

REINVENTING CULTURE IN URBAN PLACES - ITN URBACT NETWORK

III QUARTERLY NETWORK JOURNAL



*Written by Elisa Filippi, URBACT Lead Expert, with the kind cooperation of all partners.
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INTRODUCTION

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Art, loneliness, social isolation, and healthy communities.

What do these themes have in common—and how can they help improve the well-being of our cities?

This question lies at the heart of the third edition of the URBACT REinventing CULTure in Urban Places Network Journal. Since our autumn meeting in Sandymount Business District (Ireland), the RECUP journey has moved forward with two key objectives in mind: first, to deepen our understanding of how creativity, arts, and culture can help address social isolation and loneliness; second, to build on the results of the small-scale testing actions carried out at the local level, and translate them into the first drafts of the Integrated Investment Plans (IIPs), the main legacy of the network in each partner city.

Over the past months, partners have been actively engaged in a rich set of learning and exchange activities. Through the Masterclass on loneliness, we explored inspiring approaches adopted by cities to tackle isolation through cultural participation.

In Paris, during the URBACT Capacity Building Event, we discovered that we are truly “all in the same boat”: cities from across Europe came together to review each other’s investment plans through peer-to-peer exchanges, strengthening both ideas and confidence.

The highlight of this period was undoubtedly our transnational meeting in Bielsko-Biala (Poland). There, we had the opportunity to directly experience the transformative power of art through study visits, deepen our understanding of loneliness in a dedicated workshop led by Ad Hoc Expert Christophe Gouache, and experiment with innovative peer-review methods using personas.

To further enrich this edition, we are also pleased to present a new episode of our podcast “Voices from the Stage”, featuring one of our RECUP stakeholders.

Curious to explore more?

Enjoy the reading!

MASTERCLASS ON LONELINESS: HOW TO FACE LONELINESS THROUGH CULTURE, CREATIVITY AND AN INTEGRATED URBAN APPROACH?

On 23 January 2026, RECUP partners gathered online for the second edition of the Network's Masterclass series. The session — “*How to face loneliness through culture, creativity and an integrated urban approach?*” — marked an important moment of deepening: after months of testing at the local level, it was time to engage more systematically with the challenge that sits at the very core of RECUP's work.

Loneliness is no longer an invisible or marginal concern. It has become one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary urban life, affecting people across ages, neighbourhoods and socio-economic backgrounds, and quietly undermining well-being, trust and belonging. The Masterclass brought together research, city practice and concrete urban initiatives to help partners understand it more precisely and act on it more effectively.

FRAMING THE SESSION: WHY LONELINESS, WHY NOW

The session opened with Anita Horvat, Lead Partner from the Municipality of Újbuda, and Elisa Filippi, RECUP Lead Expert. Their framing was clear: if culture is to play a structural role in cities' development, it cannot be considered separately from the social realities it is meant to address. Loneliness is not a personal failing, it is a public challenge that requires coordinated responses, and cities are uniquely positioned to act.

IMPERFECTCITY AARHUS: EMBRACING IMPERFECTION IN URBAN SPACES AND MENTAL HEALTH

The first contribution came from **Dina Ntziora** and **Antonella Radicchi**, presenting the European Urban Initiative project *ImperfectCity*, developed in Aarhus (Denmark) and its transfer partner cities.

The project begins from a simple but provocative observation: our cities are designed as if perfection were achievable — optimised flows, frictionless spaces, clean lines — yet human life is inherently messy and relational. *ImperfectCity* reframes urban design as a practice of embracing complexity and vulnerability. In Aarhus, creative interventions in everyday environments helped reduce stigma, foster unexpected social encounters, and create conditions for people to feel less alone.

For RECUP partners, the message was familiar: culture and urban design are not separate domains. They are mutually reinforcing tools for addressing the invisible wounds of city life.

BREAKING ISOLATION: LESSONS FROM A SIBLING URBACT NETWORK

The second contribution came from **Christophe Gouache**, Lead Expert of the Breaking Isolation URBACT Action Planning Network, involving ten small and medium-sized cities across ten EU countries, from Portugal to Slovenia, from Denmark to Greece.

Christophe opened with a question that is easy to overlook: is social isolation actually a public problem, or just a private one?

The answer is unambiguous. Although isolation has long been treated as an individual difficulty, the evidence now firmly places it in the domain of public policy. A 2024 European Commission publication noted that loneliness has become a societal challenge requiring action at local, national and international levels. Yet explicit policies dedicated to tackling it remain rare. Most existing frameworks address exclusion, discrimination or poverty, but not isolation as such.

WHY IT MATTERS: THE EVIDENCE

Social isolation and loneliness harm both physical and mental health, reduce life expectancy, and are linked to an estimated 871,000 deaths per year globally. Research shows that the mortality risk from poor social relationships is comparable to that of smoking or heavy alcohol consumption. A ten-year study of over 12,000 people found loneliness associated with a 40% increased risk of dementia; lack of social connection is also linked to a 30% higher risk of coronary heart disease and stroke.

The WHO's own Constitution defines health as a state of physical, mental and social well-being — yet social health remains, in Christophe's words, “the missing pillar” of most urban health strategies.

MANY CAUSES AND A CLEAR ROLE FOR CITIES

Social isolation has many interconnected causes. At the individual level, these include bereavement, mental health challenges, physical illness, unemployment, poverty, addiction and lack of social skills. But urban conditions matter just as much: the absence of free, accessible public space; poor transport; the cost of participating in social life; a lack of community centres and third places.

This is where the connection to RECUP becomes most direct. Cities cannot solve every personal risk factor, but they can redesign the conditions that make connection easier or harder. Cultural infrastructure, public space and community programming are not soft additions to urban policy. They are among the most powerful levers cities have.

SEVEN CHALLENGES, ONE MODEL

Christophe outlined seven key challenges cities face in addressing isolation: identifying those already isolated; recognising those at risk before isolation deepens; developing direct responses; reinforcing prevention; raising public awareness; building cross-departmental partnerships with local NGOs; and perhaps most fundamentally cultivating a culture of mutual community care.

To help cities navigate this complexity, the Breaking Isolation network developed a practical policy tool: the *Breaking Isolation Intervention Model*, built around four complementary axes — **Identifying, Helping, Preventing and Raising Awareness** — and mapped across three levels of support (intensive, targeted and universal) and four types of beneficiaries.

In Pombal, Portugal, what started as a weekly walk for older residents grew into something far more significant. Week after week, the same faces returned not just for the exercise, but for the ritual, the conversation, the sense of being expected somewhere. Sport, as the city coordinator put it simply, was just a pretext to connect. That programme has now been running for twenty years.

In Agen, France, social-housing building carers check whether the mail has been collected from tenants' mailboxes each morning. If it hasn't, they call or knock. A small act that becomes, for the most vulnerable residents, a lifeline.

In Skofja Loka, Slovenia, eleven elderly volunteers drive other elderly residents to appointments, groceries and social activities. Peer-to-peer, neighbour-to-neighbour and quietly effective.

The Masterclass closed with a discussion that drew both sessions into a set of shared reflections. Several things became clear. The evidence on risk factors and age groups also enriches how RECUP partners design their Investment Plans offering a more precise picture of who is most vulnerable and why.

CAPACITY-BUILDING EVENT IN PARIS - "WE ARE ALL ON THE SAME BOAT"

February began with a three-day **Capacity-Building Event in Paris**, organised by the **URBACT Secretariat** and attended by all RECUP partners together with the Lead Partner and the Lead Expert.

The event marked an important milestone: it was the final opportunity for RECUP partners to meet and exchange with peers from across Europe involved in other URBACT Innovation Transfer Networks. It created a shared space for reflection, comparison and mutual learning, with a key insight: despite different contexts, cities are often navigating similar challenges.

One of the central moments of the event was the peer-to-peer review of the Integrated Investment Plans. Each partner, having read the plan in advance, acted as a "reviewer" for a city from another network. Guided by a common framework of questions and assessment dimensions, this exercise brought a valuable external perspective.



Another highlight was the **storytelling laboratory**, where partners worked collaboratively on how to communicate their Investment Plans more effectively. The focus was not only on what to say, but how to say it: identifying the right narrative, the most appropriate tools, and the key messages capable of conveying each city's story of change.



THE RECUP NETWORK IN POLAND: ART AS A COMMON URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

The fourth Core Network Meeting of the RECUP network took place on 4 and 5 March 2026 in Bielsko-Biała, a city in southern Poland at the foot of the Beskid Mountains and, in 2026, the first-ever Polish Capital of Culture. The meeting combined strategic work on the Integrated Investment Plans, a dedicated workshop on loneliness, and an extensive study visit through the city's cultural institutions and public spaces, offering partners both the tools to finalise their plans and a live example of what an integrated urban cultural policy can look like in practice.

The morning session opened at the City Hall, with a welcome from Kinga Czernek of the Municipality of Bielsko-Biała, greetings from the Mayor, and an introduction by Aldo Vargas, representative of the Polish URBACT National Point, who encouraged RECUP partners to continue engaging with European learning networks. Anita Horváth, Project Coordinator on behalf of Lead Partner Újbuda, and Lead Expert Elisa Filippi opened the working session with a brief ice-breaker before moving into the substance of the day.



Elisa presented a clear overview of the network's two-year journey and of what the meeting was designed to achieve. After six months of understanding Újbuda's good practice, twelve months of adapting and testing it locally, the network has now entered its final phase: consolidating lessons from testing actions and preparing plans for long-term implementation. The aim of the Bielsko-Biała meeting was to upgrade the already existing Investment Plans, checking their quality and readiness, and strengthening them across three dimensions: the logic (sharpening problem definitions, target groups and expected outcomes); the ecosystem (broadening stakeholder ownership, improving horizontal and vertical integration); and implementability (funding strategy, governance, monitoring).

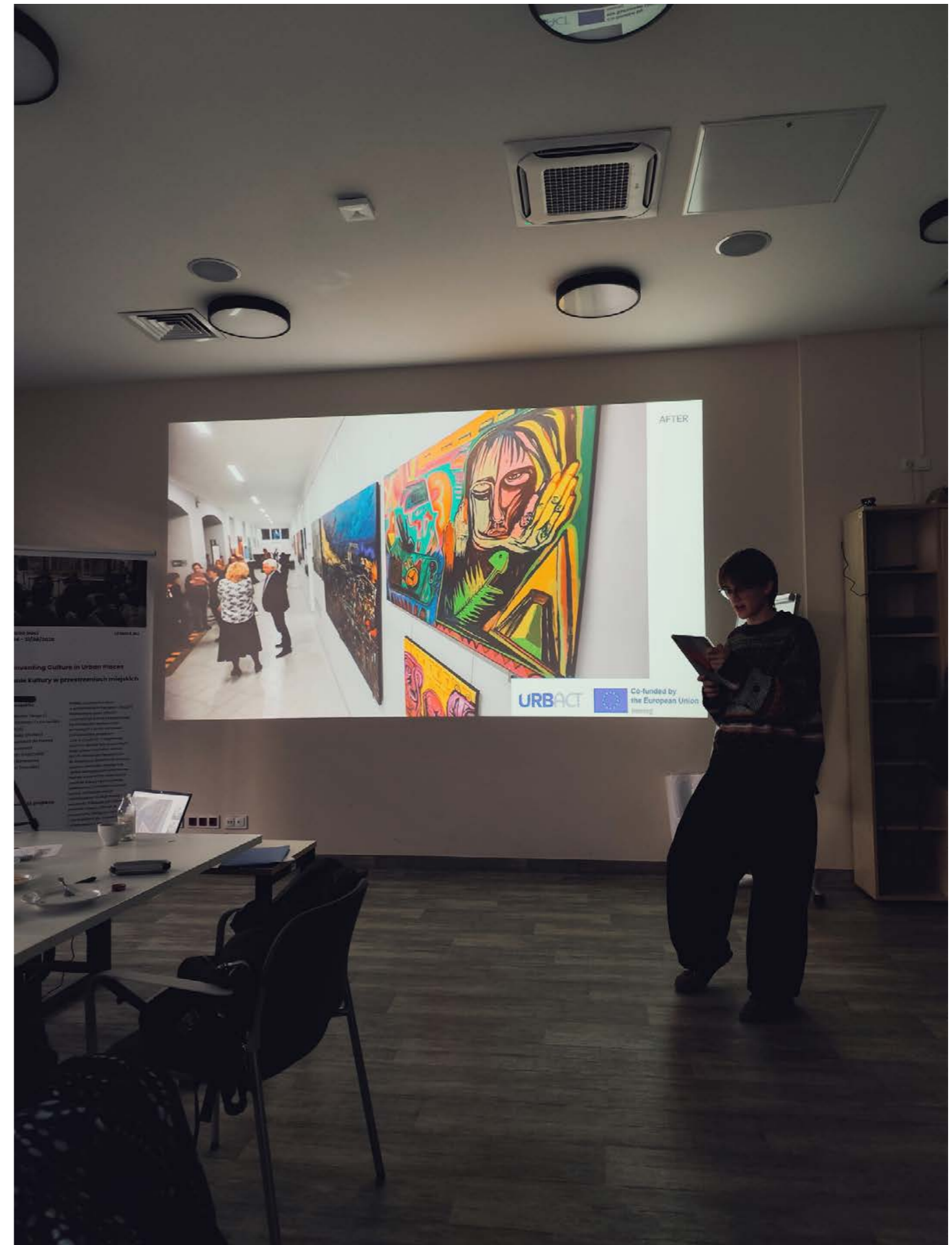
A Mentimeter exercise on the progress of local activities gave a live picture of where each city stood before moving into the peer-review session.

The peer-review used a persona-based method introduced by LE Elisa Filippi. Each participant received a stakeholder profile, a realistic character representing a specific perspective on the Investment Plan, and kept that role for the entire session. As each city delivered a short pitch of its plan, the others asked questions and decided whether they would endorse it, speaking entirely in character. The purpose was to stress-test the plans through the eyes of the people they are designed to serve, surfacing gaps in logic, ownership and communication before the plans are finalised.

The afternoon moved to the Senior Centre, one of the municipal units housed in a building that was originally part of Bielsko-Biała's historic textile industry. Purchased by the municipality and fully redeveloped between 2021 and 2023, the complex today hosts several departments of the City Hall, including the Senior Centre, which operates under the Department of Social Policy. The Director led a guided tour of the facility, explaining how the centre functions as a social and cultural hub for older residents, offering educational workshops, cultural events, artistic classes, physical exercise sessions, and activities designed to foster social interaction and prevent isolation.

Two elements attracted particular attention from partners. The first was the community garden on the terrace adjacent to the building, where seniors meet regularly to grow plants, work together, and spend time outdoors, an informal but consistent space for social connection. The second was the small exhibition space inside the centre, used both by local NGOs to present their activities and by participants themselves to display artworks created during workshops. The discussion that followed touched on the role of cultural and social centres as accessible community hubs, the importance of creative activities in reducing loneliness among older people, and the potential of informal outdoor spaces as tools for strengthening social bonds.

Back in the meeting room, LE Elisa Filippi briefly presented three ongoing or upcoming funding calls relevant to partners' Investment Plans – EUI, CERV Network of Towns, and the final URBACT AN call – and introduced the "Funding Clinic" exercise: each partner is invited to identify one or two actions from their plan that could be scaled up or strengthened with additional funding, and will receive personalised written feedback and suggestions from the Lead Expert, followed by a short individual online session.



The Lead Partner's communication officer then presented the network's communication strategy. The shift now underway is significant: after months in which Testing Actions were the main focus of communication, the emphasis moves to the Investment Plans, their ambition, their evidence, and the stories they carry.

The day closed with a session on art and well-being led by Aleksandra Tarnawa, Bielsko-Biała's ULG Coordinator, and Anna Kroczek, Deputy Director of the Vertical Slice Foundation, a local organisation working at the intersection of art and digital initiatives. The session also featured a contribution from Franek, a representative of High School in Bielsko-Biała, bringing a young person's perspective into the conversation.

The second day was held at Point 11, the civic cultural space on 11 Listopada Street, Bielsko-Biała's historic main pedestrian street, that also hosts the city's own RECUP Testing Action. The morning opened with a workshop on loneliness facilitated by **Christophe Gouache**, Ad Hoc Expert for the meeting and Lead Expert of the Breaking Isolation URBACT network.

Building on the January Masterclass, the workshop explored the nuances and complexity of the phenomenon. Christophe began by distinguishing between social isolation and loneliness and by drawing attention to a distinction that has direct implications for policy design: an elderly person receiving daily care from professionals may have many interactions and still experience deep isolation, because those interactions lack the quality of genuine social connection. Quantity and quality, in other words, are not the same thing.

The workshop mapped the multiple and interconnected causes of isolation across three levels: individual factors (unemployment, retirement, poverty, domestic violence, addiction, physical or mental health issues, bereavement, lack of social skills, technological and cultural barriers); city-level factors (lack of public meeting spaces, insufficient cultural and transport infrastructure, absence of non-monetary social spaces, weak local social media); and macro-level factors that tend to be underestimated in policy discussions, the individualistic values embedded in Western urban culture, the erosion of extended families and community institutions, labour market precarity, consumerism, the decline of local media, and political polarisation, which has in many places made it harder for people to talk across differences, even within families.

Gouache also drew attention to the psychological barriers that prevent isolated people from seeking help, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, negative thought patterns, emotional exhaustion, trust issues, and stressed that policies addressing isolation cannot ignore these internal obstacles, however well-designed the external offer may be.

The central exercise of the workshop used personas to ground the discussion in concrete human situations. Behind every policy, Gouache reminded the group, there are real people. Understanding who they are, what brought them to isolation, and what would actually help is not a peripheral step in plan design, it is a prerequisite.

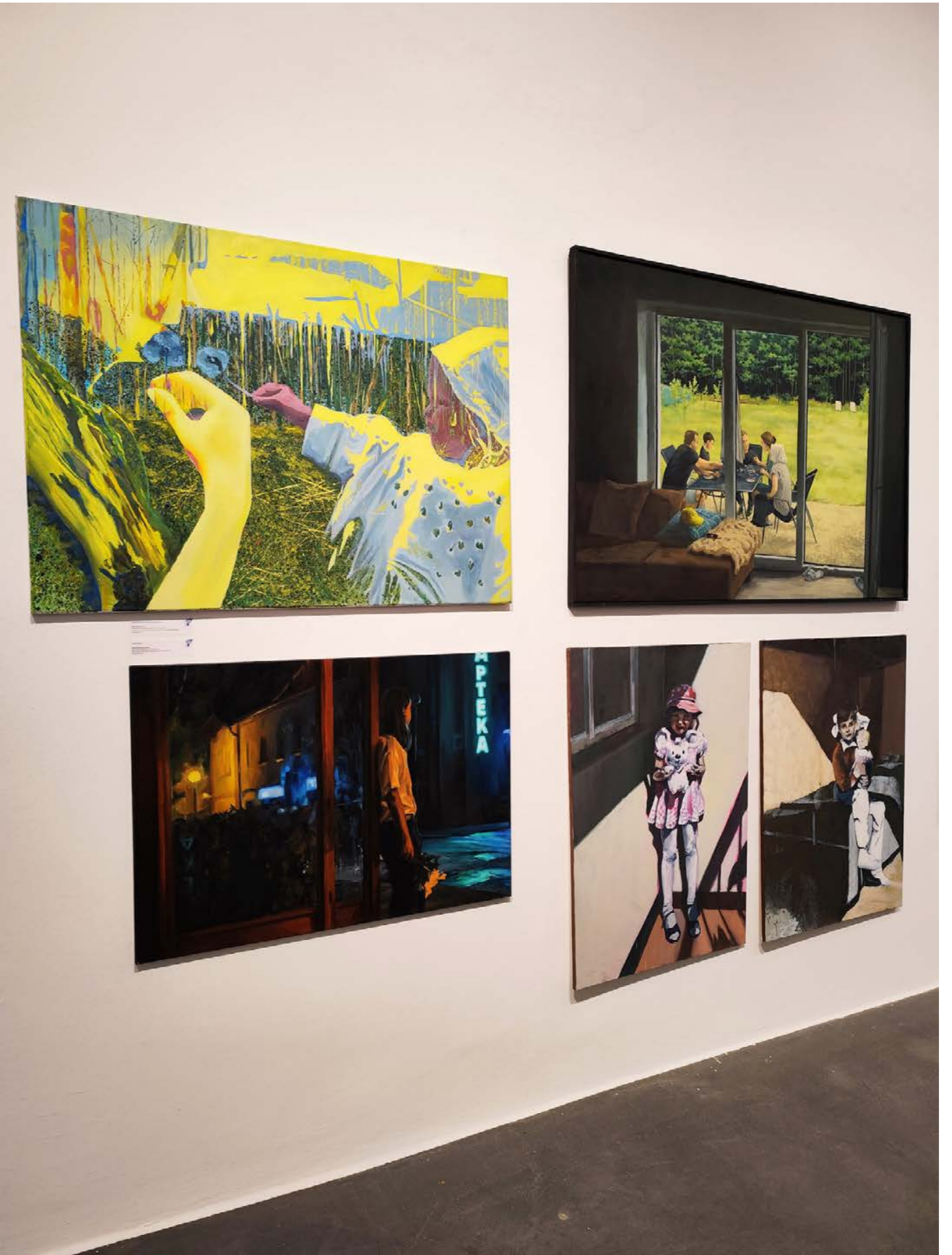
THE STUDY VISIT: A CITY'S CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

The study visit took partners through a wide range of cultural institutions and public spaces in Bielsko-Biała, with the explicit aim of demonstrating how investments in culture, heritage and creative initiatives can enhance residents' quality of life and support urban development.

The first stop was the Bielsko Cultural Centre (BCK), named after Maria Koterbska, for over 35 years the main municipal hub for concerts, festivals, outdoor events and city celebrations, as well as a home for amateur artistic ensembles and cultural education initiatives.

At the Bielska Art Gallery BWA, partners were introduced to the gallery's programme of exhibitions by Polish and international artists working in visual arts, photography and new media, alongside its educational activities, workshops, artist talks, curator-led tours. During the visit, the gallery was hosting the post-competition exhibition of the 17th National Biennale of Drawing and Painting for Secondary Art Schools, showcasing







selected works by students from art schools across Poland.

The Baniailuka Puppet Theatre, one of the oldest and most internationally recognised puppet theatres in Poland, offered a particularly relevant case for RECUP. The theatre stages approximately 350 performances per season and produces around four new productions each year, each preceded by in-depth research on a social theme. The theatre has also introduced an innovative performance format in which the actor is visible on stage, holding and interacting with the puppet directly, a deliberate choice to build a more immediate relationship between performer and

audience. Funding comes from the city budget, ticket sales, grants and sponsorships.

Near the Kubiszówka Cultural Centre, partners stopped at the mosaic “Mozaika BB – Our World of Values,” a large public artwork created on an exterior wall through a series of workshops involving residents of different ages. Under the guidance of professional artists, participants shaped ceramic pieces that were assembled into a single composition, depicting values identified through a public debate with residents: cooperation, freedom, respect and tolerance.

At Książnica Beskidzka, the main regional public library, partners found an institution that has significantly expanded its social role. The library organises approximately 2,000 cultural events per year across its central branch and 17 district locations, lectures, author readings, workshops, exhibitions. Its bibliotherapy and art therapy programmes serve care facilities, special schools and psychiatric hospitals. The BEKA section, designed in consultation with young users, functions as a social and creative



hub hosting a Film Discussion Club, theatre classes, RPG sessions, board games and creative workshops. The library also lends board games, one of its most popular services, and enables local artists to exhibit in its corridor spaces, offering many of them a first opportunity to reach a wider public.

At the Jewish Cemetery, partners experienced how a place of memory can be brought into active cultural life. The ceremonial hall hosts theatrical performances by the Polish Theatre and collaborating youth groups. A guided activity in the cemetery’s “Secret Garden,” led by educators from Klub Gaja, invited participants on a mindfulness walk through the grounds, concluding with each person writing their emotions on a wooden plaque and hanging it on a tree, a collaborative, temporary installation described as a “tree of emotions.”

The cable car ride to Szyndzielnia offered a final perspective on the city’s cultural offer. The historic upper station, Stara Stacja, functions today as a restaurant and cultural venue, hosting events such as the Dziewięcił Mountain Festival. The city’s cultural programme is articulated around three pillars, community, creativity and nature, and Szyndzielnia is where all three converge.

The study visit concluded with an urban



game: “Following the Whisperers – The Trail of Slavic Demons” (Śladami Szeptuch – Szlakiem Słowiańskich Demonów), designed and led by local street artist Malik, who is also behind Bielsko-Biała’s own RECUP Testing Action. Using the SplotBB digital platform, participants explored the city through interactive tasks, hidden clues and stories drawn from local legend and Slavic mythology.

The game demonstrated how place-based storytelling and digital tools can activate public spaces, making cultural heritage accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.

VOICES FROM THE STAGE: INTERVIEW WITH A RESIDENT OF SANDYFORD BUSINESS DISTRICT

METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS

During this period, the network’s activity concentrated on the revision of the Integrated Investment Plans (IIPs) submitted by member cities. To structure this process, two complementary tools were developed and deployed: a **Personas Card** and a **Peer Review Scorecard**.

THE PERSONAS APPROACH.

The personas methodology helped city teams stress-test their plans against the expectations and critical questions of ten distinct stakeholder types, from the Municipal Finance Officer and the Managing Authority representative, to the Community Activist, the Freelance Artist, the Vulnerable Groups Representative, and the Local Press Journalist, among others. Each persona card captures what that stakeholder cares about, the questions they would ask, and the red flags that would raise their concerns.

During review sessions, city representatives were asked to read their plan through the lens of selected personas, simulating the scrutiny it would face from real external audiences. This exercise was particularly effective in surfacing blind spots around financial sustainability, but also inclusion, and governance.

THE PEER REVIEW SCORECARD.

Each city team also assessed a peer city’s plan using a structured scorecard built around eight criteria: problem clarity, coherence, feasibility, governance and participation, financial sustainability, inclusion and accessibility, impact measurement, and partnership leverage. Each criterion was scored on a 1–5 scale, leading to an overall verdict “**GO, GO WITH CONDITIONS, or NO-GO (FOR NOW)**” together with the top conditions to be met and a “killer risk” to be mitigated.

The two tools worked in tandem: the personas opened a qualitative, empathetic reading of the plans, while the scorecard translated that reflection into a structured, comparable assessment, shifting peer review from polite commentary to substantive, criteria-based dialogue.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Now that the first versions of the Integrated Investment Plans are almost ready, the coming months will focus on refining and upgrading them, with particular attention to inclusiveness, integration, and sustainability.

Two key moments will mark this next phase: the third Masterclass, dedicated to monitoring and assessing the impact of cultural events and featuring a guest speaker from the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, and the 5th Core Network Meeting, to be held in the beautiful city of Dubrovnik.

Stay tuned!

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