



Urban Pockets

Reclaiming the public
in left-over open spaces

Urban
reclaiming
in left-over

Pockets
the public
open spaces

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03 **Who**

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01

What

Urbego believes that neglected public spaces can be transformed into key places where the city beats on the rhythm of the community and neighbourhood activism. Together with local institutional partners and residents, we have undertaken a series of actions in 2014 that address the role and function of public space. So far, Urbego has sparked interest in the re-establishment of public space as a relevant arena in Belgrade, Tirana and Skopje, mapping, surveying, gaming, creating and working with citizens on their visions of what public space ought to be. The experiment was successful, marked by the implementation of a community pocket park in the Albanian capital in January 2015.

In his seminal work “The Practice of Everyday Life” (1984), Michel de Certeau warns against superficial investigations of culture and tradition, and calls attention to the daily practices of individuals and communities. In these daily practices, he argues, lies the opportunity to re-invent rituals and thus overcome institutional impositions. Similarly, Doreen Massey in her ode to space (2005) argues that notwithstanding the interactions experienced at regional and global levels that undoubtedly are deserving of attention, equal consideration must be given to the exchanges occurring in public spaces. These patches of urban spaces are the very arenas of political discourse. Democracy, she states, is put to the test in public space.

There appears to be an alarming increase in the neglect and misuse of public and open space in cities across Europe in the course of the past few decades. This turbulent period of unparalleled growth and institutional experiments has caused a shift in the management of cities from a Keynesian welfare system to a more capitalistic/neo-liberal entrepreneurial approach. On the one hand, this has opened up opportunities for new plans and policies; on the other, it has caused what can be pronounced as a gradual blow to the quality of the built environment and overall liveability of the city.

As policy and investment attention is focused elsewhere, public space is increasingly fragmented, dysfunctional, and, essentially, deterring or unwelcoming. This means that cities are slowly losing an essential spatial element for public discourse and community fulfilment, the implications of which are starting to show in health, identity, and safety conditions of city residents. There is a strong need to re-consider and re-think the manner in which public space is dealt with at present, and re-invent the practice of everyday life, and, ultimately, the revival of the city.

In areas in which planning is constrained by implacable

(and inefficient) political frameworks and severe financial limitations, much rests on the energy of the resident. As argued by Michael Batty (2010) the pulse of the city is in its people. This also means that the rituals and practice of the planner are also being re-defined and transformed. Planners assume a more mediating, catalytic role, seeking to establish, enrich and maintain connections among different actors in space.

Driven by this new planning ideology, Urbego believes that neglected public spaces can be transformed into key places where the city beats on the rhythm of the community and neighbourhood activism.

Together with local institutional partners and residents, we have undertaken a series of actions in 2014 that address the role and function of public space. So far, Urbego has sparked interest in the re-establishment of public space as a relevant arena in Belgrade, Tirana and Skopje, mapping, surveying, gaming, creating and working with citizens on their visions of what public space ought to be. The experiment was successful, marked by the implementation of a community pocket park in the Albanian capital in January 2015.

These accomplishments, in part financed by The Balkans Arts and Culture Fund (BAC), were only a starting point of a lengthy process of participatory urban methodology building. Our definite goal is to enlarge the built experience in order to explore the methodology in new contexts in need. Our project proposes a strategy of intervention in small-scale open spaces such as neighbourhood gardens, courtyards, leftovers, redundant spaces or even streetscapes. Based on a co-creation process, it aims to revitalize neighbourhoods by changing mistreated open spaces into community hubs. To this intent, Urbego operates in-situ with local partners and communities of residents under the umbrella of the International Platform for Planning Professionals.



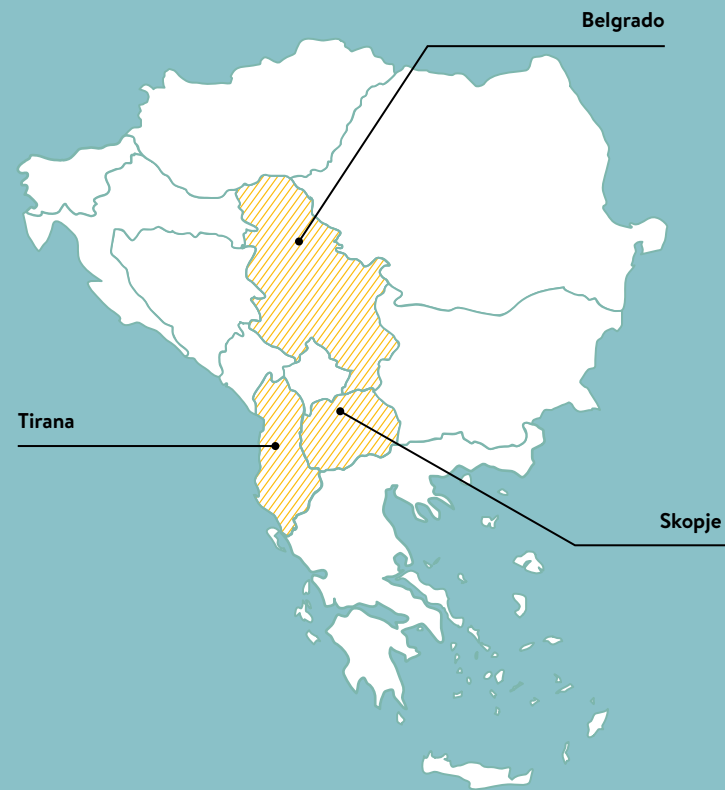
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02

Where

Condition of implementation



Condition of implementation

1

Cities with no resources and unclear urban policies

The program acts in different cities where cost cutting policies do not guarantee enough resources for the intervention on urban open space. In the past experience, the program focused on Balkan cities where radical social and economic changes led in the last decades, to a rapid growth and an increasing degradation of their public and open spaces. In absence of institutional intervention, Balkan cities developed a vibrant pattern of spontaneous bottom-up projects, but they often lack of resources, visibility and effectiveness, and they are anyway not enough to supply the strong demand for quality public and open spaces. Similarly to Balkan cities, many countries cities are seeing their budget shrinking, and strong incentives to focus on strategic cost-effective interventions. Reclaiming the public in left-over spaces is an interesting model to operate in these contexts, by proposing a strategy that optimises the result by establishing new partnerships within residents, public and private sector.



2

Cities with community problems

The main objective of Reclaiming the public is to enhance the daily life of people living in cities, by improving the quality of the surrounding open space. This environment requalification not only affects the individual life but above all their sense of community. Even cities with a strong background in public realm management, and good financial resources, are sometimes facing issues related to sense of exclusion and isolation in particular areas that might lead to anti-social behaviours/ safety issues/ conflicts. The Co-Creation strategy developed by Urbego can offer a way to tackle these issues by answering properly to community needs, by redefining the sense of belonging of residents to their neighbourhoods and reinventing their relationship with the cities they are part of.



3

Innovative cities

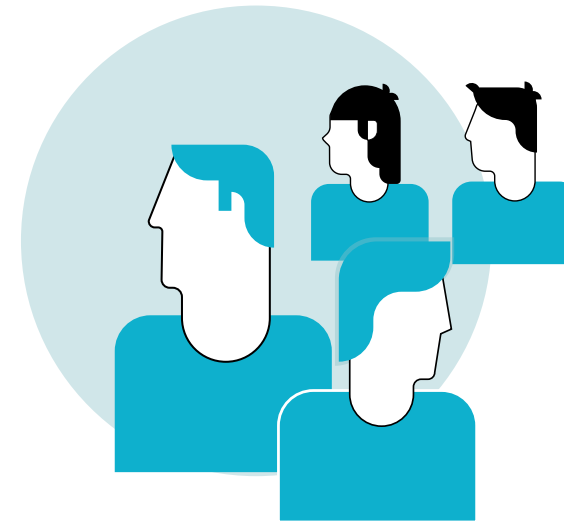
Reclaiming the public is offered as a tool to every community in every city that wants to develop new strategies of intervention in the open space. It promotes a new way to work on the public realm, with citizens taking direct action in transforming and taking care of the cities where they live.



03

Who

Actors



Citizen

The project involves the local community of residents in each of its phases: concept phase, design, fundraising, construction and maintenance. Self-established communities can apply directly for an intervention. Wherever Urbe-

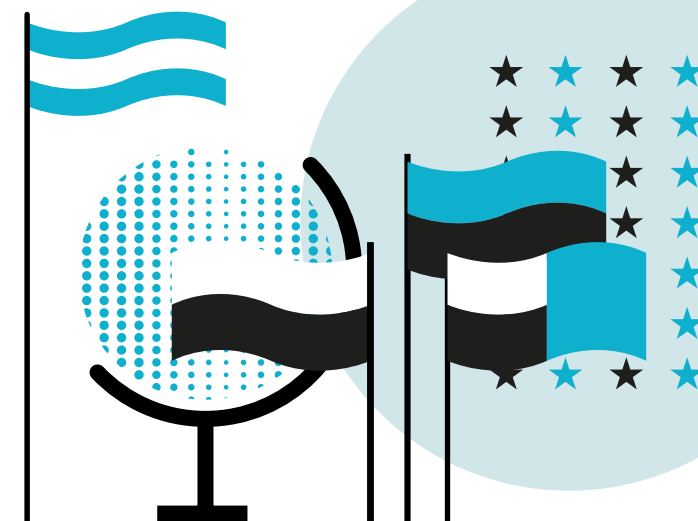
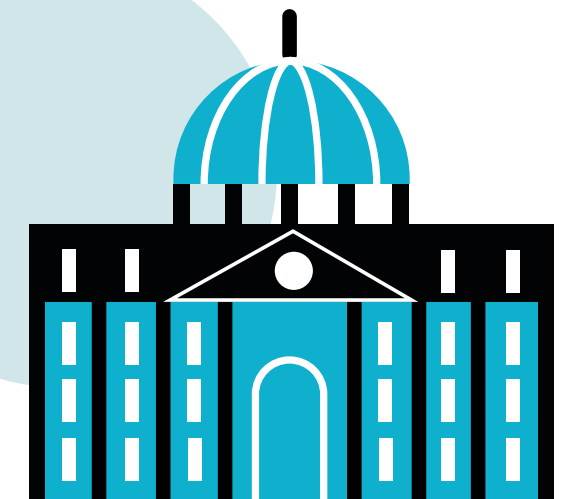
go together with the local partner would envision the possibility for a successful intervention and a self-established community has not been identified, local residents are engaged and, if interest in the project, they are helped to set an action team.

WHO

Local partners

The local partner can be a NGO, a public or private institution, a design practice. They share Urbego values and principles, and they have a rooted experience in intervention in the open spaces in the cities where they operate. The local partner acts as a

link between Urbego and the local communities, and is responsible for monitoring the implementation and promoting locally the program. The local partner is also responsible to engage local institutions, as well as other public or private local organizations that can contribute to the project.



International partnership

A key component of the program is the link between international partners, operating at different levels. Urbego acts as a networking agent and facilitator for the partners. Local communities and organizations can rely to the know-how

of the international expertise members of the Urbego network. Local communities and organizations are linked with alike groups in different countries, sharing experience and developing strategies for coordinated interventions. Urbego also links local groups to international partners and funders.

04

Why

Objectives



RECLAIMING THE OPEN SPACE

Enhance the existing public and open space to meet the need of the local community users.

Create new community public places (gardens, pocket parks, shared yards) in redundant outdoor areas, spaces in between buildings, promoting mixed use of car parking.

Use the bottom-up approach to produce urban quality revival

ENFORCING COMMUNITIES

Revive and strengthen the “Yes We Can” Culture: A square in your pocket promotes the interaction within neighbours, empowering them and offering a chance to relate to public institutions/ internationals/ other communities.

Use the co-design process to foster social interaction: Living close to each other does not automatically mean community. In urban environment, often neighbours have very limited interaction among each other. The participative creation can enhance the interaction between the willing citizens.

Encourage Neighbourhoods’ networking and expertise transfer: the redesigned open space will keep enhancing the interaction among neighbours, between those who implemented the process and those who plan to activate their nearby open space.

BUILDING THE SENSE OF PLACE

Build a sense of place through public realm recognition and open space legibility

Shape a local identity or a neighbourhood character: by enforcing their decision making in the creation-construction process, community’s appropriation capacities of the spatial surroundings are enhanced. The public space requalification is characterized by local marks related to a specific community needs.

Enforce the sense of belonging and satisfaction: When public space is conceived in order to improve local services, some neighbourhood’s defects, previously raised by the community, are compensated and the sense of satisfaction of a specific environment can be increased.

REGENERATING CITIES VIBRATION

Portable model: when successful, the first intervention becomes a model for similar projects.

Incremental development: the intervention can evolve in time, can be replicated in a different neighbourhood (spreading) and promoted in a different city (seeding).





05

How

Theoretical Background

Intervention process & users
involvement

Theoretical Background

In-between spaces as an opportunity

In-between spaces, perceived as dead zones, take shape in the city's landscape as slumps and fragment the urban fabric. More associated with urban cracks, they are often under-utilised spaces, imagined as dirty, unwelcome and unsafe zones of the city. Usually they are non-built areas such as leftover spaces, vacant lots, inactive streetscapes, unused piazzas and riverbanks. Others constitute physical barriers in the shape of an underpass, a wall, or an overpass. They share a common attribute that is the search of an identity. Inherently flexible, they present a significant opportunity for local communities, architects, planners and other actors to turn urban leftovers into vibrant city places. The past years have shown how the involvement of community groups and institutions in the transformation of these in-between spaces has been essential.

The revival of public and open spaces has been recently observed in Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and London, showing the capacity of local micro-interventions in transforming cities' neglected open spaces into vibrant places for the community. Citizens were at the centre of these initiatives together with public institutions. Local actors supported and financed these innovative strategies of remaking the city and even integrated emerging participative strategies in their public policies. Notwithstanding these efforts, this form of urban activism requires a ➔





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new operative toolkit. With this in mind, Urbego focuses on areas lacking resources and a reliable institutional framework. Our project explores new methodologies that tackle the political and economical insufficiency by relying on the micro-networks emerging from the civil society. These new energies promote new strategies for reinventing collectively the city's liveability.

Incremental Housing model transposition

The Incremental Housing Strategy is innovative in its application of design to develop custom/tailor-made solutions based on voiced needs. A similar strategy was developed in developing countries, such as India, where families were not able to cover more than 10% of the housing construction/reconstruction cost. In this case, the financial issue was tackled by identifying some alternatives such as payment in kind. The community was involved in the demolition and construction process, material gathering and distribution and finishing touches such as painting the house with a desired colour.

This process did not only have a positive financial impact, but also met the needs of the community and ultimate maintenance of a local character. The social value of this project is very inspiring for the A square in your pocket strategy because it operates first on the base of a bottom-up approach. And second, it delivers some crucial ingredients for successful interventions in low-income regions, such as empowered participation, co-responsibility schemes, a pay-as-you go spirit and a staged/phased development, among others.

Benefits of a participatory approach of placemaking

The Project for Public Places defines place-making as follows: Place-making is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Put simply, it involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space to discover their ideas and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place. The vision can evolve quickly into an implementation strategy, beginning with small-scale, doable impro-





vements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them”.

This process clearly relies on participatory process, which is based on shared ownership of decision-making and shared responsibility in place making. Historically, the bottom-up approach appears as a reaction to the “top-down” approaches to development in which decision-making emerges from external development professionals. A reality largely criticized especially when it raises the question about the accuracy of outsiders’ intervention in the settlement of local development. Do they have the right to control local people’s life without even having the accurate knowledge of the context? Regarding the polemic, participatory alternatives are rising gradually and knowing a higher success in urban development practices. To embrace this positive shift, the project makes use

EXPLORING SOCIAL EFFICIENCY OF CO-FINANCING

1 –Local ownership

Co-financing enables to develop local ownership, empowerment and realize community projects that lack institutional and public funds.

2 –Responsibility

It makes users or local communities responsible for the operational and financial feasibility of their projects.

3 –Local engagements

It also ensures the local acceptance of open space projects and the local engagement for their ordinary maintenance.

of the participatory approach principles:

1. Multiply the involved actors: Local & international partners, Citizens and stakeholders
2. Empower and not lead: the project agent facilitate a process of empowerment, learning and action
3. Share the control by sharing the decision-making and financing.
4. Enhance the mutual learning: in community-based projects, people must be placed at the centre of the process. Their skills, knowledge and inner exchanges deliver several potentials for the project success but can be also damaging. A successful application of a bottom-up approach demands good communication, facilitation and conflict negotiation skills. Urban professionals must be sensitive to local character and power differences.
5. Identify the involvement tools: Visual and interactive tools/ Group discussion/ Exhibitions/ Short Interviews/ Questionnaires/ Long-term action research/ Collaborative building
6. Redefine the role of the urban agent: a learner, a mediator, a catalyst

In sum, a successful participatory implementation will be operative when the skills, experience and objective analysis of urban professionals are combined with the skills, experience and contextual perception of local people. Visual and interactive methods must be planned to stimulate people’s participation and guarantee a better data quality. Such a process has pitfalls. Many participatory projects are still dominated by the top-down approach. People’s participation is limited to consultancy with no real sharing of decision-making.

The participatory tool are being more extractive that empowering strategies. Local stakeholders often dominate the power and the control of the process. Time constraints can also rush the process, jump some crucial phases and limit thus the implementation of a real and efficient participatory process.

To avoid these pitfalls, some measure of effectiveness must be conducted. The constant evaluation of the participation and joint goals can help in controlling the good ongoing of the participatory plan. Partners and participants must be taking in charge the monitoring. —



Intervention process & users involvement

Can we make our own public space? It is the question that lingers in the institutional vacuum, in the silence of urban planning. Of course, we reply, we can. Can we make it cheap? And we reply, yes, we can. Can we make it adaptable? Yes, we can. And it continues.

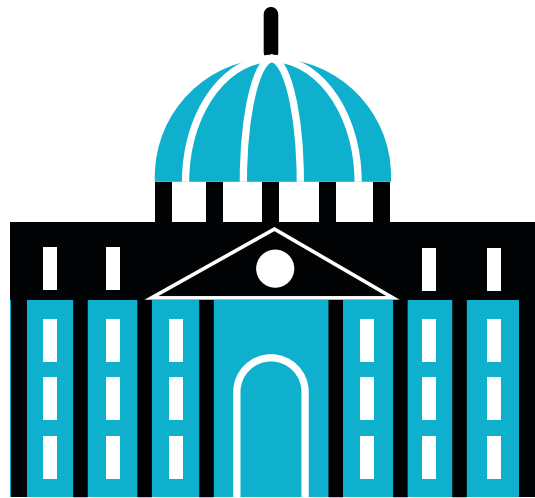
This typical “yes we can” culture is showing great vitality and creativity in the times of unclear urban policies and economic instability, but still the potentials of this energy are not being fully utilized, partly because of a lack of a link between different local actors and offer support in finding the common ground with the institutions. Cities do not rise all by themselves. No, they are created by virtue of the fact that opposites converge; that is what leads to the emergence of new qualities of urban spaces. Accordingly, we have to find fast, creative, profitable ways to capitalize on local energy and turn under-used open spaces into treasured community places.

Interestingly, many of the best, most authentic and enduring destinations in a city, the places that keep locals and tourists coming back again and again and that enhances the quality of life, were born out of a series of incremental, locally-based improvements. One by one, these interventions built places that were more than the sum of their parts. This approach is based on taking incremental steps, using low-cost experiments, and tapping into local talents (e.g. citizens, entrepreneurs, developers, and city staff). It is an open and evolvable process that includes 9 steps. ●

1

The identification and involvement of an interested local partner

The local partner can be a NGO, a public or private institution, a design practice. They share Urbego's values and principles, and they have a rooted experience in intervention in the open spaces in the cities where they operate. They act as a link between Urbego and the local communities, and is responsible for monitoring the implementation and promoting locally the program. The local partner is also responsible to engage local institutions, as well as other public or private local organizations that can contribute to the project. The involvement of the Municipality and local private sectors from the first phase is essential to build up trust and political and economic support.



2

Mapping spatial potentials

The local partner identifies potential locations suitable for interventions and transformation, combining cartography, wayfinding and citizens' involvement. Self-established communities can apply directly for an intervention. The mapping focuses on vacant lots or forgotten spaces at the very small scale. Usually only a few house lots in size or smaller, these micro spaces can be tucked into and scattered throughout the urban fabric where they serve the immediately local population. These vacant plots are occasionally used for informal activities such as: children games, outdoor cooking, wedding ceremonies and meeting points. At the same time, in many cases these vacant parcels represent an image of decay, being dumping sites for trash and building rubble, and unsafe public space.



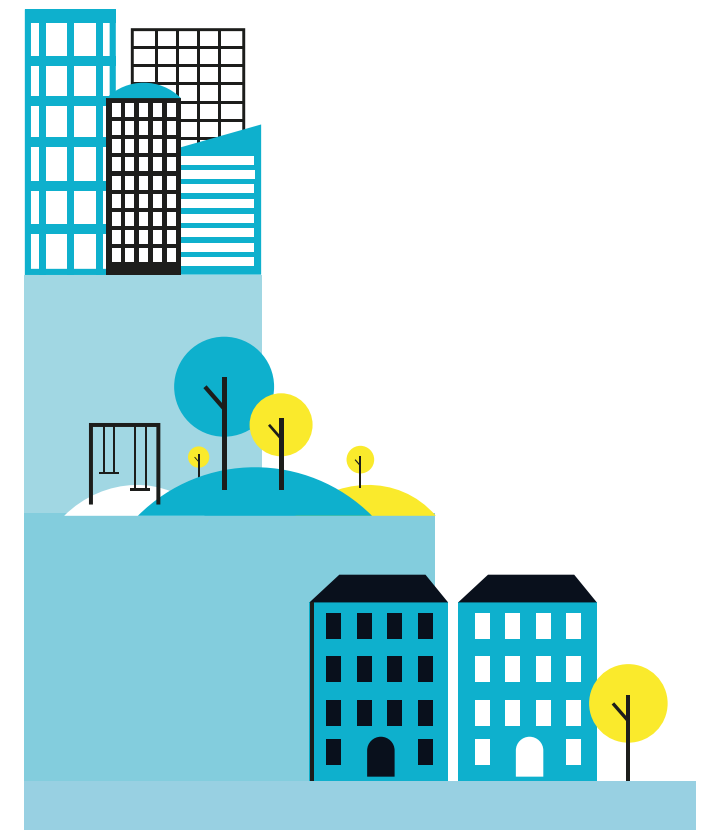
“It will never rain roses: when we want to have more roses, we must plant more roses.”

– George Elliot

3

Prioritize site interventions

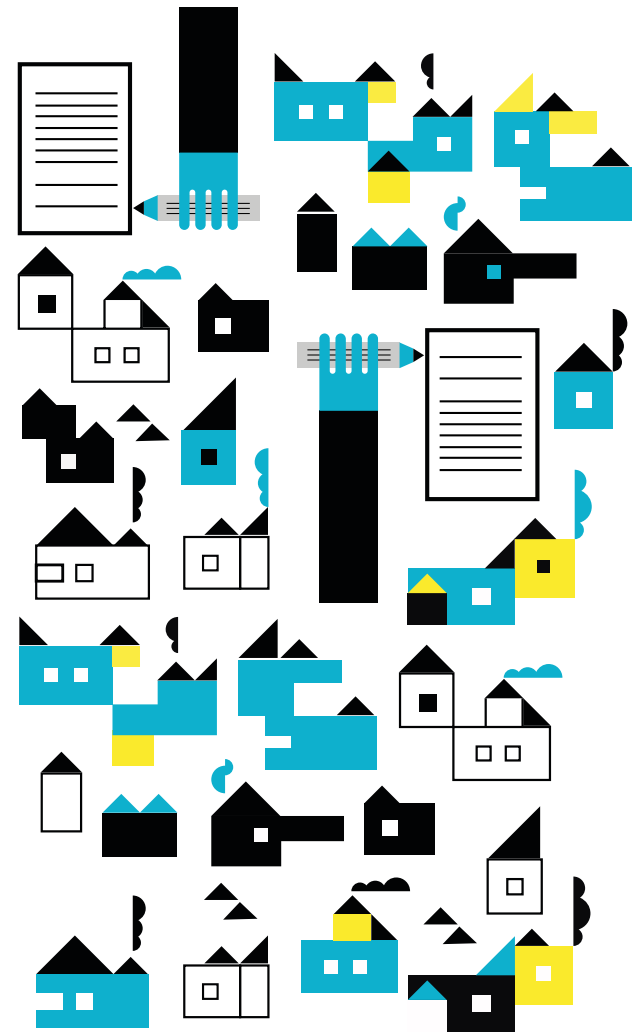
Prioritization of the intervention areas is made based on their location within the city, their current uses, their ownership status and the interest of an engaged and self-established community. Wherever Urbego together with the local partner would envision the possibility for a successful intervention and a self-established community has not been identified, local residents are engaged and, if interest in the project, they are helped to set an action team.



7

Assess community motivation and needs

The local partner carries out a door-to-door survey in the neighbourhood surrounding the selected open spaces to assess needs, perceptions and wishes of the local community. The survey can function as a communication tool. It will inform people that the “Urban pocket” making process is underway.



7

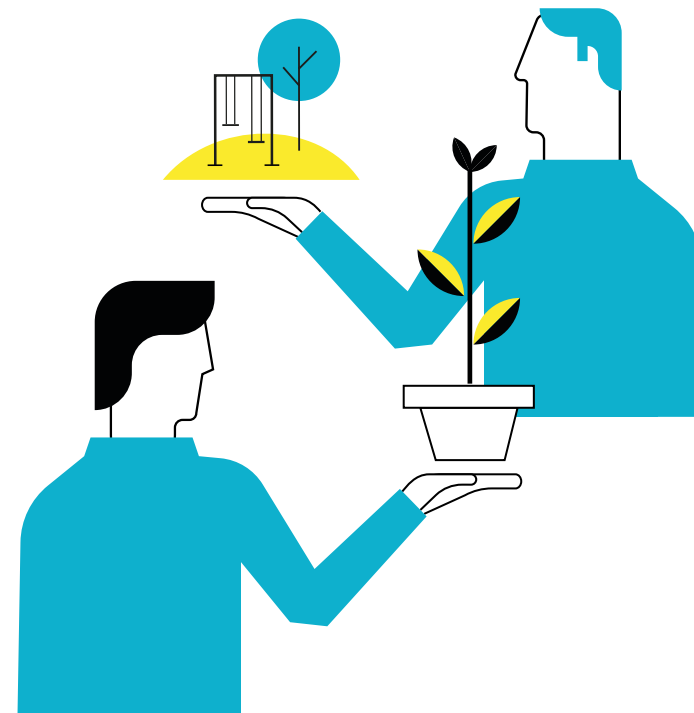
Meet the potential users and stimulate their involvement

The results are summarized in a format useful for priority setting and decision-making. The major issues identified by the needs assessments are presented and discussed during in-situ meetings with the local community. The findings are translated into simple sketches or visualizations that help the residents to understand clearly the possibilities offered by the site.

7

Co-design phase

Taking a co-design approach, Urbego views non-professionals as experts in the practice of everyday life. By working closely together, we got deep and contextualized insights into their needs. This model displays the existing urban morphology and typology, and indicates possible new objects to build in the space. It is used during the meeting with the local community to engage them in the design phase: participants are asked to intervene directly with the model to mark existing “hot spots” in the plot, and to locate desired elements and new functions discussing and negotiating. During this iterative and participatory design process, the model changes and reflects the conflicts and interests at stake until it synthesizes them into a definitive scenario. This scenario will include three realization stages according to the resources available: cleaning and greening, re-paving and basic spatial reorganization up to the total transformation of the public space.

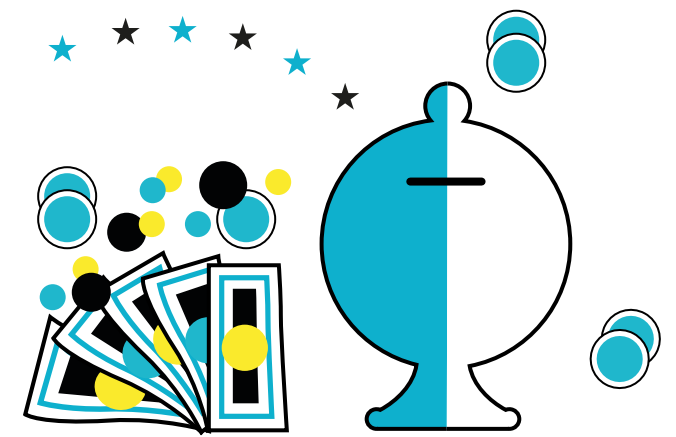


7

Co-finance

The implementation of the project is supported by a combination of three sources of funding:

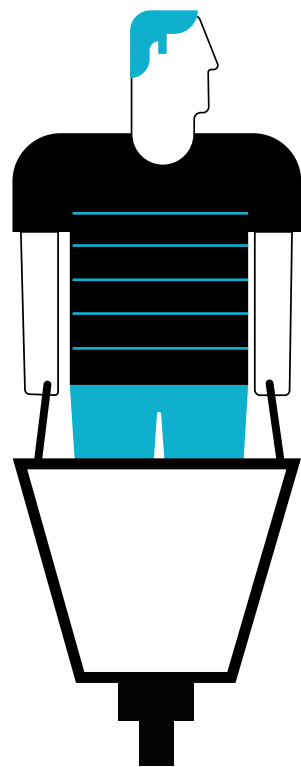
1. Local funds
Each project relies for a relevant part on local resources provided by the local business, Municipality and local institutions. These can be raised through donations, sponsorship or any combination of the two.
2. International funds
Special funds are collected by Urbego and the local partners to cover the remaining costs of the interventions. These funds can be directed to a specific intervention, or dedicated to the whole program, plus the general organization and the promotion of the program itself.
3. In-kind contribution
The sustainability of the program relies primarily in cost-efficiency and design of interventions that are scaled on the local availability of resources, often very limited. A way to make the budget affordable from a financial prospective is to rely on local community self-help and the volunteer work.



8

Self-build

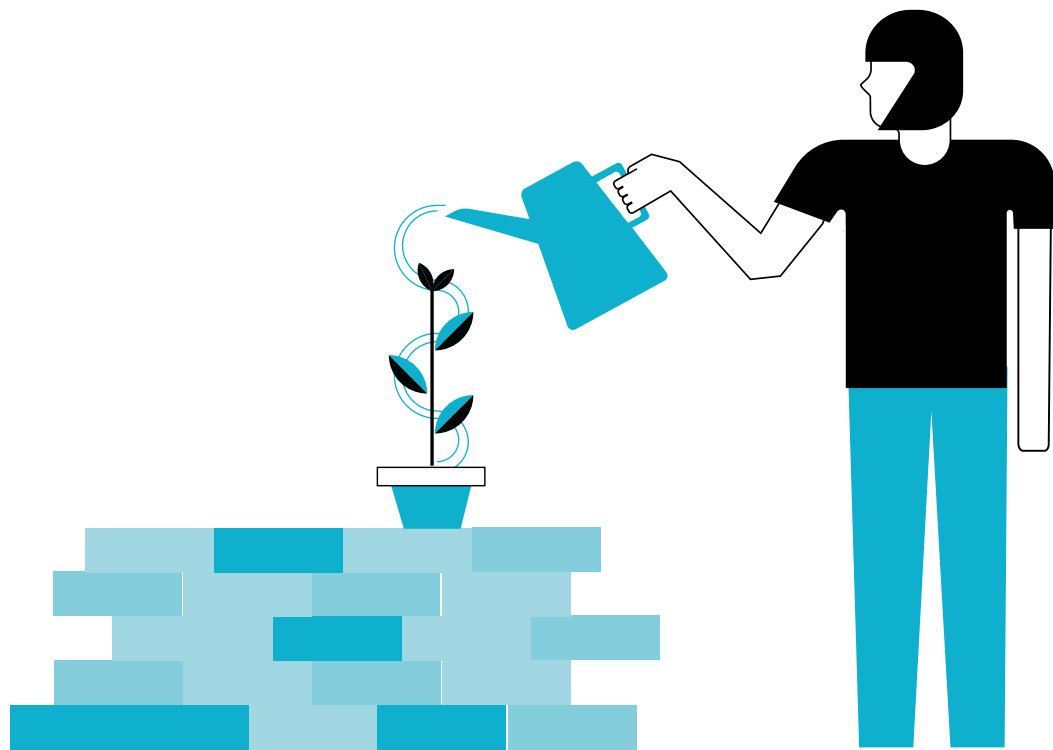
In the wake of so many top-down, large-scale redevelopment efforts with little to no community input, the Incremental square making approach focuses on human-scale, easily replicable urban improvements that are responsive to local residents' needs. The construction phase involves directly the residents and the local community that work on a voluntary base, or according to time-sharing schemes. The project adopts an incremental approach that allow the users to make small-scale, improvements in the space, taking ownership of the new square. The implementation should consist in intensive interventions over a relatively short period of time to maintain the active engagement of the people and to make the square ready to be used. This approach allowed the character of the square to grow over time so that it could continually evolve to accommodate the demands of the inhabitants around it.



9

Plan site maintenance

An action team of residents is formed through all the stages leading to the realization of the square. It will be responsible, with the eventual support of the municipality, of the maintenance of the new public space. A year plan for maintenance and management of square is defined by all the actors involved in the process.



Experience transfer

Scaling up

Next steps

“These are places too small for municipalities to care about, or in neighborhoods that developers don’t find desirable. If you care about them, go do something there.”

Scaling up

The project follows a test-measure-refine approach using pilot projects as a way to engage users, make ideas visible, spark conversations, test and adjust the methodology on the ground. The pilots are centres of experiment and learning that become precedents and catalysts for action elsewhere, in the city. Observing the outcome of the first pilot can encourage local partners or citizens group to undertake similar initiatives. The early involvement of the local government in the process is essential to be able to jump in scale from isolated projects to city-wide strategies and build a relationship between citizens groups and local governments to support a continuous process.

A key component of the program is the link between international partners, operating at different levels. Urbego acts as a networking agent and facilitator for the partners. Local communities and organizations are connected with alike groups in different countries, sharing experience and developing strategies for coordinated interventions.

Next Step

In the light of the experience gathered in the Balkans, Urbego is developing contacts with several organisations in different cities to transfer and adapt the methodology to new contexts. More specifically, Urbego is looking to expand on this initiative, starting with Bucharest and Athens.

Bucharest

Since the very beginning of the Socialist period, for many of the Romanian cities little attention was given to community life.

While previously built neighborhoods maintained their physical and socially viable characteristics, in which public space played a central role, progressive extension of cities drawing upon a larger and larger number of people required new rapid solutions.

The massive agglomeration of people as well as the ideological response to it - new principles and regulations sought to obey a new political order, concentrating public life only in designated and programmed places and events - quickly excluded the idea of community from elsewhere, especially from dwelling areas. Spatial planning was radicalized (rationalized) and open space was devoid of any quality other than a separator of buildings or a scenography for grand public manifestations. Moreover, after the fall of the communism, as the cities continued to expand and new interest was gained in the peripheral areas, the lack of concern for the quality of life and of open urban spaces inside the city lead to a further degradation of open spaces.

On the other hand, adaptations to one's dwelling were more and more apparent, proving an increased preoccupation with the living conditions. People were confronted with an increased impossibility to conciliate their growing needs with the imposed dwelling conditions. For many of them the answer came in renovating their dwelling, adding extensions and taking on themselves parts of the common open space.

The collective spaces in the block neighborhoods present an opportunity for the community to re-establish itself. The spaces themselves may have enough elasticity to hold the growing needs of people and to adapt to new conditions. As the population is becoming more and more aware of the importance of living conditions, the leftover spaces hold the promise of fostering small communities from the ground up.

Athens

Athens is a city that has grown very rapidly in the second half of the 20th century. The urbanisation process has been massive and not planned according to the European way, but in a more informal and spontaneous manner. The city has flooded towards many directions using as module element the block-of-flats or polykatoikia. Open spaces and green areas have not been planned in this development and the city today lacks breaths within its dense urban fabric. It is only during the last 20 years that we have witnessed an abundance of public competitions concerning public spaces, pedestrianisations and parks. This has been a sign of the return of the public space within a more formal context. However, very few realisations of these projects have been carried out until today.

People in Athens have not been accustomed to living and experiencing the public space. The prevailing attitude has been that of consumerist activities related to the life in public, from cafeterias to retail streets. The last years, that coincide with the so-called financial crisis and austerity measures, the attitude towards the city has shifted. There have been many initiatives, community groups and informal organisations that reclaim the life in public space in an engaged and conscious way. Athens has a lot of latent potential that can be looked at through a creative perspective.

The forms of appropriation of the public space are varying in degree and participation: from gatherings in the few parks and crowded bicycle rides, to the independent creation of green areas. Especially in the dense urban fabric of Athens, we have seen examples of initiatives struggling to preserve the remaining open spaces. The Navarinou park is one of the most representative examples. It showcases the former parking transformed into a park by the community of Exharheia neighbourhood, who have gathered and created a self-managed park with their own funding and personal work.

Parallel to the few remaining empty lots, a typical Athenian urban characteristic is the “akalyptos” area that is the in-between area of block-of-flats -polykatoikies. This space is the sum of the backyards of the various polykatoikies within a building block. It is most commonly considered as a left-over space, not only because it is situated at the backyard, but also due to its fragmentation. The akalyptos is composed from the space of many block-of-flats. Even though each one is not considered as a significant space, when they are added up, the space that occurs is worth studying and transforming. The akalyptos are can be regained as a vivid space, only if the divided property problem is outdistanced. Participatory design approaches and community empowerment processes are the keys to take into account, in order to create a place for the surrounding community that is treated with respect and enjoyed as a common.

A Maintained Presence: Tirana

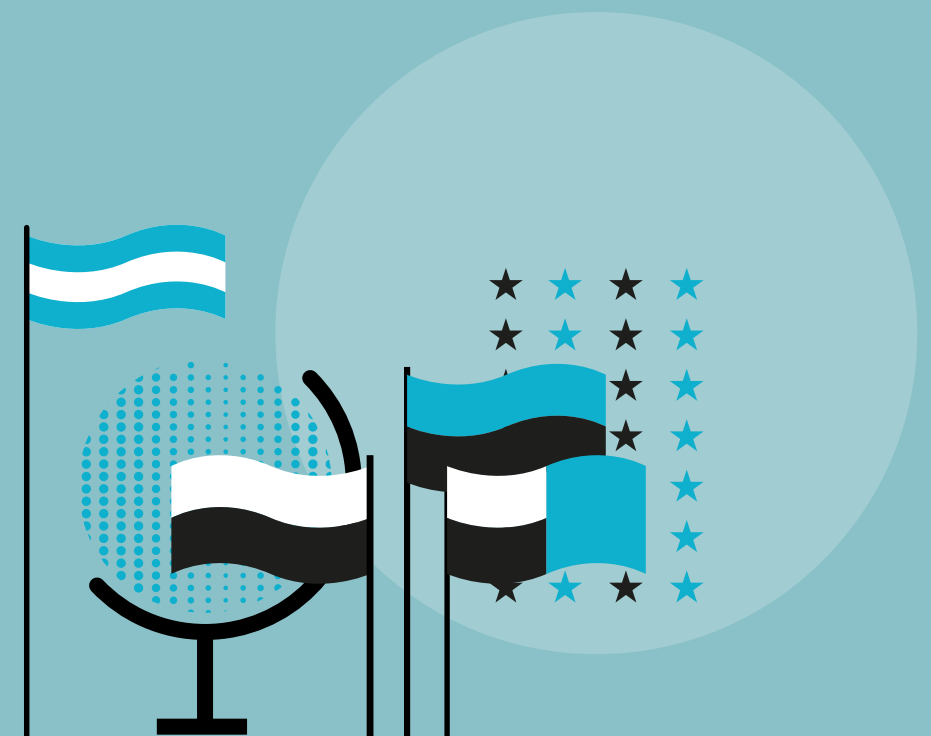
Urbego will continue to participate in areas in which the program is already active.

The first intervention is being implemented in Tirana. At the same time, the local partner is working on engaging new communities for new interventions in the city.

Education and promotion: Cairo and Rome

As a complementary activity to the program, Urbego keeps working on education and training for professionals in city making and students of urban related studies. Urbego is working on the organization of a summer school in Cairo, together with Berlin University.

Also, incremental square making will be part of this year edition of Rome Public Space Biennale.





About **URBEGO**

Urbego is a multidisciplinary platform of young, motivated and skilled professionals from all around the globe. Urbego wants to provide rapid responses for specific challenges in cities by applying an in situ approach collaborating with local partners, ranging from civil society representatives to research institutions and decision makers.

Urbego's members have a wide range of expertise, going from urban governance, planning, economics, architecture and culture to communication and engagement. Through workshops, these skills are combined with local knowledge from citizens, students and decision makers to find the best solution for the individual case.

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COLOPHON

URBAN POCKETS

Concept by Urbego
Giulia Maci, urban planner Copenhagen
Farah Makki, architect Paris
Simone Gobber, architect London
Alexandros Zomas, architect , Athens
Filipa Pajevic, economist, Montreal

Micromega Architecture

Mara Papavasileiou, architect Athens
Alexandros Zomas, architect , Athens

MKBT

Catalina Ionit
Mihai Alexandru

IAAU PARTNERS

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Coalition for Sustainable Development
Co-Plan
Mikser Festival
School of Urban Practice

New Partners

Odaia Creativa
MicroMega Architecture



