

# Future STEAM Cities:

## Seven lessons, five journeys

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It is the middle of July, and one by one, people from Future STEAM Cities are logging off for the summer. Automatic replies land in my inbox carrying that particular weight of summer rest and disconnection, reminding me that I'm not far off doing the same — closing my own laptop, a gesture as familiar as it is long awaited. This summer feels different, though: it carries the realisation that Future STEAM Cities is coming to an end, and that the people who built it are quietly stepping away to rest just before its final sprint and showcase of results in Nicosia during the URBACT City Festival in late September. Two years of transnational activity and local testing and definition of investment plans capped by the hectic final days of June — late night emails on Action Network and EUI call proposals.

The short pause between the calls' deadlines and the holiday break gave me a good excuse to get time to sit down with each partner city and ask not “is the investment plan good enough” but “what actually happened to you during these last two years.” Cities finishing a plan are, understandably, too close to it — every section just refined, every indicator just fitted into place. Taking a step back and gaining some perspective produced a sense of time travelling: an opportunity to walk that path again, looking at it with wiser, more experienced eyes — the eyes shaped by everything learned along the way. The investment plans are, in the end, the result of so many different dimensions of learning.

Not everyone made the same journey. Some partners were in the room from the first transnational meeting in Aveiro, back in October 2024; others joined halfway, inheriting a plan and relationships already in motion. And yet, asked what they were most glad of looking back, every one of them gave more than one answer — the STEAM topic, the people around the local stakeholders' table, the inspiration drawn from other cities, the URBACT method, the events and tools. It was rarely just one of these. Usually it was all of them, tangled together.

## Five cities, five journeys

Aveiro, the innovation transfer city, spent the last two years working two gears at once — building its own Continuity Investment Plan while also acting as the hub the other four cities were transferring from. That double role shaped the whole journey, not just its final stretch: as Aveiro helped partner cities understand a fairly complex model and adapt it, partially, to four very different realities, it was also watching how each city read that model differently, and feeding what it learned back into its own thinking. Alytus's clarity on formal business partnerships, Oulu's instinct to bring adults and seniors into STEAM alongside schoolchildren, Kolding's attention to soft skills alongside technical ones, Plock's approach bringing its own Museum into the STEAM offer, connecting art and science through its local heritage — each came back to Aveiro as a genuine addition, not just proof the transfer had worked. Two years on, Carla and Daniela reflect on Aveiro's own plan and conclude it is not a rerun of the original model but a continuation shaped by everything the network sent back to it.

*Lesson 1: even the city a model comes from doesn't just teach it — it keeps rebuilding it, using what its partners hand back.*

Alytus joined Future STEAM Cities to answer a question it had been living with for years: how do you stop young people leaving. Asta has been in the project from day one and Veronika joined recently, and their account of the two years keeps returning to the same point: how much of what changed for Alytus came from watching other cities work, not just from adapting Aveiro's model. At the Kolding transnational meeting, seeing how STEAM could start from something as modest as building with Lego, rather than a citywide programme, changed how the team thought about the scale of what they needed to build — proof that STEAM education could be a much bigger and more flexible idea than the one they'd walked in with. STEAM starting in early childhood was the long-term bet Alytus made at the outset; two years on, it's still the bet, but a broader and better-informed one than it would have been without four other cities to learn from.

*Lesson 2: a network's real value often isn't the model it transfers, but the chance to watch four other cities wrestle with your own problem in real time.*

Business Kolding recognised itself in Aveiro's challenge almost immediately — Leendert's shorthand was that you could take the description of Aveiro Tech City, swap in Kolding, and lose almost nothing: a smaller city losing its technical graduates to a larger neighbour, in this case Aarhus and Copenhagen rather than Porto and Lisbon. What the two years surfaced, though, was more basic than any of the plan's mechanics. Reflecting on why earlier efforts hadn't landed, Leendert's and Arnthor's own conclusion was disarmingly simple: the various parts of the local ecosystem — schools, companies, the municipality — had never really been introduced to each other properly. Something that sounds too obvious to be a lesson, and is exactly the kind of thing that only becomes visible in hindsight.

*Lesson 3: transfer often surfaces not a missing idea, but a missing introduction — the connections a city assumed already existed.*

Płock arrived at Future STEAM Cities already wary of a familiar pattern: a city that had absorbed years of EU and national infrastructure funding without always turning it into lasting local capacity. What the network gave it, in Gosia's and Agata's account, was something most funding proposals don't: no requirement to commit to hard numeric targets before the work had even started. That freedom to explore first and prove later showed up directly in the response from Płock's own EU funds colleagues — after sitting in on roundtables of teachers newly enthusiastic about STEAM, having piloted it in their own classrooms, they asked to get involved in more international projects like this one, a reaction no output indicator in the plan could have predicted. Poland's national education reform, introducing STEAM elements across all schools from this September, has since turned Płock's local investment from a city preference into something closer to a national obligation — a stroke of alignment the city didn't have when it joined, and one that strengthens its case considerably.

*Lesson 4: room to explore before being pinned to hard targets builds more genuine buy-in than a well-specified KPI ever does.*

Oulu entered the network already one of its most established STEAM cities — a long-standing reputation as a Northern European technology and innovation hub, STEAM embedded across schools and kindergartens well before Future STEAM Cities began, and a city strategy running to 2035 that commits STEAM a place through the next decade. That maturity set Oulu a different task from most of its partners: not building STEAM credibility from scratch, but translating a rich, already-trusted practice into a plan precise enough for a funder to act on — turning years of narrative monitoring into structured indicators, and working out how to extend STEAM beyond schools to adults and seniors without losing what made it work in the first place. Throughout, Oulu engaged with peer review and the network's exchanges as a genuine two-way conversation, not a formality to get through on one side and defer to on the other.

*Lesson 5: real wisdom showed not in how much Oulu already knew, but in its humility to be genuinely open to learning from less experienced partners, and to recognise them as a source of knowledge in their own right.*

## What travelled between cities, not just from Aveiro

The individual journeys above are only half the picture. Running underneath all five was a second, quieter form of learning — how a small, deliberately sequenced team of lead partner and experts, working alongside each other rather than in parallel, gave cities something closer to a coherent through-line than five separate pieces of advice ever could. That coordination is substantial enough to deserve its own account, and I'm writing that up separately for the wider URBACT community of practice; here it's enough to note that its effects are visible in every city paragraph above.

*Lesson 6: coordination is not a background cost of running a network — it is itself a deliverable, one that shapes what every city is able to produce, whether or not it ever gets named.*

## An open door, not a closed programme

By the time this is published, most of the people behind Future STEAM Cities will be back at their desks — but the network still has two moments left to show what it built, at the URBACT City Festival in Nicosia this September and the European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels this October. This June, some of the cities were finishing their Investment Plans while also applying to URBACT's call for Action Networks and the European Urban Initiative's call, results due this autumn — proof that the evidence, logic and partnerships this network built don't stop being useful the day it closes. For any city wondering whether a journey like this is worth starting, the honest answer is yes — and not primarily for the funding but because it brings a methodology that pushes a local authority to work differently, inside itself and with its stakeholders, in ways that outlast the network itself. The specific doors — Action Networks, the European Urban Initiative, and others beyond URBACT like the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Initiative — keep reopening on their own times.

*Lesson 7: a network's most useful legacy isn't the plan it leaves behind, but the readiness it builds — the same evidence, logic and partnerships that closed one door end up being what opens the next one.*