

Daring Cities Quarterly Network Journal

Q7-Q8 March–August 2026

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Introduction

Daring Cities is an URBACT Innovation Transfer Network, building on Ravenna's experience of the collaborative urban regeneration of the Darsena area in the EUI Innovation Action project DARE. The network concentrates on co-producing new spaces and services with local initiatives, supported by new narratives about the participating cities' focus areas and evidence-based definitions of quality of life. This Journal, prepared by Lead Expert Levente Polyák, covers the period of March - August 2026 and introduces the key activities of the Daring Cities network in this period, with a particular focus on the Dunaújváros and Olomouc Transnational Meetings that structured the consortium's work in this period.

Transnational meeting in Dunaújváros



The Dunaújváros meeting began on 11 May with an informal dinner. The dinner, as well as many partners traveling to Dunaújváros together from Budapest set the tone for the meeting and helped partners to exchange informally. The formal programme officially began on **Tuesday, 12 May**, at the Dunaújváros Municipality, with a welcome speech by a Deputy Mayor of Dunaújváros, responsible for economic affairs. The welcome speech was followed by an overview of the **current state of the project**, the state of the deliverables

and local processes. After exploring how cities stand with their local processes, open calls, testing actions and Investment Plans, partners focused on the themes of cultural heritage as a tool for urban regeneration, as well as on the role of socialist realist architectural heritage in local identity.

In the first afternoon, participants joined a **critical walk** in the focus area, the centre of Dunaújváros. The walk, following the **socialist realist heritage trail** newly upgraded in the context of the Daring Cities project, was led by Imre Szabó, the Chief Architect of Dunaújváros. The walk was followed by a **Peer Review session**, focusing on the challenges of Dunaújváros related to its natural and cultural heritage.

The second day concentrated on **citizen involvement in managing green areas and natural heritage**, including the role of new institutions in natural heritage management. Following an **Investment Plan** workshop, partners participated at a series of workshops focusing on the **Final Network Product** and the **Final Transnational Event**. After departure, some partners extended the meeting with a site visit in Budapest, exploring self-organised communities that co-manage natural resources in the city.

Dunaújváros Peer Review Session



While the Peer Review session was conceived to focus on the challenges of Dunaújváros related to its natural and cultural heritage, a series of **other themes** also emerged that are central to the city's future. Population decrease and ageing were defined as the key demographic challenges of Dunaújváros that needed to be addressed. The **demographic situation** also affects the way people use the public spaces and services of the city: new trends in real estate development indicate a growing number of apartments sold to daily commuters to Budapest. Experience shows that these commuters spend little time in Dunaújváros, they don't contribute to the city's economy and don't engage with its social and environmental challenges. Therefore, **involving temporary residents and integrating newcomers** as well as offering youth pathways to stay in the city are of paramount importance for the city.

As a response to these challenges, Ravenna shared its experiences in **helping people settle in the city**, through one stop shops and funding youth associations that organise events to attract students to engage with the city. Ravenna also investigates regularly the demand for different kinds of events and services on the side of newcomers and youth, in order to adjust its offer and match demand with supply. Similarly, Altea focuses on helping new residents break isolation and **reducing solitude** in the city, through tandem language teaching and other ways to connect newcomers with residents.

All partners agreed that mid-size cities such as Dunaújváros have the possibility of being more **attractive** than big metropolises, thus attracting various social groups. Dunaújváros's green spaces, infrastructure and proximity to Budapest are a particular asset that can increase the city's attractiveness. However, better connection to the railway station could further enhance the city's connectedness. Furthermore, the city needs to **tell its particular story** in a more assertive way to make itself visible to a broader section of society. An example brought by Olomuc is the aggressive brand building of the city of Ostrava, with the "[Ostrava!!!](#)" campaign.

Focus on green area management and citizen science

One of the key focuses of the meeting was on co-governance and co-management of common assets, including cultural and green heritage. To contextualise this theme beyond the project's boundaries, the Lead Expert gave an introductory presentation, exploring the diverse **scales, legal frameworks, and community-led models** used to involve citizens in managing natural heritage and urban green spaces. As climate change makes it increasingly difficult for municipalities to maintain green infrastructure, tapping into bottom-up community resources has become essential for urban environmental sustainability.

At a localized neighborhood scale, this **collaborative model** is exemplified by a community garden in Budapest, which was established on a vacant public lot after intensive

negotiations with the local municipality. Due to overwhelming public demand, a lottery system is used to distribute plots, as there are ten times more applicants than available parcels. Under a regularly renewed public contract, the land remains public, but the citizens take full responsibility for its upkeep. Beyond growing crops, the volunteers organize community events and lead educational campaigns on composting, climate adaptation, and insect habitats.

To handle broader urban areas, cities are turning to **structured volunteer networks**, such as organizing summer initiatives where residents are incentivized to water street trees. These programs require public education so that citizens understand how to care for the trees without overwhelming the plants with water. The economic efficiency of this volunteer-led approach is illustrated by New York's Central Park, where a volunteering organization has reduced the city's direct maintenance costs to just twenty-five percent, saving three-quarters of the municipal park budget.

Shared green management can also emerge from **direct citizen activism** during urban development conflicts, as seen in the case of Rome's [Lago Bullicante](#). When a developer accidentally ruptured an underground water reservoir, a natural lake emerged, prompting local citizens to campaign for its protection. After the city expropriated the area on the condition that a park be built within ten years, the community successfully intervened at the final hour to prevent the land from reverting to the developer. By demonstrating at city hall, they secured municipal resources and have successfully managed the entire lake park with volunteers for a decade, coordinating daily maintenance and opening hours.

Similarly, in Bucharest, an abandoned concrete dam project from the Ceaușescu dictatorship was slowly reclaimed by nature, transforming into a wild urban rainforest. Following public interest sparked by a magazine article, citizens successfully lobbied to turn the concrete basin into a protected reserve, establishing the first urban natural park in Romania and prompting a new national law to govern such spaces. Managed by a local association, the [Vacaresti Park](#) now serves as a major educational sanctuary with active lakes and swamps where school groups can study local vegetation and wildlife.

Finally, shared management operates on a highly **decentralized scale** through frameworks like Turin's [commons regulations](#). These regulations establish formal agreements granting citizens the right to manage small neighborhood green plots. While the city can provide resources upon request, the daily responsibility for the space belongs entirely to the local residents, demonstrating that empowering citizens is a viable path for maintaining urban nature at any scale.



In the case of Dunaújváros, this theme was demonstrated by the institutionalization of **community-led green governance** and inclusive environmental action. Developed under a LIFE project that champions nature-based solutions and New European Bauhaus values, the initiative establishes a structured pilot model to transition from passive municipal planning to active public co-design and co-implementation. Rather than acting as a simple administrative body, the project established a dedicated governance system and a physical community space called the Biodo ([Biodiversity office](#)), which is rented cheaply to local groups and managed through simplified rules to ensure direct access for all citizens. Led by a volunteer facilitator who bridges the gap between the municipal administration and civil society, the office functions as an active community-building hub and a venue for public debates, board game clubs, and bottom-up green markets.

This governance model integrates citizen input through systematic stakeholder mapping using a power-interest matrix, establishing new groups to guide local environmental interventions. Faced with severe local climate impacts, such as a major summer drought that killed over two hundred trees in the local arboretum, the community prioritized this site for restoration. By generating visual plans that are put to a public debate and community voting, the project ensures that co-creation translates directly into real-life implementation, successfully avoiding the public fatigue of endless municipal discussions.

To deepen public engagement, the office pioneers **inclusive, hands-on environmental actions** and digital citizen science. Through the [House of Generations](#) initiative, vulnerable

residents—such as individuals with rare diseases, psychological challenges, or physical mobility limitations—work alongside volunteers to build cheap, simple insect hotels. To gather environmental data, the project deploys "Bauhaus kits" and leverages citizen science, organizing [BioBlitz](#) events with the iNaturalist mobile application so citizens can photograph and map local biodiversity. This mapping is strategically paired with Spoi, a competitive Japanese trash-collecting sport, and [Soil Blitz](#) paper-based soil analysis, gamifying ecological protection to attract a broader public.

Furthermore, the initiative relies on **intergenerational educational partnerships** to embed sustainability in the wider community. Modelled on the European Commission's [GreenComp](#) strategy, the team trains local schoolteachers to transform their schools into local green labs. This includes highly successful actions like the compost bucket challenge, which successfully engaged busy parents through their kindergarten children in a class competition to collect organic food leftovers for school composting. Ultimately, while the transition to community-led governance faces the classic fragility of depending on a few highly motivated individuals, the project seeks long-term sustainability by building strong alliances with local NGOs and supportive politicians, ensuring the physical infrastructure remains a vital, self-sustaining resource for the citizens.

Cultural heritage and memory politics



The other central theme of the Dunaújváros meeting was the **struggle over the memory of modernist and postwar socialist realist architecture**, closely linked to local identity and the question of how to tell the story of the city. The Lead Expert's presentation introduced the theme and allowed participants to better grasp the socio-cultural context of Dunaújváros's urban and architectural form.

The relationship with **modernist and post-war socialist realist architectural heritage in post-socialist Europe** is far from neutral, serving as an active battlefield of memory politics where political regimes, artists, and local communities contest historical narratives. In Hungary, following the systemic transitions of 1990, the first wave of **memory cleansing** focused heavily on removing socialist terminology from the public landscape. The 2010s marked a highly aggressive second wave of memory cleansing under the Hungarian Orbán regime. This wave sought to systematically return prominent public spaces, such as Budapest's Parliament Square and Buda Castle, to their appearance in the specific year of 1944. The dark irony of using 1944 as an aesthetic benchmark lies in the fact that in that year, Hungary was transitioning from a fascist regime to a Nazi-controlled government.

To enforce this historicist vision, the regime systematically **demolished modernist public buildings** in the Buda Castle, such as a major electric power station in 2020, replacing them with fake historicist structures and omitting the original modern buildings from tourist information tables to erase them from history. This systematic destruction is also exemplified by the National Radio building in Budapest, which was demolished for a Catholic university campus despite widespread public protest, leaving the site as an empty zone of destruction after court cases halted the project.

This lack of public empathy toward post-war architecture prompted significant **artistic and cultural reevaluations**, notably at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Here, artists addressed the psychological stigma that treats post-war modernism as an icon of communist evil, or revived the memory of communist-era cultural centers, showing that discrediting modernist architecture had also discredited the vital institutions fostering social cohesion inside them.

Reclaiming these spaces has often come through **citizen protest and creative reappropriation**. For example, Berlin's Palast der Republik was demolished and replaced by a fake historicist facade at the Humboldt Forum—a structure the presenter calls a "historical lie"—despite civil society efforts to reuse the building. Conversely, successful reappropriation has occurred through creative storytelling, such as Warsaw's Centrala design group making modernist pavilions fashionable on T-shirts, or the rediscovery of Nowa Huta near Krakow as a trendy destination for both tourists and locals.

Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the **high quality of life** offered by the socialist urban planning model, organising the city around units of around 3,000-persons with a rich variety of services and green spaces. While Budapest faces intense real estate pressure that

easily sweeps away protected buildings, Dunaújváros has been preserved almost entirely by accident because it lacks development pressure, keeping its original 1950s and 1960s modernist fabric intact—making it one of the rare almost intact socialist new towns.

Cultural heritage and citizen involvement

Another key discussion of the meeting focussed on cultural heritage and citizen involvement. The Lead Expert's presentation explored the powerful connection between **cultural heritage, urban transformation, and social cohesion**, demonstrating how physical spaces and local traditions can be actively reclaimed to build community, combat historical erasure, and empower citizens. Rather than viewing history as an obstacle, the presentation argued that cities can build on heritage by first raising **public awareness** through collaborative, neighborhood-level exploration.

A key example for this is the [Budapest 100](#) programme, where residents invite the public into their homes, design graphical banners, and co-create historical booklets, turning historical documentation into an active, community-building exercise. These collaborative efforts foster **heritage communities**—groups of citizens organized around a physical site. These communities can exist locally or internationally, as demonstrated by the global crowdfunding campaign launched to save Venice's [Poveglia Island](#) from privatization, or the international coalition supporting the post-war wooden houses of [Open Jazdów](#) in Warsaw. Through decentralized concepts like Rome's [Ecomuseo Casilino](#), historical knowledge is co-created with residents, treating local practices and personal memories as parts of a living, territorial museum rather than confining heritage within physical walls.

Reclaiming urban assets also relies heavily on **multi-stakeholder partnerships and co-governance**. This is illustrated by Bratislava's [Old Market Hall](#), an abandoned municipal space running a massive deficit that an NGO successfully turned into a popular, self-sustaining civic venue. A video created by the Lead Expert for the [Social Cohesion Component](#) of the Council of Europe's Heritage Strategy 21 reinforces this collaborative ethos, detailing how heritage spaces, stories, and skills help individuals form a cohesive society where they can gather, participate in decision-making, and build **shared identities**. By temporarily opening heritage sites to test their potential without high-risk investments, municipalities can transform neglected spaces into community reference points and anchors for democratic debate. Forming partnerships between public authorities, academic institutions, private businesses, and civic groups allows partners to co-design reuse processes, fostering a sense of shared ownership and reviving forgotten, intergenerational skills. This inclusive model is particularly crucial for **post-war modernist architecture**, whose identity is frequently undermined by hostile memory politics that seek to erase the era, leading to restorative projects like Otherity that bring post-war modernity back to public knowledge.

As shared by representatives of the **Altea** municipality, the practical integration of material and intangible heritage is also showcased in their town. For its physical heritage, Altea recovered an abandoned seaside family home once slated for privatization as a school—and restored it using public funds into a community museum and Valencian language classroom celebrating a local writer. Similarly, the Molí dels Moros, a historic Moorish windmill, was rebuilt to host acoustic music and storytelling shows. Even when physical preservation failed, as when a private owner suddenly demolished the iconic, protected Two Towers, civic advocacy and public pressure ensured the site was ultimately rebuilt as a hotel that respected the historic skyline.

Beyond physical structures, Altea protects its **intangible heritage** to foster a deep sense of belonging, transforming a five-to-six-century-old communal laundry site at the Parque del Agua into a live music venue and hosting classical concerts. This shared pride culminates in the four-hundred-year-old [Fiesta de l'arbret de Sant Joan](#), a community-led summer ritual where citizens carry a twenty-five-meter tree through the old town to the church square, working together to raise it as a symbol of agricultural fertility and local solidarity, fostering a powerful, shared feeling of Alteanity.

Transnational meeting in Olomouc



The transnational meeting in Olomouc was conceived as the final meeting of the Daring Cities partnership. The meeting, organised by the Olomouc Municipality, was divided into two parts. The first day was conceived as a public event with invited guests external to the project, also accessible to the professional public at the [Pevnost Poznání](#) (Fort of Science). The second day, on the contrary, was limited to project partners and included site visits in the city.

The meeting began in the evening of 7 July, with an **evening walk**. The walk, leading participants through the city centre, the green belt surrounding the centre, the botanical garden as well as a scientific research centre and related start-up incubators, allowed partners to gain an overview of the city, its quality of life and challenges.

The official opening of the meeting took place on 8 July, with **welcoming remarks** by the Mayor of Olomouc. This was followed by an introduction to Daring Cities by the Lead Expert, focusing on the project's shared journey, URBACT's logic of stakeholder involvement and knowledge exchange, the adaptation of Ravenna's good practice to other cities, the trajectory designed for the partners' learning process, the synergies between the local actions of partner cities, their shared challenges and solutions. The introduction was followed by Ravenna's **presentation of the DARE project** and **partner cities' reports** of their challenges, trajectories, actions and investment plans. The experiences of cities were contextualised by **additional presentations** focusing on temporary use in Ravenna, the Association of Metropolitan Areas in the Czech Republic and future EU funding for cities and metropolitan areas. The first day of the meeting continued with a **roundtable discussion** with partner cities followed by a Q&A session involving audience members. The day was concluded by a **guided tour of the event venue**.

The second day was organised around **internal project discussions**, focusing on the final deliverables, administrative reports as well as the final network product. Before lunch, participants joined a guided tour in the City Hall building, followed by a thematic walk in the city.



The Metropolitan Areas Association

One of the key themes of Olomouc during the Daring Cities project was the **metropolitan scale**. Since several partner cities were interested in how to conceive an adaptation of Ravenna's good practice at the metropolitan scale, organisers invited a representative of the newly established Association of Cities, Municipalities, and Metropolitan Areas of the Czech Republic to share the association's objectives.

The central theme of the presentation was the vital importance of **strategic regional coordination**, political advocacy, and international network-building in preparing Czech municipalities for the structural changes of the post-2028 European Union programming period. This theme was framed around the establishment of the Association of Cities, Municipalities, and Metropolitan Areas of the Czech Republic in January 2026, which represents a historic consolidation of the country's most significant urban centers after more than fourteen years of collaborative groundwork. By **uniting fourteen metropolitan areas and fourteen statutory cities**, the association represents over sixty per cent of the national population and over seventy per cent of the gross national product. The core argument of the presentation was that this immense demographic and economic weight must

be channelled into a unified, proactive lobbying force capable of advocating for municipal interests before both the Czech national government and the European Union.

A prominent sub-theme is the **impending paradigm shift in the mechanisms of European public funding**. The presentation emphasized that the post-2028 period will be fundamentally different, particularly due to the introduction of the National Regional Partnership Plan and the rise of directly managed programs. To thrive in this new funding environment, municipalities must move beyond being passive recipients of national grant allocations. Instead, they must actively integrate into the structures of the European Union by **building robust, cross-border partnerships** and mastering a more sophisticated style of transnational communication and cooperation. Current pilot initiatives, while valuable for resolving immediate communication and participation challenges, must ultimately serve as a training ground. The presentation stressed that local administrations must leverage these preliminary networks to transition into much larger, capital-intensive investment programs, such as the European Fund for Competitiveness and the Connecting Europe Facility, which finance large-scale transport and infrastructure projects.

Through its newly established coordination office in Prague, the association seeks to **centralise funding opportunities, international contacts, and partnership resources** to support its member cities. This office has already demonstrated its capability by securing a NetZero Cities grant to foster network communication, and it is actively pursuing an International Visegrad Fund grant to establish a cooperative model within the Visegrad Four to collectively represent Central European interests in Brussels. The presentation concluded by urging all international delegates to fiercely **defend the territorial dimension** in post-2028 negotiations, ensuring that sufficient European funds are directly allocated to projects implemented on the territory of cities, municipalities, and their regional partners.



Future funding for cities and metropolitan areas

In another, related presentation from the Czech Ministry of Regional Development outlined the **future of public funding**, focusing heavily on the strategic preparation required for the post-2028 programming period. The core question for municipal administrations should not merely be where the money is, but rather which cities and projects will be technically and organizationally prepared to utilize these funds the moment they become available. The upcoming period will heavily reward municipalities that actively prepare integrated strategies, organize their local stakeholders, and identify their real challenges today instead of passively waiting for funding calls to be published. Programs like URBACT, despite being "soft" programs, perform the essential heavy lifting of **helping cities gather stakeholders and build solid implementation plans**.

Regarding the status of the post-2028 period, a preliminary political agreement has initiated an active dialogue between the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union. While negotiations continue over cohesion policy and the broader multi-annual financial framework, some small successes have already been secured, such as negotiating a reduced frequency of audits and controls for beneficiaries and promoting simplified cost options like unit costs and lump-sum financing. However, the future framework will also **blend traditional cohesion approaches with the model of the post-pandemic Recovery and Resilience Facility**, which places a heavy emphasis on milestones, reforms, and performance. This transition, coupled with a proposed rapid twelve-month decommitment rule, will place intense pressure on managing authorities to begin implementation quickly, heavily favoring prepared, integrated, and partnership-based projects that have active project pipelines ready by the time 2028 starts.

In terms of the future funding architecture, **national and regional partnership plans** will remain the main envelope for cohesion policy and municipal investments. The Integrated Territorial Investment instrument will continue with a lighter administrative intensity, though the European Commission has chosen to make specific territorial and urban chapters optional for individual member states. Czech negotiators attempted to persuade the Commission to mandate a minimum percentage for the urban dimension, but the Commission has remained strict in leaving this to the discretion of member states, though ongoing dialogue negotiations could potentially change this.

Additionally, **directly managed programs** like Horizon Europe are expected to continue with generous funding for topics such as climate neutrality, smart cities, and the New European Bauhaus. While national and regional envelopes remain the core for physical investments, financial instruments will play a much more prominent role in the Czech context for financing major projects. Programs like URBACT and the European Urban Initiative are secure in the draft regulations, which is a major negotiating success. Ultimately, cohesion funds alone will be insufficient; cities must learn to blend funding from municipal, regional, national, and private business partnerships. Olomouc and other participating cities should remain daring, using the partnerships and action plans they designed during the Daring Cities project to **position themselves for these post-2028 opportunities**.