

Supporting Transformation in Urban Areas: The Desire Project



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Abstract This chapter presents the project *Desire*—Designing the Irresistible Circular Society—within the context of the New European Bauhaus (NEB) program, emphasizing how its goals align with the NEB’s core values of sustainability, inclusivity and aesthetics. As one of the six lighthouse projects funded under the NEB, *Desire* seeks to inspire a movement by developing a new school of thought, drawing inspiration from the original Bauhaus. Following a theoretical exploration of these guiding values, the chapter outlines the context and framework within which the *Desire* project operates. It highlights how the project translates NEB ideals into practice, shaping innovative and sustainable solutions to address contemporary societal challenges. The chapter concludes by introducing the concept of the “sites’ biographies”, which provide detailed accounts of the unique histories and contexts of the project’s sites of experimentation. These biographies set the stage for the in-depth discussions featured in the following eight chapters of the book.

Keywords New European Bauhaus (NEB) · Sustainability · Aesthetics · Inclusion · Societal transformation · European Transformation sites

1 Designing the Irresistible Circular Society

The New European Bauhaus (NEB) is a European program that focuses on sustaining transdisciplinary projects that interpret an original system of values and principles aimed at making the European Green Deal tangible for people and accompanying its implementation on the ground. The NEB seeks concrete changes that enhance our everyday life in neighborhoods and transform our living environments into more

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sustainable, inclusive and beautiful places while bridging the world of science, technology, art, education and culture. Its ambition is to tackle global challenges working at the local level with projects that create transformative pathways able to prioritize the quality and accessibility of places, regain a sense of belonging, introduce life-cycle thinking and circularity in the industrial ecosystem and reconnect cities and people with nature in a multispecies perspective.

Announced back in September 2020 in the State of the Union Speech, the development of the NEB was characterized by a participatory process that highlighted specific themes of interest: reconnecting to nature, recognizing a sense of belonging, prioritizing the places and people that needed the most and the need for long term life cycle thinking in the industrial ecosystem. Under the NEB, six Lighthouse projects have been funded, all serving as pioneering examples of sustainable, inclusive, and aesthetic urban development. These lighthouse projects, located across Europe, showcase innovative approaches to integrating environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and cultural heritage in urban spaces and aim to support the EU Commission with the development of policies that support the creation of a NEB movement [1].

Desire—Designing the Irresistible Circular Society, as one of these Lighthouse demonstrators, is a two-years project that started in October 2022 and aims to create a movement while exploring alternative ways of living, setting new standards for how urban spaces are transformed. The project supports the EU Mission “Climate Neutral Smart Cities” and the “EU Green Deal” by demonstrating ways to develop an irresistible circular society. Rooted in the fields of architecture, design and art, Desire focuses on reimagining how solutions are developed to address major societal challenges, such as biodiversity loss, climate neutrality and resource depletion.

The project has three operational objectives:

1. To create a learning environment rooted in the values, principles and approaches that inspired the original Bauhaus school. This environment fosters the creation of a learning community dedicated to aesthetic, inclusive and sustainable transformation.
2. To embody the NEB values through experimentations from eight diverse European sites, all under transformation and each representing different themes, geographies, scales and maturity in their processes. All these sites serve to the project as concrete examples of areas committed to experimenting with new approaches, methods, tools, contributing with their experiences to deliver the Desire lighthouse demonstrator.
3. To establish a scaling framework, including a co-created platform and digital infrastructure to boost the project’s impact across Europe. This framework supports a long-term shared value creation, stakeholders’ involvement and empowerment by connecting an international community of European municipalities, citizens and other stakeholders and by attracting substantial funding for the implementation of solutions.

In essence, all Desire activities set the foundations of a school of thoughts and practice, inspired by the original Bauhaus. It establishes a scaling framework for

the learnings drawn by on-sites experimentation coming from demonstration activities taking place in eight urban sites in Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia, and The Netherlands.

This book describes the investigation activities taking place within the project that relates to monitoring, assessment and learning activities and the experimentation taking place at each site under transformation, to draw lessons learned nurturing the NEB values and principles. The following section presents a theoretical exploration of the NEB values and principles. Then, the chapter continues with an explanation of the experimental and investigative activities run within the project. It concludes with presenting the structure of the subsequent chapters of the book.

2 The New European Bauhaus Values and Principles

2.1 *Three Values*

The New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative emphasizes the value *beautiful* as a fundamental pillar in shaping sustainable and inclusive communities. Beauty in NEB is not merely aesthetic; it encompasses a holistic approach that integrates functionality, sustainability, and social inclusion [3]. Drawing from Porta et al. [4], beauty emerges from long-term processes in which citizens and various stakeholders continuously interact and shape the urban environment. Cozzolino [5] further emphasizes how beauty is not merely the outcome of a top-down planned and designed form but can rather emerge spontaneously from the interaction of urban agents through space and time. Starting from this concept of spontaneity, beauty is considered to arise from everyday actions and from a combination of formal and informal processes, rather than from pre-defined harmonious forms. This concept of “spontaneous beauty” aligns with the NEB emphasis on inclusivity, which aims to cultivate environments where people actively contribute to the development of aesthetically pleasant and sustainable spaces through collective experiences. By recognizing this collective character of beauty, the NEB encourages embracing this notion of “spontaneity” to move beyond design models that follow fixed aesthetics paradigms towards urban environments that reflect both community engagement and emergence. Therefore, such dynamic view on beauty fosters the development of environments that are adaptive to the co-evolving conditions that characterize complex socio-ecological systems [6]. Thus, beauty become essential to inspire the connections to the environment fostering a sense of responsibility and belonging [7].

Then, *together* emphasizes collective action and collaboration across diverse disciplines, sectors, and communities. The New European Bauhaus fosters co-creation and participatory processes in which different sectors work together to design sustainable and inclusive environments. Such a collaborative approach is essential to addressing complex societal challenges, as it combines different perspectives and expertise, fostering social innovation [8] and shared ownership of solutions [9, 10].

Embracing this value, means breaking traditional ways of working, often characterized by silos between sectors. This means connecting to the principles that are described in the next sub-section to operationalize this vision. Adopting a collaborative way of working across sectors aims to ensure that the emerging environment is more comprehensive, equitable and better suited to the needs of all individuals, particularly those that are usually underrepresented. Within the NEB framework, this value fosters reflections on the human-nature relationship, promoting designs that enlarge the usual human-centered perspective towards one that considers also other species, prioritizing ecological balance alongside social equity. This aligns with the growing field of multispecies design [11, 12].

The value *sustainable* integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions to create resilient and regenerative urban environments. It highlights the importance of developing spaces and communities that minimize their environmental impact, promoting an efficient use of resources. Therefore, cities are seen as complex socio-ecological systems that should harmonize human and natural systems for long-term ecological balance [13]. Moreover, this NEB value aims to promote biodiversity and aligns with regenerative design principles, advocating for systems that renew their energy and materials [14]. Therefore, the need to close loops and developing circular systems is key to develop urban systems that could minimize resource depletion. To reach these goals a profound behavioral change is entailed. Within the NEB framework, creating a sustainable urban environment entails integrating awareness, education and participation into the circular model, fostering a culture that upholds sustainability in all its aspects.

2.2 *Three Principles*

The focus on employing *participatory processes* highlights the evident shifts from a world where science and governments depict future scenarios of societal transformation toward one that recognizes the crucial role that individuals and organizations play. Such shift recognizes the plurality of interests that characterize societal transformation [15]. Already since the 1960s, simultaneously to the rise of several activist and political movements, the fields of participatory design and urban studies, as well as of system innovation, started focusing on a communicative rationale where consultation with different actors played a significant role [10]. The Arnstein ladder [16] being one of the most famous and recognized representation of power shifts that occur when processes involve multiple stakeholders. Recently, co-creation has gained prominence, seen as a catalyst for positive effects, including creativity, effective change, and public sector reform [17, 18]. Co-creation empowers participants as active contributors, involving them in developing products, services, and systems, and shifting from mere consultation to collective action and self-governance. Hence, co-creation as a way of empowerment could be described as an outcome to be attained, rather than methods to be used [19].

Second, promoting *multi-level engagement* has been central to European policy, evolving into a multi-level governance system that fosters collaboration across various government levels, and stakeholders, including NGOs, lobby groups, and citizens [20, 21]. Originally applied to European cohesion policy [22], this system now influences diverse policy areas, distributing policymaking powers across supranational, national, and sub-national entities [23, 24]. Effective partnerships and synchronization among different administrative levels are crucial [25], referred to as an integrative way of working [26], particularly for addressing grand societal challenges like climate neutrality, ensuring comprehensive and integrative governance. Within specific governance levels, this implies sharing power and decision-making responsibilities among departments and actors, i.e. horizontally. This horizontal aspect has been the subject of several synchronization and communication systems [27]. However, within multi-level governance systems vertical cooperation among actors and sectors relies on different levels. Therefore, multi-level systems are intrinsically entailing to push organizations, entities, governments and institutions to establish networks of organizations of diverse nature that operate at different levels [2].

Third, adopting a *transdisciplinary approach* involves integrating knowledge from various disciplines and sectors to address societal challenges. Unlike multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary work, transdisciplinarity [28] emphasizes cross-pollination of knowledge from different fields and organizations, leading to integrative solutions with societal significance. This approach aligns with triple and quadruple helix innovation models, which focus on collaboration between academia, industry, government, and civil society [29]. The call for reconciling society with nature connects to the idea of extending the above-mentioned models further towards a quintuple helix [30] that incorporates the natural environment, emphasizing the need for diverse actors to engage their design capacities in addressing complex challenges. Individuals, organizations, businesses, public entities and authorities, voluntary associations, etc. have already been recognised as (design) capability holders when it comes to responding to complex challenges [4]. When connecting to the natural environment the approach to working with different capabilities is yet to be fully explored, i.e. acknowledging a more than human perspective.

3 Forging the Foundations of a School of Thoughts

3.1 Context of the Experimentation

The eight urban transformation sites subject of the experimentation within the Desire project are rooted into diverse socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. Three sites are placed in Denmark (Gadehavegaard, Kalundborg and Herlev), two in Italy (Cascina Falchera in Turin and MIND in Milan), one in Slovenia (BTC City, Ljubljana), one in Latvia (Zjepju, Riga) and one in The Netherlands (Wildemanbuurt in Amsterdam). Since five different Member States across the EU are represented, it

is important to consider that urban transformation and regeneration may be understood differently across these sites. Urban transformations have been characterized by very different processes in these countries resulting in very different understanding of values and narratives of change across the local communities taking part to the transformation. It is therefore essential to recognize that transformation processes are not necessarily positive concepts. In many cases, these could come with frustration, fear of the future, and subjection to top-down planning processes [31]. Additionally, a deeper understanding of what transitions toward sustainability and transformation entail for everyday life often reveals that communities may resist the needed changes. This resistance highlights the complexity of big societal shifts, as they challenge established norms, practices, values and beliefs. Recognizing this, the European Commission has pledged to make the “transition acceptable” to ensure broader public support and participation in the process [32, 33]. Moreover, different countries may vary in their readiness to socio-ecological change carrying different welfare models and differing in challenges and opportunities when it comes to changes in behaviors, socio-economic structures, market and consolidated patterns.

Moreover, the eight sites are of very diverse geographical scales, level of maturity in their transformation processes and address different themes, issues, challenges and target groups. The partners operating on the sites last from initiatives that are operating already since decades (i.e. the NGOs operating in Wildemanbuurt) to some that started operating within existing transformation sites at the beginning of the project (i.e. Cascina Falchera). Some operate on small areas or on a few buildings (i.e. Herlev) and others that deals with transformations happening on areas of millions of square meters (i.e. MIND, BTC City). Therefore, the meaning of Desire might change from site to site, representing a small piece of a long-term journey or being the initial boost to explore and imagine desirable futures.

3.2 *Desire’s Framework*

To address the complexity and diversity within Desire, a flexible and adaptable framework has been designed to be able to compare such diversity along several dimensions (see Fig. 1). This framework serves the purpose to create a learning environment that could scale Desire’s experiences and lessons learned towards a broader impact at the EU level, forging the foundations of a school of thoughts. Moreover, it supports the site experimentations in embodying the NEB values in their plans, activities and learning throughout the project. The framework acknowledges the different levels that the project touches upon from the micro-level of the experimentations to the meso-level of the outcomes of the project, up to the macro level addressing the New European Bauhaus initiative. These levels do not stand alone but rather are strongly interconnected and influence each other by the development of continuous feedback loops between complex interconnected dynamics.

The framework is represented by three levels (micro-meso and macro) that are represented by three verbs: DO, ASSESS and EMBED.

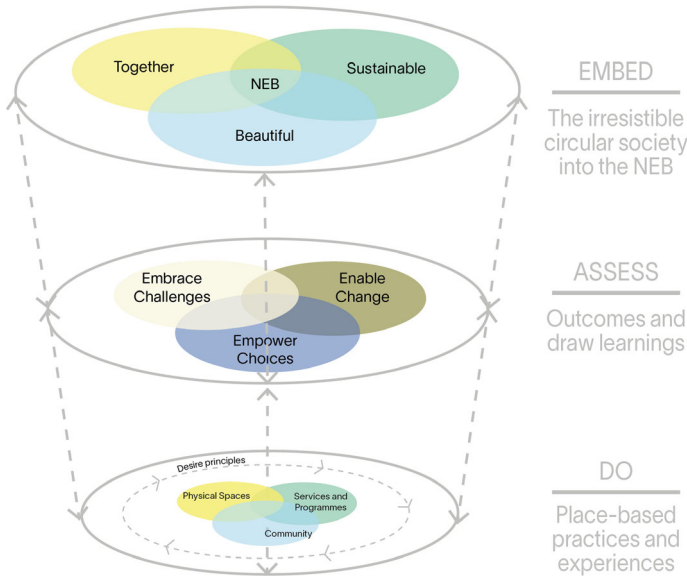


Fig. 1 Structure of the desire’s framework [34]

The micro-level (DO—place-based practices and experiences) concerns the activities planned and delivered within the experimentation of the eight transformation sites. Each action has been monitored through the specific inputs and outputs produced. At this level, the experimentations primarily concern three design components: “physical spaces & infrastructures”, “services and programs” and “community”. These components serve as the foundation around which the sites have been organizing their activities. Moreover, this level is concerned with the co-creation of a set of project principles (e.g. aesthetic, circularity, biodiversity, movement and belonging) to be verified in action.

The meso-level (ASSESS—Outcomes and draw learnings) is set to draw learnings from the experimentation, monitoring and assessing the outcomes emerging from the different contexts and local practices. The observed transformations relate to relationships, behaviours, organizational and governance aspects, etc. This level entails three dimensions: “embrace challenges”, “empower choices” and “enable change”, under which the outcomes of the experimentation are extracted to draw lessons learned at the project level.

The macro-level (EMBED—The irresistible circular society into the NEB) is informed by the DO and ASSESS levels and it is attributed to the project’s results that Desire will bring into the NEB perspective to influence its future development. Through this level Desire aims to support not only the NEB but also other Missions such as the EU Mission Climate Neutral and Smart Cities. The three levels are thus strongly related and linked by constant feedback loops that Desire supports with its activities that are further detailed under Chap. 10 of this book.

4 The Sites' Biographies

The next eight chapters of this book deep dive into the experiences of the different Desire's sites. The direct protagonists of the experimentation narrates the work carried out under the project. These chapters represent case studies, in which successful practices and learnings are narrated sustaining the "lighthouse" nature of the project, representing transformations that could lead towards an irresistible circular society. These stories allow to contextualise the experimentation into the diverse settings, producing data on the micro-level dynamics of the overall project and providing a common ground for the comparison of the experimentations that it is subject of Chap. 10 of this book. The contributors were provided with a basic template to structure their story. Such template asked to include a list of components. First, contextual information on the socio-political context of the site, its geography and level of maturity of the transformation and the issues characterizing the site. Second, a description of the challenges that the sites addressed. The sites were free to organize these under the umbrella of the three design components of the DO level (see Fig. 1) or not. Third, a description of the site experience and the related activities. Here, the authors were free to decide whether to organize their discourse around the three dimensions of the ASSESS level (see Fig. 1). Finally, a description of the key learnings they could draw from their experiences.

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