

Social Urban Innovations and the Supporting Role of Universities

A Thoughtbook

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Authors:

Despoina Kortessidou (University-Industry Innovation Network; UIIN)

Tasha Day (University-Industry Innovation Network; UIIN)

Editor:

Alexandra Zinovyeva (University-Industry Innovation Network; UIIN)

Contributors (alphabetically):

Adeline Leroy (Institut Mines-Télécom Business School)

Aidan Cerar (Institute for Spatial Policies)

Alep Blancas (Innovative Futures Institute)

Cinzia Colapinto (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Claudia Cuypers (University of Applied Sciences of Amsterdam)

Damiano Cerrone (SPIN Unit and UrbanisAI)

Daniela Pavan (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Dan Podjed (University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts)

Daniela Pavan (Ca' Foscari University)

Elma Demir (Institut Mines-Télécom Business School)

Evelina Barbanti (Petra Patrimonia)

Isabel Gomes (Advancis Business Services)

Julie Pellizzari (Florence School of Banking and Finance)

Kari Herlevi (Sitra)

Maiju Suomi, (Suomi/Koivisto Architects & Aalto University)

Marcela Acosta-Garcia (Aalto University)

Mark Kauw (AMS Institute)

Matías Barberis Rami (EFIS Centre)

Max de Ploeg (Pakhuis de Zwijger)

Nanke Verloo (University of Amsterdam)

Pablo José Martínez Rojo (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)

Romy Heymans (Pakhuis de Zwijger)

Rosalía Vicente (Knowledge Foundation Madri+d)

Sara Arko (University of Ljubljana)

Susana Elena-Perez (University of Loyola and EFIS Centre)

Vladi Finotto (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

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Coordinator institution: Knowledge Foundation Madri+d

Project contacts: Alep Blancas, alep.blancas@ifuturesinstitute.com and Rosalía Vicente, rosalia.vicente@madrimasd.org

Project Consortium

Knowledge Foundation Madri+d

Aalto University

Advancis Business Services

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Institut Mines-Télécom Business School (IMTBS)

Institute for Innovation and Development of University of Ljubljana

University-Industry Innovation Network (UIIN)

University of Applied Sciences of Amsterdam (AUAS)

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List of abbreviations

HEI	Higher Education Institution
WP	Working Package
UCAMP	Urban GoodCamp project

00 Executive Summary

What is this publication about?

The **Social Urban Innovations and the Supporting Role of Universities**, part of the Erasmus+ funded Urban GoodCamp project, presents four key directions for urban innovation. These cover aspects of design, stakeholder synergies and approaches to overcome organisation hurdles, as well as the role of knowledge institutions in strengthening and amplifying these directions. Its materials are based on forward-looking trend analysis of urban challenge solutions, desk research, 19 contributions by experts and a validation workshop. Below, we present a **snapshot of the four directions** for social urban innovation:

1 Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice

Key elements

1. Transdisciplinarity addresses complex global challenges.
2. Involves actors from academia, policymakers, societal organisations and industry.
3. Integration requires “hybrid” skills, mindset, and organisational support.
4. Aims to break down disciplinary boundaries by addressing language barriers, among others.

2 Urban (Experimentation) Living Labs

Key elements

1. Living Labs offer a co-innovative setting for testing metropolitan solutions.
2. Involves multiple stakeholders in joint testing, development, and creation.
3. Accelerates adoption of solutions by stakeholders.
4. True co-creation involves active user participation.

3 Advocacy Actions

Key elements

1. Advocacy actions involve a multifaceted approach for a just urban future, addressing activist research, communication, and policy-making.
2. Activist research combines scientific rigour with social activism.
3. Communication disseminates impactful approaches to urban challenges.
4. Policy-making amplifies topics for social innovation.

4 Civic participation

Key elements

1. Civic participation involves individuals and groups leading and designing community decisions.
2. It strengthens democratic governance by citizens.
3. Collaboration with individuals and communities is crucial for meaningful implementation of measures.
4. Civic participation reveals complex power dynamics in developing vibrant urban spaces.

Based on the collected and synthesised insights six themes for the **role of universities in supporting these directions** emerged, including: **I.** taking a transdisciplinary approach in education; **II.** taking a transdisciplinary approach in research; **III.** fulfilling HEIs’ social commitment; **IV.** amplifying important individual and institutional initiatives; **V.** supporting institutionally grassroots initiatives, and **VI.** being more involved in the regional environment.

Inclusion happens by
design, or not at all.
— *OluTimehin Kukoyi*



01 Introduction & Approach

In the following section, find an overview of the Urban GoodCamp project's overarching goals, objectives and methodology, and locate the Social Urban Innovations Thoughtbook in the project's methodological approach.

Project's Approach

The **Urban GoodCamp** (UCAMP) project, under the coordination of Knowledge Foundation Madrid, was launched in January 2021 and funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ program. The Urban GoodCamp brought together seven European partners from six countries to empower Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to participate in joint actions to tackle urban problems.

The project's main aim

The UCAMP project aims to empower HEIs and their urban stakeholders to tackle pressing regional urban challenges by creating and actively engaging urban communities of practice, developing and implementing multidisciplinary learning interventions for university students, young researchers and lifelong learners to create real-life solutions. The project was conducted in six European cities – five of which are capital cities, grouped into three areas of urban focus: Circular economy, Waste Management, Urban Biodiversity, and Sustainable Communities.

Key activities to meet the project's objectives

The project achieved its goals by researching the regional urban challenges in consultation with local stakeholders across the six partner cities. It proceeded to develop challenge-based learning interventions to build capacity for implementing urban solutions. The project achieved its objectives through the following activities divided across multiple working packages (WP):



The **investigation phase (WP2)** set the project's groundwork by helping define pressing urban challenges across the partner cities through **desk research activities**, such as expert interviews, desk research and case studies collection, as well as **foresight-oriented methods** such as trend scoping and horizon scanning. Moreover, **consultation (WP3)** with a wide range of stakeholders from HEIs, life-long learning institutions, public and private sectors, and civic society created opportunities to find synergies to collaboratively address urban challenges within this project and beyond. More on the investigation's results can be found [here](#).



Through the **development phase (WP4)**, the partners' approach to addressing the identified urban challenges was to create **learning interventions**. These interventions would aid their participants in developing critical thinking and systemic approaches to innovation while raising their knowledge of relevant (selected) urban challenges. This objective was achieved by **developing a training program** intertwining theoretical and practical cross-disciplinary learning to bring together different actors, such as university students, academics and community stakeholders from various disciplines. The training program, which included masterclasses, workshops, site visits and a mentorship scheme, can be found [here](#).



Through an **implementation and validation phase (WP5)**, the partners pilot-tested the developed training programs in the HEIs of the partner cities. The pilot testing of the developed training program at partner cities allowed the development team to ensure the effectiveness of the educational models. It resulted in the conceptualisation and development of a variety of unique solutions touching upon different sustainability challenges in each of the partner cities, which can be found [here](#).



Finally the project's activities were disseminated through a **showcasing and sustaining phase (WP6)** by organising local showcase events, regional workshops and a European-wide, online forum.

The main research, development and testing project activities described above were underpinned and supported by the following WPs:

WP1 Management: This WP ensured the highest possible standards of work process and successful delivery of all outcomes.

WP7 Quality Assurance: The focal point of the WP was monitoring results by controlling the deliverables of the Urban GoodCamp Programme. WP7 was closely related to WP for project management, as good management, effective communication, and effective financial administration are essential to quality.

WP8 Dissemination: The main objectives of the WP entailed creating awareness about each partner city's challenges and the need for a co-creation multidisciplinary approach to addressing them, as well as widely disseminating the project results and outputs.

We are here:

WP9 Exploitation and Sustainability: The main goal of this WP was to strengthen the implementation and exploitation efforts of the outputs and outcomes created throughout the project and to foster the sustainability of the project's results.

The **Social Urban Innovations and the Supporting Role of Universities Thoughtbook** is part of the Exploitation and Sustainability activities and builds on the results from WP2 Investigation, WP3 Consultation events and WP6's event activities.

02 Thoughtbook's Methodology

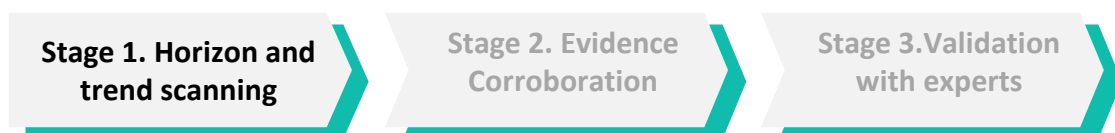
The following section describes the development of the Social Urban Innovations and the Supporting Role of Universities Thoughtbook.

The Thoughtbook's three-fold aim was achieved through a participatory, evidence-based design approach. This included horizon and trend scanning, desk research of white and grey literature, and testing with external experts through interviews, written contributions and a validation workshop.

Methodology & Tools

The **Urban Innovations Thoughtbook** has a **three-fold aim**: (1) to use **foresight and forward-looking analysis** to identify future challenges across the six pilot-testing cities and (2) to **understand social urban innovation directions** that could tackle the aforementioned challenges, as well as (3) to **identify the role of HEIs** in engaging and supporting the urban innovation trends.

This aim is pursued through a **participatory evidence-based design approach** of horizon scanning foresight methodology, grey and white literature desk research, interviews and a validation workshop, organised in three main stages.



The purpose of Stage 1's horizon and trend scanning activity was to utilise the **consortium's internal expertise** in searching for a diverse range of early signals of change (referred to as trends) that would reveal potential urban challenges as well as ideal courses of action to realise urban innovations by behaviour dynamics and actors of change.

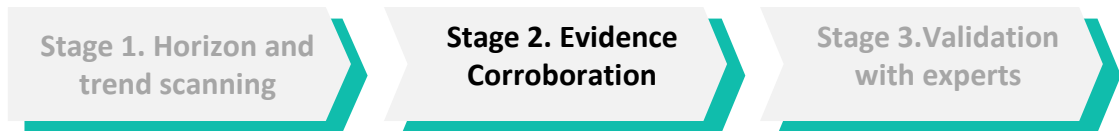
For this activity, the consortium partners **scanned for trends** touching upon environmental, economic and socially sustainable aspects of urban developments across the piloting cities. Subsequently to the scanning, UIIN analysed and clustered the 380+ collected insights (trends) into **seven categories based on the societal sectors** in which the trends' activities operated and realised. The three loops of sense-making and clustering and the collected trends can be found in this [online canvas](#).

In a nutshell, the seven trend categories, as well as an overview of the included trends' projections for forward-looking initiatives aiming for urban innovation, include:

- **Governmental-related trends**, entailing institutional infrastructures and mechanisms of governmental-mobilised initiatives for urban innovation;
- **Policy-related trends**, covering regulation initiatives on the level of municipalities, as well as roadmaps for sustainable strategy and operations;
- **Private sector-related trends** on business models for social and environmental responsibility;
- **Media- and communication-related trends**, shedding light on different dissemination approaches, campaigns and events for amplifying messages on better tackling urban challenges;
- **Community-powered-related trends** collecting a variety of citizen-led and –designed initiatives for more inclusive urban design and development initiatives;
- **HEI-related trends**, including holistic approaches that knowledge institutions adopt in educating citizens and professionals of the future and

- **Intersectoral trends** covering trends that don't fall into more than one trend category and range across cross-sectoral collaborations, alternative financing models for tackling

urban challenges, socially relevant R&D projects, and social enterprises, among others.



Stage 2 began with a further analysis of the seven trend categories. This was the starting point for designing **four forward-looking key directions** for social urban innovation that are intersectoral and, therefore, depend on the engagement of multi-stakeholder and multi-discipline collaborations. Conducting additional **white and grey literature desk research** allowed for finetuning the scope of the four directions.

These four directions for social urban innovation, which will be explored in depth throughout this Thoughtbook, include:

- I. **Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice** entails high-impact research and methods integral to the needs of the social web. This direction emerged from elements across the intersectoral and HEI-related trends.
- II. **Urban (Experimentation) Living Labs**, like co-creative innovative settings, are spaces where multiple actors jointly develop and test urban solutions that can be adopted smoothly and swiftly. The trend clusters that informed this direction are the intersectoral, HEI-, private sector- and governmental-related ones.

- III. **Advocacy Actions**, such as activist research, media communication and policy work initiatives to amplify just and inclusive approaches to urban challenges and to mobilise communities. Intersectoral, policy, media, and HEI-related trend elements are included in this direction.
- IV. **Civic participation**, including participatory design and citizen-led activities for identifying and addressing urban problems, combining empirical and peer-reviewed knowledge. This direction is powered by elements of the intersectoral, community- and HEI-related trends.

Each of the directions will be further explored in the upcoming chapters.

Stage 1. Horizon and trend scanning

Stage 2. Evidence Corroboration

Stage 3. Validation with experts

Following the design of the four directions, a **series of targeted interviews** were conducted to validate and further flesh out different aspects of the directions to better understand their promises and pitfalls. Alongside the interviews, the consortium opened **a contributions call** for submitting short articles to validate the four directions further. The 19 contributing experts ranged across all partner countries – Finland (3), France(2), Italy (5), Slovenia (2), Spain (3) and The Netherlands (4). With their experts' insights, we were able to shed light on the directions' value, as well as their major stakeholders and the dynamics between these stakeholders, the approaches to overcome barriers in realising them and the role that HEIs can play in supporting, strengthening and amplifying each of the directions.

In addition to the interviews and the contributed articles, an online validation workshop was held on November 29th, 2023, as part of WP6's European Urban Challenges Jam

events (as described in Chapter 1's overall project approach). During the workshop, the participants brainstormed opportunities and barriers across the four directions and the approaches HEIs could adopt to support them. The workshop's brainstorming results can be found in this [online canvas](#).

How to orient the Thoughtbook?

Chapter 3 presents a detailed outlook into each of the four directions in the format of an overview of each direction and Stage 2's white and grey literature that informed them.

Moreover, the entirety of Stage 3's expert contributions can be found in **Chapter 4**.

Finally, **Chapter 5** is reserved for the synthesised recommendations on HEIs' role in supporting, strengthening and amplifying the four directions for social urban innovation.

03 Overviews of Directions for Social Urban Innovation

This section presents the overviews of the four directions for urban social innovation, as identified through Methodology Stage 1's seven trend categories and further informed by Stage 2's desk research. This section also introduces the experts under each direction and the scope of their contribution.

In summary: Four Directions for Social Urban Innovation

In the heart of the Thoughtbook lay the four directions for social urban innovation. Based on the methodology behind this publication, i.e., as described in Chapter 2, these four directions entail cross-disciplinary collaborations between multi-stakeholder groups. The directions' summaries follow below, each described further in the following pages.

1 Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice

In the face of complex and interconnected global challenges, the concept of a systemic approach, specifically transdisciplinarity, has gained prominence. The successful integration of different disciplines, peoples and perspectives, including academics, policymakers, societal organisations, industry, and citizens, can power a methodology incorporating the appropriate set of skills and mindset, and a supportive organisational context that will help cross boundaries.

2 Urban (Experimentation) Living Labs

Urban Labs provide a co-innovative setting in which multiple stakeholders, such as research institutions, urban planners, industry partners, (non) governmental agencies, local communities, startups, and end users, jointly test, develop and create metropolitan solutions that can be adopted smoothly and swiftly, thus creating long-term regional impact. True co-creation, a core element of living labs, is achieved when users actively participate in innovation.

3 Advocacy Actions

Advocating for societal change in the urban context can have a transformative effect when amplification covers the three dimensions: activist research, combining scientific rigour with social activism; communication and dissemination of impactful approaches to urban challenges; and policy-making consolidating systematic actions for urban transformation. Together, these elements highlight the multifaceted approach of advocacy actions in shaping a just urban future.

4 Civic Participation

Civic participation entails the active engagement of individuals within their urban communities. It encompasses various activities, including participating in public community events, joining advocacy or grassroots movements, and contributing to decision-making on urban societal issues. Civic participation provides insight into the complex power dynamics crucial for developing vibrant and responsive urban spaces co-designed or led by citizens.

Overview: Direction 1 on Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice

How do we approach urban challenges and design urban solutions that prioritise high-impact transdisciplinary research and practice integral to the social needs?

Amid a climate and energy crisis, escalating social and economic inequality and plummeting biodiversity, citizens worldwide find themselves entangled in what are termed ‘wicked problems.’ How can top-tier academics spanning diverse disciplines grapple with the consequences of such profound societal challenges?

Transdisciplinarity’s promise

The overwhelming complexity of these significant societal issues arises from dynamic interconnections among various factors and actors. This complexity makes it increasingly more work to pinpoint causal effects and potential outcomes. In response, the concept of a ‘systemic approach’¹ has gained traction to comprehensively understand the intricacies of the problem.

Hence, a systemic approach demands that a complex issue is understood from various disciplinary fields and societal sectors simultaneously; the transdisciplinary approach – the transdisciplinary approach.² It’s crucial here to differentiate transdisciplinary research from multi and inter-disciplinary research, for transdisciplinarity involves actors from outside academia throughout the research process, in comparison to academics working alongside each other with limited integration of insights (multidisciplinarity) or each

disciplinary expert contributing equally to the research process (interdisciplinarity)³. The eclectic set of transdisciplinary actors includes but is not limited to academics, urban planners, policymakers, representatives of non-governmental organisations, local businesses, and governmental agencies, all of whom are pivotal in adopting a systemic approach.

Contextual obstacles

While transdisciplinarity is promising, transdisciplinary teams often diverge rather than converge. The practical implementation of conceptual ideas faces hurdles due to a lack of practical tools and hands-on methodologies that render systemic thinking feasible⁴. Alternatively, some methods become overly practical, losing their foundation in the core principles of systemic thought⁵.

A major observed contextual hurdle manifests as mismatches in academic language wording and the translation of academic language for non-academics, highlighting deeply rooted and fundamentally distinct worldviews⁶. As we collectively move onwards, acknowledging these language barrier hurdles and complexities can illuminate steps that bridge the gap between transdisciplinarity’s promises and reality.

Overview • Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice

An example of such a step is “A Manifesto for the Just City” book ² by a group of researchers at Delft University of Technology, who seek to encourage students to formulate their visions for just urban transitions. This book is only one of the TU Delft Global Initiative’s Global Urban Lab. With research and education projects from various faculties and with many stakeholders, The Global Urban Lab aims to actively contribute to finding viable routes to realise inclusive cities.

A second major contextual hurdle for transdisciplinary research is knowledge (mis)valuation. Different forms of knowledge may be considered unequal in academic settings, with natural and technical sciences often enjoying higher, more absolute value than the social sciences. In addition, knowledge outside academia, such as practitioners’ or indigenous knowledge, is sometimes perceived as inferior and less relevant.

An example of overvaluing technical knowledge at the expense of social scientific knowledge valuation is an excessive focus on techno-centrism and the perception that enabling new technology is the world’s best opportunity to limit global emissions to net zero. Fundamentally, ideas of future techno-solutionism “aren’t far from the type of thinking that created the climate and ecological crises in the first place. They imagine luxury as heavily based on material consumption. As a result, they tend to overlook and devalue aspects of our world that are less obviously associated with luxury: the natural environment, clean air, animal life, time spent with family and friends, local communities”³.

Admitting the social underpinnings of a dramatic social transformation is the first step in enabling the permeability between different disciplines.

Contributions to the Thoughtbook

On top of the provided examples, in this section, we spotlight five thought pieces that can help shape an understanding of different aspects of transdisciplinarity in research and practice and the dynamics between the involved parties.

- Dr Vladi Finotto, an Associate professor in Entrepreneurship and Strategy at the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, positions academic research within public universities as the most well-positioned to address wicked problems requiring a systematic approach through transdisciplinarity.
- Dr Dan Podjed, an Associate Professor in Applied Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana’s Faculty of Arts, makes a compelling case for techno-social innovation requiring close collaboration of social and technical scientists.
- Maiju Suomi, one of the founding architects at Suomi/Koivisto Architects and a doctoral researcher at Aalto University, emphasises the social responsibility of architects and built environment scientists to create spaces for beyond-human and human communities to bring nature into our cities.

Overview • Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice

- Damiano Cerrone, the co-founder of SPIN Unit and an urbanist, researcher and educator, has developed an AI-backed tool that democratises urban design decision-making and transforms citizens from commentators into active placemakers.
 - Adeline Leroy, an associate researcher at Institut Mines-Télécom Business School, advocates for a cultural shift in universities for regenerative entrepreneurship to tackle urban problems.
- Delve into these spotlight pieces in Chapter 4, pages 26-36.

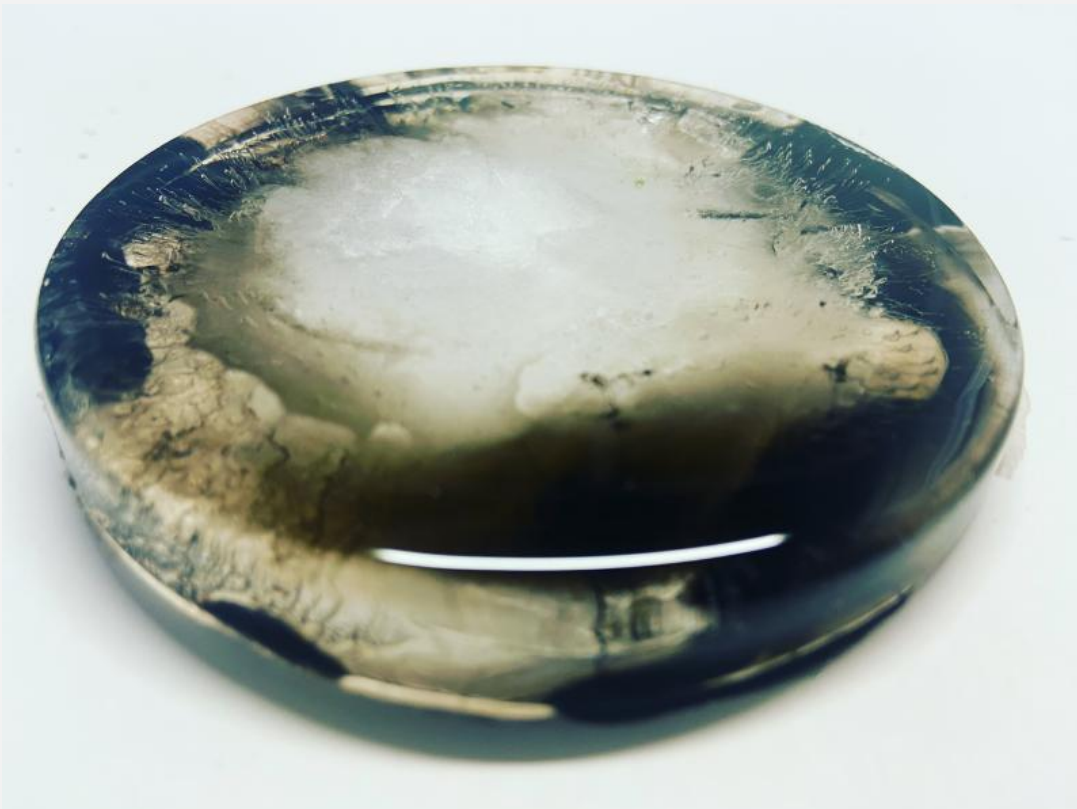
Box 1.

Art meets Science in the Anthropocene

One of the various initiatives designed to overcome the transdisciplinary hurdles of language barriers and knowledge valuation, includes STUDIOTOPIA; a residency programme designed for renowned and emerging contemporary visual artists to host a scientist or researcher in the independent & inspiring environment of their studios, reversing the usual approach whereby artists are invited to work at R&D departments of universities or companies.

Throughout its duration (2019-2022), STUDIOTOPIA proposed a vast programme of activities across the eight partnering institutions: residencies, exhibitions, pop-up labs, workshops and talks.

Find more information at STUDIOTOPIA's [website](#).



Overview: Direction 2 on Urban (Experimentation) Living Labs

How to organise innovative settings for the co-creation of knowledge and solutions by conducting local experiments with local stakeholders?

As defined by ENOLL (2013 9), Urban Living labs represent “user-centred ecosystems operating in multistakeholder, public–private–people partnerships, integrating research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings.” The emphasis on co-creation and collaboration with diverse stakeholders defines the essence of the Living Lab methodology¹⁰.

Urban Living Labs’ promise

The Urban Living Lab’s way of working is a pivotal toolkit. It offers diverse methods and experiences to bring stakeholders together, identify and engage them, establish shared visions, design and perform experiments, and, most importantly, facilitate collective learning¹¹. Eventually, Living Labs will act as spaces for experimentation and open innovation to create physical products to support policy implementation of urban transformation¹².

Unveiling Living Labs’ realities, goals and user involvement

Drawing from a literature review on the scanning of 90 sustainable innovation projects in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) that label themselves as living labs, a few observations emerge

that attempt to clarify the ENOLL description¹³.

The context in which the 90 scanned projects operate and their goals are crucial to their effectiveness; their activities take place in a real-life use context, emphasising practical application and implementation. Similarly to the previously mentioned literature, an observable common goal among Living Labs is to develop innovative, novel products to address either existing or emerging problems, with decision power being distributed among private actors, public actors, and knowledge institute stakeholders, including users, across various stages of the innovation process. This inclusive decision-making approach ensures that all participants’ diverse insights and preferences are considered and valued.

This conceptual and operational setting ensures that the innovations developed within Living Labs are not just theoretical concepts but are tested and refined in everyday situations, making them relevant and applicable. However, the post-analysis of the 90 innovation projects reveals that a mere 12 projects genuinely qualify as Living Labs, and, remarkably, the projects accurately identified as living labs don’t necessarily label themselves as such. The distinction of Living Labs among these sustainable urban innovation projects entails two primary aspects:

Overview • Urban (Experimentation) Living Labs

(1) the nature of innovation activities conducted and (2) the level of user involvement intended during these activities. True co-creation is only achieved when users actively participate in the innovation development.

Specifically, user testing and iteration in the innovation process occur in only 51 of the 90 projects. Among these 51 projects, 38 primarily engage in testing, implementation, or demonstration activities where user interaction is inherent. Genuine development with user input is less frequent, occurring in only 12 projects. Interestingly, some projects self-identified as Living Labs lack direct user participation but emphasise user-related activities, conducting either user-sourced or, i.e., project activities using user-data, by sensors, smart meters or apps, or user-oriented tasks, i.e., explicitly aiming at providing solutions from the perspective of the users.

Evaluating the impact of living labs

Despite (or perhaps because of only) nearly 20 years of experimentation, the available literature on the benefits of living labs is limited, with scant information often residing at the lowest levels on measurement scales for both strength and quality of evidence ¹¹. This deficiency may stem from different types of barriers in adopting living labs, ranging from organisational and institutional barriers, such as lack of long-term commitment, lack of supporting legal and policy framework and sufficient financial resources, to cognitive, cultural and obstacles to behaviour, such as the perceived complexity of setting up Urban Living Labs, risk aversion and reluctance to commit to the Labs' multi-year projects and

conflicting expectations between different stakeholders. In contrast to the OECD's advocacy for improving understanding of the Labs' innovation and societal impact, other barriers include knowledge and process barriers, like the uncertainty regarding the added value of the Living Labs and public monitoring and assessment challenges, as well as ethical challenges, regarding the intellectual property of the Labs' co-creation process and the inclusiveness of all relevant stakeholders. ¹⁴.

Contributions to the Thoughtbook

In this section, we spotlight three pieces that can provide additional details to the different aspects of Living Labs as multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder urban experimentation testing grounds.

- [Mark Kauw](#), a Living Lab Program Developer at AMS Institute, shares lessons learned from navigating living lab stakeholder synergies and overcoming collaboration barriers;
- [Pablo José Martínez Rojo](#), a Senior Project Manager at Grant Thornton / Universidad Complutense de Madrid, highlights the pivotal roles that Urban Labs can play in bringing diverse stakeholders together to design and experiment with innovative solutions;
- Dr [Susana Elena-Perez](#) and Dr [Matias Barberis](#), senior researcher and researcher, respectively, at EFIS Centre, highlight Living Labs' role in fostering European economic and social resilience.

Delve into these spotlight pieces in Chapter 4, pages 37-42.

Overview: Direction 3 on Advocacy Actions

How can universities utilise activism research, communication and policy work to amplify just and inclusive approaches in addressing urban problems and mobilising communities?

Factual knowledge has always held immense power to unveil injustice or perpetuate discrimination. The question arises: Who controls this knowledge, who is it meant for, and whose interests does it serve? Throughout history, organisations and governments have systematically manipulated knowledge to maintain an unequal status quo¹⁵. Embracing an inclusive perspective when working with knowledge requires acknowledging this historical context.

The three aspects of advocacy actions

In this landscape, European universities can play a pivotal role in accelerating societal transformation¹⁶ and leverage their institutional research, education, and collaboration potential through the three-pronged concept of advocacy work on urbanism encompassing activism research, communication, and policy work.

Activist research in socially responsible universities

To start with, the cornerstone of socially responsible universities lies in the methodological toolbox of activist research, collaboratively produced and dedicated to social change. In the mainstream discord, tensions arise

when blending scientific research and activism, with the former covering the systematic study of phenomena through observation, documentation and the use of evidence, with the latter seeking to advance a specific cause and, therefore, holding on to a bias that obstructs an objective scientific method. Nonetheless, based on our working definition of activism¹⁷, activist research can prioritise rigorous fact-checking, peer reviews, and a focus on co-producing urban design and development knowledge by pursuing collaborations between academia and grassroots movements^{18, 19}. This way, university researchers can collaborate with activists, social movements, and other progressive institutions to combine analysis with pressure for social transformation. An example of activist research lies in the Transnational Institute think tank, which “uniquely combines a ‘big picture’ analysis with proposals and solutions that are both just and pragmatic.”

Enhancing accessibility and classroom integration of just initiatives

At the second helm of advocacy actions, socially impactful research can be made accessible across the universities and the general public through clear language, briefings, and diverse media formats.

Overview • Advocacy actions

University communication and outreach offices can strengthen the public messaging of socially responsible research by fostering dialogue and providing platforms for diverse voices. For instance, in 2023, for the 160th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, the University of Amsterdam organised for its staff and students a “Keti Koti (‘break the chains’) Discussion Table,” an initiative to increase awareness of the consequences of the Dutch colonial and slavery past. Over shared rituals and meals, black and white participants share their different personal experiences, emotions and insights over this problematic history.

Going beyond the communication of just initiatives, integrating concepts and ideas of socially transformative research into classrooms can spark and empower students to develop critically conscious understandings of the world to help them see, share, and overcome the unbalanced power relationships that often order civic life ²⁰. Moreover, critical education can open up spaces for a more equitable approach based on the co-production of knowledge ²¹.

Policy making for systematic urban change

Research and education organisations operating at the nexus of knowledge generation and policy-making have a critical role in creating critical spaces for contextualised and emancipatory learning ²¹. By amplifying topics for social innovation and pushing for strategic reforms, they can contribute to a more equitable and democratic world. Such policy work amplifying approaches to urban design and development can have a snowball effect, as intellectual and infrastructural progress can

inspire more people to defend and push for further changes, creating a systemic and irreversible shift towards a better future.

Contributions to the Thinkbook

On top of the provided examples, in this section, we spotlight four thought pieces that can help shape our understanding of advocacy action in the urban context, encompassing activism research, communication and policy work.

- Romy Heymans, project leader and programme maker for Designing Cities For All at Pakhuis de Zwijger, emphasises the importance of flipping power dynamics between ‘experts’ and audience to enable open conversations;
- Max van de Ploeg, project leader for Week Against Racism and a programme maker for Inclusive City at Pakhuis de Zwijger, discusses the importance of opening up spaces for a more equitable approach to knowledge;
- Julie Pellizzari, a research associate at the Florence School of Banking and Finance, part of the European University Institute in Florence, underscores the importance of understanding the diverse needs of civic society in policymaking;
- Dr Cinzia Colapinto, Associate Professor in Strategic Management at the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Italy), discusses how advocacy can be a powerful tool for raising awareness, mobilising public support, and influencing policy decisions.

Delve into these spotlight pieces in Chapter 4, pages 43-51.

Overview: Direction 4 on Civic Participation

How to best adopt participatory design and empower citizens to lead activities for addressing urban problems that combine empirical and peer-reviewed knowledge?

It is commonly asserted that enhanced community involvement in urban decision-making yields numerous valuable advantages. Integral to civic participation activities is how individuals and groups involve themselves in their communities in both political and non-political ways, allowing people to have a voice in the decisions that affect them ²².

Varying degrees of engagement for citizens

Regarding citizen participation in addressing urban issues, the Ladder of Citizen Participation model ²³ and the proposed typology of a metaphorical “ladder” explores the dynamics of participation’s power and engagement. The ladder ascends from non-participation to citizen-led actions, reflecting citizens’ varying influence on decision-making processes.

Arnstein elaborates a descriptive continuum of (shifting) participatory power that moves from *non-participation*, where citizens are merely informed or educated on urban design and development decisions (no power), to *degrees of tokenism*, where they are engaged and involved in decisions through consultations and ethnographic research (counterfeit power) to *degrees of citizen participation*,

where citizens collaborate with field experts, delegate power and lead urban projects (actual power).

Benefits of Civic Participation

When viewed in conjunction with the imperative role of citizens in identifying and resolving urban challenges, Arnstein’s ladder underscores the need for innovative citizen engagement methods. In building an adaptive and resilient city, citizen participation is not merely a conceptual ideal but a tangible and vital component—examples of citizen-designed projects pop up in European cities. An example includes the citizen-designed neighbourhoods in Amsterdam’s Klaprozenbuurt deindustrialisation project ²⁴, where multiple sessions with different stakeholders take place to take everyone’s needs and wishes into account and then integrate these to create collective sketch plans.

In addition to neighbourhoods’ co-development by citizens, civic participation can also offer an alternative for the governance and ownership of public property to ensure housing as a human right ²⁵. Two examples of citizen-led initiatives attempting this cooperative approach to land governance can be found in the H-Buurt neighbourhood

Overview • Civic Participation

and in the De Nieuwe Meent, both located in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam. The benefit for the community lies in governing land through community land trusts, where instead of selling land to the market for profit projects, citizens collectively buy or lease the land for non-profit reasons to create affordable homes and other amenities for the community. ²⁶ Stakeholders and decision-makers on these civic participation initiatives include the Amsterdam municipality, expert advisors, the surrounding community and people living in commonly owned houses.

Contributions to the Thoughtbook

In this section, we spotlight four thought pieces that can help shape the understanding of inclusive urban approaches by showcasing the intricate dynamics of power and conflict for the realisation of civic participation crucial for developing vibrant and responsive urban spaces.

- Evelina Barbanti, a Project Manager of European-funded initiatives at Petra Patrimonia

emphasises the participatory and bottom-up approach to civic participation;

- Dr Aidan Cerar, an Urban Sociologist at the Institute for Spatial Policies in Slovenia, touches upon the different perspectives of stakeholders involved in civic participation projects;
- Dr Nanke Verloo, an assistant professor in urban politics and planning at the University of Amsterdam, shares her research on the relationships between citizens and the state and how citizens can be better included in planning processes, with a particular focus on conflict and
- Daniela Pavan, an Innovation Designer at PlnK and Marketing Consultant at the Venice School of Management of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, explores the need for co-designing impactful processes with citizens.

Delve into these spotlight pieces in Chapter 4, pages 52-59.



Credit: De Nieuwe Meent; Retrieved by: <https://nieuwemeent.nl/en/>

04 Contributions under the Directions for Social Urban Innovation

This section presents the entirety of the contributions by experts that corroborated the value of the four directions for urban social innovation.

Engaged Research for Societal Challenges

featuring Dr Vladi Finotto, associate professor in management and strategy at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy)

Over the past 50 years, HEIs have been called to evolve and directly impact societies, territories, and economies. Initially, and based on specific historical contingencies—the United States in the 60s and 70s, or better, the Coasts of the US in those decades—they were called to act as engines of innovation and economic development through the commercialisation of the useful knowledge they produced. It would take long to recall the regulatory devices and political stances that first substantiated the “technology transfer” model we became familiar with in the US and subsequently worldwide.

Caught in a productivity slump in the '70s and '80s, with large corporations becoming increasingly bureaucratised and unable to disrupt entrenched business models and industry logic, many developed countries sought within universities advanced solutions that could provide regional and national economies with a competitive advantage. Academic research then systematised and rationalised such states into models of “entrepreneurial universities” and triple- and quadruple-helix frameworks for capitalising on knowledge spillovers from research.

Navigating the Anthropocene

As far as it was dynamic, the world then was not even comparable to the complex and intricated web of

interdependencies it is now. Experts talk about the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch marked by the visible impact of human activity on the physical environment that surrounds us²⁷. Vladi reflects on how the Anthropocene is full of grand; one would say existential, challenges and wicked problems which call for holistic problem-solving approaches and interactions among different epistemic communities, academia and different social groups. Think about the climate crisis: solving it requires systemic approaches that stitch together, into a coherent whole, new technologies, new social behaviours, and novel analytic toolkits to measure complex webs of interaction between artificial artefacts, industrial processes, and the environment, from the soil to the atmosphere.

Breaking silos of academic research

Whether it is solving local and global climatic problems or rethinking and reviving “living” ecosystems such as cities, Vladi underscores how HEIs nowadays cannot afford to continue conducting research in disciplinary silos. Nothing new, one might say: the leitmotif of transdisciplinary research has been a staple in the debate on universities for quite a while now.

Direction 1 • In the spotlight • Dr Vladi Finotto

While claims and expectations have been high, the reality is sober. Prestigious academic journals in many fields still judge manuscripts and projects based on “standard” views of normal science, making it difficult to legitimise novel approaches to make sense of the world.

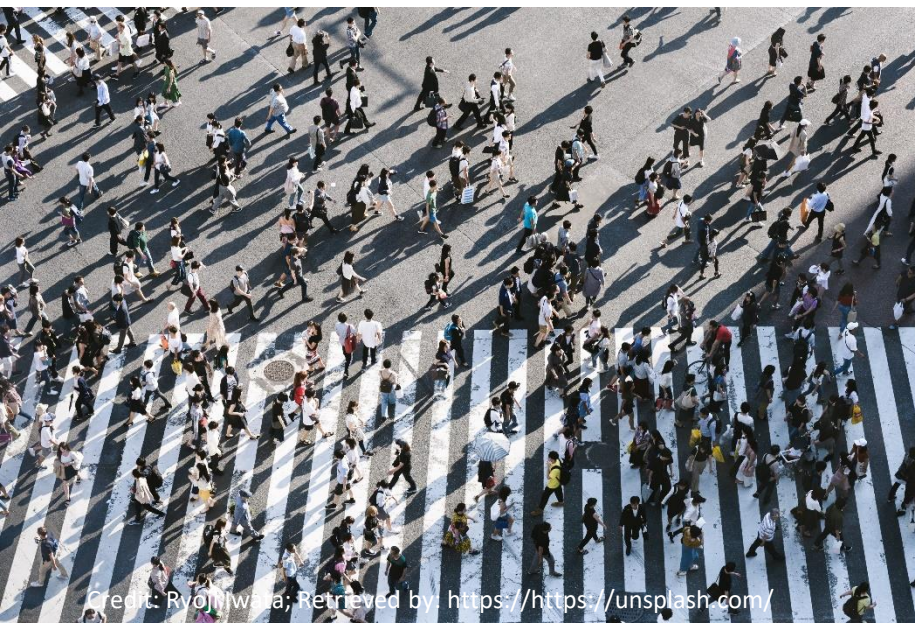
Second, universities still favour theoretical abstraction vis-à-vis the material impact of research: for all the words on novel approaches to hiring and promotion, academic careers remain anchored to traditional schemes of “contribution to theory” via journals, while “impact” is largely underestimated in departmental decision-making processes. If the world has become complex and reclaims holistic views and solutions, academic research needs to be open to practitioners and citizens both in setting their agenda and in the process of shedding light on questions and

paths towards answers.

Embracing transdisciplinarity and pluralistic approaches

The challenges that lie ahead are eminently institutional. First, scientific research conducted in HEIs is on the verge of being disrupted: it either will become transdisciplinary or other institutions—private and industrial research centres—will be the ones tackling the major problems affecting humanity. HEIs, particularly public ones, cannot give up on this mission, given their statutory interest in the common good. Second, the “practice” of research needs to change or, better, be interpreted more pluralistically: theory-driven speculation needs to parallel research that departs from urgencies and a variety of triggers in society. ■

Dr Vladi Finotto (he/him) is an associate professor in entrepreneurship and strategy in the Department of Management at Ca' Foscari University. He has been working on themes such as business model reconfiguration and strategic innovation induced by changes in consumer preferences and behaviours since 2008. Currently, he teaches strategy and innovation for the agri-food industries in Ca' Foscari's Master's programme in Food and Wine Culture. Among others, in the past, he coordinated the local unit in an EU/FP6 project, took part in a number of national high-impact projects and is part of international research networks on innovation and strategy. Find more about Vladi's work through his [LinkedIn](#) page.



People-centered Techno-social Innovation

featuring Dr Dan Podjed, associate professor in applied anthropology at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts (Slovenia)

Why the world needs (applied) anthropologists

Dan Podjed underscores transdisciplinarity's significance and stresses the need to break the barrier between anthropology and technical disciplines to understand physical reality better and make tangible changes. Notably, the international event "Why the World Needs Anthropologists," which he co-organised from 2013-2018, aimed to showcase the value of applied anthropology in Europe and beyond. Specifically, the 11th edition of the "Why the World Needs Anthropologist" event ([2023](#)) encouraged participation from individuals outside the anthropological community. Anthropologists may be critics of social reality, but it is with collaboration with other professionals that they can co-design meaningful solutions for Urban social innovation.

Techno-social innovation, instead of techno-solutionism

Drawing from his experience in the DriveGreen applied research project for developing an eco-driving application for a transition to a low-carbon society (2014-2017, find more on this good practice here), Dan highlighted the need for a holistic

approach that would combine social innovation while avoiding the pitfalls of techno-solutionism. Central to the project's success was the thorough collaboration between anthropologists and engineers, with the latter following the formers' ethnographic field research to deeply understand the rationale and motivation of commuting citizens across four cities. Once citizens' mobility challenges were mapped, the team continued developing a smartphone app called the "123" app promoting sustainable commuting practices.

This transdisciplinary project achieved a social-technological innovation breakthrough by introducing the concept of "indirect micro-donations" and encouraging collaboration for the common good within the 123 apps. Through this initiative, app-using citizens could compete with a public figure in their city for a specific time and a specific eco-mobility activity. For instance, if participants, on average, outperformed the mayor in cycling, the latter would contribute a symbolic amount from their personal budget to enhancing the city's cycling infrastructure. This concept goes beyond individual competition, evolving into a quantified "us" where collaboration and competition coexist.

Direction 1 • In the spotlight • Dan Podjed

There is no such thing as “one size innovation fits all.”

When reflecting on his learnings from working on transdisciplinary projects, Dan emphasised the need to confront systematic social problems with nuance rather than discarding them as mere exceptions from a “life normality” disillusion, e.g., the recent events of the Covid-19 pandemic, the wars in West Asia, East Europe and Africa, environmental catastrophe, and energy crises. Rejecting the notion of “going back to normal” and acknowledging the abnormality of a perpetual state of crises as the new normality can bring a sense of relief and be the first step to addressing the problems of contemporary life.

Additionally, moving away from the “one size fits all” mass-produced solutions, unattached from people’s needs, and utilising approaches that can improve people’s lives requires a crucial shift from an expert-centric research and solutions development to a people-centred approach. For the development of people-centred solutions, the initial step requires identifying diverse groups of people and using anthropology and ethnographic-based approaches to understand them, e.g., interviews and participant observation. The second

step entails analysing people’s lifestyles and habits. Then comes the step of interpreting people’s needs, and this is where expert-centred design and development enters the equation while still involving people in the decision-making process.

From a forward-looking perspective, Dan urged a transition from a people-centered to a planet-centered mindset, emphasising the interconnectedness of human activities with the well-being of all species on Earth. Only highlighting the staggering fact that one-fifth of the total biomass of all mammals on the planet is attributed to humans and their domestic animals prompts a reconsideration of humanity’s impact on the planet’s diverse ecosystems. Additionally, future sustainability efforts should seamlessly integrate technological and social innovation elements. Such techno-social solutions will not be based on the current myth of technologies being ethically neutral or supporting people’s isolation but prioritising meaningful connections and societal well-being. ■

Dr Dan Podjed (he/him) is an anthropologist dedicated to developing ethnography-based solutions and innovative research methods at the intersection of different scientific fields. He is a Research Fellow at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Associate Professor at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts and Senior Advisor at the Institute for Innovation and Development of the University of Ljubljana. He is also one of the Executive Advisors of the EASA Applied Anthropology Network. As part of his eclectic career as a journalist and writer, he has published multiple books, with his latest one being "Why the World Needs Anthropologists" (2021), where he and his co-editors brought together the leading experts in the field to highlight the value of anthropology in today's world. Find more about Dan through his [website](#).

Beyond-human focused architecture

featuring Maiju Suomi, founding architect at Suomi/Koivisto Architects, and doctoral researcher at Aalto University (Finland)

A new approach to architectural research and practice

The Alusta Pavilion project is a tangible manifesto of a new architectural approach that questions the dichotomy between culture and nature. The Pavillion is an experiment inspired by a post-human environmental philosophy that emphasises the well-being of humans and non-human animals while acknowledging and considering the environmental and social impacts of materials and the lifecycle of spaces. The Suomi and Koivisto creative team's environmental approach extends beyond the created physical

space and considers the broader impact of the entire process, from material extraction to construction and eventual deconstruction.

This approach to architectural research and practice is valuable for another reason: it addresses political issues through the lens of beauty, creating an atmosphere that engages people with environmental and climate concerns. While everyone is deeply concerned about these issues, empowering individuals to find their unique path to sustainability is essential to turning apathy into impactful action.



Credit: Suomi/Koivisto Architects; Retrieved from: www.met-a.fi/

Direction 1 • In the spotlight • Maiju Suomi

A wide array of stakeholders and collaborators

The transdisciplinary nature of architectural projects led the Suomi and Koivisto duo to adopt a profoundly collaborative approach in conceptualising the Alusta Pavilion. They engaged with ecology researchers who played a crucial role in advising and shaping the design and functionality of the Pavilion, ensuring that its plant selection catered to pollinating insects' feeding and protection needs. Collaboration with different departments at Aalto University, including ceramics professors, supported the construction of the Pavilion.

Beyond working closely with researchers, Suomi and Koivisto sought partnerships with museums in their area to reach a broader audience. Specifically, they collaborated with the Architecture Museum and Design Museum in Helsinki to display the Pavilion and actively engage museum visitors through discussions, workshops, and lectures within the Pavilion itself. These activities fostered a deeper connection between their project and the public and sparked conversations about sustainability, ecology, and the potential for positive urban change.

Additionally, Maiju recognised the significance of engaging with the local community and elected governmental decision-makers. While the project was privately initiated, she and her architect partner ensured it adhered to the necessary building regulations and obtained the required permits from the city.

The positive response of Alusta Pavillion by the (beyond-human) community

Different people can perceive multisensory projects, like the Alusta Pavillion, in various ways, and while such projects serve multiple purposes, this dynamic demonstrates the depth of meaningful design. Meaningful design goes beyond merely creating aesthetically pleasing items; it's about making a substantial impact. The Pavilion project is a testament to the value of growth that extends beyond economic considerations, focusing on environmental expansion and coexistence with other species instead of encroaching upon their habitats, such as transforming parks into parking lots.

Reflecting on the Pavilion's journey, Maiju shared that the project received overwhelmingly positive responses from the general public, with the majority of people appreciating the transformation of an underutilised space into a vibrant, eco-friendly pavilion.

However, it's worth noting that not everyone embraced their approach. Suomi and Koivisto encountered minimal opposition from a few residents who expressed concerns about the perceived 'messiness' of the pavilion's design, as they found the ecosystem-centric aesthetics divergent from the traditional, neatly manicured urban spaces. Such responses reinforced the importance of cultural shifts towards embracing more diverse and natural urban environments. Regarding collaborations with municipal authorities and elected officials, their support is crucial for projects' success within their cities.

Direction 1 • In the spotlight • Maiju Suomi

Engaging with them can be a mixed experience due to differing viewpoints from the architects, for example. However, Maiju reflects that it's all about finding common ground and demonstrating the value and benefits such projects bring to the community.

What does it take to create accessible public spaces?

Maiju emphasised that a significant challenge in creating more substantial and impactful urban projects lies in the idea of individualism and individual life in the city. Specifically, when it comes to the mindset of a significant portion of Finnish citizens, people expect society to provide for them rather than taking the initiative to create change within and with their local communities. This symptom of living in

a capitalist society has citizens trapped in buying homes, cars and material goods but lacking a sense of ownership and connection with public spaces.

This challenge can be mainly addressed within the education system, where educators should empower individuals to become more proactive while developing practical skills. After all, what is more exciting than using simple techniques that involve students, residents, and museum-goers in creating accessible public spaces? Participatory design can be incredibly empowering, too, as it allows people to find hope and meaning, which can sometimes be lost when tackling problems in isolation. ■

Maiju Suomi (she/her) is a founding architect of the Suomi/Koivisto Architects agency and a doctoral researcher and educator at Aalto University, embarking on a journey of environmental architecture while bridging nature and culture through the creation of multisensory spatial experiences. After years of practising architecture and teaching at Aalto University, she decided to pursue a doctoral degree to deepen her understanding of architecture's sustainable aspects and enrich her practice and teaching. Driven by a sense of responsibility towards sustainability and a desire to create spaces that transcend the conventional boundaries of architecture, together with her colleague, Elena Koivisto, created the Alusta Pavilion in 2022. Find more about Maiju through her [website](#).



Credit: Suomi/Koivisto Architects; Retrieved from: www.dezeen.com/

The role of AI in facilitating transdisciplinary research

featuring Damiano Cerrone, co-founder of SPIN Unit and UrbanistAI, urbanist, researcher and educator (Finland)

The need to balance data-based or image-based approaches

Rather than specialising in a particular method, Damiano Cerrone is an advocate of specialising in the development of sets of eclectic methods. He recognises that the preference for a more data-based narrative or image-based approach depends on the specific challenges and projects.

For example, if one project is trying to reimagine the future of cities, more than relying on data may be required as data primarily describes the past. In urban design cases, using images is much more effective than data. Conversely, data was crucial in communicating a research project's results. In a previous project which involved the correlation between biodiversity loss and disease development, data perfectly illustrated the connection between living in the Finnish countryside and a lower likelihood of developing type one diabetes.

As Damiano phrases it, it is his job to think about “the best lens to use at a given phenomenon and then adapt different methodologies to suit its unique requirements”. The need for a case-based versatile approach was one of the seeds of the creation of UrbanistAI, an image-based generative AI platform used to facilitate the collective reimagining of future cities, codeveloped by SPIN Unit, which

Damiano co-founded and Toretel. The tool effectively facilitates multidisciplinary collaboration for urban design rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

Transform citizens from commentators into active placemakers

In addressing the multidisciplinary nature of an urban design team, whether in the public or private sector, Damiano emphasised the challenge of multi-national individuals from different fields struggling to integrate into the design process due to the distinct technical wording inherent in their respective disciplines. According to him, the crux lies in the disciplinary-specific vocabulary that creates communication barriers. On top of this, some people are considered to be more articulate than others, and being articulate is associated with being more persuasive.

Integrating a generative AI imaging tool, like UrbanistAI, into the interaction process proves instrumental in allowing people of different cultural backgrounds, abilities and even languages to collaborate on urban design projects by generating visual expressions and images to convey ideas. The UrbanistAI's functionality enables users to input keywords related to their intended output,

Direction 1 • In the spotlight • Damiano Cerrone

which the platform interprets to generate high-quality 3D renderings and visual representations.

Once the users find an image that best expresses their idea, they can directly share it with their team and express their visions for the future of their cities.

In this sense, the platform democratizes and facilitates decision-making negotiations involving citizens, city leaders, and experts in urban applications, as the visuals can be transformed into design guidelines for urban planners, architects, and designers. The ultimate objective of the platform's implementation is to transform individuals from mere commentators into active peacemakers, thereby shifting their roles in the community. Damiano shared that this approach has been successfully employed in co-design processes across various countries,

including Europe, Singapore, and AUE.

Integrating non-human species in urban planning

Damiano believes that the most neglected actors in urban research and decision-making are non-human species, and the next step should be to integrate these actors firmly into the process. He recently started a project on planning cities with and for non-human species. The key takeaway from this project is the recognition of non-human species as a crucial factor that has yet to be addressed in urban planning and decision-making processes. Damiano aims to rectify this by actively incorporating non-human species from the beginning of the planning perspective rather than as an afterthought, as is often the case with traditional planning. ■

Damiano Cerrone (he/him) is an urbanist, researcher and educator. His practice focuses on urban research and policy design for the public sector. He cofounded SPIN Unit, an urban research and innovation practice and UrbanistAI, a participatory design platform to reimagine our cities' future, a tool created through a collaboration between SPIN Unit and Toretel. Cerrone is also affiliated with and teaches at several academic institutions, such as the Tampere University (Finland) and TerreformUR. His previous experience includes being an expert at TalTech, a consultant at Demos Helsinki, and a visiting professor at Beijing University of Technology. More information can be found in [his website](#).



Teaching Sustainable Transdisciplinary Entrepreneurship

featuring Adeline Leroy, associate researcher at Institut Mines-Télécom Business School and doctoral researcher at Université Paris-Saclay (France)

Transdisciplinary work leads to discipline transformation through a plurality of views and approaches. Universities and VETs, therefore, must also consider the teaching methods and objectives required to achieve this.

For Adeline Leroy, the first step in tackling urban challenges through entrepreneurship at universities is reinventing entrepreneurial mythology by questioning neo-liberal social identities that underline business owner risks and property. Educational paradigms, the means for sustainable medium- and long-term change, have been disrupted by the Anthropocene and can no longer be seen as before ²⁸. It is about teaching a new 'entrepreneurial identity' rather than the one currently transmitted by mainstream entrepreneurship.

It is a question of understanding the new sustainable and united social dimension. Knowledge and expertise must be decompartmentalised as each discipline can deal with the different fields of knowledge that enable the systematic definition of desirable actions.

Moving beyond neo-liberal paradigms in addressing urban challenges

Adeline shares that sustainable societies are linked to an economic system that sustains life since they are based on rebalanced and harmonious

relationships between human beings. The capitalist economy, by contrast, is extractive ²⁹, while the regenerative economy is the opposite, replacing and enhancing human, ecological and financial resources. Therefore, sustainable societies cannot be adequately addressed within the neo-liberal framework. Urban challenges are linked to circular and regenerative economies. Therefore, universities cannot address these challenges by teaching mainstream entrepreneurship derived from a society embodied by start-ups and driven by public policies ³⁰. Universities forget that skills convey neo-liberal mythology ³¹ that is performative and counterproductive to regenerative entrepreneurship ³².

Deconstructing the Entrepreneurial Identity

Identity regulation is an ongoing process in which the individual negotiates the question of "who am I" within the social "we are" ³³. The individual elaborates "self-narratives" based on cultural resources, memories and desires to reproduce or transform their identity, underlining the performative effect of neo-liberal mythology. Becoming an entrepreneur involves identity work provoked by three macro principles of neo-liberal mythology:

Direction 1 • In the spotlight • Adeline Leroy

the place of emotion versus rationality, the predominance of growth as the sole objective, and the question of ownership. As long as companies are seen as only economic organisations with an economic purpose where actors are purely economic, the construction of social identity within entrepreneurship will continue to be seen through performance.

It is not more militant to teach neo-liberal entrepreneurship than regenerative entrepreneurship. Teaching entrepreneurship is political; each tool, theory, and model conveys a political conception of entrepreneurship, and teaching is performative when it calls upon a specific mythology.

Navigating cultural shifts for regenerative entrepreneurship

These are real challenges for higher education and vocational training

because they are changes in posture in the representation of target objectives and the adjustment of means. Adeline reflects that there are profound cultural changes for which the ways of transmitting and training are decisive, both in a concrete way and in terms of opening possibilities.

To overcome these challenges, universities should:

- Consider the performativity of their teachings.
- Adapt the examples given to concrete and expert cases capable of opening possibilities
- Contemplate inevitable identity in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education.
- Progressively define the mythology of regenerative entrepreneurship from which students will draw and its artefactual translations ^{34,35}.
- Open the opportunity for an eco-regional and collective entrepreneurial adventure. ■

Adeline Leroy (she/her) is a doctoral researcher between Université Paris-Saclay and the University of Technology Sydney, researching how to transition from extractive business models to regenerative ones by using the quintuple helix model applied as it's applied at the European level. Parallely, she is an associate researcher at Institut Mines-Télécom Business School, conducting research in regional innovation systems, urban transition, civil society-university-industry collaboration, entrepreneurial universities, entrepreneurial ecosystems and entrepreneurial mindsets.



Credit: Daniel Funes Fuentes; Retrieved from: www.unsplash.com/

Stakeholder Synergies for Living Labs' Community Engagement

featuring Mark Kauw, Living Lab program developer at AMS Institute (The Netherlands)

The Living Lab approach at AMS Institute

The Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions (AMS Institute) is dedicated to researching urban problems and accelerating innovations and sustainability transitions in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam through a vision that materialised upon its founding (2014) by Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), Wageningen University & Research (WUR) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). AMS Institute's research focus revolves around six defined topics, including (1) smart urban mobility, (2) urban energy, (3) climate resilient cities, (4) metropolitan food systems, (5) responsible urban digitalisation and (6) circularity in urban regions.

This is where the Living Lab approach becomes pivotal for AMS. Mark Kauw shares that, through Living Labs, AMS Institute conducts research that translates into tangible impacts in the city while ensuring the effective co-creation and collaboration between academics and policy officers in the municipality while acknowledging the complexity of the Living Labs stakeholders' diverse expectations.

Lessons from navigating stakeholder synergies

Regarding the major stakeholders partaking in Living Labs, it's crucial to start with the fact that AMS goes a long

way in involving all affected stakeholders at the discussion table and placing the ones that will benefit from the solutions' end product at the centre. However, as Mark reflects, determining the end user can be a nuanced process. For instance, engaging citizens is often seen as a priority for an urban project but may not be effective in certain scenarios, especially when dealing with projects of a low level of tech-readiness, meaning that a certain innovation is far from ready to implement in society, thus making it in the short term irrelevant for many citizens. Below, Mark illustrates two examples highlighting both an unsuccessful and a successful synergy in engaging key stakeholders within AMS Living Lab's research.

The first case involved a fruitless collaboration that resulted in no tangible synergy between the collaborating parties in a redevelopment project. The intended partners were AMS Institute, a real estate developer and the municipality of Amsterdam. The project's goal was to create a textbook case of a Living Lab.

A meticulous step-by-step process entailed engaging the right stakeholders, co-creating plans, seeking signatures for collaboration agreements and forming a research consortium. Nonetheless, at the agreement's finalisation stage, the real estate developer stepped back and ultimately did not sign the agreement,

Direction 2 • In the spotlight • Mark Kauw

revealing a mismatch in risk tolerance of resources, time and capital, which stemmed from their uncertainty about the Living Lab's initial research outcomes. This case unravels a critical lesson on understanding stakeholder perspectives, managing risks and expectations and aligning values and interests between academia and stakeholders to foster effective collaborations.

On the flip side, the Southeast Energy Living Lab emphasises a successful synergetic dynamic between the involved parties: the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, TU Delft, AMS Institute and the municipality of Amsterdam AMS. The consortium's collaboration, which started in 2019, aims to support Amsterdam's Southeast district in becoming energy-neutral by 2040, a step further than the Amsterdam municipality's overall goal of reducing its CO2 emissions by 95% by 2050. Unlike the formalised approach in some Living Lab cases, Energy Lab Southeast's partners demonstrated a strong commitment and motivation towards working together and engaging in hands-on efforts with diverse stakeholders. This commitment most likely stemmed from their shared interests and a mutual understanding of the collaboration's potential benefits. A distinctive element, in this case, is that the Energy Lab's commitment was rewarded early

on by successfully securing major grant proposals – a success indicating an alignment of the collaboration's goals with funding opportunities and reflecting the partners' ability to leverage their collective expertise to secure financial support for their initiatives.

The role of community engagement in Living Labs

An essential element in mutually beneficial collaborations for creating Living Labs is a return of value to the communities or platforms that contribute to obtaining valuable empirical material for research. In the case of the Energy Lab Amsterdam Southeast case, having a dedicated district in Amsterdam facilitates establishing a robust local network, accessing data from the municipality, and fostering collaboration with the local community. The enduring nature of this collaboration, functioning as a platform rather than a short-term initiative, highlights a shared commitment among participants for sustained, long-term engagement. ■

Mark Kauw (he/him) is an Urban Living Lab program developer at the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions (AMS Institute). Mark is involved in coordinating the AMS Institute's Living Lab program, which encompasses managing a portfolio of externally funded urban Living Labs, ensuring coverage of the urban challenges for the metropolitan area of Amsterdam, as defined by the AMS Institute, and managing the Living Labs' long-term capacity planning. In addition to his role in the AMS Institute, Kauw is also dedicated to the Amsterdam Energy Lab Zuidoost's (South East) work, which is focused on adjusting to energy transition challenges. Based on his previous experience as a developer in the sustainability program of Utrecht University, he initiated the UULabs, the "university campus as a living lab" concept. Find more about his work at his [LinkedIn](#) page.

Think-and-do Urban Experimentation Labs

featuring Pablo José Martínez Rojo, Senior Project Manager at Grant Thornton / Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain)

In our rapidly urbanising world, cities grapple with a myriad of challenges spanning environmental sustainability, transportation efficiency, social equity, and economic development.

Moreover, as the primary entities responsible for meeting the needs of their citizens, cities are uniquely positioned to address these concerns.

Pablo José shares his experience at the helm of European projects, delving into understanding how large European cities address challenges to foster innovation and generate greater social and economic value, through the development of urban experimental spaces for researching and uncovering innovative solutions and instruments that could enhance the regions' ecosystems for entrepreneurial innovation.

The path to digital-social innovation through multistakeholder collaboration

From his previous research within the project, it became evident that conventional top-down urban planning and development methods need to be revised to address complex problems.

In this context, Urban Labs emerge as pivotal collaborative environments, bringing together diverse stakeholders to collectively design and experiment with innovative solutions that can be readily and efficiently implemented.

One such case is the [Betterplace Lab](#), which shapes digitisation socially and makes it usable for the common good. To this end, they conduct research and experiment with innovative projects.

The team characterises itself as a digital-social think-and-do tank, a phrase that might encompass many elements but proves effective. In a world where digital presence is crucial for survival, combining "thinking" and "doing" becomes imperative for usefulness.

Below, Pablo José distils three core ideas that encapsulate the essence of Betterplace Lab's purpose:

Firstly, the projects initiated in the lab adopted a "multistakeholder" approach. To the question of "Who are the most appropriate stakeholders to be involved?" the answer is straightforward: all those with something to contribute and align with the organisation's goals. Noteworthy is their objective to serve as policy support makers and collaborate with public administration by providing advice, policy recommendations, awareness raising, and program design. This perspective is rooted in the insights gained from fieldwork.

Secondly, Betterplace employs a "new work" approach regarding organising and operating activities.

Direction 2 • In the spotlight • Pablo José Martínez Rojo

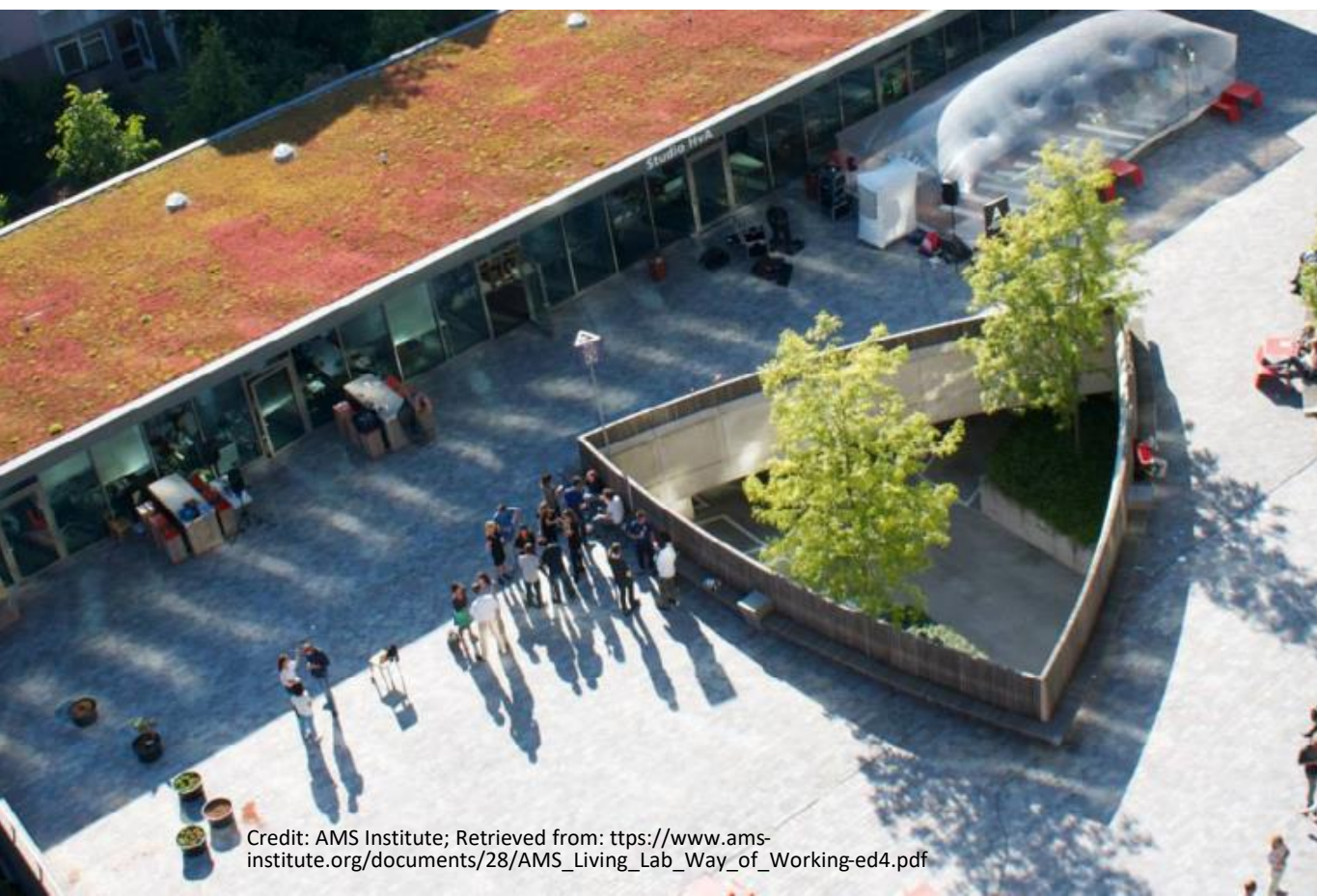
This entails a democratic style of working with competence-based hierarchies, self-organised teams, circles of organisation, and complete transparency—the "new work" philosophy centres on unlocking the potential of every individual. As of mid-2022, Betterplace Lab comprised 11 employees, presenting their operational model as straightforward. While adaptability is deemed crucial, acknowledging freedom as a catalyst for fostering creative and innovative environments is evident.

Thirdly, Betterplace Lab advocates for openness to the world. Among their outward-facing activities,

collaborations with other countries, especially in developing regions, stand out as a significant contribution. Anyone involved in social work understands that the rewards received often surpass what is given.

In conclusion, the exploration of Betterplace Lab reveals a dynamic intersection of innovation, collaboration, and social impact. For Pablo José, it exemplifies a model that addresses the complexities of our evolving digital landscape and actively contributes to the common good, showcasing the transformative power of urban innovation. ■

Pablo José Martínez Rojo (he/him) is a senior consultant at Grant Thornton/Universidad Complutense de Madrid, working on innovation and entrepreneurship projects, both at national and European levels. He has worked with urban labs in Madrid, helping young entrepreneurs to evolve their ideas, for more information [here](#), and he is continuously working with Spanish regions in improving their ecosystems, more information [here](#).



Credit: AMS Institute; Retrieved from: https://www.ams-institute.org/documents/28/AMS_Living_Lab_Way_of_Working-ed4.pdf

Fostering societal resilience through future-oriented science-based labs

featuring Dr Susana Elena-Perez, associate professor at University of Loyola and senior consultant at EFIS Centre and Dr Matías Barberis Rami, researcher at EFIS Centre (Spain)

A good case of creating social impact through living labs

Matías Barberis Rami and Susana Elena-Perez introduce FUTURESILIENCE, a project coordinated by the European Future Innovation System (EFIS) Centre. The project, which “creates FUTURE societal RESILIENCE through innovative, science-based co-creation labs”, aims to strengthen European economic and social resilience through an enhanced ability to respond to future crises quickly. This goal will be accomplished by implementing 10 ‘FUTURESILIENCE Labs’ in which multiple stakeholders will:

1. Identify, understand and frame concrete urban challenges.
2. Develop and analyse plausible future scenarios, particularly how the challenge could evolve over time.
3. Discuss and test evidence-based strategies tailored to their specific context and matching local needs.

This approach looks at strengthening capacity at the societal and economic level, minimising the impact of multiple crises, breaking the silo approach and promoting the design of robust policies addressing existing and emerging needs with a future-proof tag on them.

A multidisciplinary approach to urban resilience

Susana and Matías argue that the concept of urban resilience has gained a predominant role on the public agenda of urban development.

While the project takes multiple shapes in different disciplines, there is a common ground of understanding: resilience entails the absorbing, adaptive and transformative capacities of a society facing challenges, and more particularly, shocks and crises. Building resilience depends heavily on the ability of the social, economic and political systems to mobilise resources in the face of crises, quickly set up connections between heterogeneous areas and engage with multiple stakeholders to create new future narratives.

Policymakers, the scientific community and society’s interplay

The interconnected nature of the underlying factors (also seen as vulnerabilities) that increase the impacts at the societal level is challenging policymakers to make decisions in dialogue with the scientific community and with society as a whole.

Direction 2 • In the spotlight • Susana Elena-Perez & Matías Barberis Rami

Susana and Matías argue that policymakers should analyse the roots of increasingly complex challenges and understand how people deal with the impact of shocks in their everyday lives. Dialogue with the scientific community is key for more robust and tested approaches. Research and innovation systems can inform governments, businesses, industries, higher education institutions and civil societies.

This is possible by providing full, timely and fair access to science-based approaches, concrete information and tools that contribute to build system-wide resilience, not only in the recovery phase, but also in preparation for future developments or events.

Additionally, engaging with society is fundamental as citizens define the true meaning of public policy. This is key for an effective change and to make

science, technology and innovation more open to stakeholders and society as a whole.

To achieve the transdisciplinary collaboration between the different stakeholders, the 'FUTURESILIENCE Labs' will be mentored by multidisciplinary teams who will analyse how concrete challenges may evolve into different future scenarios.

This approach allows possible solutions that are valid for multiple situations. It also provides enough flexibility to quickly adapt the policy design for crises, while keeping the paths of urban improvement and transformation.

Finally, the labs will also apply behavioural approaches to understand societal barriers to implementing the solutions, reducing resistance to change and facilitating adaptation. ■

Dr Susana Elena-Perez (she/her) is a senior consultant and policy analyst at the European Future Innovation System (EFIS) Centre, with 20 years in research and innovation policies. She is also an associate professor at Loyola Andalusia University and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, focusing on regional development and innovation policy. Her extensive experience at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre involved project management, data analysis, and content creation. Find more about his work at her [LinkedIn](#) page.

Dr Matías Barberis Rami (he/him) is a researcher at the European Future Innovation System (EFIS) Centre. He is interested in sustainable futures, resilience and policy analysis of urban decision making and development, and its connections with architecture and nature. He is also the project manager of the Horizon Europe project FUTURESILIENCE. More information regarding Matías' and the project can be found on his [LinkedIn](#) page and on the project's [website](#), respectively.

A Transparent Approach to Inclusive Dialogue and Advocacy

featuring Romy Heymans, project leader and programme maker for the Designing Cities For All, FemCity and Social City programs at Pakhuis de Zwijger (The Netherlands)

Pakhuis de Zwijger as a 'dialogue centre'

Located in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Pakhuis de Zwijger is an accessible, independent, and safe public meeting space that amplifies diverse opinions and insights to generate creative solutions for urgent and complex social issues. Its work in collectively visualising the cities and metropolises of tomorrow is a good case of collaboratively conceptualising, supporting and amplifying ideas and initiatives for social urban innovation. Romy Heymans, referring to Pakhuis as a "dialogue centre," explains how the organisation prioritises fostering dialogue over traditional debates, which forms the foundation of its advocacy work, bringing together varied perspectives.

A transitional effort to constantly explore solutions and envision a shared future joins the increasing demand from Pakhuis' audience and its program-making teams for a different kind of conversation—one that goes beyond the conventional expert- and Western-centric approach. In response, Pakhuis integrates a variety of workshops, audience interactions, performances, and a multimedia approach into its programs, recognising the necessity of engaging diverse audiences effectively.

Flipping power dynamics for inclusive conversation

Pakhuis de Zwijger's programs are designed to forefront diverse perspectives, intentionally steering clear of inviting established figures whose voices often dominate specific discussion circles. While designing and developing programs, Romy and their team actively seek to platform voices with unique perspectives, contributing to a diverse and enriched discourse of discussions to create a valuable experience for experts and the audience.

When it comes to the interaction of invited speakers and the audience, they quite literally flipped the script, with the audience participating in the discussion alongside the "experts". Specifically, for "Designing Cities For All" events, the recordings of which are accessible on Pakhuis' [archive page](#), they shifted away from the conventional expert-driven conversation towards a more interactive and inclusive format, fostering a more equal and engaging dialogue.

This shift in power dynamics allows the audience to express their opinions, ideas, and questions before the experts respond. While this format is still evolving, the initial response from the audience has been positive,

Direction 3 • In the spotlight • Romy Heymans

signalling a successful move towards a more inclusive and participatory discussion model.

Though seemingly simple, this approach has proven effective in broadening perspectives and enriching discussions. Acknowledging the significance of perspectives from those involved, Romy emphasises the relevance of the “nothing about us without us” slogan in shaping Pakhuis de Zwijger’s inclusive and dynamic approach to dialogue.

Addressing internal and external challenges facing the cultural platform

In exploring the barriers and conflicts associated with organising events that amplify socially important messages, Romy poignantly identifies both internal and external challenges.

An example of a commonplace internal challenge in large organisations like Pakhuis is aligning individual team members’ values and diverse views and determining how those values should be expressed and externalised. This internal reflection involves continuous conversations, reflection, defamiliarisation from biases, and learning among team members. Notably, institutional decisions may not always align with every team member’s views, emphasising the individuality of creators within the broader institutional framework. This nuanced approach aims to navigate the complexities of false balance while recognising the diversity of thought within the organisation.

As for the external challenges, transparency in communicating different programs’ goals and decisions is paramount in fostering

accountability and recognising the validity of dissenting voices and the decision-making process.

Organisations can provide clarity and invite constructive dialogue by openly sharing the rationale behind decisions, even if controversial. One example where such communication proved itself was in the events covering the stand of different parties ahead of the Dutch national elections. In the event’s announcement, the invited parties were justified against the Pakhuis’ manifesto for dialogue.

Another external challenge is that it’s not rare for platforms engaging in social commentary to face criticism, with some commentators perceiving the work as an echo chamber where only like-minded individuals receive a platform. Romy shares that it is not despite but because of diverse opinions in society that it is invaluable to adhere to one’s values despite potential backlash. To illustrate this principle, they share the case of a program they co-designed addressing transgender issues in journalism, which ended up receiving significant backlash from trans-exclusionary radical feminist groups. In designing spaces and places of social value, Romy advocates for a broader interpretation of safe spaces, where individuals can make mistakes, be corrected, and engage in a learning process. This approach is reflected in Pakhuis’s programming, creating a conversational environment where participants are encouraged to express diverse opinions and learn from each other, fostering growth and mutual respect.

In the spotlight • Romy Heymans

An approach for overcoming advocacy challenges

The shared approaches Romy shares to address common barriers for designing advocacy actions can be split broadly into two fractions.

The first explores the central notion of objectivity for societal impact in the coexistence of journalism and activism. While Romy sees these elements—societal impact, media creation, transparency, and positionality—as interconnected and logical, they acknowledge that more traditionalist journalists or scientists may advocate for a continued pursuit of objectivity. They challenge, however, the idea of absolute objectivity, emphasising that everyone perpetuates certain perspectives, rendering complete neutrality unattainable.

Drawing from their master's thesis on fact-checkers in Brazil, they explore the concepts of neutrality and transparency, with the former being dependant on individuals' interpretation and the latter being a central concept in any form of media creation, advocating for clarity about the creator's identity, motivations, and

the process involved.

At the other helm of approaches to barriers is the importance of addressing the challenge of false balance, also known in journalism as giving equal weight to opposing views. Romy highlights that the false balance perspective often oversimplifies complex issues, presenting them in a binary manner that may not accurately reflect reality. The example they provide to illustrate this concept is the climate change debate, where giving equal space to the minority perspective creates a misleading sense of validity for both sides despite overwhelming scientific consensus. To counteract false balance, they advocate for contextualising different perspectives and acknowledging that there is a place for presenting alternative views while ensuring they are appropriately framed within the broader context.

In conclusion, Pakhuis de Zwijger actively seeks to create a space where experts, regardless of gender or background, feel confident in contributing to the broader discourse. ■

Romy Heymans (they/them) is a project leader in the Editorial & Partners arm of Pakhuis de Zwijger, where they work on (re)formulating the long-term vision, mission and editorial charter of the organisation in collaboration with their team of programme-makers. At the same time, they pursue their self-initiative journalistic endeavours, under "Heymans Media." Moreover, at Pakhuis de Zwijger, they are a project leader and senior program designer for the Designing Cities For All, FemCity and Social City programs, and an events moderator. Coming from a journalism and religious studies background, they have worked in the Dutch newspaper Trouw and the media platform BNNVARA, as well as an academic work editor at Scribbr, a fact checker, and a campaign coordinator. Find more about their work on their [LinkedIn](#) page.

Decolonization advocacy and Pakhuis de Zwijger's Impact

featuring Max de Ploeg, project leader for Week Against Racism, and a programme maker for the Inclusive City program at Pakhuis de Zwijger (The Netherlands)

The normalisation and...

A few years back, when Max de Ploeg was part of the student movement, people were barely allowed to discuss diversity and decolonisation. There was denial about racism; people were urged to take a 'colourblind' approach that was not sensitive to the inequities of race or insisted that it was only a problem in the US and not in the Netherlands. At this time, decolonisation was not taken seriously. However, if one looks back over the last five years, one can see a shift in the normalisation of talking about racism and decolonial topics.

... the appropriation of decolonisation discussions

In the current social landscape, decolonisation has become more of a mainstream topic of discussion, but Max stresses that in the process, its meaning has become diluted. Discussions around the topic of decolonisation act as actions of tokenism while leaving the fundamental logic unchallenged. Still today, the narratives of institutions are usually very linear and liberal in their approach to diversity and often have languages for sanitising racism.

On top of this, diversity work is also often appropriated. There are, for example, many white university

professors teaching colonial history. It transpires, therefore, that people of colour put something on the historical and social agenda. Still, it can end up that they are excluded from the very jobs that would allow them to propagate and research these concepts and ideas.

Max has, however, noticed that in making space for conversations about decolonisation, you could normalise it and even bring it into the mainstream without appropriating the space of discussion. To continue this work, he stresses that it's essential to be able to have conversations about decolonisation where there is space for people to truly listen to and learn from one another.

Overall, Max stresses that his priority lies firmly in helping grassroots organisations. However, he is open to dialogue with institutions about setting up their power structures and how these could be shifted. Through his work on community organisation of grassroots communities, he strives to open the door to these communities' narratives and provide a platform for their demands, bringing them into contact with local politicians or the municipality.

It is important to facilitate and dare to be part of these narratives – and Pakhuis de Zwijger allows this diversity to be fostered.

Direction 3 • In the spotlight • Max de Ploeg

Because Pakhuis de Zwijger is a big cultural platform, they have a unique position to strengthen the position of these groups. Furthermore, through his program-making work, Max can make space for groups who need access to a broad audience for them to share their experiences and perspectives.

Finding a common language

Pakhuis de Zwijger seeks to platform everyday people who are doing work out in the world. And because they are everyday people, they speak a common language.

However, the organisation's go-to communication approach is largely based on discussion. For some people,

discussion is not a format that works or resonates with them. Because of its format, most of those who engage with the platform will likely have obtained higher education diplomas. Nevertheless, the programme managers at Pakhuis de Zwijger strive to speak a common language so that as many people as possible can engage with their work.

Finally, Max emphasises that it is not possible or sensible to create a platform that works for everyone because society is highly diverse, and everything will fit only some of the different needs and preferences. Creating anything fully inclusive for everyone may be impossible, but it is important to be transparent about who your platform is catered to. ■

Max de Ploeg (he/him) works as a Project Leader for Week Against Racism, a Programme Maker for Inclusive City at Pakhuis de Zwijger and the co-founder of Stichting Aralez, a network of grassroots organisations for decolonisation. Through his community organising work, he runs a project called Indigenous Liberation, which is focussed on coalition building and decolonising the climate movement. He teaches at IES Abroad on topics of neocolonialism. Finally, on top of this, he organises a yearly reparations conference and monthly learning sessions about decolonisation. Find more about his work at his [LinkedIn page](#).



A vision towards cultural change for sustainability

featuring Julie Pellizzari, research associate at the Florence School of Banking and Finance (Italy)

Balancing politics and sustainability

Julie Pellizzari emphasises that the key stakeholders in her projects, which focus on climate change adaptation and disaster risk management, awareness-raising and training on sustainable finance approaches, have included and continue to include international organisations, European institutions, climate change research centres, national and local governments and policymakers. While acknowledging that engaging these stakeholders introduces a political dimension to the discourse, as a researcher and lecturer, Julie emphasises her commitment to steer clear of politics and focus on capacity building and content. In her field of work, political pressures are evident when reconciling financial and sustainability objectives and contribute to generally slower processes. Finally, Julie emphasises that, depending on the nature and scope of the projects, cultural communities, civil society and communities can also play a key role as key stakeholders.

Policy shortcomings in Venice

Regarding the interplay of political decisions with financial underscorings, Julie focuses on the city of Venice as an example of policy initiatives falling short in addressing citizens' needs.

Regarding the interplay between policy

choices and financial underpinnings, Julie has worked on a research project investigating the city of Venice as an example of policy initiatives that fail to address citizens' needs. Specifically, Venice needs help to address housing market challenges, the rising cost of living, mobility concerns and the worrying transformation of Venice into what she describes as an 'amusement park'. She emphasises that the first step in advocating for better policies at the local level is for local representatives and elected officials to deeply understand the diverse needs and circumstances of Venice's residents. These representatives should pay attention to the surrounding areas of Venice and the unique geographical features that affect its citizens.

Julie illustrates her point by referring to Venice's upcoming entry tax, scheduled for spring 2024, which will require visitors to pay a €5 entry fee (per person, per day), and questions the effectiveness of this nominal fee in deterring visitors and whether it will genuinely contribute to the city's sustainability, improved quality of life, and residents' right to live in their city. In her view, the measure appears to be more about economic interests than about protecting the city and its citizens and does little to alleviate the stressful conditions experienced by Venice's local population.

Direction 3 • In the spotlight • Julie Pellizzari

Anticipating a mindset shift

In designing better advocacy actions, from policy work to media and journalistic communication, Julie highlights the importance of considering the cultural aspects of each society. Taking Italian society as an example, she notes that Italians tend to accept reality but may lack the activist and revolutionary nature seen in other cultures (with rare examples such as Venice calling association from Venice). As a result, she reflects, citizens may take longer to process and communicate criticism of policies and decisions that don't meet their needs and challenges. Therefore, while many associations and communities are eager to bring about change in Venice, there is a lack of 'connection'. Julie

advocates a collaborative effort involving governments (national, regional and local), policy makers, experts and citizens, drawing inspiration from successful models. She stresses the need for a mindset change, starting with those in power, as civil society advocacy can be stifled without real support. Finally, Julie suggests a potential strategy involving increased collaboration with universities to create public-private partnerships. This approach aims to harness the combined strengths of private institutions and universities to foster linkages, conduct multidisciplinary research and develop innovative solutions to facilitate informed decision-making. ■

Julie Pellizzari (she/her) is a research associate at the Florence School of Banking and Finance, part of the European University Institute in Florence, specialising in training financial supervisors on climate-related risks. After completing her master's degree at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, she conducted in research focusing on water governance and management and worked on European projects related to sustainability and climate change impacts, such as depopulation and housing issues in Venice. She also has experience in European projects aimed at strengthening partnerships between the EU and non-EU countries, with a focus on countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. She also has experience in European projects focused on strengthening partnerships between the EU and non-EU countries with a focus on the Middle East and Northern Africa countries, as well as the Caribbean and Latin American countries. Find more about his work at his [LinkedIn](#) page.



Credit: Henrique Ferreira; Retrieved from: www.unsplash.com/

Framing Venice: the role of media

featuring Dr Cinzia Colapinto, associate professor in management at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy)

The role of the media in shaping Urban identities

Since the identity of a place finds expression, among other dimensions, through its depictions in the traditional and new media ^{36, 37} at national and international levels, the identity of Venice, in relation to its main urban challenges, can be analysed through its appearances in the headlines. The media plays a vital role in creating and popularising a brand image and identity ³⁸: “The overwhelmed city” ³⁹ struggles to transmit its prestige. At the same time, only its challenges seem to emerge from its representation in the media, creating a negative image in the reader’s mind. The mainland area suffers an even worse fate with no redemption derived from a globally renowned urban identity. On the other hand, the neighbouring islands in the Lagoon experience an idyllic narration, contributing to the utopic perception of rural areas ^{40,41} Somehow, we can identify a frontstage and a backstage with lights and shadows emerging here.

Using media and communication to inspire change

In light of the multi-sided platform role that media can play, communication is crucial in initiating a change process. Media advocacy involves media and communication to bring attention to a

specific issue or cause. When it comes to urban challenges, media advocacy can be a powerful tool for raising awareness, mobilising public support, and influencing policy decisions.

Advocates can use a mix of traditional media and digital media to inform the public about these issues, their causes, and potential solutions. The choice of media and the framing of the issues can greatly impact the success of the efforts and the relationships between the main actors.

More importantly, advocates can foster community engagement and involvement in addressing urban challenges. A co-creation and co-design process that aims to generate a platform for community voices and stories can empower different stakeholders.

Overcoming barriers to urban change

As it is well known, most people resist change in the short term, and when many different stakeholders are involved, it is even more challenging. Indeed, involving a wide range of stakeholders – including local communities, policymakers, media outlets, and urban planners, requires the identification of subgoals to reach and celebrate and a capacity to negotiate to reduce distances from the different goals of each involved actor.

Direction 3 • In the spotlight • Cinzia Colapinto

Building coalitions to amplify the message and ensure a more comprehensive approach seems relevant to overcome this collaboration challenge. As a result, the use of clear messaging and storytelling that resonates with the

target audience and humanises urban challenges has to be understood and implemented. ■

Dr Cinzia Colapinto (she/her) is an associate professor of Management at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She obtained a Master's in Political Sciences (Major in Economics, 110/110 cum laude) and a Ph.D. in Business History and Management at the University of Milan (Italy). Her research interests include innovation management, managerial decision-making, and entrepreneurship, and she teaches strategic management, innovation management, entrepreneurship, and marketing and communication. Find more about her work at her [LinkedIn](#) page.



Fostering Citizen Engagement for Urban Progress: A Collaborative Approach

featuring Evelina Barbanti, project manager of European funded initiatives at Petra Patrimonia, Venice (Italy)

Citizen engagement is about education and change.

Citizen participation is a people-centered process that provides growth and educational opportunities for the stakeholders involved. Change is promoted through a participatory process where all perspectives are considered. Thus, the results represent a communal-based, empirical learning opportunity.

Conflict is an inevitable part of the engagement process.

Citizen participation involves gathering insights within a given urban area to understand the existing active citizen groups and their activities. This initial process is termed *stakeholder mapping*, which enables us to connect with all activities in the selected area. The different stakeholders involved and the potentiality for conflict may vary by location, but the factors that always remain the same are the mapping and methods for addressing intricate dynamics. Managing

stakeholder conflicts is a crucial aspect of citizen engagement. Evelina stresses that it is vital to communicate to stakeholders that conflict is a natural part of the process and will inevitably arise within it. Acknowledging and addressing conflicts is the sole means to navigate them successfully.

Potential approaches to citizen engagement

Citizen participatory activities must be organised within a participatory and bottom-up approach. It is essential to collect preliminary citizen data and knowledge, approach them to be an active part of the organisation, and then deliver the activities. A participatory leadership model could suffice as well as a moderating role to support citizens in working in groups to address the relevant topics while defusing any conflicts or issues the group faces. ■

Evelina Barbanti (she/her) is a Project Manager of European funded initiatives at PETRA PATRIMONIA, Venice. Her work is focused on the Agenda 2030 within an education and research perspective. Aside from her work, she is passionate and active in her local area promoting initiatives regarding citizen engagement in relevant urban topics with a variety of associations. Find more about her work at her [LinkedIn](#) page.

Harmonizing stakeholder perspectives in urban governance

featuring Dr Aidan Cerar, urban sociologist at the Institute for Spatial Policies (Slovenia)

Civic participation in addressing complex challenges

Aidan Cerar is often hired or commissioned by municipalities to assist in designing urban policies, such as developing a sustainable urban mobility plan or managing participation processes when projects involve redesigning local streets or squares.

Aidan identifies three dimensions in supporting locals in reimagining public spaces in the heart of their communities and realising their design ambitions. The first one entails civic participation in seeking feedback from residents to improve existing urban plans. The second one is placemaking to work with communities' existing organisations, initiatives and goals and support them in the realisation of these, for which he has developed the "Zunaj" mechanism (translated to 'small outdoor actions'). The third dimension involves tactical urbanism, a framework that allows temporarily redesigning streets locally and simulating the redesign elements ahead of the participation process to enable people to understand the issues and consider alternatives.

These three dimensions encompass Aidan's experiences with civic participation in the urban context, an approach that can strengthen the democratic governance of local communities and involve people in decision-making. People are inherently creative and understand their needs,

making them capable of expressing them and even contributing to the design of open spaces. Moreover, activating citizens counterbalances capital investments, emphasising the quality of life over financial returns in urban developments. Given societies' challenges, primarily related to global warming, Aidan stresses that many planned measures require collaboration with individuals and communities to be meaningfully implemented. Thus, it's essential for everyone, including experts, politicians, policymakers, decision-makers, and the general public, to learn, practise and embrace civic participation.

Harmonising the perspectives of different stakeholders

Across all forms of civic participation, several actors come into play. Overall, the primary objective of bringing different actors together is to comprehend the diversity of their opinions, identify points of convergence, and highlight the advantages and disadvantages of different positions. The ultimate aim is to harmonise these perspectives to achieve a balanced and well-informed decision-making process. On one side, you have the decision-makers, such as elected officials, and on the other, you have the policymakers and experts employed by the municipality.

Direction 4 • In the spotlight • Aidan Cerar

The dynamic between these two sides can create the first potential for conflict that hinders the project. Policymakers and experts may align with the planner's perspective and understand the merits of their approach. However, as decision-makers, elected officials like the mayor might have divergent views and prefer an alternative course of action that aligns with their political agendas.

Additionally, municipalities often engage external experts when managing a project. These experts are typically contracted to provide specialised knowledge and insights for urban projects. Ensuring alignment with these experts is crucial since their input carries significant weight due to their deep understanding of the subject matter, such as the intricacies of infrastructure reconstruction.

Lately, key actors for civic engagement involve the local community and its inhabitants. It's important to understand that the community rarely has a uniform opinion against different urban challenges, and we see that when outside experts communicate with the community, they do not find a unanimous stance. This lack of a uniform consensus occurs because each community comprises multiple smaller communities that often exhibit varying opinions. For instance, citizens could advocate for building a basketball playground in the local park while facing resistance from other citizens, like dog owners or walkers, concerned that the basketball field will disturb the pets. This disparity, although it may seem imperfect, is commonplace across communities.

Making sure that communities feel their voices are being heard

Aidan provided an example that

encapsulates some of these dynamics in a placemaking initiative, where we selected to support a local community that aimed to revamp a local basketball court.

However, in this case, a new initiative simultaneously emerged from within the same neighbourhood, led by individuals who had previously dismantled the old basketball court due to dissatisfaction with it. Aidan's team started by placing posters throughout the neighbourhood to draw in community members to organise a community debate centred around this basketball playground. During the discussion, it was evident that there was a substantial divide between these two community groups. Fortunately, the community was striving to refurbish the basketball court compromised by refurbishing another public space nearby.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the team discussed refurbishing a basketball court with the opposing group, which decided not to dismantle the basketball court. They believed young people needed a place to socialise and engage in sports.

Moving to another project related to traffic-related strategic planning, Aidan's team faced a complex situation regarding more pedestrian-oriented street plans and parking policies, which often faced the discontent of some community members. In this specific project, the situation required significant effort to resolve, and it took months for the participating individuals, including municipal experts, local community members, and district authorities, to collaboratively craft a plan and reach specific compromises, with the final decision resting with the mayor.

Direction 4 • In the spotlight • Aidan Cerar

Fearing that the policy might be unpopular during re-election season, they issued a no-go on the plan. Such situations often lead to the disappointment of community members, making it difficult to re-engage them in future initiatives.

It's different though, when no tangible result is reached because a minority of locals demand something potentially harmful to the community, for instance, more car-friendly measures in school zones. Understanding their issue and then communicating to the larger population why it can't be realised is essential. For example, communication strategies emphasise

the importance of low-speed limits, speed bumps, and reduced traffic for enhancing safety. The aim of such a campaign wouldn't be to change the minority's opinion but to explain to people who don't have an opinion yet why this approach would be more beneficial in the long run. This combination of approaches helps manage and mitigate potential challenges for realising civic participation initiatives. ■

Dr Aidan Cerar (he/him) is an urban sociologist at IPoP, the Institute for Spatial Policies. IPoP is an independent research institution and a think tank aiming to achieve synergies across a range of disciplines and practises dealing with space and place. His work includes both theoretical research and practical involvement. He is engaged in several forms of civic engagement and participation, especially in helping municipalities design urban policies, supporting placemaking initiatives, and developing tactical urbanism methods.



Improving the relationship between citizens & the state

featuring Dr Nanke Verloo, Assistant Professor in Urban Politics and Planning at University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

Better involve citizens in the planning of our cities

According to Nanke Verloo, it is healthy to distinguish between the lifeworld of people and the system world of government: the lifeworld of people is messy and chaotic, whereas governments have a responsibility to stick to good governance, transparency, accountability, and equality. However, the structures of governance systems cannot be reformed to better fit with the more chaotic world of citizens. Citizen knowledge can and should be used more to make policies and planning more fitting to the world of citizens.

Use conflict to enhance civic participation processes

The moments where the worlds of citizens and the system clash are particularly interesting. We can see this conflict as something to resolve and as a moment of information exchange: citizens becoming more knowledgeable about policies and more able to organise themselves to speak out against policies and plans. Using these knowledge-production moments, we can build a bridge between the life-world and the system world.

A deductive and inductive process of choosing stakeholders

When considering the main stakeholders in the participation process, it's important to base their choice on the typology of the civic participation initiative. On the one hand, if an invited participatory process occurs, the stakeholders are chosen based on a deductive approach and the preconceived themes of interest. On the other hand, in the case of a citizen-generated participatory process, an inductive approach gives freedom for all interested parties to show up and be considered as relevant stakeholders.

When the government is actively trying to involve citizens in policy-making or planning, the main stakeholders are those most affected by the policy or plan, such as those living in a neighbourhood or street where a change is planned. On the other hand, if citizens are organising themselves, often differently termed 'activism' by the government, it tends to be different groups who participate; they are not necessarily direct users of the space and policies but rather people who speak out against injustices.

When working on citizen participation, policymakers must identify all the relevant stakeholders who should be included in the project, paying close attention to include those who do not necessarily shout the loudest.

Direction 4 • In the spotlight • Dr Nanke Verloo

Who is willing and able to participate depends on who has the time and resources. It is often a particular type of citizen who participates in these initiatives; it is usually higher educated people who have time on their hands. Groups with less time and resources, for example, working mothers, are unlikely to participate. Furthermore, activists are often excluded from decision-making because policymakers deem them to be ‘too vocal’.

Look at the past before looking into the future.

Many civil servants go into citizen participation, wanting to look at the future. However, we should first look at the past and acknowledge the emotions and disappointments before we even start looking at the future. Many citizens are not participating in this process for the first time; for some, it might even be the tenth time. They are likely to hold resentments that many of the things they spent time on didn't happen. It is common for civil servants to want to avoid this difficult topic, but it is highly important to organise a session to express and acknowledge the frustrations and emotions that already exist in the neighbourhood.

Communicate honestly

Furthermore, civil servants often come to the participation process with a

political agenda already in mind. Many outcomes of the initiative are already decided by the municipality, and there needs to be more meaningful flexibility left for citizens to decide. On top of this, the civil servants are uncomfortable with communicating this reality honestly because they are afraid to lose participants. According to Nanke, it is crucial that what is being promised to citizens is honest and transparent. Sometimes, the truth is unpalatable, but it is essential that you communicate nonetheless so people can give informed consent on whether to participate.

If opening up to the participation of citizens is just a check box activity, it is better not to do it at all. In this way, you are not wasting their time. If citizen participation becomes a necessary checkbox when decisions have already been made, trust between citizens and the state is worse in the long run.

Micro-interactions matter

Effective civil participation does not depend on policymakers' good intentions or well-designed processes, but it very much depends on the micro-interactions between civil servants and citizens. In these micro-interactions, citizens often feel misrecognised, mistreated and ignored. Once this happens, citizens do not trust the state anymore. ■

Dr Nanke Verloo (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in Urban Politics and Planning at the University of Amsterdam and in 2023 she worked as visiting professor at CIDER, Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota, Colombia where she undertakes comparative research into citizen participation and conflict. Nanke specialises in conflict, citizen participation, and inclusion and exclusion in urban development processes. Trained in both Anthropology and Public Administration, she uses an interdisciplinary and ethnographic approach to explore how cities can be governed, lived, and experienced more inclusively. Find more about her work at her [LinkedIn page](#).

The role of citizen engagement, contextual understanding & partnerships for positive change

featuring Daniela Pavan, Innovation Designer at PInK at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy)

More robust dialogue between citizens and public institutions encourages behaviour change.

In a constantly changing world, citizens have acquired a more critical and fundamental role in contributing to the design and implementation of innovative solutions to complex urban challenges. Factors such as increasing digitalisation, the uncertainty faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasing awareness of societal problems like climate change or growing inequality have made citizens more mature. Citizens want to feel more empowered and involved, to understand and influence the local environments they are part of, and to design and enhance a more constructive citizen-public authority relationship.

Towards this goal, citizen engagement can become a strategic practice for local authorities. Co-designing processes with citizens and sharing decision-making paths and collective actions can be more meaningful and impactful in supporting cities addressing issues while increasing social accountability. A more robust dialogue between dwellers and public institutions can encourage behaviour change at the individual and the community level, triggering a more effective response to local issues.

Understanding the civic participation context is vital.

However, it must be said that the outcomes of citizen engagement practices are context-specific and can be influenced by many factors. These include the willingness of governments and citizens to engage with one another, as well as social, economic, environmental and cultural factors which may shape the potential effectiveness of citizen engagement. Therefore, understanding the context and identifying how to enable conditions for the proper engagement of dwellers are key to achieving results.

The crucial role of partnerships

Success in urban development can be achieved through an integrated approach, with strong partnerships between local citizens, civil society, industry and public governance are crucial. In this context, university-community engagement is emerging as an effective driver for social innovation, and the role of Higher Education Institutions is becoming increasingly fundamental, as they are anchor organisations, that can open dialogues with other stakeholders and lead the process of positive change in their urban environments.

Direction 4 • In the spotlight • Daniela Pavan

The case of Venice

An example of a strong interaction between local citizens, civil society, industry and public governance can be found in Venice. This city has reinvented itself several times, thanks to the action of its inhabitants. Indeed, when facing moments of crisis, Venetians have always shown resilience and a solid attachment to the city. An example of this resilience is the Lazzaretto Vecchio hospital, built by Venetians in 1423 to fight the plague. Today, the building symbolises Venetians how strong they can be together as a community. Another example in more recent years is the challenges of the “Aqua Granda”, i.e., a record high tide that struck Venice. In 1966, Venice faced the highest “Aqua Granda” in its history, with a rise in sea level of 194 centimetres, followed by the High Water of 2019, with an increase of 187 centimetres.

Fast forward to today, even though Venetians have consistently demonstrated a strong bond with the city, in 2023 the number of residents

counts less than 50,000 people due to the multifaceted challenges that over-tourism poses to the city, some more detrimental than the historic “Aqua Grandas” due to the growing difficulties represented by over-tourism.

The constantly shrinking population translates to a reduced level of citizen participation in public decision-making processes and in a city that needs to identify new ways to become a “hub” for a community of new residents. To achieve the latter and co-design a new city model for Venice, Universities in the city have assumed a more crucial role. The Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, for example, is working to support Venice in tackling its pressing urban challenges by implementing new ways to engage urban communities, such as developing innovative multidisciplinary learning interventions open to university students, young researchers and life-long learners to work together and co-design real-life solutions to make Venice a more sustainable urban ecosystem. ■

Daniela Pavan (she/her) is a “bridge builder” between the worlds of business, innovation and the creative industry. She has over 20 years of experience working in the world of digital, design, communication and partnership creation with corporations, creative agencies and start-ups. She covers the role of Innovation Designer at PInK (Promotion of Knowledge and Innovation) at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and is Marketing consultant at the Department of Management/Venice School of Management at Ca’ Foscari University. Find more about her work at her [LinkedIn page](#).

05 Recommendations for socially innovative HEIs

This section presents recommendations on how HEIs can engage with, support, strengthen and amplify the four directions for social urban innovations, as they derived from the analysis and synthesis of contributions' insights. The recommendations are organized into six themes, each proposing specific actions across the spectrum of institutional and individual efforts for social innovation.

Recommendations for HEIs: Overview

Through the analysis and synthesis of the external experts' insights, collected through interviews, written contributions, and a validation workshop, **six themes of recommendations for HEIs emerge**. Each theme highlights different institutional and/or individual suggested actions for HEIs to contribute to the realisation and amplification of the four directions for social urban innovation.

1 Taking a transdisciplinary approach to education

HEIs attract young talents with a high education level in the urban context. These are the future citizens who will also be asked to co-design impactful solutions to the challenges of their cities. Experts stress that for HEIs to help their staff take an transdisciplinary approach to education and for students to learn to do things differently, HEIs should learn to do things differently.

2 Taking a transdisciplinary approach to research

For HEIs to realise more transdisciplinary initiatives, experts advocate for a few critical starting steps, including inclusive terminology, open science, and technology-driven knowledge accessibility. The redirection of knowledge from scientific publications to practical applications is also deemed vital to enhance social value and research reach.

3 Fulfilling HEIs' social commitment

The role of HEIs in fulfilling social responsibility and commitment to communities is in line with their so-called 'Third Mission,' which represents the economic and social mission of the university and its

contribution to communities.

4 Amplifying impactful initiatives

Utilising HEIs' communication platforms to disseminate impactful work can be vital in supporting grassroots initiatives by staff and external collaborators. Promoting media and information literacy can equip HEI staff with science communication skill sets to share their research best.

5 Supporting institutionally grassroots initiatives

Experts shared the need for a more vital collaboration between universities and small, but impactful organisations with limited resources to host student internships. Additionally, by providing financial support to students in their practice-based internships, HEIs can help them gather valuable professional experience.

6 Being more involved in the regional environment

HEIs can be crucial as knowledge bridges and support partnerships between citizens, universities, industry, and local governments, all actors essential for urban innovation. Experts emphasise HEIs' potential to foster collaboration and translate research results for policy uptake.

Theme 1: Taking a transdisciplinary approach in education

1.1 Fostering transdisciplinary competencies

One way to accomplish offering more holistic urban studies education is by “training students in multiple disciplines”, as Dr Dan Podjed, an associate professor in applied anthropologist at the University of Ljubljana’s Faculty of Arts (Slovenia), advocates for because “such multidiscipline-proficient professionals could bridge the gaps of different, seemingly distant scientific worlds, e.g., anthropology and engineering, and enhance the effectiveness of collaborative projects.” Additionally, according to Adeline Leroy, a researcher at Institut Mines-Télécom Business School (France), HEIs can “integrate sustainable and transdisciplinary entrepreneurship into their education and outreach activities” and “accompany the implementation of technical knowledge with the exercise of relational skills”.

One way to apply a transdisciplinary approach to educational offerings is to co-design programs on urban studies with students. According to Maiju Suomi, an environmental architect and doctoral researcher at Aalto University (Finland) and Kari Herlevi, Head Global collaboration for sustainability solutions at Sitra, “HEIs can reimagine their educational programmes to incorporate students’ contributions in impactful urban projects”.

Additionally, in the effort to redesign educational offerings, Dr Dan Podjed stresses that HEIs should “go beyond the people-centred perspective when

thinking of urban social innovation”. City planning affects not just humans but other beings in the environment, and it is important that HEIs take a sensitive approach to this fact.

1.2 More hands-on experience opportunities for students

Regarding students getting hands-on experience, Maiju Suomi added that HEIs can allow students to “participate in international or intercultural exchanges as a form of activism, and to play a societal role, creating a solid foundation for impact.”

Also, HEIs can facilitate their students’ being part of the citizen participation process by encouraging their participation as research assistants in relevant research projects to get hands-on experience in collective decision-making processes. Dr Nanke Verloo, an assistant professor in urban politics and planning at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands), presents the case of her students brought into cooperative courses with the municipality of Amsterdam. Specifically, “the municipality identifies spaces in the city that they are not sure what to do with them, and students study the dynamics of the area and make proposals to the municipality.” Part of this process of nurturing active citizens relies on HEIs transitioning from focusing on nurturing knowledge to nurturing skills and taking a practice-based approach in their education, as emphasised by Adeline Leroy.

Theme 1: Taking a transdisciplinary approach in education

On challenges that hinder the further adoption of hands-on experience, Damiano Cerrone, an urbanist and researcher (Finland), notes that it is “difficult to teach with a practice-based approach at the bachelor and master’s levels, as stronger collaboration is required between universities and external partners who can host internships and projects for their students.” In fact, it’s the “people who already work in the industry and society that should be seen as key knowledge carriers and resources,” notes Max de Ploeg, programme leader and maker in Inclusive City at Pakhuis de Zwijger (The Netherlands). By collaborating with such external actors, students can find entry points to unique professional networks for engaging in internships and building valuable professional relationships.

Furthermore, the “engagement of students in Living Labs should not be limited to the duration of their formal education, and HEIs should strive to facilitate alumni engagement and retention in these labs after graduation,” as suggested by Mark Kauw, urban living Lab programme developer at AMS Institute (The Netherlands).

1.3 Teachers as well-versed mentors

Currently, Max de Ploeg emphasises that “in many universities, curriculum requirements are fairly strict, and the way that the production of knowledge happens at these institutions is very traditional and singular; learning by reading is valued over learning by doing”. To promote the potentiality for advocacy action within HEIs, “knowledge institutions should call into question how pupils learn, what they learn and who is teaching it.”

It has come up through this thoughtbook’s contributions that HEIs need to “nurture the appropriate talent within their institutions and hire educators who are well-versed, thoughtful professionals who can act as mentors for their students. Educators with this mindset can help students to self-initiate and implement small- and large-scale projects instead of simply following class instructions,” as Maiju Suomi emphasised.

As elaborated by Adeline Leroy, several steps can be taken on the level of the individual educator to prepare students to become urban social innovators. “Primarily, teachers should adopt a reflective approach to their subject area, critically analysing the content they share in class, their methods, and which skills these methods nurture.

The knowledge, tools and methodology chosen should be appropriate to form a base for interdisciplinary collaboration. Teachers should also identify the areas of expertise their discipline might not explore and guide students through transdisciplinary approaches to progress their learning.”

It is interesting that to integrate the desired changes, Max de Ploeg notes that it requires creativity and flexibility, which many HEIs currently need. Moreover, “within current HEI systems, it can be difficult to start innovative projects due to existing curriculum rigidity, reward and promotion structures, and the full schedules of academics”. A potential way around this could involve “combining the expertise of more seasoned professionals with the energy of younger professionals and students to mobilise a project within an HEI.”

Theme 2: Taking a transdisciplinary approach in research

2.1 Inclusive language in urban research

When researching and conducting urban innovation projects, it is crucial for “academics and HEIs as an extension to ensure that inclusive and contextualised language is used,” Dr Dan Podjed remarks. The power of language lies in its ability to shape the perception of abstract concepts. Therefore, the usage of specific wording that does justice to the nuanced topics of urbanism should be considered. For instance, “[in designing research projects] experts should avoid referring to people as “users” and “customers,” as these labels diminish their multifaceted needs. Other labels propagating a non-realistic status quo include addressing urban problems as ‘challenges.’ This labelling mishap gives the impression of situations that could benefit from a creative approach and disregard the systematic issues that require emergency action.”

2.2 Open Knowledge Centres

For the adoption of transdisciplinary approaches to research, HEIs can promote the use of open science and multidisciplinary to develop solutions for urban problems, as suggested by the validation workshop’s participants. To support this reorientation, HEIs can strengthen their external collaborations and “join or establish cross-regional knowledge exchange mechanisms to learn from HEIs already engaging in

regional social problems, learn from best practices.” Within the university, interventions can be implemented to stimulate cross-disciplinary conversations. For instance, another suggestion in the validation workshop was the establishment of “water-cooler discussion spaces” across faculty as places where academics from different disciplines can come together and make connections between their research projects.

Technology can be utilised, too, to make the immense knowledge reservoirs within HEIs accessible to the broader research community. For example, “open digital multi-discipline repositories can be clustered by AI agents as an additional help to make sense of human ingenuity and build bridges between disciplines,” a contribution made by Dr Vladi Finotto, associate professor in management at Ca’Foscari University of Venice (Italy).

HEIs can also use their internal resources and expertise in data management to lead the production of data for the development of simulation models (such as the city digital twin model), which can help develop strategies to increase preparedness for current and future crises, suggestions proposed by Dr Susana Elena-Perez and Dr Matias Barberis, senior researcher and researcher, respectively, at European Future Innovation System (EFIS) Centre (Spain).

Theme 2: Taking a transdisciplinary approach in research

2.3 Redirecting knowledge from scientific publications towards practical means

To support research with social value, regardless of its short-term economic benefits, awareness can be brought to the value underlying academics' contribution as (trans)disciplinary experts in non-exclusively science-based discussion tables would "contribute a vital intellectual perspective and provide depth to decision-making processes." Pakhuis de Zwijer often invites scholars to contribute their insights to their programmes on social innovation. Romy Heymans reported that for Pakhuis de Zwijger, "collaborating with academics from universities and research institutions willing to participate and enrich discussions on the social value of their research is not challenging" and that academics are eager to discuss this side of the social aspect of their research.

Nonetheless, Romy also highlights the significance of diversifying the roles of participants at the discussion table. While academics contribute a vital intellectual perspective, the conversation gains depth and practical relevance when individuals from civil society and those with lived

experiences are included in the discussion table around the social impact of research in the lives of the local communities.

To assist urban development and innovation internally, HEIs can begin to redirect their knowledge and efforts from scientific publications towards practical means. Dr Nanke Verloo reminds us that "HEIs already have extensive knowledge and expertise across the topics of transdisciplinarity, urban labs, advocacy and citizen participation, and they could better draw on these resources and use the expertise of their professors who are researching in these areas to aid the process."

HEIs can also lead in conducting research that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, addressing complex urban issues comprehensively. They can foster collaboration between faculty, students, and external stakeholders to generate innovative solutions, Elma Demir, a researcher at Institut Mines-Télécom Business School (France).

Theme 3: Fulfilling HEIs' social commitment

3.1 Transparency of decision-making

As Maiju Suomi emphasised, HEIs “have an obligation to their students to cater to their increasing sense of social responsibility and train them in the skill and competencies to be able to respond in the 21st Century.” It is important, therefore, for HEIs to “overtly communicate their commitment to involvement with local communities.”

It is also important for HEIs to “be transparent about the level of commitment they are willing and able to provide [when partnering with local communities]. Long-term involvement and value exchange with communities are always preferable, as this is how sustainable and meaningful relationships can be cultivated. However, if the engagement is tied to short-term research projects, HEIs should be honest about this upfront,” stresses Mark Kauw.

Romy Heymans, project leader and programme maker for the Designing Cities For All, FemCity and Social City programs at Pakhuis de Zwijger in the Netherlands, suggests that this commitment to transparency can take the form of “inviting constructive dialogue to provide clarity by openly sharing the rationale behind community-related decision-making, even if controversial.”

3.2 HEIs increasing their legitimacy

“When engaging in local projects, university professors can offer guidance and communication support, and as their argumentation carries weight, they can lend legitimacy to projects by supporting them with research data. Having professors who align with or voice similar ideas in citizen engagement initiatives can facilitate the work of these groups and add legitimacy”, emphasises Dr Aidan Cerar, an urban sociologist at the Institute for Spatial Policies (Slovenia).

However, he stresses that it is important to note that “while university professors can influence public opinion, they do not hold the power to effect direct change. The ultimate decision-making authority lies with policymakers and those in local government, notably the mayor and city council.” It is, therefore, helpful to involve the local government in quadruple helix collaborations with universities, local businesses and civil society.

Theme 4: Amplifying important individual and institutional initiatives

4.1 Utilise communication platforms to amplify impactful work

There are many ways for HEIs to act like megaphones of just and fair approaches to urban problems and utilise their influence to promote them. For instance, “HEIs can utilise their main communication offices and platforms to amplify impactful work in urban innovation projects across the community,” per the validation workshop participants’ suggestion. Maiju Suomi built on that suggestion for the institutions to “assist in disseminating project outcomes to raise visibility and increase recognition for grassroots projects”.

Additionally, it’s the “responsibility of HEIs to communicate their research and projects in an accessible way”, as suggested by Dr Vladi Finotto and “contribute to public awareness of grassroots initiatives through research-based communication”, as shared by Elma Demir. Elma adds that HEIs also “can create partnerships with media outlets to improve the quality and reach of their communications if necessary.”

In terms of HEIs amplifying the value of different grassroots organisations and social movements, “HEIs can encourage their staff and students to volunteer in local projects supporting such causes” through, for example, designated days for volunteering personnel, as suggested by Evelina Barbanti, project manager of

European funded initiatives at Petra Patrimonia, Venice (Italy).

In addition to communicating impactful work, HEIs can also join forces with “different entities such as experts, education-related companies and foundations, to collaboratively create experimentation spaces, like living labs, for research incorporating external partners,” suggests Pablo José Martínez Rojo, a senior project manager at Grant Thornton / Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain). In this process, Mark Kauw adds, “HEIs should designate a clear role and responsibility division on who can follow up on such ambitious plans”, to ensure accountability and that plans designed in the living labs are put into practice by relevant actors.

4.2 Outreach of education and research

HEIs can also promote civic education and engagement by organising community outreach programs, workshops, and forums.

Elma Demir points out that HEIs can “facilitate the exchange of knowledge between researchers and citizens, empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes,” with Evelina Barbanti adding that “HEIs can invite students to participate in [science communication] events being implemented in their local area.”

Theme 5: Supporting institutionally grassroots initiatives

5.1 Financial backing of grassroots initiatives and involved actors

As covered under the “Transdisciplinary approach in education” theme, “practice-based approach to learning at the bachelor and master’s levels as stronger collaboration is required between universities and external partners who can host internships and projects for their students, for training well-versed talent with expertise in theory and practice.” However, Damiano Cerrone, Maiju Suomi, Evelina Barbanti and the participants of the validation workshop point out that “a lack of financial backing is also a problem in creating these practice-based learning opportunities for students.” Specifically, Damiano Cerrone elaborates that “students should intern at urban design firms for

several months and become part of the team. The barrier is that start-ups and SMEs cannot always afford to pay students a salary, so these initiatives need financial backing from the universities so that everyone involved is supported and fairly remunerated.”

“To promote advocacy action, knowledge institutions should question how pupils learn, what they learn, and who is teaching it. Once these questions have been approached, HEIs can make space and investment available for alternative ways of gaining knowledge in a way that contributes to grassroots initiatives and not only institutionally established projects,” suggests Max de Ploeg.

Theme 6: Being more involved in the regional environment

6.1 HEIs as knowledge bridges beyond eclectic actors

“Urban innovation can be enhanced through a collaborative approach where strong partnerships between local citizens, universities, industry and local governments are crucial,” highlights Daniela Pavan, Research Fellow at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Italy) on the vital topic of HEIs’ connection with other regional actors involved in urban design and development. “As a third party, i.e., not an administration nor a political one,” she continues, “HEIs can become anchor organisations, activating different communities and engaging with the appropriate stakeholders.”

The role of the HEIs as a bridge between multiple institutional bodies is also emphasised as vital for HEIs “acting as knowledge glue between urban actors who live and use the city and foster collaboration between these actors” as noted by Kari Herlevi. “For instance, HEIs can promote a healthy, active and safe ecosystem that fosters dialogue with policymakers and translates research results for policy uptake while having the capacity to understand the demands of their local community,” shared Dr Susana Elena-Perez, Dr Matias Barberis and Evelina Barbanti.

Furthermore, “developing different supporting processes and designated leaders to strengthen their capacity for collaboration”, shared Damiano Cerrone and Evelina Barbanti, “would ease building deeper connections

with local actors.”

6.2 Being embedded in the local communities

For HEIs with a strong regional footing, it wouldn’t come as a surprise that partnering with external organisations and embedded initiatives, or with those that have a prolonged presence in their local communities also allows HEIs to be further activated as part of their social regional web.

Specifically, as Mark Kauw remarks, “grassroots initiatives have the potential to become long-term regional partners for HEIs, due to their strong connection with communities, instead of municipalities who have high-turnover rates and less longstanding connections with communities.” However, “given their already existing connections with municipalities, HEIs can encourage municipality staff to participate in local initiatives and research projects” Pablo José Martínez Rojo shares.

For example, “HEIs offering support to civic groups, and providing resources such as intellectual input and physical spaces could be an avenue to sustainable Citizen Science projects,” suggest the participants of the validation workshop, “the results of which HEIs can potentially wield to influence local urban policies, contributing valuable insights and data”.

Theme 6: Being more involved in the regional environment

To mitigate unfavourable power dynamics when HEIs enter communities, “HEIs could include communities in co-creating research problems or solutions”, emphasised the validation workshop’s participants. Incentives can be realised through “citizen science projects that grow to public-common partnerships.” With “universities being increasingly involved in citizen participation initiatives when it comes to the development of their campus spaces”, as Dr Nanke Verloo points out “, it’s not that citizens are necessarily happy with these processes. The university itself could better draw on and utilise

the knowledge and experience of professors with experience in citizen participation and not limit decision-making to a small group of senior management individuals who are not experts per se on the subtle intricacies of the matter at hand.”



Credit: [João Marcelo Martins](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Conclusion


Throughout the Social Urban Innovations and the Supporting Role of Universities Thoughtbook, as part of the Urban GoodCamp project, the amalgamation of insights from horizon scanning, desk research and experts' contributions underscores shared commitment to cultivating a more equitable, sustainable, and participatory urban paradigm through multi and cross-disciplinary approaches carried by various stakeholders.

The Thoughtbook explores four transformative directions—Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice, Urban Living Labs, Advocacy Actions, and Civic Participation—each offering a distinct lens to envision and shape the urban future. In a nutshell, Transdisciplinarity in Research and Practice delves into the systemic understanding of complex challenges, emphasising collaboration across diverse sectors. The Urban Living Labs direction emerges as innovative testing grounds, fostering co-creation and collaboration to implement impactful solutions swiftly. The third direction, Advocacy Actions advocate for societal change through activist research, practical communication, and policy work. Finally, the Civic Participation direction, integral to inclusive urban development, engages individuals in decision-making, spotlighting diverse perspectives and fostering empowered communities. These directions forge a comprehensive roadmap for a more equitable, resilient, and participatory urban landscape.

Alongside exploring different aspects of the four directions, such as the involved actors, the synergetic dynamics between the involved actors and the approaches for overcoming barriers in the directions' implementation, the expert contributions also shed light on the pivotal role that HEIs can take in this supporting the four directions' different elements.

The HEIs' contributions include two themes dedicated to adopting an (1) transdisciplinary approach in education and (2) research for redirecting teaching and researched knowledge to practical application, with an additional theme (3) amplifying existing impact initiatives through the HEIs' communication platforms. Moreover, two themes rotate around (4) institutionally supporting grassroots initiatives created by internal and external stakeholders and (5) being more involved in the regional environment. Finally, through the sixth theme, HEIs have an opportunity to (6) fulfil their social responsibility to their communities. And emerge as influential agents driving positive urban metamorphosis.

As the Thoughtbook concludes, it envisions a future where these four directions converge, creating a transformative landscape where academia, stakeholders, and citizens collaboratively shape inclusive, innovative, and resilient urban environments.



European urban ecosystems are under pressure, and it is only the collaborative effort of societal actors that can reduce the intensity and impact of this pressure on the social life and the economy.

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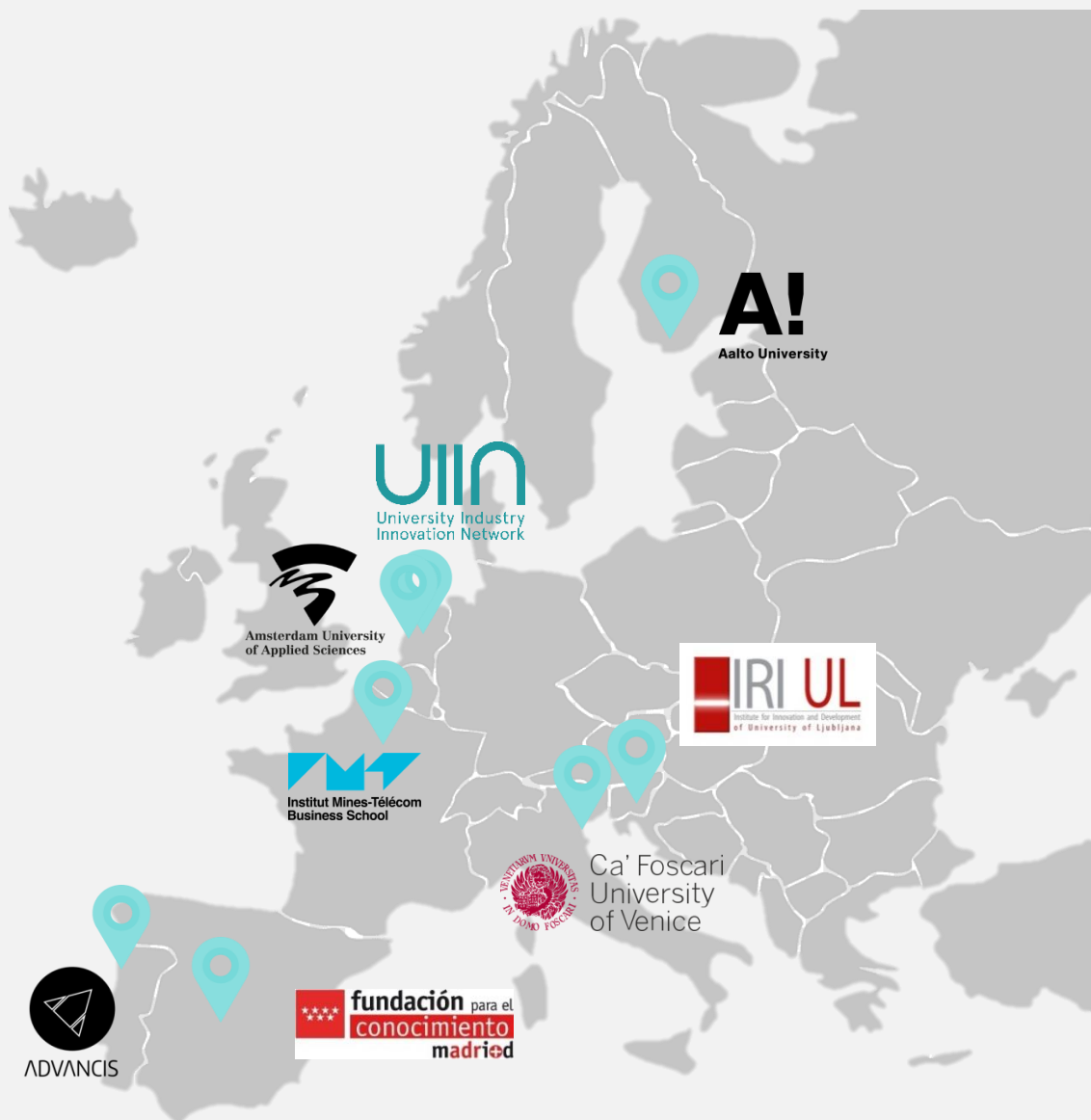
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