

Belonging by connecting

A field guide to designing sustainable places through community practice

Local communities are driving sustainable urban transformations, showing what happens when citizens become co-designers. A new 'landscape' of local placemaking is emerging, fostering more liveable cities and neighbourhoods. This field guide charts this evolving terrain, offering pathways to a social and urban design practice which is both more locally-driven and ecologically sustainable.

Designed as a travel companion, the guide explores local experiences at eight urban sites across five European countries, drawing on insights from the EU Desire project, supported within the New European Bauhaus initiative. The centre section recounts stories from these placemaking experiments, offering a first-hand embedded look at local and sustainable design in action.

Belonging by Connecting brings together collective know-how on designing places *with* and *in* communities. Advocating a radical shift in the way we design, the guide introduces a framework for local sustainist design. It offers an action-oriented perspective for those looking to join the movement towards more sustainable, connected places.

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By Diana Krabbendam, Michiel Schwarz &
Bono Siebelink, with Hans Krikke and Emiel Wolf



WHO MADE THIS GUIDE

Making this field guide has been an act of co-creation—a fitting approach, as we believe that collaborative creativity is essential for fostering meaningful change in our cities and elsewhere. This guide—inviting readers to explore uncharted paths—could only come to life through the work of many. In the process of making, it became an opportunity to combine our imaginations and creativity, uncovering pathways towards more sustainable futures.

At its heart, the guide draws from the experiences of eight urban sites across five countries in Europe, whose stories were originally investigated and documented by researchers from Politecnico di Milano and Aalborg University within the *Desire—Designing the Irresistible Circular Society*—project. The knowledge gained through their interactions with these sites, along with the insights shared among the participants, were crucial in making this guide what it is.

The Amsterdam-based partners in the *Desire* project—Samenwonen-Samenleven and The Beach—are the initiators of this guide and became co-authors. With their local experiences and expertise in building community in Amsterdam's Wildemanbuurt, they saw that the challenges to fostering inclusive and sustainable neighbourhoods faced at the Amsterdam site, have much in common with all the site communities in the *Desire* project. The realisation that there is common know-how to be shared, inspired the theme of this guide: *designing sustainable places through community practice*.

This field guide aims to delve deeper into the power of local communities and the radical shift in roles necessary to bring them to life. Early on, the initiators invited Michiel Schwarz to join as a co-writer and partner in navigating the evolving

landscape of social and sustainable innovation at the local level. He brought his expertise in 'sustainist design' into the guide—insights that were co-developed over the past decade alongside various design practitioners and embedded researchers, Diana Krabbendam of The Beach among them.

To ensure this guide was not only informative but also visually engaging, the editorial team worked closely with the talented designers of the Copenhagen-based creative agency NXT. Their creative input helped craft a guide that invites diverse audiences to engage with its content and be inspired by it. Finally, the Amsterdam printer Raddraaier SSP provided invaluable advice and support, ensuring that the printed guide became visually compelling and engaging.

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Printing: Raddraaier SSP, Amsterdam

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Amsterdam / Copenhagen, 2024

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desire an irresistible
circular society



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Part One

p8 01. Onto new ground

How *Desire* got us here
Why this field guide
Radical change
Ways of looking
A cultural shift
Changing perspective
Localities
Design challenge
The road ahead

4

Part Two

p33 02. On site: local experiences and practices

Ziepju Street 11, Riga
Gadehavegård, Copenhagen
Wildemanbuurt, Amsterdam
Circulair Campus, Kalundborg
MIND, Milan
Cascina Falchera, Turin
BTC City, Ljubljana
Herlev, Copenhagen

Itinerary

Part Three

Into action: 03. p105 where are we going?

Mapping ecologies of place
Pathfinders to local change and collective action
Fertile grounds: local design in community
Action agenda for local sustainist design

Connect!

5

Acknowledgements, references and credits

p153



How *Desire* got us here

A field guide can only be created by directly entering the fields and exploring its terrain. This guide traces its origins to the European *Desire* project, part of the New European Bauhaus initiative—in which several contributors to this guide were actively involved. Focused on sustainable urban design, the project explored eight European sites* using an embedded approach, with local partners working as action researchers and co-participants. Their exploration through the fields of *Desire* got us here.

As the participants at the sites shared their perspectives, experiences, and expertise a community of practice emerged. Through consortium gatherings and peer-to-peer exchanges, local actions transformed into a shared, collaborative journey. The partners of *Desire* became more than a network; they formed a vibrant ‘Community of Local Design Practice’. This field guide represents the next step in this continuing journey—offering a travel companion for the road ahead.

From the outset, *Desire* aspired to spark a movement—a long-term, transformative effort. This field guide, as an extension of that project, seeks to contribute to the collective learning about local change and design innovation. By doing so, it aims to empower and strengthen place-based movements, across Europe and beyond, as they strive for sustainable urban transformation. The movement is ongoing.

*On site: local experiences and practices – see p33
Ziepju Street 11, Riga
Gadehavegård, Tåstrup
Wildemanbuurt, Amsterdam
Circulair Campus, Kalundborg
MIND, Milan
Cascina Falchera, Turin
BTC City, Ljubljana
Herlev, Copenhagen

Why this field guide

Local communities increasingly find themselves on the frontlines of change. As part of a global movement of grassroots initiatives, they are actively making our cities and neighbourhoods more sustainable. They demonstrate what can happen when citizens become co-designers of their own living environments.

The countless local urban initiatives that have emerged worldwide over the past decade, highlight that practices for creating ‘green’ and ‘just’ places, are to be found right in our immediate surroundings—in our streets and neighbourhoods. This signifies a fundamental change away from the traditional approach of designing our living spaces in distant offices of urban planners and designers.

A new ‘landscape’ is emerging where citizens and communities become co-designers. Place-based practice, rather than top-down policies or global strategies, is leading the way. The movement towards local co-design continues to progress. In this evolving landscape we need to chart where we are, and seek new paths to the future, abandoning old routes. That’s what this guide is all about.

The ground we’re stepping onto is far from untouched. As we explore this landscape, this guide can build on a growing network of locally embedded initiatives. Hence, the metaphor of a ‘field guide’—to help navigate this terrain, drawing from the body of practice that is already taking root.

This guide doesn’t offer a step-by-step itinerary or fixed guidelines that tell us where to go next. Instead, think of it as a travel companion, taking us to real-life places and local experiences. In the final part of this journey, it charts what they tell us about future pathways for locally-driven sustainable change. It brings together collective know-how about designing places *with* and *in* communities. At its heart are the practices of co-design and connecting—a shared challenge. Take this field guide as an invitation to join forces towards new paths.





12



13



Onto new ground

Onto new ground



14

15

Radical change

Because the place-based initiatives arise at the local level, usually small-scale, their considerable achievements and potential tend to be overlooked. Yet these initiatives are pioneering innovative ways to improve neighbourhood quality of life, promote sustainable practices, and foster greater community engagement.

Perhaps their greatest impact lies in how they reshape our understanding of the living environment as an ecosystem. This perspective transcends traditional urban design, focusing less on the physical built environment, and more on human qualities and the way we experience our living environment. It has us focus on the 'lived city'—to use Richard Sennett's phrase, concerned with *la cité*, in contrast to *la ville* (2018).

This change of perspective shifts our focus firmly onto the local. Call it the 'street level' of urban life. It represents a move from the global paradigm of sustainable development to a place-based approach. Putting the local at the centre underscores the importance of proximity. To focus on the local changes everything. It shifts our entire approach, working *within communities* rather than imposing external solutions on local residents. It offers us a radically different outlook on the landscape we find ourselves in.

This guide adopts a radical stance in two senses of the word. First, it challenges established approaches to urban design, emphasising its local qualities. Second, it draws on the origin of the word 'radical,' meaning 'roots' focusing on the fundamental values and qualities that give meaning to our living environments.

Urban design traditionally has prioritised the functional features of space and the physical relationships between elements. In contrast, this guide shifts the focus to human connections—connections to each other, to the environment, and to nature. By foregrounding values like empathy, care, and belonging, it marks a departure from conventional methods, embedding social concerns into design practices. This approach fosters connectedness, community, and a stronger sense of place.

It starts with the observation that people live in places not abstract spaces. Designing meaningful neighbourhoods begins not with blueprints and physical infrastructure, but with relationships and engagement. It's the active process of connecting—to people, surroundings, and nature—that creates a sense of belonging and identity. Hence, the title of this guide: *Belonging by connecting.*

A new landscape is emerging where citizens and communities become co-designers



Ways of looking

Like all travellers, we need a place to start, and a travel direction. Moreover, we'll have to decide what to pack. What kind of cameras or binoculars should we take with us to explore the fields?

The term 'point of view'—as used in cinematography—is insightful here. It refers to the camera's position and the direction it faces, which determines what comes into focus and what will be in the foreground or the background.

Our focus, and what we choose to bring back home, depends on our particular perspective, what we see as important to be advanced and shared for the future. The approach taken here starts from a recognition that we live in a time of profound transition—not only in the state of the world but also in how we perceive it and engage with it. We see the turn towards local, community-based approaches as part of a broader cultural shift. A shift in seeing and doing—which is reflected in the change we are advocating.

*To focus on the local
changes everything*

A cultural shift

Compared to last century's modernist way of organising our societies and our ways of living, a new ethos is emerging among millions of people worldwide. We can see it in the growing movement of people who are aspiring to a future that is collaborative, more local, more inclusive and more sustainable in every sense. It reflects a fundamental change in the values we live by, in what we wish to produce and consume, and how we collectively design our world. In other words: a change of culture.

The term 'sustainism' has been introduced to name a new cultural era for the 21st century—'Sustainism is the new modernism' as the title of a manifesto by Michiel Schwarz and Joost Elffers has it (2010). It makes explicit that the quest to more sustainable places—including the growing number of local grassroots initiatives noted at the very start of this field guide—must be seen as part of a cultural movement. A world-wide movement, which interestingly, is mostly played out locally. It provides the backdrop for our journey.

Changing perspective

This observation of what's been happening is not based on theory. The cultural movement towards more sustainable, inclusive and regenerative ways of living is unfolding in practice. It can be noticed all around us—if it was not, we couldn't have put together this guide.

As said, this field guide views the cultural transition from a localised perspective, from the ground level, rather than top-down or through a global lens—recognising that one-size-fits-all strategies often fail to work at the neighbourhood level. It advocates locally-embedded practices, whereby citizens and inhabitants can become co-designers of their own living environments.

It's the active process of connecting—to people, surroundings, and nature—that creates a sense of belonging and identity

22

Localities

At the very heart of our journey are eight real-life places spread across five European countries—all featured in the middle section of this guide. These unique locations were central to the New European Bauhaus project *Desire—Designing the Irresistible Circular Society*, which we introduced on the opening page. We'll be revisiting the experiences of these urban sites: Copenhagen, Tåstrup, and Kalundborg (Denmark), Turin and Milan (Italy), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Riga (Latvia) and Amsterdam (Netherlands). As we will see, each of the featured sites has its own distinctive character, ranging from housing areas to innovation districts, and from public-private renovation areas to neighbourhood incubators.

We are very much travelling in the footsteps of the *Desire* project, involving local organisations, action researchers, municipalities, developers, and artists at the various sites. The urban design initiatives encountered at these sites gave us invaluable insights into how sustainable urban transformation truly happens at the local level. By revisiting these eight sites, we uncover common themes and patterns, using their lessons as a springboard to explore what kind of locally-driven design approaches can lead us to more sustainable and inclusive places.

A world-wide movement, which interestingly, is mostly played out locally

23

Design challenge

The task of developing local strategies for creating sustainable change in our cities and neighbourhoods is considerable, and there are many roads we can travel. In this guide we take this challenge explicitly as a *design* challenge. We do so, convinced that a place-based design approach—rooted in community—is a far better compass for building inclusive and sustainable places than global, one-size-fits-all strategies. This belief sets the terms for our travel direction, and prompts us to develop an action-oriented design agenda.

Drawing from the experiences of local initiatives at our featured sites, we tie these lessons into the broader field of 'placemaking' and 'community design' practices. Over the last few decades, *placemaking* has become a powerful way of rethinking urban design—grounded in designing cities with and by local residents. Across the world, this movement has sparked communities of practice that embrace grassroots, locally-driven design approaches. These approaches put local inhabitants at the centre of the process, transforming them into active partners alongside

local authorities, developers, and urban designers to co-create their living spaces.

***Shifting our focus:
to design with
people, locally, and
in community***

Whilst practice rather than theory has led the way, there's plenty we can learn from recent design approaches to find pathways to more sustainable and inclusive neighbourhoods. For instance, the idea of 'civic design'—local co-design initiatives where civic groups take the lead in shaping their living environments—is gaining traction (Schwarz 2022; de Kreek et al. 2024). Similarly, the concept of 'sustainist design'—introducing social sustainability criteria into our design briefs—offers a practical framework for charting paths forward (Schwarz & Krabbendam 2013).

What ties these approaches together is their transformative nature: they fundamentally reshape how people relate to their built environment, to nature, and to one another. In essence, this is about redefining what we mean by *designing* our cities and neighbourhoods. In doing so we pave the way for bringing more social and human criteria into our design processes—qualities like nearbyness, connectedness, collaboration, collective ownership, shareability, and commons. It shifts our focus to design with people, locally, and in community.

***This field guide
is ultimately
a design guide***



The road ahead

This field guide then, is ultimately a design guide. It offers a roadmap for wandering explorers in search of pathways to local sustainable design. Drawing on past practices and charting new pathways, it will lead us to an action agenda for local and sustainable co-design. It serves as both a call to action and an invitation to connect. Together, we can reimagine what it means to create liveable cities and neighbourhoods—and forge new ways of designing sustainable places.

Let's go!





30

31

Onto new ground

Onto new ground

On site

Local experiences and practices

32

02.



The landscape

A five-storey residential building on Ziepju Street 11 in the south of Riga, is about to undergo a physical and social transformation. Built more than fifty years ago—when Latvia was part of the Soviet Union—it was initially used as a service hotel, associated with leisure, accommodating a bar and sauna to entertain hotel guests. Later it became a residential building. Today, the building looks dilapidated, having been abandoned since 2018. When it became vacant, the Riga municipality decided to rebuild and repurpose the building for social housing, with daycare centres for children and mentally disabled people. The municipality of Riga is engaging neighbouring residents and children in the renovation process by co-creating the building's future, focusing on the shared public garden connected to the neighbouring building, Ziepju 13. Part of the renovation process is the design of a new procurement procedure, involving values such as beauty, biodiversity, or community engagement for the architect to work with.

35



Awakening Ziepju 11: designing shared spaces for a stronger community

The broken windows, graffiti-covered walls, and crumbling concrete suggest that the Ziepju 11 building is a forgotten place. At the same time, the degradation of this building provides an opportunity—the renovation of Ziepju 11 serves as an experiment for the Riga municipality to incorporate notions of sustainability, circularity and community engagement into the procurement process, rather than merely aiming for the fastest and cheapest rebuilding methods. By rethinking this process, the municipality aims to integrate the voice and needs of future users. This aim does not only apply to Ziepju 11, since the Riga municipality is facing a broader issue of renovating its 6000 former Soviet housing blocks and gardens. How will the municipality transform their functional aesthetic and poor building quality into green and attractive places to live in?

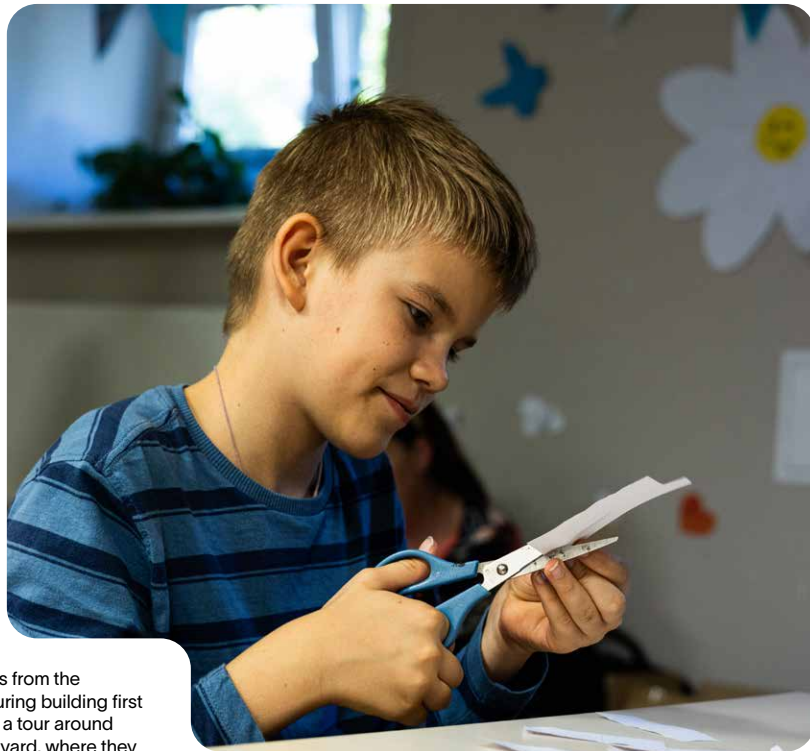
Beyond the procurement procedures, the journey of Ziepju 11 is emblematic of a bigger exploration—how will the future building accommodate communities that feel ownership of their living environments? This requires a shift in perspective for both the residents and the municipality. How can residents actively shape their environment instead of being mere users of a place?

Ziepju 11 belongs to a type of housing that is also called a 'sleeping building', a Soviet term referring to the residential function of a building. The municipality has started a process to 'awaken' this building and its garden together with citizens to create a place that stimulates new connections between the future users of the building—neighbours, residents, children and mentally disabled people. Through participatory workshops, the municipality collaborated with these groups to design the green courtyard between the buildings. A leap of faith for all parties involved, as such a collective effort is new for everyone.



A pink-haired lady with a rabbit on her shoulder arrives at the garden of Ziepju Street 11. Next to the garden stands a large, abandoned building, in need of renovation. In the middle of the green field in front of it, a large white pop-up tent is set up. Chairs and benches have already been placed inside the tent. Slowly, the neighbours arrive. They are here to share their ideas for the future communal garden that will be renovated together with the building. Many chairs are still empty, and there is a sense of discomfort in the air—how to start this meeting? While some other participants seem to be elegantly dressed for the occasion, seemingly reserved at first, the pink-haired lady appears more down to earth. She is not afraid to voice her opinion. In front of her apartment building, she has been maintaining her own garden with seeds and bulbs that she brought from the countryside when she moved to Riga. If anyone knows how to run a garden, it's her.





Residents from the neighbouring building first received a tour around the courtyard, where they shared their immediate thoughts about the future of the garden. Afterwards they gathered around design tables, discussing what they would like to see in the future.



On site: local experiences and practices

A new understanding of places

Where to start? Some say that residents in Riga are accustomed to being a *user* within a centralised system. In Soviet times, workers from eastern parts of the Union were provided free housing by the Riga government when coming to work for local government projects, such as infrastructure construction. This contributed to their social segregation as they would be placed in a building only with their colleagues, still impacting residents' lives today. Becoming active *contributors* within their living environment, embracing a proactive role and becoming part of a lively community, is a slow process and demands rethinking old routines.

The active contribution of Riga residents requires the municipality to move away from old systems of top-down city planning, and to arrange a participatory approach that includes the voices of all residents. By creating a shared language, through which the wishes of citizens are translated into concrete design, the municipality is challenged to listen and use a flexible approach. While they are first testing the waters, both the municipality and citizens adopt a new role in the urban development of Riga through the participatory workshops.

The municipality has started a process to 'awaken' this building and its garden together with citizens

On site: local experiences and practices

Designing for each other

The first foundations of a contributing community are already visible even though engaging the neighbouring residents in the workshops proved to be difficult for the municipality. To motivate the residents from the neighbouring building, they sent letters, hung posters and made personal phone calls. Some decided to join the experiment. In a series of workshops, participants were presented with a large map of the garden with cut-out images representing possible activities and facilities in the garden. After this, they could place the cut-outs on the map and discuss the reasons behind their decisions. Remarkably, the participants paid closer attention to other user groups than their own while designing the garden.

Children thought of accessibility for the elderly, while the elderly suggested sports facilities for the younger generations. During the first stages, school children were only asked to design play and sports facilities. Once they were asked to design freely without a prompt, they proposed adding greenery, shelter for animals and flowers to the garden. These results show that the participants felt an inherent sense of care for others, including non-human inhabitants.

The investment in the existing relationships between residents, schoolchildren and the municipality turned out to be a priority

The design process also presented unexpected challenges. The assignment of the design method was not accessible enough for the disabled people who participated, as they were expected to sit still and pay attention for a long time. During another design workshop with neighbours and children, the idea for temporary planter boxes was proposed for community gardening. However, the idea was eventually withdrawn because the asphalt pavement was in a poor condition, making the planter boxes inaccessible to people in wheelchairs. The garden would not have been inclusive. This shows how understanding different needs and addressing blind spots are part of the community-building process.



On site: local experiences and practices



On site: local experiences and practices

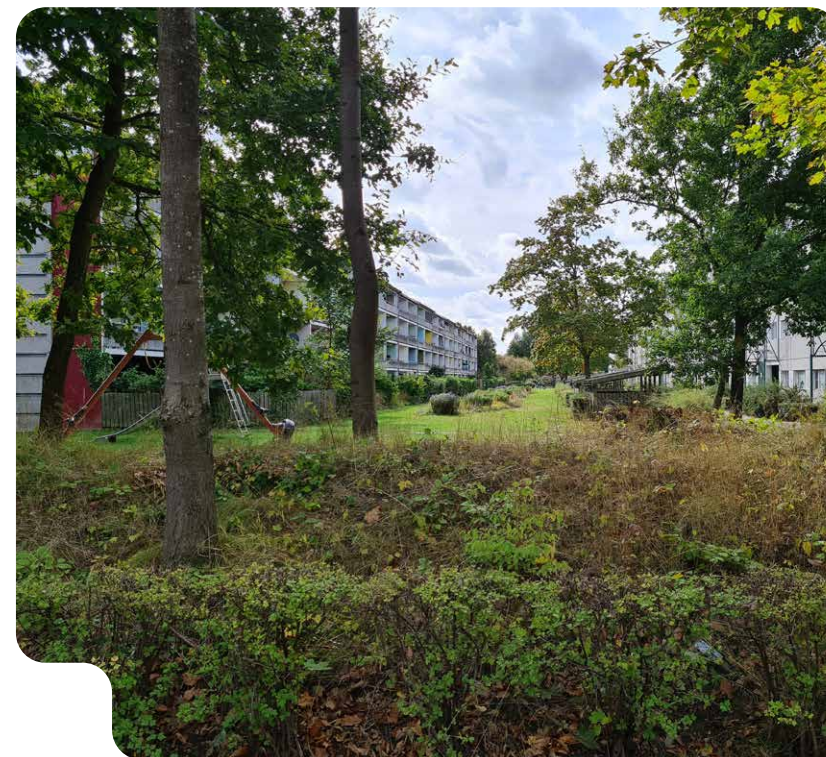
The social makes the physical

The community involvement did spark a new way of thinking for the municipality, according to Rūdis Rubenis from the Riga municipality. “We have to let go of the idea that we can solve everything by pumping in money and building interventions. Repair the building, make it pretty, and the relationships will follow. But we actually have to invest a lot in the social side, the relationships, to solve our physical problems.”

The journey of Ziepju 11 started out with developing a more inclusive and sustainable procurement method for the building, which focused mostly on the renovation of the building itself. The team gathered colleagues from the municipality to discuss the future of the social housing design. However, during the process, the investment in the existing relationships between residents, schoolchildren and the municipality turned out to be a priority before starting any physical intervention at all. In the next four years during which Ziepju 11 will be renovated, the municipality will invest in building stronger relationships with the future users of the building, hoping that these relationships will foster a stronger connection to the garden and apartment building.

“We have to invest a lot in the social side, the relationships, to solve our physical problems”





The landscape

43

A major transformation is happening in Gadehavegård, a social housing area of nearly a thousand apartments in Tåstrup, a town near Copenhagen. Built in the seventies, the area is characterised by repetitive housing blocks and large parking lots. The Danish government has designated Gadehavegård, as well as fourteen other neighbourhoods in Denmark, as so-called 'ghetto areas'. This controversial policy aims to tackle socio-economic challenges in vulnerable neighbourhoods, while the classification is partially determined by the percentage of non-Western migrants in a neighbourhood. The policy will lead to the demolition of a big part of Gadehavegård's social housing stock to make way for mixed housing, of which sixty percent will be built in the private sector. As the development is imposed by the government law, residents did not have a say in it. After demolition, a large park will replace the existing road and two parking lots. The housing association Domea.dk is looking for ways to involve residents and users of the area in envisioning Gadehavegård's future.



Designing a future park: community involvement in Gadehavegård's renewal

Urban renewal transforms more than just buildings. It affects the relationships, feelings of belonging, and connections in resident communities. The government's decision to transform Gadehavegård leaves little room for current residents to influence the urban renewal plans. That is why Domea.dk organised design workshops for over thirty eighth-graders from the local elementary school, particularly focusing on the future park. Their task was to visualise their hopes and dreams, with attention for sustainability and circularity. In collaboration with the design and research studio GXN and the private consultant cooperative for social organisation AGORA, Domea.dk turned abstract ideas into concrete plans.

On site: local experiences and practices



Excitement fills the room on this late summer afternoon at the Ole Romer Library in Høje Tåstrup. In the room, different tables are covered with various creations: photographs of the serene greenery in the surrounding landscapes, experimental building models, renders, and beautifully crafted sketches. Reminiscent of an architecture studio, this exhibition by a group of eighth-grade students showcases the results of a two-week design sprint. Their assignment was to imagine the future of the new park at the heart of the Gadehavegård neighbourhood. The audience includes municipal representatives, the mayor, architects and housing association employees. They move slowly between the tables, engage with the students, ask them questions, and exchange ideas. These designs spark new conversations, bringing together perspectives from different ages and professions. But incorporating all voices in the discussion is the hardest challenge ahead.



On site: local experiences and practices

What language to use?

A shared language is needed when residents are engaged in urban renewal plans. A language that bridges the gap between the technical urban planning and the lived experiences of residents. GXN and Domea.dk facilitated the design workshops for eighth-graders by teaching them the basics of photography to study the existing natural environment and use drawings and models to visualise their ideas. They explored concepts like biodiversity and sustainability in their neighbourhood and surrounding green areas, and applied these concepts to their future designs. Equipped with the right tools and knowledge, the students communicated their ideas to those responsible for the renewal—not through a spoken language, but through an act of making.

At the end of the two weeks, the students bundled their values into a manifesto including statements such as “keep involving residents,” “a park should show our different cultures,” or “no aesthetics without sustainability.” It was not through talking, but through doing that these students articulated their visions, seamlessly intertwining sustainability and social inclusion.

Will these ideas be included in the development plans? The students’ unconventional designs were not immediately implementable, but Domea.dk is designing a new tender programme inspired by the values expressed through the designs and manifesto. Architects competing for the project will need to demonstrate how their proposals integrate community engagement as well as the sustainability and inclusion values offered by the students. This marks an innovative approach, since anchoring community involvement in tender programmes is uncommon in the Danish social housing sector.

The students communicated their ideas to those responsible for the renewal—not through a spoken language, but through an act of making



Who is involved?

In Denmark, tenants of housing associations have a voice in deciding about renovation and maintenance of their housing project through a ‘tenant democracy’. All tenants can usually pre-emptively vote against or in favour of the renovation activities. However, for Gadehavegård this democratic process is overridden by the government’s ‘ghetto law’, which eliminates the mandate of residents in the tenant democracy. The decision of the government to demolish and rebuild Gadehavegård can therefore not be opposed by current tenants.

By organising the workshops and tender programme, Domea.dk took a first step in restoring the residents’ voices, although the engagement of the adults has not yet been effective. During the student presentations at the Ole Rømer Library, where they presented their designs in front of the mayor, municipal officials and housing company employees, one group was missing: their parents. Despite receiving an invitation, they chose not to attend. Domea’s initial focus on the youth was strategic, hoping they would act as ambassadors to inspire their families to join the discussion, but to no avail.

The reluctance to participate can be explained by the scepticism about the plans for Gadehavegård, which involve reducing the social housing, forcing some residents to relocate elsewhere in Tåstrup. Because of their more pressing economic and social struggles, the residents might feel detached from workshops on biodiversity and greening.

The aim is to redefine the relationship between the housing associations and residents, changing it from a transactional into a collaborative one

The students demonstrated a strong awareness of sustainability and circularity in their designs, suggesting the upcycling of materials and nature-inclusive designs.

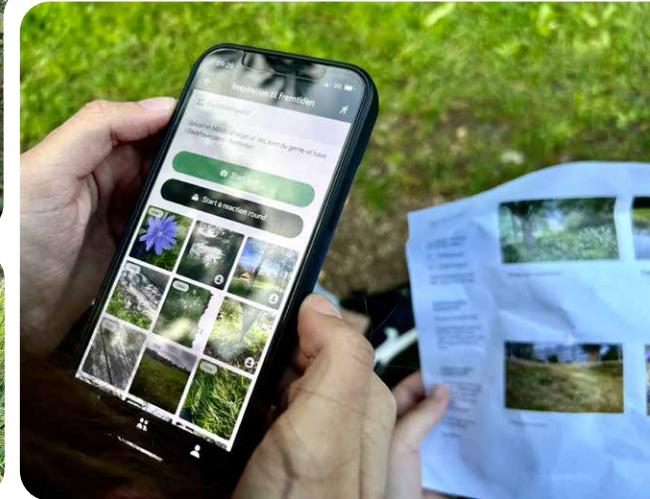
How to build trust?

Domea.dk recognises that trust is essential at the foundation of community involvement. To address this challenge, the housing association may need to look inward. “If we want people to be involved, they need to feel a sense of community,” says Lisbeth Engelbrecht, project manager at Domea.dk. “We have to come up with smaller projects and build up from there. We need to work on our own culture to involve people even before the start of our projects.”

Since the housing association lacks the resources to manage communities at the level of individual apartment buildings, Domea.dk is seeking funding to hire staff who can engage directly with residents and facilitate the conversation about the future of the area. Through informal encounters, starting with chats on the street, Domea.dk hopes to slowly build a relationship with the adult residents. Because the distance between them might be too vast to start a collective design process, Domea.dk is looking for resources to find time—time to build trust, listen to residents’ needs, and restore the relationship with them.

Only by 2029, the renewal of the park area will start. Until then, Domea.dk has the time to extend its community involvement. The complexity grows as the voices of new residents will need to be involved in the renewal too. For now, the focus has been on the park, but will Domea.dk involve resident voices in the residential areas too? The aim is to redefine the relationship between the housing associations and residents, changing it from a transactional into a collaborative one.

“We need to work on our own culture to involve people even before the start of our projects”



During the design sprint, students collected images and other impressions of green spaces and biodiversity around Gadehavegård with the ‘Our Walk App’. This revealed their needs and wishes for the future development.







52

On site: local experiences and practices



53

The landscape

In the Wildemanbuurt, a neighbourhood in the western outskirts of Amsterdam, residents started their own projects for a sustainable and socially inclusive neighbourhood. This post-war social housing area is characterised by abundant space and greenery. Over the next few years, some of the housing stock and public space will be redeveloped as part of the city's urban renewal plans for the area. Two local NGOs, The Beach and Samenwonen-Samenleven, support residents who are starting their own activities and projects in their neighbourhood to increase a sense of belonging and ownership. Focused on bottom-up and community-led urban development, these organisations help residents build new relationships and cultivate a sense of ownership of their living environment. The NGOs open their doors and provide a place where citizens can exchange ideas—to support them in taking an active role in the future development of the neighbourhood.

On site: local experiences and practices

Wildemanbuurt

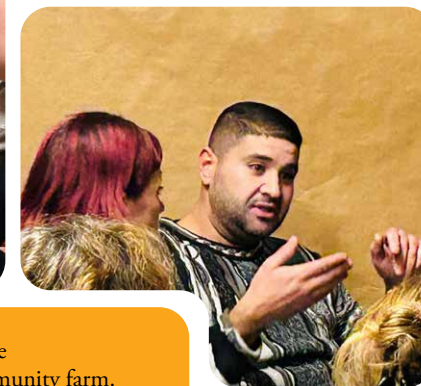
Amsterdam



The power of making: community-led urban development in the Wildemanbuurt

What do you need to feel at home? Do you need to feel a sense of pride, attachment or passion about a place? Perhaps you feel the need to shape your environment the way you want to. To realise your dreams. Being able to make something meaningful in your neighbourhood—a story, a garden or new relationships—helps to define and evaluate your feeling of a home. And through making something together with others, you might end up sharing something you are proud of.

On site: local experiences and practices



It is already dark outside when residents from the Wildemanbuurt come together at the local community farm. These residents have united in local design groups, devoting themselves to their own neighbourhood projects. This evening, they have to look each other in the eyes. Tension has been rising among the groups. Is everyone transparent enough? Do they feel like they can trust one another? What future is everyone working towards? They requested a meeting with the partnering NGOs in the neighbourhood to discuss underlying concerns. The residents feel the need to know what other groups are working on and how the EU project funding is divided. This evening, they plan for a better collaboration in the future. Will disagreement spark solidarity?



On site: local experiences and practices

A group of young local residents collects stories, for example by interviewing residents from the Amsterdam New-West area. Together they form the collective Y.O.U. (Young Osdorp United), reshaping negative media portrayals of the area into a narrative of empowerment.



Design and Do Groups

Committed residents in the Wildemanbuurt run their own neighbourhood projects, workshops, and services, fostering a connection to local places and establishing trust among fellow residents. The NGOs in the neighbourhood strengthen and expand these initiatives called *Design and Do Groups*. They support these groups of committed residents in turning their neighbourhood plans into concrete activities.

These activities consist of community gardening, waste management, citizen journalism, media production with the local youth, dance events for a healthy and vibrant neighbourhood, and much more. The design groups organise activities to engage residents from the entire neighbourhood, with a focus on making things together. They run them independently, oversee their own budgets, and together they form a network of active citizens. These new networks contribute to a 'neighbourhood ecology'—a web of committed actors and activities that collectively constitute the neighbourhood. This is important, considering Wildeman's history.

The neighbourhood has gained a bad reputation, due to poverty, crime, and a poor housing stock, reinforced by negative media coverage and the marginalisation of minority groups. A history of top-down urban planning and broken promises of renewal plans have damaged the trust among residents in the municipality and social service organisations. Today, the neighbourhood is at the dawn of a large-scale urban renewal, expecting the demolition and rebuilding of most of its housing stock and public places. For some residents this feels like a fresh start: a new story in need of new relationships among residents, rather than buildings.

Public places as a social incubator

The resident groups use public places as a means to sustain residents' attachment to the neighbourhood. They use interventions in public places as incubators, creating the right conditions for new relationships to sprout. One of the resident groups, Wildeman Green, organises gardening activities in which residents collectively take care of various kinds of plants, flowers and herbs. The project creates space, both physically and socially, for unexpected encounters and exchanges. By taking charge of the green places, residents claim ownership of the neighbourhood's development.

The group Wild Pride (Wilde Trots) invites residents in different places around the neighbourhood to have a coffee or tea around a mobile coffee bar. This simple intervention encourages residents to value public places for their ability to connect people. It creates moments to pause, look around and be present in those places rather than treating it as a space to merely pass through. By building new relationships, residents collectively reflect on the development of their neighbourhood and their roles within it.



These new networks contribute to a 'neighbourhood ecology'—a web of committed actors and activities that collectively constitute the neighbourhood

Embracing friction

Part of becoming a closer community is addressing the friction that arises during the process. Halfway during the *Desire* project, the resident groups requested a meeting with the local NGOs to discuss trust-related issues and the distribution of the *Desire* project funding between the groups. Because they focused on their own projects, the groups lacked awareness of other projects and did not know how the funding was used. Moreover, if the residents did all the work and function independently, what were the local NGOs even doing?

After two meetings and some heated discussions, the resident groups collectively decided on the redistribution of funds among newly formed resident groups, and the confusion regarding the involvement of the local NGOs was resolved. Eventually, the groups joined forces in organising a neighbourhood event marking the end of the *Desire* project. From this friction grew a stronger sense of solidarity. The resident groups and NGOs grew into a neighbourhood community through understanding each other's expectations, different needs and backgrounds. They realised that they shared similar goals but approached them differently.

This development underlines the need for incorporating transparency in the community building process. "When we as NGOs want to design together with residents, we have to be transparent from the very beginning. The residents eventually took the ownership over the project by requesting more transparency themselves," says Rosalie Bak, social designer at Samenwonen-Samenleven. At the beginning of the shared design process, it is essential for everyone to understand each other's roles in the process.

"The residents took the ownership over the project by requesting more transparency"

On site: local experiences and practices

Shifting responsibilities

The resident groups shifted roles and responsibilities. Not the landscape architect, but the residents design green places. Not the municipal waste management, but residents process local waste. They roll up their sleeves, join forces with the municipality and take ownership of neighbourhood services. Seeing familiar residents caring for public places activates other residents to do the same.

At the same time, reallocating roles in a top-down system is a tough task. The Amsterdam municipality has invited some of the resident groups, such as the local waste managers, to collaborate in the neighbourhood. Yet the municipality struggles to integrate the informal approach of the citizen-led initiatives into its bureaucratic procedures. The realisation that citizens can take on tasks traditionally handled by the municipality is a first step, but integrating this into a functional collaboration requires rethinking old customs.

The resident-led Circular Wildeman Cooperative collects bulk waste in the area with the goal of giving it a second life. This is a key example of Community Wealth Building in the New-West area of Amsterdam.

Active residents, local organisations and the municipality work together to implement Community Wealth Building, which envisions the local economy as community-driven. This implies that investments, funding, and profits circulate within the community rather than flowing to external parties. It embraces community-based principles, such as fair employment and community owned and -led social enterprises, procurement in favour of locality and viewing the environment as a common good. With this approach, residents, local institutions and the municipality strive to increase collective and democratic ownership and redefine wealth beyond economic gains.

Not the landscape architect, but the residents design green places. Not the municipal waste management, but residents process local waste

59



The landscape

Kalundborg—a Danish town of 16,000 residents on the Northwestern coast of the Zealand Island—is expanding. The town is renowned for its biotech industry, home to companies like Novo Nordisk. Today, the industry is developing a new biotech campus together with the municipality and the new educational institutions in the town. This development could reinforce the existing separation between the industry and the city centre of Kalundborg. Knowledge Hub Zealand, an organisation that manages the development of the new educational campus, and the Royal Danish Academy's architecture department collaborated in the *Desire* project, and commit themselves to connect the new campus to the town's centre. Their aim is to involve the voices of citizens and students and co-create the town's future with the industry and educational institutions, assuring that residents feel belonging in all parts of town.



A new symbiosis for Kalundborg: from separation to collaboration

With investments in the biotech industry and education, Kalundborg embarks on a journey of rediscovery. Known for the 'Kalundborg Symbiosis'—the circular partnership among local companies in the industry—the town is challenged to extend this symbiosis beyond the existing industry, while also involving new stakeholders and citizens. How will the town grow through the collaborative efforts of residents, students, educational institutions and the industry?

With a stark contrast between the medieval, idyllic city centre and the large-scale biotech industry, the new educational campus is imagined by its stakeholders as a place where different worlds meet. Kalundborg's municipality strives to make the new campus inviting for people from the town's centre by developing places where people feel at home. Some residents are sceptical, as they did not feel heard in the past due to the priorities of the industry. To spark a new symbiosis, the *Desire* team worked on rebuilding trust among residents and uniting their voices.



On this usually serene street in the centre of Kalundborg, a group of residents is creating a scene. Quite literally. Children and adults blocked traffic with signal tape, turning the asphalt road into a canvas by chalking and painting flowers, a narrow water stream, and playing areas. They are showing the town what this street could look like. Moveable trees and chairs in repurposed garbage bins are added to the scene. Once everyone is done, they sit down, have a coffee and look at what they created. Passersby pause to observe the scene and curiously ask: "What are they doing here?" The answer is simple: they are bringing their vision of Kalundborg to life. As they pack up their chalk and brushes, the residents move on to the next street.





The once-empty train station, now home to the Royal Academy, stands beside a road traditionally reserved for car traffic. It became the first location for the interventions by the Phoenix Group.

New voices

At the heart of Kalundborg's rediscovery are the new universities. While most universities settled on the new education campus on the outskirts, the Royal Danish Academy's architecture department was established in the town's centre. The school is integrated into the fabric of the town as it is settled in the vacant train station in the centre and its lectures are screened in the local cinema—since its rooms are not used during the day. The school considered this necessary for merging with the local community.

The *Desire* team collaborated with the Really Regenerative Centre, a learning institute for regenerative development, and landscape architecture firm, Tredje Natur. They invited Kalundborg's citizens to map the town's history, through examining the divide between the industry and the lived town. From this arose a group of residents, wanting to get involved with the cultural and physical development of the town. The resident collective 'Phoenix Group'—referring to the start of something new—aims to make a change through activities and interventions. Without a clear agenda, the group defined their values along the way. They use their activities to unite people in the town and create relationships. Their establishment gave residents a voice, by exchanging ideas and creating a dialogue through experimentation.

Rather than approaching urban development as a planning process, the Phoenix Group focused on testing and imagining change

Testing and imagining change

Rather than approaching urban development as a planning process, the Phoenix Group focused on testing and imagining change. In the late summer of 2023, the group rolled out moveable furniture and trees, equipped themselves with chalk and paint to visualise pedestrian friendly streets filled with greenery and places to meet. Their drawings brought their dreams to life. The intervention offered space to discuss the changes they hoped for. The Phoenix Group executed the intervention in different parts of the town to create visibility to the public. This showed the town that change can start with the action of citizens. By creating this 'scene', the group attempted to claim their role in the new symbiosis of Kalundborg.

Beyond these streets, students from Kalundborg's new universities were asked by the *Desire* team to share their visions for the future campus. During sensory workshops, they walked around the new campus area with their eyes closed, imagining how they would like to feel there. They then translated these experiences into drawings, which were shared with high-level decision-makers from the local industry, educational institutions and the municipality. The exercise proposed to use the lived experiences of students as inspiration for the development of Kalundborg. It placed citizens' values at the core of Kalundborg's future, not just bricks and buildings.

The stakeholders must define their roles as they join the new symbiosis, a process that may bring a sense of uncertainty

Efforts to connect the campus with the broader city were strengthened by collaborations between educational institutions and the local industry. They identified shared goals and crossovers, and together they composed a shared vision for the future campus. This created a mutual reliance. New partnerships started between the educational institutions as soon as they recognised the research fields their students could collaborate on. This allowed for future sharing of laboratory facilities. Additionally, students will visit the industrial companies as part of their curriculum. With these efforts, the *Desire* team encouraged the institutions to view the development of the campus, as well as Kalundborg as a whole, as a collective endeavour.



"I don't see it as a problem when there is friction, it's just a conflicting situation you have to confront"



During the workshops about belonging, students were asked how they wish to feel on the new campus. They expressed their ideas with personal drawings, empathy maps and mood boards.



Redefining roles

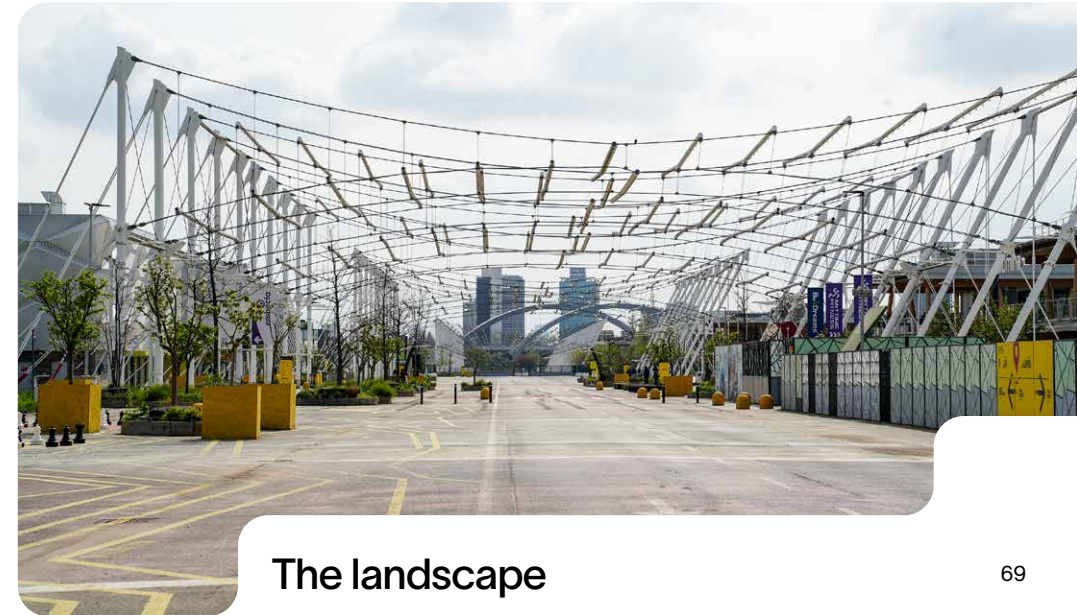
Despite this progress, the shaping of the new symbiosis in Kalundborg is still in the beginning stages. The Phoenix Group continues to grow, also involving government officials and politicians. The group strives for autonomy by applying for their own funding and becoming financially independent. The *Desire* team keeps collaborating with the group and is planning more interventions. While the official partnership of the Phoenix Group with the municipality and the industry has yet to be developed, the *Desire* team investigates possibilities for more formal resident involvement, such as citizen councils. The municipality is struggling to embrace experimental approaches, constrained by efficiency and its bureaucratic procedures. Balancing both the demands of the biotech industry and the needs of residents, proves to be difficult. The municipality is invited to walk the path of Kalundborg's urban development together, expanding on the community building efforts of the *Desire* partners and the work of the Phoenix Group.

This implies that the stakeholders must define their roles as they join the new symbiosis, a process that may bring a sense of uncertainty. But as Flemming Overgaard, architect and teaching assistant at the Royal Danish Academy says, "In the new synergy, it is not just one part or the other to determine what is right or wrong. I don't see it as a problem when there is friction, it's just a conflicting situation you have to confront." Even though all different voices—the residents, students, industry, universities and municipality—have expressed their wishes, the challenge is to unite them to discover the future of Kalundborg together.



68

On site: local experiences and practices



The landscape

The Milan Innovation District is at the dawn of a large-scale transition. In 2015, the World Expo was hosted at the one-square-kilometre site in northwestern Milan, attracting visitors from around the world. Today, the area faces accessibility challenges, while rapidly transforming into an innovation district focused on science and technology, including universities, business, leisure facilities, and housing. The aim of the stakeholders active in the district, is to foster a socially and culturally inclusive environment. *Desire* partner PlusValue, an advisory company that has been active in the area for over five years, formed a development team with the public-private company Arexpo, established for the redevelopment of MIND, and the Australian real estate developer Lendlease. These partners will transform the area by 2031, committing to making MIND a more inviting place for new inhabitants and visitors. The Politecnico di Milano contributed to exploring the right methods and redevelopment models during the *Desire* project.

On site: local experiences and practices

MIND

Milan

69

By the time the stakeholder team of the Milan Innovation District (MIND) meets on a dark February afternoon, the district with expansive streets and remarkable buildings has already become empty of visitors. The stakeholder team consisting of architects, developers, representatives from the local hospital, startups, and universities discuss MIND's development for the coming years. They are particularly interested in making the disorienting one-square-kilometre district more accessible.

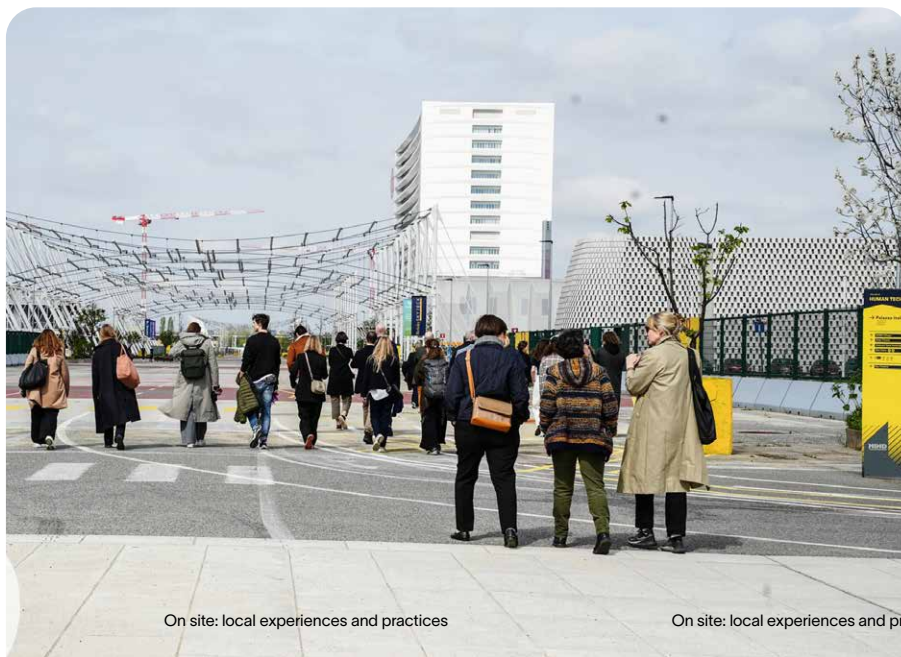


No clear solution has been found yet; previous plans proved too complicated to implement. But in this formal setting, in a conference room with white walls and a businesslike atmosphere, MIND changes direction to focus on beauty. "We need beauty and the human scale," the architect says. Why did no one think of this before?



Beauty at the core of transformation: a walk through the Milan Innovation District

Let's take a walk along the Decumano, the central promenade stretching one kilometre through MIND. As we move forward, we pass towering cranes, large construction sites and looming buildings, indicating that we are standing at a place in transition. Because of the World Expo, this place is designed as a large exhibition space. How can this district transform from a place to be looked at, into a place to be lived in? In a few years, this promenade is supposed to become the heart of a lively area, a hub for innovation and science, combined with an inclusive and sustainable living environment. A city within a city. But as we walk here today, it is clear that a long journey still lies ahead.



On site: local experiences and practices

On site: local experiences and practices

Listening first

The development team began their exploration by simply listening. Listening to those who frequently visit MIND as well as those who work and study in the area. Through interviews, surveys and focus groups, the team gathered as much input as possible. Through the eyes of its users, MIND does not have a clear identity, lacks a sense of community, is missing public meeting and resting places and is rather disorienting due to its large, uniform streets. Some referred to it as a 'non-place', lacking social connections and engagement opportunities.

Beyond listening in formal settings like meetings and interviews, the development team experimented with creative

methods to better understand people's emotional connections—or the lack thereof—to MIND. Students from the School of Fine Arts Restoration, located in the district, were asked to write two postcards to a friend. One to describe their first impressions of the place, and their vision of MIND in 2050 on the other. They used words like safety, creativity, and empathy

to depict their desired future of the district. Their input was passed on to the developers, contributing to the collaborative process of shaping the district's future. The postcard exercise encouraged the students to describe their emotional connection to the place and envision possible future facilities and activities at MIND. This imagination exercise can contribute to a design practice that shapes the district around feelings of well-being and belonging.

The stakeholders introduced beauty as a catalyst for bringing people together, turning the place into a destination rather than a place to pass through

72



MIND's new BeautyforAll concept embraces aesthetic interventions to create a sense of comfort and orientation in the district. Greenery has a priority in this development.

On site: local experiences and practices



Encountering beauty

As we continue our walk on the Decumano, we get a sense of the long distances and the large scale. At the start of the project, the development team adopted the idea 'MINDforAll', an approach aimed at making public places more accessible and inclusive. They prioritised the introduction of mobility services for people with physical disabilities, such as bike sharing or a transportation service. In practice, the implementation proved to be complex within the scope of the *Desire* project.

During one stakeholder meeting, an architect proposed to redirect the attention to the human scale: MIND had to become an inviting place, appealing to all visitors. Instead of solely focusing on the mobility aspect, the stakeholders introduced beauty as a catalyst for bringing people together, turning the place into a destination rather than a place to pass through. This evolved 'BeautyforAll' approach then focused on designing beautiful experiences in public places, which redirected the plans of the development team. In collaboration with local stakeholders, the development team identified a set of values essential for designing attractive and inclusive environments, ensuring biodiversity, art in public space and a sense of familiarity for visitors.

From this moment onwards, the development team had to take a step away from their initial plans and take a leap into a new direction centred on beauty. "It was a long journey figuring out an approach that works," says Francesco La Loggia, project manager at PlusValue. "In a place of one million square metres, you need to pick your battles. We simply hadn't thought of beauty before, but it fits with our idea of MIND—a place where new things can start."

On site: local experiences and practices

73



Benches as interventions

On our left, we notice a yellow bench. The oddly shaped, wooden bench is placed here for people to rest and take in their surroundings. Four of these benches divide the Decumano into navigable parts and are strategically placed: close to a bar, next to the local restoration school, in the middle of the Decumano and in front of a construction site. The latter could provide a space for *umarell*, Italian for elderly men standing still in front of a construction site, their hands clasped behind their back, patiently observing the changes unfold. Building on this image, the benches serve as places to pause and reflect on the evolving surroundings.

Perhaps a pedestrian is joined by another, allowing for new interactions and new connections.

The benches serve as places to pause and reflect on the evolving surroundings

Though they are small in size, their impact is notable. The benches also create points of recognition, serving as landmarks for navigation. More importantly, the benches generate 'imaginary squares', encouraging activities and gatherings around the bench as well. Even the smallest intervention can significantly impact the way people use public places at MIND. Experiments like these are all part of the 'BeautyforAll' approach. The development team is exploring how they can integrate the initiation and monitoring of such interventions into the future plans for the area.

Investigating and tracking the use of the benches provides valuable information. Measuring the interactions and visits of passersby, informs the development team on how to plan public places at MIND.

On site: local experiences and practices

The path ahead

We pause. We observe our surroundings and imagine what the district will become in twenty years. Although the development team wants to continue the experimental approach, it proves to be challenging to incorporate a rather intangible and subjective concept as beauty in the fast-paced urban development of the site. As Francesco La Loggia explains, it is difficult to convince public authorities to embrace an experimental and artistic approach. With tight urban development budgets, experimentation is often not a priority. But according to La Loggia, consulting local experts of the place contributes to finding creative solutions: "It helps to understand the local context very well. I know every inch of MIND, all the corners, all the plans and ambitions of its users. From here I could act as a local expert and find creative solutions to implement new projects."

"We simply hadn't thought of beauty before, but it fits with our idea of MIND—a place where new things can start"

75

On site: local experiences and practices





On site: local experiences and practices



On site: local experiences and practices





The landscape

In the Falchera district, about a thirty-minute journey from Turin's city centre, stands Cascina Falchera. This farmstead surrounded by fields, greenhouses and historic buildings dates back to the eighteenth century when the



Falchera area was a predominantly rural area. After the Second World War, Falchera underwent a transformation to accommodate industrial workers, turning the district into a suburb of Turin. By the late twentieth century, Falchera faced socio-economic deterioration due to industrial decline and depopulation. During this period, the Cascina became an educational centre for schools in the city. Eventually, the Cascina had to close its doors. It reopened in the spring of 2023, when Consorzio Kairos, a consortium of social cooperatives dedicated to pursuing the interests of local communities, joined forces with the municipality of Turin. They reimagined Cascina Falchera as a green, urban living lab: a place where communities can take root and grow, awareness of the Falchera history is nurtured and ecological knowledge is cultivated. This development is carried out collaboratively with local stakeholders and students.



On a warm September afternoon, a group of young adults gathers in the courtyard of Cascina Falchera, ready to roll up their sleeves. Moments ago, they learned about nature-based solutions for combatting the heat during hot summers. Now, the talk is over—it's time for action. Brick by brick, they remove the pavement in the courtyard, revealing the neglected soil underneath. While this symbolic action may not immediately alleviate the challenges of hot Turin summers, it marks an important step in reclaiming space

for nature and biodiversity at Cascina Falchera. Together, the young adults plant a garden and carefully select the different plants. They name the garden after Marielle Franco, a Brazilian LGBTI+ activist whose courage has been an inspiration for the workshop participants. By doing, this group provided a fertile ground for Cascina Falchera's fresh start.



On site: local experiences and practices



Roots in the past: Cascina Falchera's journey towards a Biodiversity Hub

Identities are constantly evolving. They are not shaped in isolation but develop through our interactions with people, places and the world around us, as well as through the connection between the past and present. Cascina Falchera, a farm with over 300 years of history, is opening its doors for the collective reimagining of its identity. In need of both a physical and symbolic renovation, the Kairos cooperative invites residents—particularly young adults from Falchera and central Turin—to help shape the new chapter, offering a place where different backgrounds meet. Through hands-on workshops, projects, and events, the Cascina serves as a place where people learn about local history, nature and sustainability. Some of these workshops were facilitated in collaboration with the Politecnico di Milano and the private consultant cooperative for social organisation AGORA.

On site: local experiences and practices

Reflecting on the past to shape the future

An essential part of envisioning the future of the Cascina was looking at the past and the roots of the place. Central to Falchera's history is the role of water, both as a natural resource and a symbol of connection. The Cascina is situated in a landscape shaped by historic irrigation systems called *bealere*, human made canals typical of the Piedmont region. These waterways were once essential for agriculture, connecting different farms in the area because all relied on the water for their lands. Revisiting this history at the Cascina fostered a deeper appreciation for the fields and their heritage among visitors, while emphasising the symbolic significance of water in the Cascina's future.

Inspired by this notion, the Kairos cooperative organised the 'Water Saving Camps' at Cascina Falchera. In these workshops, young adults from Falchera and Turin explored the relationship between water and the landscape, as well as the water's connection to the local community. One time, participants learned about the role of water in climate adaptation, how to make room for the water and by doing this, support ecosystems and biodiversity. They removed the pavement on one side of the courtyard to allow the rainwater to drain to the soil. Such nature-based solutions can improve the health of the local ecosystem. However, this collective engagement with the land achieved more: it strengthened the connection between the participants and the specific locations at the Cascina. They not only learned the delicate needs of the land, but also built a sense of community among themselves.

In another workshop, they explored the water's significance through soundscaping. Participants recorded the water, listening to its sounds to explore their feelings of connectedness to the water and better understand its presence in the district. This deep listening exercise evoked respect for both the history and the vital qualities of water.

By bridging the past with the present, a stronger sense of belonging and care for the local environment was cultivated in these workshops. It's like meeting someone and learning about their past: you might feel strongly connected to that person and gain a better understanding of their identity by knowing where they come from.

An essential part of envisioning the future of the Cascina was looking at the past and the roots of the place



On site: local experiences and practices



On site: local experiences and practices

No fixed paths

Cascina's exploration of identity is not dictated top-down but driven by a collective effort. The Kairos cooperative has avoided rigid planning, letting the workshops and activities depend on the interests of the participants. They embraced the uncertainties that came with such a journey, trusting that the activities will shape the Cascina the right way. With this approach, the Kairos cooperative initiated an artist residency called 'La Roggia', a name suggested by the Water Saving Camp participants, referring to the local water irrigation system. Additionally, young adults co-created a manifesto for the farm, envisioning it as a place to 'go off the beaten path', where nature is celebrated for its wildness, and people are invited to slow down and observe their surroundings. This shows that participants took an active role in determining the direction of Cascina's future.

Parallel to the participatory community learning, the Politecnico di Milano organised several brainstorming workshops with the internal team of the Cascina to determine the overarching vision of the place. They were asked to imagine what the Cascina could become in ten years and what values it should represent. This collaborative journey with the core team led to Cascina's identity as a Biodiversity Hub. Building on its past as an educational farm, it will continue to experiment with sustainable agriculture and organise workshops on heritage and innovation.

Not having a plan might feel uncertain, yet it opens the door for unforeseen directions and opportunities. It allows the community behind the Cascina to use their creativity and imagination. This approach cultivates a sense of ownership along the way, creating a community where people feel like their voices can make a difference.

The long-term goal of the Water Saving Camps was to equip young citizens with in-depth understanding of their territory, and find the right tools to narrate their insights to others. The last workshop focused on city branding and discovered how to communicate the new narrative of the Cascina to the public.



84



Besides the co-creation workshops, Cascina Falchera hosts a wide variety of activities such as movie nights, music events, activities for children and much more.

Connecting communities

Cascina Falchera's rediscovery has only just begun. After having started with sporadic workshops, the Kairos cooperative is now establishing structure while working on the internal governance. They are planning to appoint a board representing the different Cascina departments. By organising regular meetings to stay updated on each other's activities, the farm is creating the order necessary in its associative approach. In doing so, the different social enterprises within the Kairos cooperative are strengthening their collaboration.

The activities at the Cascina were designed top-down, while it now embraces a collaborative approach with various stakeholders

The building of communities will keep evolving as well. When it was an educational farm in the past, the activities at the Cascina were designed top-down, while it now embraces a collaborative approach with various stakeholders. Now that the Cascina has become a place for young adults from Falchera, the Kairos cooperative continues its mission by making the farm more accessible to those from a lower socioeconomic background or with physical disabilities.

Furthermore, not only does the youth from Falchera become part of the farm, in return the Cascina becomes part of the social fabric of Falchera. The Kairos cooperative is gaining recognition in the Falchera community, as they are invited to join local events. The vision is to further expand its social endeavours with citizens from Turin and the local community. According to

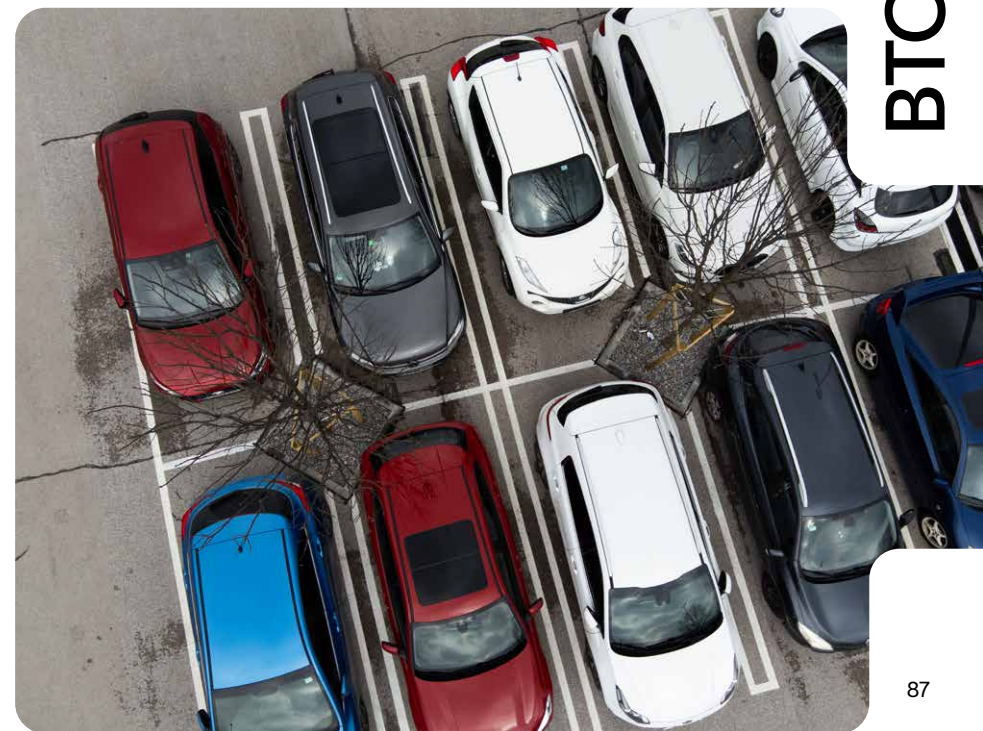
Domenica Moscato, project manager at the Kairos cooperative, "the Cascina used to be an environmental education centre open only to schools and now it is a biodiversity hub open to all."

"The Cascina used to be an environmental education centre open only to schools and now it is a biodiversity hub open to all"

85



On site: local experiences and practices



87

The landscape

One of Central Europe's largest areas for business, shopping, entertainment and recreation is undergoing a green transformation. Located in the east of Ljubljana, the nearly 500.000-square-metre retail park is filled with offices, business towers, and a big variety of shops. The area is faced with climate change challenges, such as the urban heat island effect and low energy efficiency of buildings. To create a new sustainable vision for 2050, the property development company BTC City—sharing its name with the retail park—is collaborating with CER Sustainable Business network, the largest sustainable business network in Slovenia. Together with various stakeholders from the area, they help the companies, shops or businesses at BTC to embark on a sustainability journey, by lowering their carbon footprint and improving greenery in public places. Together with the architectural research studio GXN, BTC City assesses the quantity and quality of greenery in the area and improves awareness about greening among stakeholders.

On site: local experiences and practices



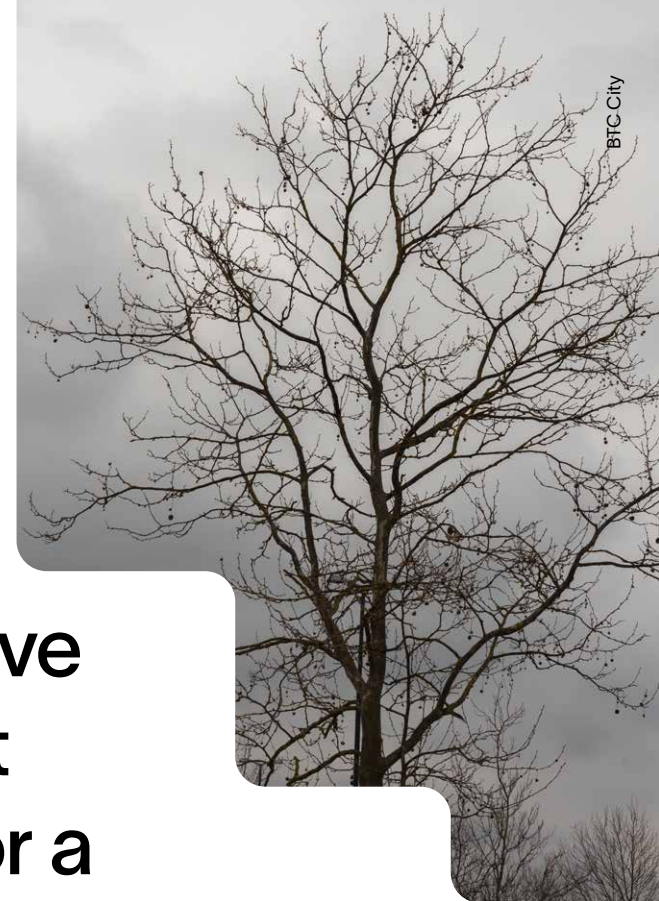
"In this vast area full of shops, offices, restaurants and business towers, I drive my car to a clothing store. It is a hot summer day and as I look around, I see a variety of buildings towering on the horizon. I see parked cars, parking cars, cars in front of me. Concrete, asphalt, and buildings stacked close to one another. I too park my car, open the door and am struck by the heat. I'm sweating, the street and the people are melting. As quickly as I can, I seek relief in the artificial cold inside. But before entering, I envision what could have been. A place filled with different colours, with enough shade, different kinds of green, the smell of grass and flowers, and the comforting sound of buzzing bees. With inviting streets for interactions among all beings. A place that we all want to be in."

A visitor's experience of BTC City.



Collaborative greening at BTC City for a climate-resilient future

In starting their collaborative exploration, BTC City posed the question: how will the retail and business area become greener and climate resilient? The sustainability strategy at BTC both concerns the greening of public places, and involves the companies and businesses in the area to become fundamentally more sustainable. Rather than placing the responsibility of the green transformation on individual tenants, BTC City initiated networks like the 'Green Community BTC City' and the 'Green Star Club', to promote collaboration and shared learning. Additionally, BTC City is taking along business owners, academics, local NGOs and local youth towards BTC's green future.



Beating the heat

The green transformation of BTC marks a changing relationship with nature. Climate change causes intense heat in the area, which is aggravated by the large areas of concrete and asphalt. Socialising outdoors during the hot summer months can be quite challenging. BTC City is therefore developing a new relationship with nature, by inviting nature back in and making outside areas more attractive for humans and other species.

In the first stages of the invitation process, a wide variety of greenery and city wildlife took over the area, with trees enhancing the grey asphalt streets and ivy hanging from building facades. BTC City collaborated with the faculties of Biotechnology and Arts of the University of Ljubljana to carefully choose the right species of trees and planting methods, assuring that nature can thrive in the area. Together with the municipality of Ljubljana, they planted a green meadow to attract bees. Through collaboration, BTC City created the conditions for nature to flourish. But, in this first stage of the invitation process, the greenery is in its early stage of growth, needing to spread across the area, rewild itself and increase in volume. The more it grows, the cooler and more comfortable the area will become.

In addition to combatting the heat, the BTC City team aims to diversify the use of outdoor places by promoting interaction and socialisation through events and activities. These efforts help visitors feel more connected to public places in the area, appreciating them not just for their commercial purpose but also as places that foster new relationships.

In a profit-oriented system with commercial priorities, adopting a sustainable vision also requires rethinking the economic mindset

The companies, shop owners and businesses of BTC City also began their journey towards a sustainable collaboration with nature. For some, sustainability turned out to be a difficult task to realise—whether due to a lack of understanding about the green transition or financial considerations. “We have to go step by step”, says Andrej Janko, Head of Sustainable Development Department at BTC City, “everyone can contribute to our sustainable vision in their own way. We will have to strengthen the dialogue with our business partners and other stakeholders to balance this with their needs and expectations. Often people say: green is expensive, but we like to start the conversation about green opportunities.” In a profit-oriented system with commercial priorities, adopting a sustainable vision also requires rethinking the economic mindset.



The BTC City team worked together with arborists and botanists to select the right species of trees and plants for the area.



These efforts help visitors feel more connected to public places in the area, appreciating them as places that foster new relationships

A collaborative process

Together with the sustainable business network CER, BTC City gathered a mix of stakeholders from academia and NGOs willing to craft a new story for BTC City in 2050. During a 48-hour hackathon, high schoolers and students from the University of Ljubljana envisioned a sustainable future for BTC City. Their ideas consisted of integrating green corridors into the area and building a technological centre encouraging young professionals to stay in Ljubljana. Additionally, representatives from Ljubljana's education, business and cultural sectors, gathered in co-creation sessions to shape the future vision of the area. Their suggestions ranged from removing advertisement in public spaces to aesthetically enhance the area through public art and innovative architectural designs.

This collaborative involvement poses a challenge—how to balance the different interests of all stakeholders? During the co-creation sessions, stakeholders proposed that BTC City should be a car-free area. This would promote alternative modes of transport and create a welcoming environment for interactions between visitors and community activities. Yet, the full implementation of this plan was not feasible, as it would have a large impact on its stores and facilities.



The Green Star certification, which helps companies track their progress in the green transition, led to the creation of the Green Star Club at BTC—a group of businesses and companies that regularly meet to share sustainability lessons, challenges, and foster collaboration.



BTC City took topics, such as mobility, safety and comfort from these proposals to guide the sustainable vision, so that the plan would benefit all stakeholders. This shows that the transformation to a greener and more inviting character of place demands a long process of balancing the different stakeholders' needs.

In a collaborative process, everyone takes their fair share of responsibility. BTC City has started a project for green lease agreements with the key business partners operating in the area. With this type of rental agreement, the business partners and BTC City commit to jointly implementing sustainable practices, including reducing energy and water consumption, managing waste responsibly, and improving the overall environmental performance of their property. With this collaboration, BTC City aims to create a greener, more energy-efficient business environment that benefits both the partners and the community. The partners' contributions to the sustainability strategy add to a pleasant environment for all stakeholders, including visitors. This shared ambition encourages the business partners in the area to take ownership.

The balancing of interests has only just started at BTC City. The shared ambitions and needs of the partners demonstrate that a new relationship between the area and its users is taking shape, or as Andrej Janko explains: "BTC City was once a place to just pass through while shopping—but it is turning into a place to pause and enjoy."



"BTC City was once a place to just pass through while shopping—but it is turning into a place to pause and enjoy"





The landscape

The story of Herlev starts at an industrial area in the west of Copenhagen. Before its industrialisation, the landscape was filled with meadows and fields, herds of cattle, small farms and swamps. In the late 1960s an asphalt factory settled in the area and closed in 2022. Today, the industrial area will transform into a housing area, including the former asphalt factory lot, which is developing into 445 apartments with green common areas. During this transition, the Danish creative agency NXT introduced the 'Garden Caretaker': a residency programme where artists live on the site for several weeks to foster a deeper connection between users, visitors and inhabitants, and the natural environment through art and storytelling. The residency takes place in a dome shaped, transparent green house, called 'The Droplet', designed by Atelier Kristoffer Tejlgaard and placed on the development site. In a society where people have become increasingly estranged from nature, the artists participating in the residency established dialogues between humans and their surroundings—nurturing sensitivity toward local species. The Really Regenerative Centre supported NXT to deepen their understanding of living system principles.



We are searching for flintstones. The dark grey and brown, glassy rocks are hard to identify in the piles of gravel at this dusty construction site. Looking up, we see the carcasses of new buildings under construction. At ground level, it is just soil, rocks and scattered patches of green. We are joined by artist Georg Jagunov, who is guiding our search and teaching us how to listen to the stones. Their colour, shading and shape tell us stories about their past. We find one, look at it carefully, and touch it tenderly. Its shape and colours reveal the interconnectedness of the past and present. Georg places the flintstones in a shallow tank filled with water. Despite being inanimate natural objects, they yearn for water as they are shaped by rivers. The stones have a history and a home just like humans. We will never take these flintstones for granted again.



On site: local experiences and practices

Building a multispecies community on a housing development site

Six artists took on the role of Garden Caretakers, working towards a common goal: building a community where all local species—not just humans—feel welcome. The Garden Caretakers in Herlev were Helene Johanne Christensen, Georg Jagunov, Arendse Krabbe, Davide Ronco, and Daily Fiction with artists Tora Balslev and Felia Gram-Hanssen. Through workshops and activities, these artists cultivated a deeper understanding of the natural world and the specific histories of the site, by using artistic methods and working with natural materials from the area.

To build this 'multispecies' community, the artists turned to sensory practices such as listening, observing or feeling and used aesthetic methods such as imagining and creating to foster empathy for and relationships with non-human species. "We have lost our connection to the other species we live with, the places we inhabit and to each other," explains Madeleine Kate McGowan, designer at NXT. "This means that we feel less responsibility and care for our surroundings. But, when you know something or someone closely, you might be more willing to care for it or them."

On site: local experiences and practices

Connecting to others and places

The Garden Caretakers invited participants to perceive the world through nature's eyes and listen to it carefully. Poet Helene took people around to explore the area, making poems for species like the birch trees on the site, and writing letters from the perspective of other species. Artist Arendse offered 'deep listening' workshops, in which the sound of natural objects like leaves, snail shells and pinecones created meditative auditory experiences. These activities invoked empathy for other species and invited participants to exchange perspectives with another species. These natural objects might not speak, but these exercises facilitated a dialogue between humans and nature.

Sculptor Georg's practice connected the past to the future of the construction site by uncovering the (hi)stories embedded in its stones, soil, minerals and plants. Participants held and examined the natural objects, learning how they transformed over time. Artist Davide created a temporary art piece with locally sourced clay and sand. Together with children from the local kindergarten, local construction workers and a biologist, he created an art piece with clay bricks that would disintegrate over time. By collaborative creation, they offered the site something in return.

Through these practices, participants gained more appreciation for the natural objects and materials. All artistic practices invited participants to attentively reflect on their connection to the industrial site and the species within it. They treated the site as a commons: a place that is maintained and shaped by all local species and humans together.

The Garden Caretakers invited participants to perceive the world through nature's eyes and listen to it carefully

101



Artist Arendse Krabbe created so-called 'listening situations' in which participants experienced calmness, gratitude or emotional feelings while listening to the sounds of natural objects.

On site: local experiences and practices

On site: local experiences and practices

Gathering the community

Building the Garden Caretaker community took time. In the beginning, NXT invited participants for the workshops by hanging posters and sharing announcements. Soon they realised they needed to change their approach by partnering with local institutions, such as kindergartens and education centres. Together they created a network of institutions with the concept of care at their root that grew stronger through the Garden Caretaker methods. As the project is about collective experiences, it proved to be more effective to invite communities instead of separate individuals.

Some people were sceptical. The project's artistic nature sometimes felt inaccessible, unfamiliar or unsettling to some and could come across as something that was imposed on them. The artists had to lower the threshold for people to join. They opened the doors of The Droplet for 'Open Greenhouses', where passersby were invited to explore the materials and practices in an approachable, hands-on way. This turned scepticism into curiosity. The artists had to carefully listen and embrace people's criticism as a valuable learning opportunity to make the project more inclusive.

Because of the novelty of the Garden Caretaker method, it was a process of trial and error. "We knew it was pioneering," says Siv Werner, project manager at NXT. "We proposed new ideas and a different language, hoping to stimulate imagination, connection, and new sensuous perceptions of the world. The results of the project are difficult to grasp, but we know it had an effect on the people. Perhaps they value fallen leaves or snail shells on the ground as more than just dirt?"

These artistic methodologies require the developing parties to take a leap into experimentation



The Droplet was the central recognition point of the Garden Caretaker project, providing a place for the community to meet and exhibit the outcomes of the artistic workshops, making the project also visible to the public.



On site: local experiences and practices

On site: local experiences and practices

New artistic value

How to integrate the artistic and social value of the Garden Caretaker project in a profit-driven system? The value of the 'multispecies' community that the Garden Caretakers created extends beyond the boundaries of the construction site. Realising this broader significance was sometimes challenging for the developers and municipal officials. The project had both symbolic and tangible impact—often subjective to each participant—although these can be difficult to measure, quantify and express in spreadsheets. These artistic methodologies require the developing parties to take a leap into experimentation and the merging of the built and natural world.

Despite these challenges, the Garden Caretakers impacted the development of the Herlev site. In an advisory report by NXT, developers were encouraged to reuse building

"We have lost our connection to the other species we live with, the places we inhabit and to each other"

materials. This resulted in the incorporation of elements from the old factory into the new buildings, and original details and colours from

the area were integrated in the design. The developers have allowed The Droplet to stay for a longer period in the shared garden of the construction site. Altogether, this shows that the experimental approach has left its mark.

During the fifth residency of Garden Caretakers, Daily Fiction curated participatory audio walks and organised a film screening for university students and construction workers at the site.



Where are we going?

105

Into action

03.

Towards local co-design

After our wandering routes through the sites we can look back at a fascinating journey. But what kind of landscape have we travelled? And what are the take-aways for future action?

In the final part of this guide, we move to a strategic action perspective. First, let's zoom out and take stock of our experiences so far. We are shifting our vantage point, from the ground level of the sites to a wide-angle view of the landscape. This brings into focus how the various experiences on the ground, and the identity of places, are the product of an interplay of human, spatial, physical and environmental elements. Through such an integral perspective we see our living environment as an 'ecology of place.'

Taking an ecological look at the landscape, we put our feet back on the ground, and home in on where place-based change actually happens. We sketch a number of defining features to re-imagine sustainable cities and neighbourhoods.

Through a series of *pathfinders* we mark our direction of travel, leading us to a future agenda for local practice.

What does this mean for design and designers? In the final stage of our journey, we turn to collective design practises. How, for example, can we develop a practice of *local* design and co-design? In addressing this question, concepts such as civic design, community design, sustainist design and placemaking can be a compass for developing sustainable local design practices.

All this we take to be a collective challenge. This guide, above all, is to be read as a call to connect—with one another across communities, neighbourhoods and physical locations. The know-how and ideas we unearth are meant to be shared and spread.

Let's continue our journey....

Ecologies of Place map

INHABITANTS

People, communities, and institutions interact with each other and their surroundings to shape urban spaces. The way inhabitants behave—and the places they aspire to create—depends on the values they hold and the local qualities they seek in the design of their living environment.

INTERRELATIONSHIPS

The relationships between inhabitants, and with their surroundings—including nature—are central to the quality of our living environments. Connections play a crucial role in shaping ecological forms, and hence who is included and who is not.

ENVIRONMENT

Creating meaningful, sustainable places requires grounding in the local context—both the physical environment and the cultural history of the community. The quality of a place depends on its roots, the sources and resources that nourish and sustain it.

Into action: where are we going?

What kind of landscape have we travelled?
And what are the stepping stones towards
future action?

Let's map our experiences from the individual sites onto a wider canvas. By changing the scale of our map, we make sense of the close-ups we took of the sites. We discern what they have in common and what recurrent patterns they reveal. It brings the 'ecology' of the landscape into view, showing us the interconnections within the entire ecosystem: *ecologies of place*. The illustration on the left offers a visualisation of cities and neighbourhoods as ecologies.

Our 'eco map' of place expands beyond the conventional meaning of an ecosystem. It incorporates people and the built environment, as well as natural and organic elements. Viewing local environments as ecologies of place, we focus on the networked character of the interrelationships which altogether make up our experiences of the places we inhabit.

Painting with a broad brush, ecosystems can be understood to involve three integral elements that feed and sustain them: *inhabitants*, *interrelationships* and *environments*. Within our ecologies of place we translate them into three constituents which—in concert—determine the quality of our urban places. They will become our stepping stones for connecting the insights from our featured sites to a design agenda.

With these three elements we can outline the key contours of ecologies of place and its defining features. The three rudimentary ecological patterns, and the linkages between them, help us to categorise what we have seen and learned so far. It's as if we are organising our collection of travel pictures into a photo album—not by location or destination, but by theme.

Into action: where are we going?

Mapping ecologies of place

INHABITANTS

The creative power of people and communities

People, communities, and institutions interact with each other and their surroundings to shape urban spaces. The way inhabitants behave—and the places they aspire to create—depends on the values they hold and the local qualities they seek in the design of their living environment.

People make places

In Riga, inhabitants assumed the role of co-designers, rather than passive users or tenants. Such an approach often requires authorities and other stakeholders to rethink entrenched routines, as the Riga municipality recognised. For example, the Riga municipality initially planned to merely renovate the 'sleeping' Ziepju Street 11 building. However, greater community involvement illustrated the need for new relationships at the heart of the site's development. This became the inspiration for redeveloping Riga's 6,000 former Soviet-era housing blocks.

What has happened in Riga shows us that it is often overlooked that people and their relationships—not bricks and mortar—are at the heart of our living environments. Places become what their inhabitants make of them. In turn, places shape the inhabitants who live there. When citizens take a more active role in shaping their surroundings, the focus shifts from physical urban development to building sustainable communities.

Creating situations for community building

When the Royal Academy's architecture department chose to settle in the heart of Kalundborg, a new situation was created. It sparked an opportunity for collaborating—with local residents, industries, and the municipality—to collectively shape the social fabric of the town. In the Wildemanbuurt, Design and Do Groups enforced a community-led situation that addressed multiple societal issues around poverty, health, safety and also uncertainties around long-term urban redevelopment. The groups co-created public meeting places, launched cooperative ventures, and started a local newspaper, allowing residents to shape their community and reflect on the ongoing urban redevelopment, and their role in it.

Creating situations that bring communities and institutions together is essential to fostering collaboration, as we have seen at the Kalundborg and Amsterdam sites. For meaningful co-creations and community bonds to grow, the right conditions must be in place.

Sharing values

Making manifestos encouraged participants in creative workshops at Gadehavegård, Cascina Falchera, and in Kalundborg to discuss, cluster, and articulate their values, setting a clear foundation for their collaborative efforts. In the early stages of co-design, the creation of such manifestos proved to be a powerful tool.

In the Wildemanbuurt, shared values were unearthed through open dialogues when the residents-led design groups had to overcome frictions in finding agreement over common values. This process illustrated the need for transparency and a common language for collaboration. At BTC City, a shared vision on the sustainable transformation of the area was created by consulting a wide variety of stakeholders: from the commercial tenants in

the area to young adults. As they all represented different interests, the challenge for the BTC City team was to find shared goals and values.

Ensuring that collaborations are fair, just, and inclusive is crucial when communities lead sustainable change. Trust, a core value witnessed across all sites, is essential for enabling collective efforts. Similarly, carefully examining inclusion as a value is necessary for successful community collaborations. To recognise and embrace shared values—which in practice turns out to be quite a challenge—is key to bringing people together around common purpose.

Making is connecting

At Ziepjú, collaborative making made people pay attention to others. When a mixed group of residents was asked about their ideas for the garden in the creative workshops, they interestingly designed for each other: children suggested improving accessibility for the elderly, while the elderly proposed sports facilities for the younger generations. A different way of making things together could be seen in Kalundborg. Here the staging of an impromptu public event in the street drew people in, inviting them to participate and become part of the making process. 'Making a scene' together in the public domain lowered the threshold to take part in the gathering.

The act of making things together—whether an expression of collective imagination or a physical project—is an effective way to connect. It fosters involvement: engagement by doing. Apparently, collaborative making can be a vital condition for inclusive co-design. It helps to overcome barriers and bridge gaps, and finally enables meaningful interactions.

Creating new stories

In the Wildemanbuurt storytelling—in films and exhibitions—the Y.O.U. collective (Young Osdorp United) transformed negative narratives

into empowering ones. A postcard writing workshop about MIND in 2050 created a new narrative—revealing the emotional connection of the students with the district, as they share their thoughts and feelings. At BTC City, young people shared their ideas of creating green corridors and building a technology centre, during a 48-hackathon, thereby presenting a new narrative of progress and sustainability.

Storytelling turned out to be a powerful way of creating a sense of belonging to places. By creating and sharing stories—through art, collaborative experiences, or community projects—the (future) residents and visitors reimagined the place and started to strengthen community ties. Their shared narratives help the communities to connect with their environment and each other, fostering a deeper sense of unity and purpose.

INTERRELATIONSHIPS

The qualities of our connections

The relationships between inhabitants, and with their surroundings—including nature—are central to the quality of our living environments. Connections play a crucial role in shaping ecological forms, and hence who is included and who is not.

Flows of collective interaction

At Cascina Falchera, collective interactions began with a co-creation process without a predefined plan. A diverse group of residents was invited to engage in an open dialogue about the shared spaces at the farmstead. Consorzio Kairos spurred on a dynamic process of co-design,

working towards transforming the farmstead. Similarly, in Kalundborg, the Phoenix Group embraced an experimental, unscripted design approach to create something meaningful from the ground up.

In Herlev, initial skepticism among visitors about artistic practices was transformed into curiosity when the artists organised open days at the art space The Droplet, inviting the public to co-create and thus creating a welcoming atmosphere. Through engagement in artistic activities, the public's imagination was encouraged and new interactions were created.

Such examples show that engaging with the existing dynamics of a place is one of the best ways to encourage collective interaction. When communities join these creative flows, it sparks the imagination of the people involved and energises the process. For those who feel disconnected, however, contributing to this transformation can seem daunting.

Quality of connections

In Cascina Falchera, hands-on involvement deepened young adults' connection to the lands around the farmstead. While taking part in Water Saving Camps they addressed local ecosystem challenges, and also strengthened their community ties.

At MIND, visitors and residents have been invited to connect and interact by offering them attractive yellow benches across the still rather undefined site. These apparently small changes created more intimate communal places. In Gadehavegård, workshops to design a biodiverse park were not the priority of all residents, likely because of their distrust towards institutions, caused by the development plan reducing housing units and displacing residents. An opening towards residents engagement was marked when eighth-grade students co-designed future scenarios for their community, giving them a voice in shaping

the future neighbourhood. The students' final presentation, attended by local officials and urban planners, allowed them to directly inspire the neighbourhood's development.

These examples emphasise that residents should be involved in shaping their local spaces, and need their voices to be heard. Meaningful connections can only emerge when people can engage with their environment and with each other, fostering a sense of community. Designing places that encourage unhurried, personal interactions helps deepen these connections.

ENVIRONMENT

Valuing local sources and cultural resources

Creating meaningful, sustainable places requires grounding in the local context—both the physical environment and the cultural history of the community. The quality of a place depends on its roots, the sources and resources that nourish and sustain it.

Rootedness

Rootedness may take many forms. In Herlev, residents have been involved in artistic activities that engage them with the natural environment. A deeper understanding of the neighbourhood's natural and cultural heritage was cultivated when using artistic methods such as imagining and creating to foster empathy for and relationships with non-human species. At Cascina Falchera, the community reconnected with the environment by exploring its 300-year history. Through collective activities like unearthing the land's

historical significance, participants deepened their relationship with both the place and one another.

Inhabitants with diverse cultural roots in the Wildemanbuurt participated in initiatives like public gardening. Acknowledging the various roots of the participants enriched the process and fostered cultural exchange, as well as a shared sense of stewardship.

Rootedness, both cultural and environmental, is a key element of meaningful placemaking. A neighbourhood's identity grows from its connection to the land and its cultural heritage, encompassing the stories, traditions, and natural elements that define its character. This connection to what lies beneath—physically and metaphorically—fosters a sense of belonging.

Interplay

In the Wildemanbuurt, the community-led design team Wildeman Green brought together residents, schools, and housing corporations to create and maintain shared green spaces. This intervention showed the transformative potential of cooperation and the interdependencies between environmental and social conditions. When steps were made to sustain circular waste collection and greening public spaces in the neighbourhood, the complex interplay between the various groups involved became apparent. It challenged established positions and revealed issues of ownership and control. It showed the need for a constructive relationship between authority support and community agency. Here, the municipality was asked to provide resources, but take a step back to let the community take the lead in developing their cooperatives.

At Herlev, sensory workshops provided an opportunity to explore interdependencies by engaging participants in experiences that combined thought, sensation, and action. Through artistic practices—with a mindful,

experiential approach—connections emerged to both the natural environment and between people.

Viewed as 'neighbourhood ecologies' such cases highlight the deep interconnections that sustain local action. Only integrated approaches that go beyond words and intellectual understanding, can foster long-term engagements with places. It challenges us to move away from top-down, fragmented approaches and instead embrace the dynamic interplay that defines local ecosystems.

Sources

At BTC City, plants and trees were introduced to serve as local green sources for both economic and environmental change. Tree planting and a green lease concept encourage local businesses to align with sustainability goals, creating a thriving future where nature and commerce coexist. With the green in place, nature is integrated into the urban fabric, the green spaces are seen as opportunities rather than costs. In Ziepju, the woman with pink hair was an important source of action. She brought valuable gardening skills to the community. By acknowledging her individual expertise, collective progress in the neighbourhood can thrive.

Sources connect us to the ground—the surroundings we live in. The extent to which people and parties feel linked to the ground, their habitat, feeds them to grow sustainably—personally and as a community. Locally embedded experiences and skills are essential to driving community action. It brings a unique and deep understanding of local places—its needs, strengths, and growth potential. However, these sources of action can only contribute when they are recognised, activated and empowered.

Fertile ground for collective action

At BTC City, design workshops emphasised the need for spaces that promote biodiversity while encouraging a slower, more mindful development

process. These workshops demonstrated that fostering natural, serendipitous encounters requires time and patience—qualities often overlooked in fast-paced development. In the Wildemanbuurt a strong culture of solidarity fuels community transformation. In this neighbourhood with limited access to services, solidarity ensures that locally created wealth—both financial and cultural—remains within the community. Here, the importance of community autonomy became evident: meaningful transformation occurs not through top-down, fragmented approaches, but through locally rooted, collaborative processes. This shift toward local leadership is also central to the Phoenix Group's work in Kalundborg, where residents are seeking greater self-sufficiency and local control, while pursuing independent funding to support their initiatives.

Creating sustainable places requires a 'fertile ground'—a supportive, interconnected foundation that nurtures and sustains local neighbourhood practices. That means actively creating an environment where collaboration and shared responsibility are encouraged.





120

121

Into action: where are we going?

Into action: where are we going?



Where do we go from here? Our featured sites gave us stepping stones for the journey ahead. But how do we find pathways to local sustainable practice? There is no clear map to follow. We need pathfinders that can help us translate past lessons into meaningful action for the future.

Pathfinders mark out new routes. They don't hand us pre-set routes, to follow—that would disregard the unique local contexts and circumstances that give places their meaning. Instead, pathfinders open up new possibilities and show us how we can change course. They help us step off the well-trodden, conventional roads and onto new paths—routes that are more in tune with local settings and communities.

The pathfinders we're introducing here aim to transform the way we think about our cities and neighbourhoods. They provide guidance in practice—drawing on successful placemaking experiences—and invite us to rethink what it takes to create places that are both sustainable and inclusive.

But to carve out paths to new practice, we first need to harness the power of imagination. Pathfinding starts with re-imagining: picturing not just the places we live now, but the kind of places we want to live in—and how we might get there. What if we didn't start where we are now, but focus on where we want to be?

Pathfinders aren't about standing still: they're about taking action for positive change. That's why we frame our pathfinders as verbs, not nouns. They serve as encouragement to local communities and others to act together in shaping their surroundings. These pathfinders shift our perspective, and focus on aspirations for the future. In the inspiring words of Transition Town pioneer Rob Hopkins: "From what IS to what IF" (Hopkins 2019).

Pathfinders to local change and collective action

What if? Pathfinders to local change and collective action

INHABITANTS

- **Community building**
What if local communities become the main drivers of sustainable change?
- **Imagining**
What if we reimagine our collective aspirations for creating meaningful places?
- **Making**
What if we collaborate in making, to strengthen our sense of belonging to the places we inhabit?

INTERRELATIONSHIPS

- ↓
Connecting
What if we base neighbourhood design on the quality of our relationships, with each other and with nature?
- ↓
Commoning & governing
What if we adopt local commons and collective stewardship as guiding principles for sustainable change?
- ↓
Engaging & co-designing
What if we focus on community engagement and co-design to foster sustainability and local connection?

ENVIRONMENT

- **Designing for proximity**
What if we place nearbyness at the centre of our design briefs for sustainable placemaking?
- **Grounding**
What if we cultivate local practices that are both socially embedded and rooted in nature?
- **Spreading-and-sharing**
What if we spread and share our place-based know-how to foster the growing local movements for sustainable change?

Into action: where are we going?

Carving new paths —what if?

- **Community building**
What if local communities become the main drivers of sustainable change?

Fostering local practices begins with people and communities, rather than top-down institutions. Placemaking driven by local inhabitants' values creates community and common purpose. Community-driven practices contribute to a sense of belonging by shifting the focus from the physical aspects of neighbourhoods to the social features of place—from the 'built city' to the 'lived city'. A crucial question becomes: who is involved in shaping our living environments, and who is not?

- **Imagining**
What if we reimagine our collective aspirations for creating meaningful places?

Collective imagination is a powerful tool for refocusing what we do and why. Reimagining future situations, aspirations, and purposes can identify the changes we need—whether in outlook, approach, or infrastructure. Sharing stories about what we expect from neighbourhood life can help us develop new practices and inspire narratives that reflect our values and visions for liveable places that are socially and environmentally sustainable.

- **Making**
What if we collaborate in making, to strengthen our sense of belonging to the places we inhabit?

Vitalising neighbourhoods and creating a sense of identity are practical challenges achieved through action, and often activism. The very act of making something together, serves as a 'social engine' to foster community and belonging. Collective making in and with community has proven to be a constructive way of establishing a

Into action: where are we going?

truly local approach to social, environmental and cultural issues. *How* such collaborative practices of making are realised, and *who* participates, turn out to be as important as *what* is actually being made.

→ Connecting

What if we base neighbourhood design on the quality of our relationships, with each other and with nature?

Vital neighbourhoods rely on strong connections, an essential feature of contemporary life. Connection is what sustains relationships, between people, institutions, and nature. Interdependent connections, as described in ecological terms, are at the heart of what sociologists call the urban fabric. Hence the need to focus explicitly on designing for relationships. Asking how relationships can be integrated into design briefs, ensures that connection becomes a foundation for vital and sustainable neighbourhoods.

→ Commoning & governing

What if we adopt local commons and collective stewardship as guiding principles for sustainable change?

Commoning, or 'all that we share', emphasises collective responsibility and local governance over traditional market-driven or top-down governmental ways of dealing with resources. This approach empowers communities to steward shared spaces and resources. The process of commoning strengthens community bonds and supports sustainable and inclusive change. It enhances a collective sense of responsibility for their neighbourhoods. By developing local practices of commoning we can collectively manage—or own—a shared resource or place in the neighbourhood. Instead of what conventionally is called 'public space', we create a commons.

→ Engaging & co-designing

What if we focus on community engagement and co-design to foster sustainability and local connection?

Terms like 'participation' and 'expert design' represent old paradigms. Different forms of engagement are called for, based on meaningful involvement of citizens and communities right from the outset. Co-design processes rooted in collaboration with citizens create sustainable and inclusive neighbourhoods. To involve communities as local co-designers, brings in lived experiences and expertises, fostering a sense of collective belonging and meaningful connections to place.

→ Designing for proximity

What if we place nearbyness at the centre of our design briefs for sustainable placemaking?

The concept of the '15-minute city', where essential facilities are within walking distance, highlights the importance of proximity for urban quality of life. Proximity thus becomes a social quality, of people and communities, instead of a geographical measure of distance. Nearbyness fosters local practices that are social and sustainable, emphasising hyperlocal solutions that grow from neighbourhoods outward, rather than nation-wide or city-wide strategies which are then imposed from above. Asking when and where sustainable or inclusive practices encourage nearbyness becomes a key question for design.

→ Grounding

What if we cultivate local practices that are both socially embedded and rooted in nature?

Lasting initiatives grow from within communities and places, grounded in local values and rooted in natural contexts. Rather than imposing external solutions which are then planted locally, we cultivate practices that use local sources and resources, reflect local histories, and value our relationships with nature. This approach ensures that neighbourhood transformations remain deeply rooted and are embedded in community.

→ Spreading-and-sharing

What if we spread and share our place-based know-how to foster the growing local movements for sustainable change?

While every neighbourhood is unique, there is much to learn from sharing successful practices. Making local efforts visible and accessible, communities worldwide can exchange ideas, strategies. Learning by sharing. That's very different from scaling up a local solution—as if we can simply apply the same specific sustainable practices all across the globe. Adopting a 'spreading-and-sharing' strategy, helps to further extend the reach of neighbourhood approaches. Shared know-how strengthens the global movement for sustainable transformation, demonstrating that hyperlocal actions—in toto—can have a worldwide impact.

Into action: where are we going?



Into action: where are we going?

A LOCAL STORY: BREADMAKING AS COMMUNITY DESIGN PRACTICE

Let us take you once more to Amsterdam's Wildemanbuurt, and tell you the story of the Wild Chefs. It all began with a simple question: how do we reach the women of the neighbourhood? The answer was breadmaking.

One day, inspired by the advice from a local neighbour, the designers at The Beach social design hub decided to invite women from the neighbourhood to bake bread together. They arrived curious and a little reserved, but soon their hands were kneading dough, while their stories filled the room. Without speaking each other's languages, these women shared their rich cultural traditions: types of bread, rising methods, the designs of village ovens from their homelands—Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco, Eritrea. They were given a place where they felt welcomed, sharing time together, and exchanging experiences. As the dough rose, so did the connections, stories, and a sense of belonging.

Bread turned out to be so much more than food is. It's a thread that connects people, carrying meanings that transcend culture and language. The rising of the dough became a symbol of hope and community. The irresistible smell of freshly baked bread drew others in. However, the women faced a challenge. Many of them

struggled with Dutch, leaving part of their stories hidden behind a language barrier. The women came up with an idea: "Why not practice Dutch while baking bread?" Soon Brood & Taal (Bread & Language) was born. A neighbourhood resident volunteered to help, and more women joined.

What began as a breadbaking session more than a decade ago has flourished into a vibrant local ecosystem of community-led initiatives and neighbourhood life. The women dreamt big: over time, they built an outdoor oven, started a neighbourhood restaurant for the lonely, grew a local herb garden, handed out snacks during the pandemic. They catered food for museums, gave baking and cooking workshops at festivals, and participated in art projects—stepping into spaces that once felt worlds away, becoming actively engaged in the community. The Wilde Chefs (Wild Chefs) as they called themselves, became not just bakers but creators of connections, and designers of community.

This is no ordinary design guide. Yet, as the practice-based stories from our featured sites have shown, our notion of 'designing' is altogether different from the conventional view of urban design. The radical shift we envision leads us to a more locally-rooted, community-driven approach—one that builds on experiences with placemaking and social design and links these to sustainable design practice. In this final section, we explore what this might mean, setting us on a path to designing sustainable and inclusive neighbourhoods—straight into a forward-looking action agenda.

Let us take a moment to recap, before we travel on. Designing our neighbourhoods has always been about more than bricks and mortar; it's about shaping the places where life unfolds. The problem is that human experiences and community concerns are often absent in conventional design approaches. That omission has been one of the reasons that the field of 'social design' has grown steadily over the last several decades.

The emerging practice of designing sustainable and inclusive places shows that it's often the interconnections that make the difference. The combination of human, social and environmental qualities is what makes our places desirable to live in. Hence, solely focusing on the environmental aspects of sustainable design is insufficient. It is essential to integrate social qualities into the design process—sense of community, belonging to place, connections to nature. The notion of sustainist design—as briefly introduced at the beginning of this guide—serves as a shorthand for a design practice whereby social design and sustainable design are inextricably connected.

Designing as a living process

As we turn towards action, we find ourselves at a crossroads, rethinking how design unfolds in practice, and whom it serves. How can we develop design practices that are equally rooted

Fertile grounds: local design in community

in connectedness, fairness and sustainability, as in the physical domain? What we're calling for are new ways of thinking—and of doing—that focus on local design and co-design. To begin, we must reform the very idea of designing.

Designing our neighbourhoods involves more than bricks and mortar; it's about shaping the places where life unfolds

In this vision, design is no longer confined exclusively to the realm of professional experts. It becomes a matter of co-designing as an open and shared responsibility. Designing becomes a living process, embedded in the rhythms and realities of everyday life. Remember the story of the women in the Wildeman area of Amsterdam, who transformed their living

place through the collective act of breadmaking and exchanging stories. It shows how designing a neighbourhood can turn into a local bottom-up collaboration developing over time, driven by the people who call a place home.

Recasting design

This field guide has taken a radical stance. Radical in terms of activating places through community practice rather than conventional urban design. And radical as in the root of the matter. In doing so, we are essentially *recasting* both the meaning and practice of design, revealing where fundamental changes in design

practice are called for. The idea of recasting can be understood in different ways—each with implications for how we design and for whom. Four modes of recasting design show us what's at stake in

transitioning to more local and community-embedded design practices.

First, there is the *model* that's adopted for design (think of the mold for a cast, through which we shape things). Here design is turned into

an ongoing activity, which can grow in place. Place-based design also recognises the unique character of each neighbourhood. Our model employs local know-how and connects to community concerns.

Second, the entire *process* by which we design shifts (the way a cast is made and used). Designing places becomes a collaborative, iterative process, rooted in local values and aspirations. At the centre of the design process lie the relationships between people, and with their built environment and natural surroundings.

Third, the roles played by the *participants* in designing are recast (like actors in a film cast). Inclusion becomes an essential feature of how we design and with whom. In this recast mode, everyone becomes a designer, participating actively in shaping their environment. In other words, *co-design*.

Fourth, the nature of our *engagements* are recast, together with forms of community involvement in design. It takes us beyond one-way participation of local residents (in the sense of traditional broadcasting) to genuine collaboration. Concerns like stewardship and the creation of a shared sense of place become integral to the design challenge.

Local design and community design

How might we envisage modes of local design? It begins with the awareness that 'being local' is a social and human quality, rather than just a mark on a geographical map. The power of the local lies in the qualities of proximity, the nearby human connections. Nearbyness—not geography—is the condition that makes the local meaningful to people and communities. This, in essence, defines 'local design'—as many of our featured

We need to incorporate social qualities into our design—a sense of community, belonging to place, connections to nature

sites have shown. Perhaps we should rename it *local community design* to make this explicit.

To foster collaborative design practice at the local level is no small task. The forms it takes will vary from place to place. Regardless of the locale, enabling inhabitants and communities to shape their neighbourhoods requires actively listening to them. More broadly, co-design can only take root when there is a 'fertile ground' for people's aspirations and imaginations. Creating the right *situation* is often the first step towards co-designing—as many of the local practices presented in this guide are witness to. And in many cases, we must acknowledge—in the words of design writer John Thackara—that 'it's not about designing in a situation, designing is the situation.'

In practice, designing local places and building community are often part of the very same process. Without an active effort to create a situation where participation and trust can flourish, many local community design projects would never have taken off. It signals the need to develop new forms, platforms, and activities to create situations that enable and encourage a design practice that is both locally-based and community-centred.

In creating local modes of urban design, the emerging insights from what's called *civic design* are highly relevant. They offer another set of

practices for empowering local citizens. Civic design has taken a variety of forms. Broadly, we can identify three orientations in local civic design practice (based on De Kreek et al. 2024). First, it can activate citizen involvement by

working directly with communities, employing design strategies to address local challenges. Second, a civic design approach can bridge the gap between communities and local institutions such as municipalities and planning agencies, and translate local ideas into plans and actions

Design as a living process, embedded in the rhythms and realities of everyday life

that policymakers and planners can understand. On a higher level, civic design can help create infrastructures to support neighbourhood initiatives. This opens new ways for communities, governments, and other stakeholders to collaborate.

Social design x sustainable design = sustainist design

As many of our local stories illustrate, social concerns affecting the quality of life are deeply intertwined with issues of sustainability. At the neighbourhood level we experience that solutions are often found at the intersection of social design and environmentally sustainable design. For too long, these design practices have developed separately, alongside one another. Now is the moment to venture onto the common ground—the crossover area—where the social and the sustainable reinforce one another.

Words matter. In this field guide—and beyond—there's a real challenge in identifying and articulating the kind of design practice we're advocating. Words like green, just, inclusive, sustainable, and socially embedded each capture an essential facet. But how do we bring all these design concepts and practices together in a single, cohesive frame—one that embraces an ecosystem perspective where these elements amplify and reinforce each other?

This is where the notion of sustainist design enters the picture. It offers a way to align our approach around the idea that social and community-focused design and sustainable design work best hand in hand. Sustainist design provides a unifying framework to bridge environmental and social dimensions of sustainability. Grounded in an ecosystem perspective, it tackles the interconnected nature of our design challenges head-on.

Design is no longer confined to professional experts, becoming a matter of co-designing and shared responsibility

This framework equips us to develop practices where local design is deeply tied to the idea of neighbourhood ecologies, creating places that are as inclusive and fair as they are sustainable.

Transformations

In an ecosystem perspective, sustainist design tackles the interconnected nature of our design challenges head-on

Sustainist design emerged within a wider cultural shift—from modernism to sustainism—shaping how we envision the future and what we value in contemporary life. As outlined in the *Sustainist Design Guide* (Schwarz & Krabbendam 2013), the sustainist design approach offers a set of social design criteria that resonate strongly at

the local and community level: proximity, human scale, connectedness, sharing, and co-creation.

In this field guide, we've been exploring through a sustainist lens. Now, it's time to use that perspective to outline a transformational design practice at the neighbourhood level. Sustainist design is all about driving positive change—reimagining how we live together and taking bold, practical steps to turn that vision into reality. It's design-as-activism: a way to advocate equity, environmental care, and community empowerment. By embracing sustainist design, we're supporting a movement towards a culture of care, connection, and shared responsibility. This isn't just about redesigning neighbourhoods—it's about contributing to a much larger story of transformation.

Creative change

It is no coincidence that many pioneering local initiatives in our cities and neighbourhoods were spearheaded by groups of artists or designers. Artistic practices at the local level have proven to be catalysts for changing the conditions of neighbourhood life, showing the way to radical change. Through creativity and artistic outlook, they were able to support inhabitants and

communities in reimagining their neighbourhoods as places where they feel at home.

The role of creatives in shaping our living places is also a reminder that designing desirable neighbourhoods isn't just concerned with ethical choices—choices about which qualities we value in shaping our cities and neighbourhoods. It's equally about our emotional connections. Our sense of home and belonging is deeply linked to the aesthetic experience and the beauty of the places we live in.

Design in an activist mode

Moving deeper into what we call a new landscape, urges all of us to play an active part. At the centre are the local residents and communities, whose capacity to engage in the design process depends on the involvement of others: local institutions, urban planners, and municipal policymakers. For local co-design practices to truly take shape, they all need to actively collaborate.

This field guide isn't here to tell these local stakeholders how to act. One of the lessons taken from our journey is that, whilst we can provide some pointers, and sketch broad community goals, these will always be tailored to the unique locale. What we hope to offer—if nothing else—is an action perspective.

Local sustainist design is about actively creating the conditions where life can thrive, for communities to prosper, and individuals can truly feel a sense of belonging. Achieving this requires us to break away from the familiar, top-down frameworks established by top-down institutions and traditional experts. This is a call to not only

***Nearbyness—
not geography—is the condition that makes the local meaningful to people and communities***

Creative practices at the local level are catalysts for changing the conditions of neighbourhood life

reimagine how we co-create our living environments, but to also embrace a more activist approach.

Activism is about change. At the local level, this involves small-scale interventions with positive impact, serving a larger purpose later on. Our collective challenge then, is to determine what kind of change we need—not just in our thinking, but in our actions too.

Based on our journey so far, we propose a series of principles together with an action agenda for local sustainist design. These are invitations to rethink our aspirations for improving neighbourhood life: moving from 'what is' to 'what if'. At the same time, they provide points of reference for shifts in design practice. Now we're all designers in some way, we must engage in a dialogue about the redesigns necessary to transform our neighbourhoods.

The actions required for change are likely to vary between citizens, communities, and policymakers or urban designers. Altogether we offer a path forward—and transform the places we live in through collective acts of redesign.

Our sense of home and belonging is deeply linked to the beauty of the places we live in





140

Into action: where are we going?



141



Into action: where are we going?

Principles for local sustainist design

- **Design as a local act**
 - Tailoring to the specific place and community: not a one-size-fits-all approach.
 - Focusing on small-scale, nearby interventions rooted in local contexts.
- **Design with and within communities**
 - Driven by the aspirations of local people, rather than external policy agendas.
 - Maximising inclusion and diversity, whilst strengthening local qualities and values.
- **Design for sustainable change**
 - Nurturing ecologies of place through connecting social design to place-based sustainability.
 - Fostering design that sustains long-term community wealth, whilst embracing the power of placemaking.
- **Design with nature**
 - Emphasising the interconnectedness and mutual dependency between the natural environment and the human-made lifeworld.
 - Regarding nature as a partner, and a source, not merely a resource.
- **Co-design for vital relationships**
 - Building collaboration, reciprocity, and commoning into the design process.
 - Employing creativity and imagination to create convivial habitats.

What needs to change?

In this field guide we've navigated between 'the trees' and 'the woods.' The journey has taken us through local practices in 'the field' (the trees), while striving to see the evolving landscape (the woods). Looking ahead, we draw up a design agenda for the future—a plan of action, to take us further on the road to designing vibrant and sustainable neighbourhoods. The change we advocate, involves a radical turn. It radically recasts what we mean by 'designing,' and lays out steps to translate our sustainist design approach into practice.

We propose five principles for *local sustainist design*. Together they capture what we view as defining characteristics for a new, place-based sustainable design practice, and provide a forward-looking framework for further development.

Action agenda for local sustainist design

Radical shifts in design practice

01. From 'designing for'
to 'designing within'
02. From functional design
to value-driven design
03. From global
to place-based design
04. From external objectives
to locally-rooted aspirations
05. From formal knowledge
to community know-how
06. From expert design
to co-design
07. From universal qualities
to nearby design criteria
08. From top-down governing
to civic design
09. From design intervention
to on-going process
10. From nature as resource
to nature as source

Local design agenda

It's all about the movement towards new ways, steering away from the conventional premises and established routes. We've consolidated this movement into a ten-point collective design agenda, charting the change we envisage—what we design, how, with whom and for what purpose. Our agenda identifies key points for changing course, based on fundamental shifts that we deem essential for the future. Do not take these as strict guidelines, but as points of departure. The shifts are indicative, exemplary, and certainly not exhaustive. Our aim is to inspire, and pave the way towards designing the social and sustainable transition of the places we inhabit.

Action points

Designing within

- Embed design within communities, guided by their stories, experiences, and needs.

Value-driven design

- Start with local social values, respecting diversity and focusing on qualities that are meaningful to local inhabitants.

Place-based design

- Make locality as a quality a defining design criterion, incorporating experiences and practices of placemaking.

Locally-rooted aspirations

- Start local design with the question: "What does this community need?" and empower local communities to shape their futures through stewardship.

Community know-how

- Prioritise lived experiences over theory, and integrate local know-how and skills into the design process.

Co-design

- Rethink roles to foster collaboration which enables local participants to co-create and bring in their unique expertise.

Nearby design criteria

- Focus on proximity and the human scale, emphasising trust, solidarity, and identity of place in the design process.

Civic design

- Empower citizens as active agents and co-producers, encourage practices of commoning, and support local stewardship and local governance at the community level.

On-going process

- Embrace 'design-by-doing' as a dynamic practice, evolving through iteration and engagement, open to experimentation and social innovation.

Nature as a source:

- Design relationships with the natural world as an integral part of ecologies of place, reinforcing circularity and enhancing environmental awareness and respect for nature.



Steps towards a sustainist transition

- **Create collaborative platforms**
 - Create conditions and design situations for collaborative creativity.
 - Establish places for capacity-building for commoning and collective design.
- **Support community initiatives**
 - Provide seed funding, open networks, and build alliances that prioritise local efforts.
 - Promote local stewardship and support community-owned businesses.
- **Embed artistic capacity**
 - Build creative hubs to integrate artistic skills into community design.
 - Leverage creative methods to imagine, visualise and co-create vibrant, beautiful places.
- **Re-imagine institutional roles**
 - Shift from hierarchical, protocol-driven structures to roles rooted in listening, support, and civic empowerment.
 - Offer long-term commitment to community-led design processes.

Enabling the transition: designing by connecting

How do we move forward? What steps can we take—in both thinking and doing—to enable a place-based sustainable transition?

In this final phase of our journey, we propose an open-ended set of *enabling steps* that can guide us toward this transition: practical approaches to shaping local action and ways to solidify sustainable design practices. Think of them as ways of connecting—between communities and institutions, between different designers, and between different aspirations and imaginations for the future. These steps point to the need for new kinds of ‘infrastructures’ within our ecologies of place—whether social, physical, or environmental.

By embracing radical shifts and new principles, we can collectively reimagine and redesign our neighbourhoods to be sustainable, inclusive, and deeply connected to the values and aspirations of local communities. Our action agenda for positive change invites all stakeholders—residents, designers, policymakers, and knowledge partners—to work together in shaping a future where design truly serves the people and the places they call home. For now, this is our response to the question “What If?”

Connecting is a
way of looking

Connecting is a
design strategy

Connecting is what
we need to belong
to places

connect

Connect
—to each other, to the places we inhabit

Connect
—to root ourselves in place

Connect
—to act, locally

Connect
—to foster community-based initiatives

Connect
—to nature as a source

Connect
—to design sustainable places together

Connect
—to empower local communities

Connect
—to reimagine vibrant neighbourhoods

Connect
—to inspire shared creativity

Connect
—to co-design



152

Into action: where are we going?

Acknowledgements, references and credits

153

Acknowledgements

The creation of this guide was itself a collaborative endeavour—reflecting the collective efforts across the various sites. The editorial team wishes to thank all those who have contributed to realising this field guide.

First of all, the *Desire* partners that put their heart and soul into their local projects. They provided us with essential input for this guide, and clarified the experiences from the various sites. We extend our gratitude to the residents, municipal workers, developers, and companies who participated in the exploration of *Desire*.

Second, the researchers of the Politecnico di Milano and Aalborg University who carefully documented the progress of each individual site, which informed the site stories of this guide. Also, we acknowledge the support of the Danish Design Center, Danish Architecture Center, Danish Industry, Technical University of Denmark, and all expert partners that advanced the learning process of *Desire*.

Third, we look back on a fruitful and close collaboration with the graphic designers of NXT. We thank them for creating a beautiful and accessible guide.

Last but not least, we wish to thank the *Desire*'s lead company Bloxhub, and in particular Aase Højlund Nielsen, who throughout the process supported us in making this field guide.

Here is the place to acknowledge that the *Desire* project furnished the context and foundation for developing this field guide. As the editorial team we see it as appropriate to provide some background information in this regard.

The two-year *Desire* project—which started in October 2022—was funded by the Horizon Europe programme as part of the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative. This policy and funding initiative aims to foster green transition in built environments, promoting solutions that are sustainable, inclusive and beautiful, while respecting the diversity of places, traditions, and cultures in Europe and beyond.

Desire stands for *Designing the Irresistible Circular Society*, built upon the belief that we can design concepts, ideas, and tools to transform our living environment—developed within the context of the New European Bauhaus. *Desire* kicked off with five co-created principles that are designed to connect cities with nature, create a green transition through new communities, and include citizens in the transformation process: aesthetics, belonging, biodiversity, circularity and movements.

The eight experimental *Desire* sites across Europe served as living laboratories, each embodying NEB values through their own transformation. Beyond their journeys, lessons of *Desire* are shared on a co-created digital platform, accessible for municipalities, stakeholders and citizens to get inspired from these transformative approaches to urban development. Embarking on an ongoing journey, the *Irresistible Cities Lab*, a community of practitioners, will activate the growth of the *Desire* community.

For more information about the *Desire* project and the *Irresistible Cities Lab*, visit the Digital Learning Hub: irresistiblecircularsociety.eu

For more information about the New European Bauhaus initiative, visit: new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu

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Hanne Kokkegård:
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p54

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p56

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p57

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Three partners in the *Desire* project collaborated in making this field guide:

THE BEACH

The Beach is an Amsterdam based hub and lab for sustainist design that aims for strengthening communities. With values such as sustainability, human scale and sharing as compass, the work of The Beach—founded in 2007—centres on designing new forms of relationships and social infrastructures with and in communities. thebeach.nu

Samenwonen-Samenleven Started as a community initiative in Amsterdam in 2004, Samenwonen-Samenleven (SWSL) is a community wealth building NGO. As co-designer and co-founder of citizen owned and managed cooperatives and community services, SWSL is fostering the values of reciprocity, inclusiveness and solidarity. sw-sl.nl

NXT

Since 2002, NXT, a Copenhagen based creative agency, has been addressing complex challenges and finding answers at the intersection of politics, business, art, and science. Through storytelling, strategic development, and influence work, they forge new connections between the built environment, humanity, and nature. Learn more at nxtbrand.dk

