Agenda emphasizes the need for integrated and universal actions involving governments, the private sector, and civil society.

From this perspective, we teachers and educators intend to contribute by sensitizing students to the societal problems identified in the 2030 Agenda.

The work carried out in the context of BIP, which we present here, is part of Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable [2].

This goal aims to improve the quality of life and well-being of city dwellers by providing access to affordable housing, reducing the number of slums, and improving urban management and green spaces to guarantee healthier living environments. This objective also emphasizes the importance of preserving cities’ cultural and historical heritage, helping to strengthen local identities within a context of sustainable urban development [2].

As already mentioned, this BIP was developed from the perspective presented by Heidegger [3] in his essay ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’, in which the author argues

that building and dwelling are interdependent acts that reveal our relationship with the world, noting that the word “buan” (old German) means to dwell, that is, to stay, to remain and, at the same time, to care, building as dwelling becomes a building that involves caring for growth [3]. This act of building, particularly edifying, is a way of forming places that organize space and enable dwelling. According to the same author, constructions do not just occupy a pre-existing space; through their existence, they give rise to new places and, in this way, organize and structure the human world. Heidegger emphasizes this interdependence, saying that we do not inhabit because we build, but we build and have built historically because we inhabit [3], which means that the impulse to build results from our way of being in the world.

This thought is very contextualizing of the problems of today's cities; in other words, it allows us to understand why cities are built in this way, why there is urban planning or lack of it, and why there are huge inequalities. All these problems are nothing more than a reflection of our way of being in the world, where we prioritize functionality and profit over building spaces that promote human well-being and interaction between people and communities.

In this sense, Lefebvre [4] describes the city and how profit is prioritized over the needs and well-being of citizens. His central thought lies in the idea of citizens' right to the city: “(the) right to the city cannot be conceived as a simple right to visit or return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a right to urban life, transformed and renewed.” (p: 119), a thought that also presupposes the active participation of citizens in the creation and use of urban spaces, in management and decisions about their development and future. Lefebvre [4] also mentions that space is a social product formed and shaped by human practices, social relations, and power struggles, a decisive idea for understanding urban inequality, where social and economic inequalities are reflected and reinforced, often marginalizing and excluding citizens.

In a closer temporal approach, following in the footsteps of Lefebvre, Harvey [5] analyses the question of the city from a geographical and economic perspective. He points out that the dynamics of capitalism and contemporary neoliberalism shape cities and that, although there is much discussion about creating a better world, the concepts underpinning these debates are primarily individualistic and property-based and do not challenge the logic of the market. He considers that “(the) right to the city is therefore much more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city incorporates: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more in line with our deepest desires. Furthermore, it is a more collective right than individual, since reinventing the city inevitably depends on exercising collective power over the urbanization process.” [5] (p: 28). For Harvey [5], the city is a common good, and the right to it is not just a legal or philosophical issue but a political one, where social movements and collectives must claim this right as a means of resisting the discriminatory practices of urban capitalism and promoting fairer and more inclusive urbanization.

Harvey [6] states that “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected human rights” (p. 23). The author emphasizes the importance of inhabiting cities and actively participating in their construction and reconstruction according to the community's needs and aspirations.

Bachelard [7] also questions our relationship with living space but from a more intimate and subjective perspective. The author explores the poetics of space, which, from our point of view, is an essential dimension in concepts related to life in cities, offering a counterpoint to the collective experiences and actions that Lefebvre and Harvey focus on without, in our view, contradicting them, Bachelard refers to the importance of personal and intimate space in the construction of meaning and being. He explores the idea of how the spaces in which we live influence our experiences, memories and imaginations, in which the “house” plays an essential role. However, in Bachelard’s view, the house is not just a physical structure but a reservoir of dreams and a space for the intimate unfolding of being, “the house is our corner of the world” (p. 24), which “shelters the devout: 24) which “shelters reverie, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” p:26.

Cross-referencing the thinking of these authors, we can say that in order to respond to SDG 11, as teachers, it will be essential to rethink our actions and the way we try to encourage students to, according to Heidegger, reflect on our way of being and being in the world, and on our priorities, how we stimulate and sensitize our students to, according to Lefebvre and Harvey, actively participate in the creation of urban actions that combat inequalities, reinvent cities and public space, while preserving it as a space of experience, imagination and the construction of memories, which protects the dreamer and allows him to dream in peace, according to Bachelard.

3 Education as a Tool for Social Transformation

Currently, there is a perception that the world is more complex and uncertain. Inequalities in several aspects have grown considerably, and we are excessively dependent on large-scale global trends to effect collective, organized, and globally impactful action. The effectiveness of education systems in preparing young people for globally aware, civic, and responsible action, as well as the relevance given to transformative, radical, and systemic education for development and global citizenship, can be questioned [8].

We are faced with unprecedented urgency in light of contemporary society’s demands and changes in the global landscape. According to many authors, education can play a crucial role in the fight against these inequalities, offering a path to individual and societal transformation. One of the most prominent advocates of this idea is the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire [9].

In his book ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, Paulo Freire [10] presents an educational approach that aims to help the oppressed understand their own reality and transform it through consciousness and collective action. Freire [11] recognized worldwide for his fundamental role in adult literacy, believes that education is a form of intervention in the world and that it must go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Educators use dialogue and reflection to help students critically analyze their realities, question dominant narratives, and envision alternative futures. This process of consciousness is a key concept in their pedagogy, empowering individuals to challenge oppression and shape their own destinies. Another fundamental principle of Freirean pedagogy is praxis, which involves integrating reflection and action. Freire rejects the idea of education as a passive process and advocates for the active involvement of students in transforming

their world. Through praxis, students not only critically reflect on social issues but also take concrete steps to resolve them, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Furthermore, Freire highlights the significance of dialogue as a pedagogical tool for mutual learning and understanding. He proposes a dialogical approach where students and educators learn collaboratively in an environment of mutual respect and exchange of ideas, where diverse perspectives are valued and respected [10]. This approach promotes collaboration and solidarity, creating a democratic learning environment where everyone's voice is heard. Through dialogue, students develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a deeper understanding of social issues, paving the way for collective action and social transformation. By focusing on critical consciousness, praxis, and dialogue, students become active participants in their education and agents of social change.

Several authors, including Freire, argue that education is crucial in addressing social challenges.

The European Commission developed the 'Europe 2020' strategy to combat the financial crisis that began in 2008. In this strategy, the Commission argues that lifelong learning and skills development are crucial for achieving smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth [12].

Costa [13] has recently reflected on this issue. According to authors such as Castells, Hargreaves, and Lévy, the education system is crucial for developing the skills and capacities necessary for full participation in the information and knowledge society. They argue that the education system is even more important in the network society than in any other type of social organization. Castells argues that education is crucial for developing analytical and critical skills that enable individuals to evaluate information and use it productively and objectively.

He highlights the significance of education in fostering innovation and creativity in the network society and integrating individuals into the global knowledge-based economy. Similarly, Hargreaves stresses the importance of education in developing the skills and competencies required to confront the uncertainties and changes of the modern world.

According to Costa [13], Pierre Lévy highlights the significance of education in helping individuals adjust to new forms of communication and collaboration in the information and knowledge society. He proposes that education should equip people with the skills to participate effectively in digital culture and become active knowledge producers.

Education is widely recognized as a powerful tool for social transformation, empowering individuals to critically engage with their realities and bring about positive change. As Mandela stated in his 2003 speech at the launch of the Mindset Network, 'education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world'. To achieve this, providing opportunities for sensitization, learning, and developing critical thinking skills is essential. Creating impartial and supportive proposals and encouraging unity in theory and practice is crucial [14].

As educators, we believe projects like the 'Unequal City' initiative can spark meaningful conversations and inspire impactful actions towards a more equitable and just future. We hope that our students will become agents of positive change. Our expectation is not limited to local communities, but we aspire for individuals to contribute to a

more inclusive, sustainable, and just world on a global scale. As Freire [15] once said, ‘There is no change without a dream, just as there is no dream without hope’. Therefore, we must preserve the inspiration of our dreams and hopes as we relentlessly pursue progress.

4 Blended Intensive Program (BIP)

This program consisted of two distinct phases: the online component, which ran from 7 December 2023 to 5 February 2024, and the face-to-face component, which ran from 19 February to 23 February 2024. The project was coordinated by the Escola d’Art i Superior de Disseny de Castelló (EASD) in collaboration with the Miguel Torga Institute in Coimbra and the Accademia di Belle Arti di Catania. Seventeen students from both institutions participated in the project.

The project explores fundamental concepts of dwelling and the right to the city through the philosophical lens of Martin Heidegger’s essay ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’. It examines how cities are used to meet material and emotional needs and invites reflection on questions such as:

- What does it mean to dwell?
- How can we build a relationship between people and the spaces they live in?
- How can we create more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable cities?

The project has prompted a rethinking of urban planning, not only in terms of functionality but also in terms of promoting human well-being and fulfillment and positive transformations toward equity, inclusion, and sustainability in urban environments.

The program employs innovative teaching and learning methods, including online collaborative work. It also uses a challenge-based learning methodology, where international student teams collaborate to complete designated projects. Specifically, groups of students from diverse academic backgrounds work together to tackle the issue of urban inequality from various angles, fostering collaboration and mutual support.

4.1 Objectives of the Project

The project’s primary aim is to reconsider the planning and organization of cities, focusing on promoting well-being and human fulfillment rather than solely from a functional perspective.

Therefore, following the principles of the Erasmus + program, we propose an intensive combined program in the field of design and contemporary culture. The m aims to facilitate critical reflection on the city, decipher existing layers of inequality, and identify ways to intervene to create more equitable and just urban environments.

The defined objectives are as follows:

- This task aims to analyze, explore, and understand the concept of dwelling.
- A reinterpretation of the concept of dwelling is proposed, considering not only functional but also emotional and spiritual aspects of individuals’ relationships with their urban environment.

- The city is approached as a dynamic organism in constant evolution, considering the daily experiences, emotional relationships, and spiritual aspects that influence urban life.
- Examine current urban issues, including inequality, social exclusion, and unsustainability, using art and culture as tools for expression and consciousness-raising.
- Create visual resources for public spaces in the city, such as squares and parks, to promote community participation and dialogue.
- Utilize the exhibition and dissemination of the project to increase consciousness.

4.2 Methodology

The program is based on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which aims to promote consciousness, critical reflection, and social transformation. This approach integrates scientific knowledge, intellectual curiosity, a critical and interventional spirit, creativity, and collaborative work. It fosters a clear understanding of complex concepts and encourages students to think critically and collaborate to achieve social change.

The program was developed in collaboration between partner institutions and divided into online and face-to-face phases. During the online consciousness phase, students gained an understanding of Martin Heidegger's theory, exploring the principles of 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking'. This led to a deep theoretical immersion, encouraging dialogue about the urban challenges and opportunities facing communities today.

During the face-to-face phase, students engaged in critical reflection and were encouraged to delve deeper into the issues and concepts discussed during the consciousness phase. They were prompted to question social norms, established beliefs, and existing power relations. In the subsequent phase, students were urged to translate their newfound consciousness and critical reflection into transformative action, leaving a tangible impact on the city through their interventions.

Consciousness—online phase—A comprehensive analysis was conducted on the urban issue in Martin Heidegger's essay entitled 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking'. This seminal work played a crucial role as a starting point for understanding the intricate dynamics associated with construction and living in urban places, while also promoting reflections on the social and philosophical dimensions of the city.

At this stage, the student conducted a comprehensive exploration to identify relevant information and critical perspectives that could help discern the interaction between the theoretical constructions presented in Heidegger's essay and the contemporary challenges faced by cities.

The Miro Visual Workspace virtual platform was used to organize a brainstorming session focused on urban discourse. The session provided students with a space to generate ideas and conduct substantive discussions on the identified urban challenges. The virtual collaboration allowed for a broad sharing of perspectives and insights, which proved enlightening for the subsequent process phases.

In the following phase, the student was tasked with visually exploring the urban environment through photography, with the specific aim of highlighting evidence of urban inequality. The primary objective of this phase was to supplement the theoretical knowledge acquired in the preliminary phase by revealing tangible and visual manifestations of the disparities present in the urban fabric.

Exploring different urban scenarios revealed multiple dimensions of inequality, such as architectural disparities, housing conditions, and access to public services, among other visible indicators. These images formed the basis for collective analysis and discussion, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the visual dimensions of urban inequality.

It is important to note that this initial phase was crucial in establishing a solid foundation of understanding and ideas, laying the groundwork for subsequent collective discussion (Figs. 1 and 2).

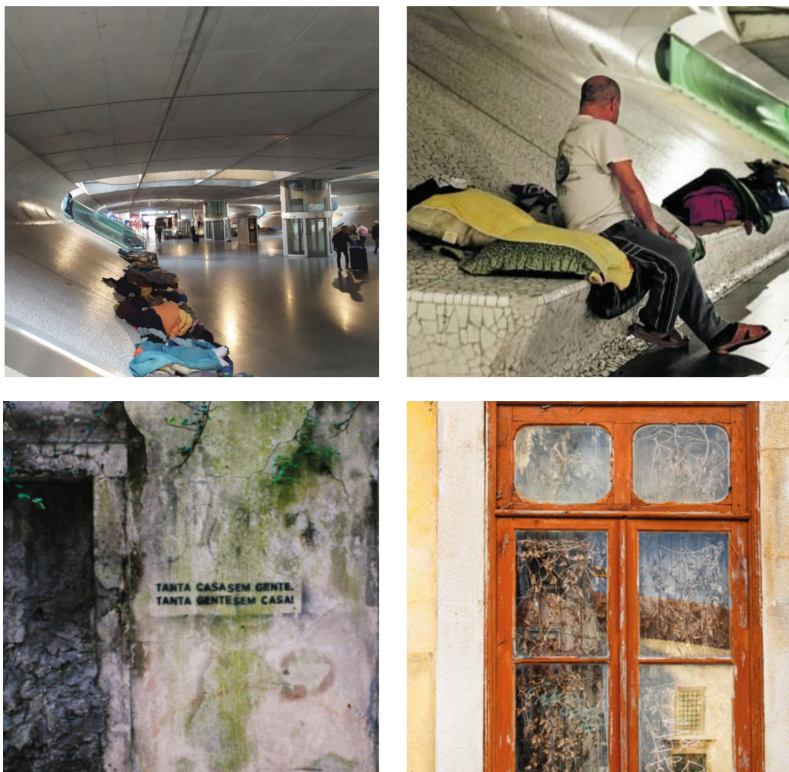


Fig. 1. Consciousness—global analysis of the urban challenges and opportunities that communities face today

Critical reflection—in-person—The meeting held at Castelló School of Art and Design (EASD) was crucial in overcoming the limitations of online interactions.

David Van der Hofstadt, a designer known for his advocacy of DIY graphic culture, led and moderated the group of students. His approach, which encouraged students to recognize the power of their voices in the creative process, was characterized by a near absence of rules. His role was essential in consolidating students' prior knowledge and acting as a catalyst, motivating them to explore the world in a deeper and more meaningful way.

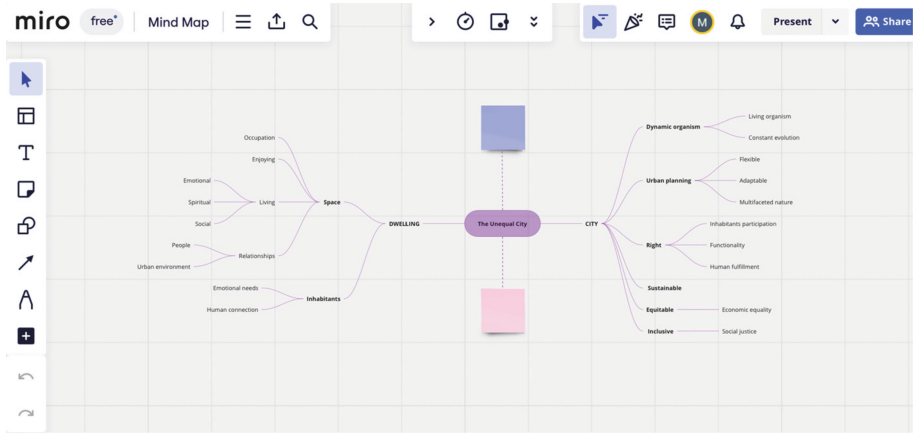


Fig. 2 Consciousness—miro visual workspace virtual platform_brainstorming

Students were grouped strategically to promote integration and inclusion, creating an environment conducive to creative expression and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Visual techniques, sketches, and diagrams were encouraged to express ideas to overcome language barriers, facilitating more effective and inclusive communication.

This approach facilitated efficient communication and enriched the collaboration process, allowing each participant to contribute their uniqueness to the collective development of ideas and solutions. Groups were challenged to consolidate their photographic and theoretical observations, integrating the understanding of urban inequality acquired in the previous phase.

The group's diverse experiences and cultural contexts enriched the ideation process. At the end of this phase, each group presented their ideas, allowing for discussion and constructive feedback. Multicultural collaboration enriched the creative process and highlighted the universality of issues related to urban inequality. This process established the basis for the following project phases, where ideas could be further developed and implemented (Fig. 3).

Transformative action—in-person phase—Screen printing was chosen as the method for disseminating messages due to its remarkable ability to produce visual materials on a large scale, making it a valuable tool in this context.

The workshop provided students with comprehensive knowledge of the materials, techniques, and possibilities inherent in the practice of screen printing. This immersion provided students with a comprehensive understanding of the potential of this form of artistic expression. It allowed them to explore and incorporate their learnings into their creations. Recognizing the distinctive and occasionally unforeseeable characteristics of the screen printing process was essential in establishing an atmosphere that not only cultivates enthusiasm but also encourages satisfaction in learning. This motivated students to confront challenges and embrace the discoveries that naturally arise during the process.

At the end of the session, the students were able to draw conclusions and reflect on the exploration and possibilities offered by the environment.



◀**Fig. 3.** Critical reflection—the process of generating new ideas, coupled with discussion and constructive feedback.

Students were encouraged to go beyond the classroom and take their message to the streets, taking inspiration from the perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Paulo Freire, who value direct experience and interaction with the world. We strategically chose key points in the city to raise consciousness of urban revitalization and the importance of these spaces for community development and well-being.

This initiative caused uncertainty among passersby, leading to meaningful dialogue about urban space and housing issues.

It is important to note that final projects demonstrate the knowledge acquired in both phases of the program and encapsulate the various perspectives and contributions shared by students throughout the process.

AQ1 Transformative action is a continuous learning process. Each action contributes to building a more aware community. The feeling of accomplishment becomes tangible when the impact of our efforts is observed, demonstrating that each step contributes to progress towards a more conscious world. This conclusion recognizes the project's success and emphasizes the significance of collaborative work and the emotional connection **AQ2** established throughout the process (Figs. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4. Transformative action—screen printing is used to communicate messages.



Fig. 5. Transformative action—artistic interventions are used as educational tools to raise public consciousness.

5 Conclusion

The 2023 United Nations report [1] highlights the overwhelming inequalities experienced in cities. Therefore, students must question their role in building a more equal, fair, and inclusive society and cities. This questioning can be achieved by encouraging reflection on the meaning of inhabiting, staying, and caring for cities, as described by Heidegger [3]. In this way, life, well-being, and interaction between people and communities can be affirmed as a right. Active citizen participation in the management and decision-making processes of cities not only promotes enjoyment but also establishes a sense of community (Lefebvre [4] and Harvey [5]). However, they should not neglect the individual and subjective aspects, using their creative freedom as arts and design students to promote and emphasize the poetics of space [7].

Undoubtedly, initiatives like the Erasmus program, particularly the Blended Intensive Program (BIP), hold immense potential to catalyze profound changes in students, surpassing the boundaries of conventional learning. The cultural immersion offered by

these programs not only enriches the academic journey but also serves as a catalyst for personal and professional growth, thereby underscoring their transformative power.

This approach fosters scientific knowledge, intellectual curiosity, a critical and interventionist spirit, creativity, and collaborative work through a pedagogical practice inspired by Paulo Freire's principles, with the aim of generating transformation.

When we delve into the specific context of the BIP 'The Unequal City', it becomes evident from the final works presented that learning is most effective when students actively participate in constructing knowledge in real-life scenarios. This active involvement, coupled with a systematic approach supported by research, analysis, and reflection, translates into practical actions, thereby reinforcing the value of hands-on learning and encouraging students to engage more.

It is crucial for students to acknowledge these challenges and gain a deep understanding of their causes and consequences. Additionally, they should be aware of their responsibilities as citizens to act with respect for human beings.

The presented final results reflect the student's individual understanding of the topic and the collaborative work and exchange of ideas throughout the program. They encapsulate the experiences, challenges faced, and solutions in building a future for more equal and sustainable cities following the eleventh Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda [2].

The importance of Erasmus programs in shaping aware and committed global citizens is evident. Additionally, programs like this strengthen the belief that change can construct a more just and equitable society because awareness is absolutely fundamental to leading the way for projects and actions that actually show results.

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Chapter 17

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