

WATER FINDS A WAY

**What the Hydro-Heritage Cities
Network teaches us about
innovation transfer (and more)**

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**Co-funded by
the European Union**
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Introduction — What exactly travels when innovation is transferred?

During the summer break, I often spend late afternoons by the Tagliamento river near my home, on the border between Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia in Northeast Italy. Watching its waters flow (and sometimes recede in drought) I find in the river, or “Tiliment” in Friulian language, a metaphor for my two-year experience with the URBACT innovation transfer of the Hydro-Heritage Cities Network. *Water rarely moves in a straight line, it bends around obstacles, disappears beneath the surface, re-emerges unexpectedly and takes the shape of the landscapes and structures it meets. Innovation moves between cities in much the same way.*



The Tagliamento river near San Daniele del Friuli

Hydro-Heritage Cities started from a simple premise: in Chalandri, Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. had brought the Hadrian Aqueduct back into urban life, transforming an almost invisible infrastructure into heritage, environmental resource and urban commons. Its water found contemporary use, public spaces were regenerated and schools, residents, cultural organisations and technical partners became part of a new local ecosystem. The innovation was not a single intervention, but a way of linking water management, cultural memory, climate resilience and community participation.



The Hadrian Aqueduct underneath Chalandri

The five transfer cities, Elche in Spain, Roeselare in Belgium, Rome in Italy, Serpa in Portugal and Sombor in Serbia, did not share Chalandri's aqueduct, institutional setting or history. They had, instead, their own relationships with water, sometimes visible, sometimes forgotten and their task was to understand what made Chalandri's practice innovative and explore what those principles could become elsewhere.

There's a central argument throughout these pages and this is that *innovation transfer is not replication, but translation*. What travels is a changing combination of ideas, principles, methods and questions and, as these encounter new physical, institutional, cultural and political landscapes, some elements take root, others lose relevance, and unexpected possibilities emerge. Transfer therefore transforms not only the receiving cities, but also the original practice, which Chalandri has seen reflected back through the interpretations of other places.

This reading is consistent with policy-transfer literature. Dolowitz and Marsh¹ distinguish between copying, emulating, combining and using a policy as inspiration, while more recent work on **urban policy mobility** shows how policies are selected, narrated, reassembled and altered as they move. McCann and Ward² describe this as mobility and mutation, much like watercourses. In this perspective, *adaptation is not a failure of transfer, but the way transfer actually happens*.

¹ Dolowitz, D.P. and Marsh, D. (2000), Learning from Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy-Making. Governance, 13: 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0952-1895.00121>

² <https://emccanngeog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/mccann-ward-policy-studies-revised.pdf>

Hydro-Heritage Cities can be read in these terms, because Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. offered principles, methods and practical examples, but each city reconstructed them around its own water systems, heritage, communities and institutional possibilities. The relevant question is not how faithfully Chalandri was reproduced, but what each city selected, how it changed through use, and whether the resulting proposition retained the original ambition to connect infrastructure, memory, environment and civic life.



Deep Dive in Chalandri - January 2025

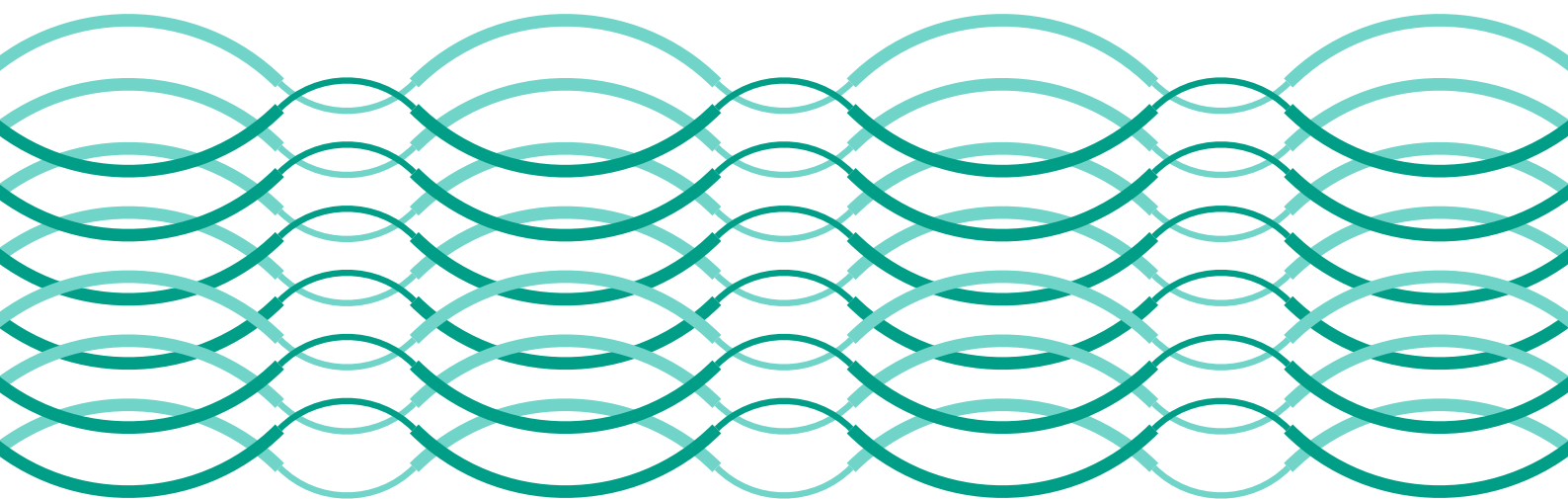
Chiara Lucchini and I look at that journey through the three mutually reinforcing pillars of the URBACT Method: participation, integration and action-oriented learning. They are used here as an analytical lens rather than a checklist, because their value lies in the way they interact. We also look at the legacy that the Network leaves in terms of policy and future developments.

The analysis draws on the network's full arc, starting from the transferability assessments, city visits and exchanges, bilateral conversations to the mid-term review, local testing actions, and to the final ULG check-up and review of the Investment and Continuity Plans. It is a deliberately hopeful, but not uncritical analysis. Hydro-Heritage Cities shows how *an URBACT network can open perspectives, build unlikely alliances and turn neglected water heritage into a contemporary urban question but it also shows how difficult it is to move from enthusiasm to ownership, from stakeholder diversity to integrated decisions, and from an attractive plan to a funded and governed programme of action.*



Reflection of the Great Backa Canal nearby Sombor - October 2025

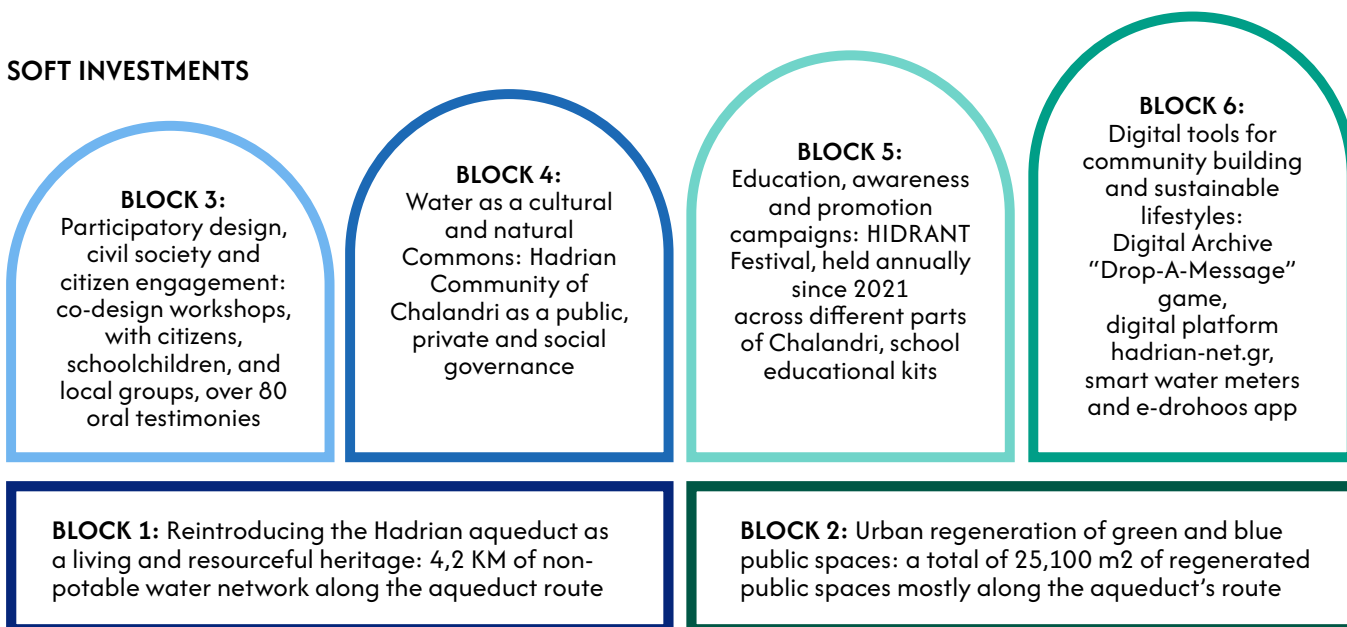
Water always finds a way, but never without resistance and the same is true of innovation. What matters is not whether it arrives unchanged, but whether, in taking a new course, it leaves behind new capacities, relationships and possibilities for action.



Innovation does not travel intact

An Innovation Transfer Network begins with the productive tension of a practice chosen because it has proved its value somewhere, yet its destination cities are not asked to reproduce it. *The real work sits between fidelity and invention, keeping alive the ambition that made the original practice distinctive while allowing it to become useful in another place.*

SOFT INVESTMENTS



HARD INVESTMENTS

For Hydro-Heritage Cities, this meant treating transfer less as a question of replication than of interpretation. As the practice moved across cities, it has filtered through different landscapes, institutions, memories and political conditions, so that adaptation has become the normal form that learning takes when it enters a new urban setting.

Taking the practice apart

Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. resisted simple transfer because its innovation is not contained in a single object or activity. The recovery of the Hadrian Aqueduct combines infrastructure, non-potable water use, regenerated public space, cultural memory, education, participatory design and community-based governance, all of them shaped by Chalandri's partnerships, resources and institutional context.

The first task of our journey was to take the practice apart, as the Transferability Study put it, through a "hack and chop" process that has allowed cities to separate transferable principles from context-specific arrangements before deciding what mattered locally.



METHODOLOGY

HYDRO-HERITAGE CITIES METHODOLOGY AND ITS ELEMENTS EXPLAINED

MODULE 1: *THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION*

1. Reframing Hydro-Heritage as a Living Resource (Block 1, 3)
2. Integrating hydro-heritage with sustainability and water management goals (Block 1, 2)
3. Innovation in infrastructure and technology (Block 1, 6)
4. Monitoring and Evaluation framework (Block 3)

MODULE 2: *GOVERNANCE*

5. Innovative governance and institutional models (Block 3)
6. Redesigning procurement processes for social and environmental impact (Block 1, 2)
7. Integrated funding schemes (Block 1, 2)

MODULE 3: *COMMUNITY-DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT AND REGENERATION*

8. Participatory sense-making for urban regeneration (Block 4)
9. Education and awareness-raising strategies (Block 5)

What travelled most clearly is a way of seeing hydro-heritage as a living resource rather than a monument, a link between memory and contemporary environmental pressures, between community knowledge and physical intervention, between cultural activity and new civic use and sense of belonging.

This shift has opened space for each city to start from its own reality, replacing the question “Where is our Hadrian Aqueduct?” with a more useful one: *“What relationship between water, heritage and contemporary urban life can be rediscovered here?”*

Reconstructing the idea locally

The answers emerged gradually, as each place began to reinterpret its relationship with water through the lens of the transfer. In Roeselare, buried watercourses became a way to think about how future urban projects could make hidden systems culturally visible, while in Sombor the canal, locks, bridges and surrounding landscapes started to be understood as parts of one territorial story rather than as separate assets. A similar broadening took shape in Serpa, where the aqueduct and Nora were connected with water scarcity, cultural activation and sustainable local development. In Elche, the Palmeral came to be read through the hydraulic knowledge and governance that sustain it, and in Rome less visible water-related heritage was linked to education, social use and the environmental activation of San Sisto.



The industrial canal in Roeselare – May 2025

None of these propositions copied Chalandri, yet all retain the essential insight that water infrastructure can be read at once as history, environmental resource, cultural narrative and ground for collective action and identity.

Progress has definitely been uneven, advancing faster where a clear local narrative was able to meet an existing policy opportunity and a coalition able to work across departments and organisations, while slower adaptation has exposed familiar obstacles such as weak political interest, uncertain implementation conditions or difficulty in explaining why hydro-heritage mattered now.



Learning by doing

Testing is the moment when interpretation has met local reality. After visits, presentations, mapping and comparison, each city had to choose a fragment of the shared learning and test whether it could engage people, reveal meaning or support a more credible plan.

The testing actions have been deliberately varied. Sombor's photographic initiative generated more than 350 images of the canal landscape while Roeselare's mural, based on archive material, has made the underground Mandel visible in the street. Through the "Conversations at the Fountain" Serpa has gathered memory, water and place in a public setting and Rome's work with schools has uncovered narrative walks and activities around less visible heritage, finally Elche's Water Day tested whether different actors could share a conversation about the Palmeral's cultural and hydraulic dimensions.



Memory of Water in Elche - 2026

Their value lays less in demonstrating finished solutions than in creating devices for inquiry. *The actions test public interest, uncover stories, open partnerships and give ULGs something concrete to work on, since collaboration often becomes easier around a walk, mural, school activity or public event than around the abstract promise of an Investment Plan.*

The learning, however, has not always been captured with the same discipline, because some actions worked more as awareness-raising moments than as experiments, and the connection between what they revealed and what entered the final plans remains clearer in some cities than in others.



Transfer as a continuing negotiation

By the end of Hydro-Heritage Cities, Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. has become a family of approaches, connected by a shared understanding of hydro-heritage but differentiated by place, scale and opportunity.

This is the first major lesson for the URBACT Method. *Action-oriented learning gives cities permission to select, try, question and revise, but it also requires discipline because tests must address strategic questions, and their results must feed into governance, investment choices and future action.*

Innovation does not travel intact but it becomes locally valuable because cities take it apart, put it to work and allow it to change.

Participation and integration: the local infrastructure of transfer

An innovation may arrive through a deep-dive, a presentation or a discussion, but it becomes local only when people begin to discuss what it means for their place. In Hydro-Heritage Cities, the URBACT Local Groups (ULGs) provided the main setting for this work, a pillar of the URBACT method, they represented the bridge between the experience of Chalandri and local knowledge, professional expertise, institutional constraints and community memory.



Core Meeting in Roeselare - May 2025

Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. cannot simply be transferred by one municipal department because its innovation connects fields that cities often manage separately such as water and heritage, culture and infrastructure, climate adaptation and public space, technical investment and community participation. Thus, the ULGs involve stakeholders not only to open municipalities to participation, but also to help cities build a more integrated policy response.

The experience of the network shows that these are connected but distinct achievements. *Participation is about who enters the conversation and whether their knowledge influences choices while integration is about how such an encounter can change the way a problem is understood and acted upon.* A diverse group can generate ideas without overcoming institutional silos and – equally – several departments can coordinate an intervention without making room for community engagement.

The ULG as a changing local ecosystem

There has been no standard Hydro-Heritage Cities ULG. All include municipal departments, but their wider composition reflect different local assets and ambitions. Across the network, heritage and environmental organisations, water-management bodies, schools, universities, civil-society groups, community representatives, tourism actors and elected representatives have participated in different combinations.

This diversity is of course appropriate, exploring how to reveal an underground watercourse requires a different balance of knowledge from one concerned with a canal landscape, an irrigation system or the future social use of a heritage site.



ULG at work in Chalandri - June 2026

The initial transferability assessments showed that the cities already had potentially valuable stakeholder ecosystems, although these actors were not always connected to one another. The network created opportunities for those working on infrastructure, heritage, education and community life to enter a shared conversation. In some cases, this led to entirely new professional relationships, while in others Hydro-Heritage Cities gave an existing partnership a renewed and more focused purpose.

The composition of the ULGs also needs to evolve, since the people who help a city interpret the original practice are not necessarily the same people needed to test an idea, draft an Investment Plan or secure its implementation. As the network progressed, funding bodies, asset managers, technical specialists and political decision-makers became increasingly important. Future transfer processes should therefore understand ULGs as changing ecosystems, rather than as fixed groups defined at the start.

Participation becomes real through action

Across Hydro-Heritage Cities, participation has been most effective when attached to a concrete task. Mapping water assets, collecting memories, creating walks, working with schools, developing exhibitions and testing artistic interventions has given stakeholders something tangible to discuss and shape together and these activities have helped translate the broad idea of hydro-heritage into local experience.

The testing actions were especially important in this respect, operating as meeting points between the participatory and action-oriented pillars of the URBACT Method. Yet the experience also reveals different levels of participation. Attendance does not necessarily lead to active contribution, and contribution does not always mean influence over decisions. In some groups, ownership has remained concentrated in a small core or even one particularly committed organisation. In others, stakeholders generated ideas but continued to expect the municipality to turn them into action.



Testing action in Rome - May 2026

The final ULG check-up survey carried out at the end of our journey broadly confirms this mixed but positive picture. *Most cities assessed participation as active or moderate and reported that members had contributed significantly to testing actions and to shaping the Investment or Continuity Plans.* Four described their ULG as a co-creation platform. The remaining responses pointed more cautiously to information sharing or responsibility concentrated among a few active members.

Because the check-up reflects the view of project coordinators from each city rather than the views of all ULG members, its results are best read alongside the wider network experience. They nevertheless reinforce an important lesson, which is, the value of participation lies not in the number of people invited or meetings held, but in what stakeholders are able to change.

From diverse knowledge to integrated policy

Over the transfer process, hydro-heritage has become a useful meeting point for different policy perspectives. Technical specialists have explained how a hydraulic system functions, historians and residents have revealed its cultural meaning while municipal staff related these ideas to strategies, governance, investments and responsibilities.

Over time, this exchange has helped cities move beyond an understanding of heritage as a collection of monuments and, slowly, watercourses, canals, aqueducts and irrigation systems have begun to be seen as living systems with cultural, environmental, educational and social value. *The strongest evidence of integration is not the range of themes mentioned in the plans, but the emergence of different value propositions that range from heritage interpretation attached to infrastructure investment to restoration linked to water awareness and cultural activation and to hydraulic landscapes understood as part of contemporary resilience.*



Serpa's aqueduct and Nora – September 2024

However, dialogue does not automatically change institutional practice. *The mid-term review and bilateral discussions repeatedly identified limited political engagement, departmental boundaries, lack of time and competing priorities as obstacles.* Some ULGs have also faced stakeholder conflicts, difficulties engaging citizens or scepticism created by previous participatory experiences. Facilitation could improve the quality of exchange, but it could not by itself create political ownership, shared budgets or formal responsibility.

At the end of the day, *integration becomes credible only when different perspectives alter a choice, in our case when heritage knowledge influences infrastructure design, environmental concerns affect the future use of a site,* community input changes a priority, or departments share responsibility for implementation. This is where the three pillars of the URBACT Method meet.

From participation to shared responsibility

By the end of the network, most cities express some confidence that their ULG will continue in some form, yet continuation will not necessarily mean preserving the same membership or meeting format. Moving from transfer to actual investment will require more formal arrangements and actors able to authorise, finance, manage and monitor implementation.

If participation in Hydro-Heritage Cities has been part and parcel of how transfer has become possible, the lasting value of the ULGs will depend on whether the connections created around the table continue to shape decisions after the table itself is gone.

The transferable core of the initiative

This integrated character is part of what Hydro-Heritage Cities identifies as **the transferable core of the experience**. Since from the very beginning, already in the Transferability Study, the identification of the project's main features, organized in **modules and submodules**, helped guide the action of the partner cities, blending the practice transfer throughout the strategic dimension, the governance frameworks, and community driven engagement and regeneration actions. Hydro-Heritage Cities network did not ask partner cities to reproduce Chalandri's infrastructure, but to adapt its combination of heritage regeneration, sustainable water management and community involvement to very different local conditions, choosing specific angles, priorities and preferred components to be applied and further developed on site.

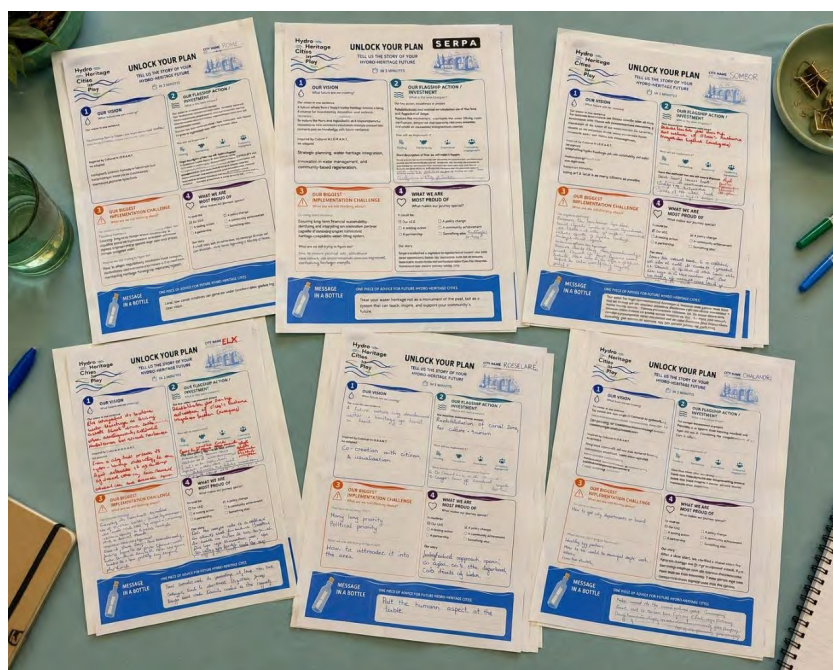
MODULES	SUB AREA	CHALANDRI	ELCHE	ROESELARE	SERPA	SOMBOR	ROMA
STRATEGIC DIMENSION	REFRAMING HYDRO HERITAGE AS A LIVING RESOURCE			X	X	X	
	INTEGRATING HYDRO HERITAGE WITH SUSTAINABILITY AND WATER MANAGEMENT GOALS		X	X	X	X	
	INNOVATING INFRASTRUCTURE AND TECHNOLOGY	X			X		
	MONITORING AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK	X			X		X
GOVERNANCE	INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL MODELS	X		X			X
	REDESIGNING PROCUREMENT PROCESSES FOR SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT					X	X
	INTEGRATED FUNDING SCHEMES	X	X		X	X	
COMMUNITY DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT AND REGENERATION	PARTICIPATORY SENSE MAKING FOR URBAN REGENERATION	X	X	X	X		X
	EDUCATION AND AWARENESS RAISING STRATEGIES	X				X	X

How the different partners took ownership of the core transferability elements of Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T.

The Chalandri experience functioned **less as a blueprint than as a modular methodological framework, whose core principles were progressively reassembled around different urban challenges** (i.e. irrigation and landscape resilience in Elche, hidden watercourses in Roeselare, heritage restoration and water reuse in Serpa, multifunctional canal development in Sombor, and the social and educational reactivation of hydro-cultural heritage in Rome). The transfer from Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. to the partner cities was not based on reproducing the Chalandri model as a fixed package, but on **selecting and adapting specific components according to local conditions**. The strongest continuity concerns the idea of hydro-heritage as a living resource, the integration of water with sustainability objectives, and participatory sense-making: these elements reappear in different combinations in Elche, Roeselare, Serpa and Sombor, while Rome translates them into a more indirect relationship between water, heritage, environmental education and social activation. Governance and funding are more unevenly transferred, reflecting different institutional capacities and project maturities: some cities focus on new governance arrangements, others on procurement or blended funding schemes. Technology and monitoring are likewise not universal components, but are adopted where they directly support the local investment logic.

From testing to investment: three pathways towards implementation

One can argue that an Investment Plan is where the freedom of transfer meets the discipline of implementation. During the network, cities have been able to explore, reinterpret and test ideas on a modest scale, but the plans required them to make harder choices, such as defining what should happen next, assigning responsibilities, estimating costs and explaining how an emerging vision might survive beyond URBACT.



Investment plans at a glance during the final meeting in Rome- June 2026

The five Investment Plans cannot be read as equally developed versions of the same project because they respond to different assets, institutional capacities and political opportunities. Some concern one recognisable place, others span extensive hydraulic landscapes or attach hydro-heritage to investments already in motion. Their budgets, time horizons and levels of readiness are consequently very different.

Clearly, their value should not be judged only by whether every action is immediately funded because these plans are also records of transfer. They reveal what each city selected from Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T., how that learning was combined with existing priorities and where the limits of adaptation become visible.

Water heritage is the use you make of it

The richness of the original practice, with its multiple transfer components, its different angles towards integrated urban planning, its different ways to incorporate water heritage in local policies, gave birth to very different and peculiar implementation pathways in the five partner cities. Seen together with **Chalandri's Continuity Plan**, and the previous experience delivered with Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T., these experiences reveal a broader trajectory. **Water initially provides a tangible object around which actors can collaborate, but through experimentation it then becomes a methodological connector between data, infrastructure, environmental performance, cultural meaning and lived experience.** Chalandri pushes this logic furthest by proposing to detach the method from water altogether and embed it in a city agency (the Urban Lab) applicable to mobility, green space, housing and other policy fields. Hence, viewing the progress and evolution of the work brought about in the six Hydro-Heritage Cities, it is quite interesting to notice how in the end the ambition is not simply to **scale hydro-heritage projects, but to scale the collaborative capacity generated around them.**

Viewed in this way, three broad Investment pathways have emerged in Hydro-Heritage Cities: 1) treating hydro-heritage as a territorial system; 2) adding heritage and public meaning to infrastructure investment; and 3) using a particular place as the anchor for wider regeneration. These are dominant planning logics rather than fixed categories, and the boundaries between them remain deliberately open.

Approach	Dominant logic	Cities	Principal challenge
Territorial hydro-heritage systems	Water heritage as an interconnected territorial system linking infrastructure, landscape, ecology, identity and governance	Elche; Sombor	Prioritisation, coordination and governance across a broad system
Heritage added to infrastructure	Cultural meaning, interpretation and participation embedded in planned water or urban infrastructure	Roeselare	Making the cultural layer integral rather than optional
Place-based regeneration and activation	A specific asset or site anchors cultural, environmental, educational and social uses	Serpa; Rome	Converting a compelling programme into a durable operating model

Territorial hydro-heritage systems: Elche and Sombor

Elche and Sombor work at the broadest scale, their plans try to make sense of systems composed of infrastructure, landscapes, institutions, environmental processes and cultural meanings.

In Elche, the celebrated Palmeral cannot be separated from the hydraulic network that has sustained it over centuries, the plan therefore moves beyond conventional heritage conservation and connects the recovery of irrigation canals and emblematic structures with regenerated water, real-time quality control, irrigation automation, environmental monitoring, education and public interpretation. The historic hydraulic system is presented not only as evidence of the past, but as part of the city's response to water scarcity and climate pressure. At the same time, Water Week, school activities, interpretation and citizen science are intended to rebuild public understanding and ownership of the system.



Peer Review of the plans in Elche - February 2026

This is a substantial transformation of the initial transfer question. At the beginning of Hydro-Heritage Cities, the Palmeral was widely recognised as heritage, but the infrastructure, knowledge and governance behind it were less visible within that narrative. By the end, the plan describes the Palmeral and its water system as a living territorial structure. The proposed investment envelope of approximately €5.7 million over 2026–2035 reflects this breadth and combines actions already under way with medium- and longer-term interventions. The key policy innovation is therefore the integration of **technical water management and cultural landscape management**: resilience of the Palmeral depends simultaneously on infrastructure, water quality, historic irrigation institutions, municipal action and social legitimacy.

In **Sombor**, the conceptual shift is particularly explicit. The Great Bačka Canal has traditionally been understood primarily as economic and agricultural infrastructure.

The Investment Plan deliberately reframes it as a **public good and multifunctional urban landscape**, adding social, cultural and ecological functions to its economic role. The resulting measures combine accessibility and sustainable mobility, community gathering places, industrial heritage, cultural tourism, ecological protection and economic uses. Importantly, this framework was not produced only through technical planning but is the result of a rich participatory process: the ULG and citizens participated throughout data collection, problem definition, identification of values and potentials and formulation of proposals. The Plan itself becomes a **“policy link” between projects already contained in sectoral strategies and new measures generated through participation.**



Testing action in Sombor - July 2026

The strength of both plans is their capacity to show that hydro-heritage is more than a collection of isolated relics and their difficulty follows from the same ambition. Territorial systems cross administrative boundaries, policy sectors and ownership arrangement and generate more possible actions than can be delivered at once. Elche must coordinate municipal leadership, the water company and historical irrigation institutions while aligning substantial infrastructure works with cultural and educational objectives. Sombor depends on cooperation between city and provincial bodies and must turn a wide portfolio of possibilities into an agreed sequence of investable projects.

For these plans, the crucial next step is prioritization since a compelling territorial vision creates coherence, but implementation requires choices about where to begin, which partnerships are mature enough to act and how early projects can demonstrate the value of the wider framework.

Adding heritage to infrastructure: Roeselare

Roeselare followed a different route. Its historic watercourses have largely become an invisible underground infrastructure. Improving water quality and the need to redesign parts of the Mandel and Sint-Amandsbeek for flood and drought adaptation create opportunities to reconnect these technical works with urban experience. Hydro-Heritage Cities introduced another question, namely, if the city's hidden watercourses could also become carriers of memory, identity and public experience.



The Investment Plan therefore proposes adding cultural and social value to already programmed infrastructure investments through historical documentation, digital interpretation, artistic interventions and neighbourhood involvement. **Water becomes a means of making otherwise technical and often unpopular public works understandable and socially relevant.** The testing actions have explored this possibility. A walk examined how residents experienced the city's water heritage, while archival research and local stories informed the development of a mural where the Mandel flows underground. The mural is modest compared with the scale of the infrastructure around it, but its purpose is significant: to test whether artistic interpretation can make an invisible system legible in the street.

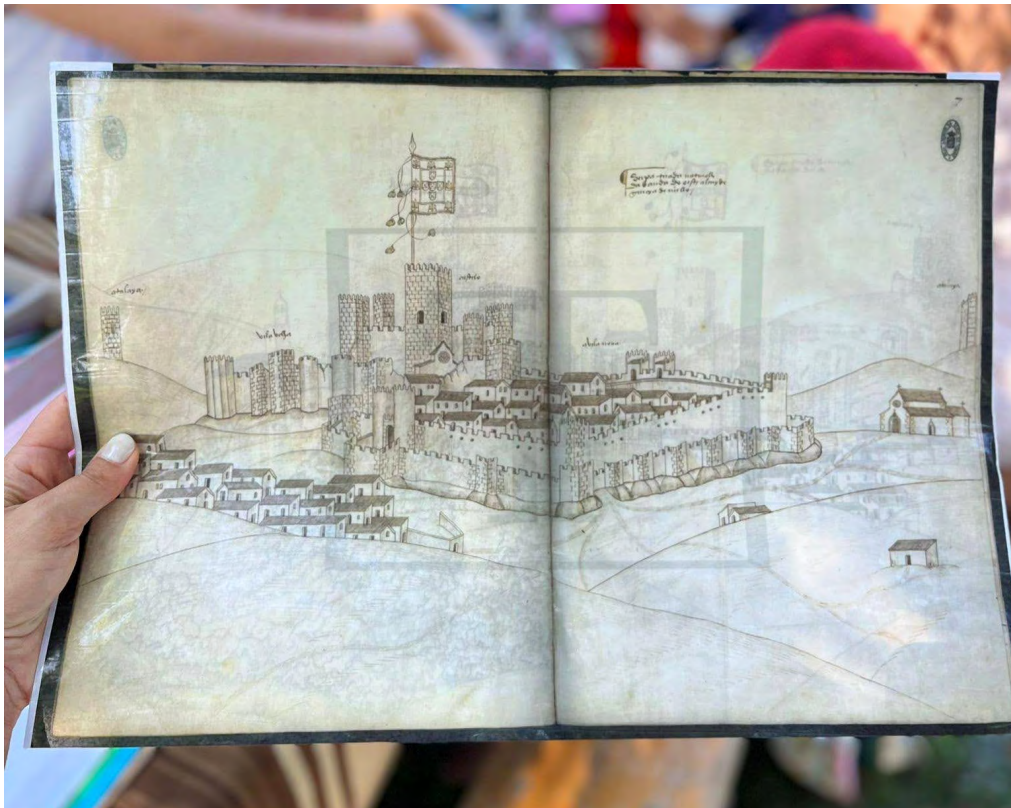
This also creates a potentially important governance mechanism for the future: climate-adaptation investment, heritage policy and community engagement can share the same implementation process rather than proceeding as independent projects.

Roeselare's pathway has an evident practical advantage because it can attach hydro-heritage to investments that already have stronger technical, policy or financial foundations. Its weakness is the risk that culture and participation become an optional decorative layer, added after the principal decisions have been made. The plan acknowledges the need to connect policy fields and appoint responsibility within the administration and this institutional embedding will determine whether hydro-heritage influences the city's investment practice or remains dependent on a committed heritage actor and occasional opportunities.

Place-based regeneration and activation: Serpa and Rome

Serpa and Rome both organise their plans around a recognisable place, although the character and scale of their proposed interventions differ considerably.

In Serpa, the Nora and aqueduct form an emblematic monumental complex whose serious deterioration creates an urgent conservation need (discovered during Hydro-Heritage Cities) and the plan combines architectural restoration with the possible reactivation of the water-lifting system, monitoring of water resources, public interpretation, cultural programming and environmental education.



Workshop during the meeting in Serpa - July 2025

The Hydro-Heritage Cities contribution is most visible in the attempt to move beyond restoring an object and in the Portuguese town, water creates the opportunity to transform restoration into climate policy. The starting point is the degraded Nora and Aqueduct, but the Investment Plan proposes recovering their functional dimension through reconstruction of the water-lifting mechanism, analysis of water quantity and quality and assessment of possible uses for irrigation, cooling or educational demonstration. This significantly expands the original heritage intervention: **the monument becomes an experimental interface between ancestral knowledge, technological innovation, responsible resource use, environmental education and cultural activation.** The Nora and aqueduct are imagined as living heritage, a site that can demonstrate responsible water use, host learning and cultural activity and reconnect an important symbol with everyday community life. “Conversations at the Fountain” and the work with schools, older residents and tourism actors helped test this broader social meaning. This co-design process also widened the project: municipal departments responsible for heritage, environment, water, urban services, development, law and IT worked with regional authorities, schools, universities, associations and private actors to redefine needs and identify actions not initially envisaged by the municipality.

Yet Serpa's plan is also a reminder that participation cannot resolve questions requiring specialised authority and investment. Ownership and institutional responsibilities are complex, the conservation works will require substantial funding, and the reactivation of the hydraulic mechanism depends on further technical study. The vision is clear and its delivery must be phased around stabilisation, feasibility, partnership agreements and available finance.

Rome's plan is linked to the Aranciera and Semenzaio di San Sisto, within a much larger and more complex municipal system. Ancient water structures identified around the Aranciera di San Sisto cannot be functionally recovered; instead, contemporary water management enters through rainwater harvesting, water-saving practices and climate education. The Aranciera is conceived as an Urban Social Greenhouse: a restored heritage asset through which water connects urban horticulture, environmental education, migrant training, schools, participation and social inclusion. The ULG process influenced this evolution, giving greater weight to permanent educational activities, water culture, collaborative management and longer-term participation. The Plan even envisages the Aranciera as a pilot for other municipal sites, together with **city-wide mapping of hydro-cultural heritage and guidelines for replication**.



*Visiting the **Parco d'Affaccio** along the Tiber river in Rome - June 2026*

School activities and narrative routes have helped explore how hidden or secondary heritage might be encountered differently but - at the same time - the process exposed the central implementation question: of who will manage the place, ensure access and sustain its programme. In a city with layered responsibilities and many competing priorities, a rich concept can remain suspended unless an operating model and institutional mandate are secured.

The common challenge for Serpa and Rome is therefore the passage from a compelling place to a durable arrangement around it. Restoration can save a structure, and activities can demonstrate interest, but neither alone creates long-term stewardship. The plans need organisations able to programme, maintain and animate the sites after the initial investment.

Chalandri: from innovation to consolidation

The pathway accomplished by Chalandri could be summarized as **the establishment of a more comprehensive methodology and approach to public policy out of the experience and testing** gathered throughout the Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T. project which was conceived around a very specific urban asset: the Hadrian Aqueduct, a still-functioning Roman infrastructure that had largely disappeared from Chalandri's contemporary urban life. The project's main perspective consisted in framing the aqueduct simultaneously as **cultural heritage, water infrastructure, environmental resource and catalyst for community action**. By combining physical regeneration and a non-potable water network with participatory design, cultural programming, local-history activities and new forms of collective management, Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T. positioned water at the crossroad between different areas of policy, using it as the main framework to integrate innovations at process, programme, policy and local action level.

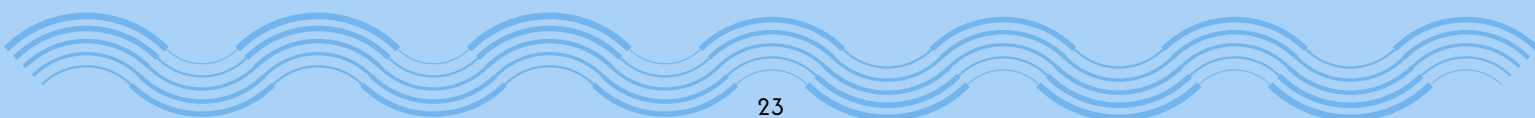
In this sense, a prominent role was played by participation, that was not conceived simply as consultation: **communities were proactively involved** in planning, designing and eventually managing collective spaces and services, including the new service distributing aqueduct water for irrigation. The delivery of a new service helped the Municipality set a different conversation with local stakeholders, rephrasing **a trustful (strengthened!) relationship between public institutions and the communities** around a topic that was considered (and treated) a strategic one for the local development. At the same time, the project left **visible signs on the physical body of the city**, showing "in practice" how public spaces and services can be put not only at the centre of the local debate but also, and most importantly, at the centre of public life, with an improved urban and architectural quality, and a meaningful long term contribution to public health and sustainability.



Experimenting how to move one step further

Having designed and delivered a reference practice so rich in implications and fields of application, and so diversified in terms of potential evolutions and further testing, Chalandri faced the transfer phase within the URBACT ITN generating a different question: **could the methodology developed around the aqueduct become a way of working for the municipality as a whole?** From the early stages of the ITN in fact, the objective was not to replicate Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T. 's thematic interventions, but to institutionalise its integrated approach, participatory methods and collaborative governance model. The intended shift was **from field-specific interventions to cross-city planning, from piloting to mainstreaming, from project coordination to systemic governance and from temporary external expertise to internally embedded municipal capacities**.

The idea of providing the city with a city agency (the Urban Lab), an institutional and operational framework to foster data-driven, collaborative, and inclusive urban policy-making was already in the minds of the Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T. 's staff at the completion of the UIA/EUI experience. Back then already, the core objectives and background recognized **participatory governance as a key component to translate community engagement into a permanent framework for civic involvement**. Data-Informed Planning was next to it, a necessary improvement in the capacity of the city to gather, read, manage and **use data for informed decisions**, and with the idea of utilizing GIS-based tools, pilots, and cross-department collaboration to shape sustainable local policies. Last, but definitely not least, European recognition was considered as



one of the ambitions for the emerging service/institution, to **take advantage of the experience built within EU programmes and financing** and with the idea of **building innovation and integrated development** also by **exploiting the high capacity of the Municipality to participate in the European debate** (besides a high success rate in the application and delivery of proposal for EU programmes, along the last year Chalandri managed also to take part in relevant strategic and operational working groups such as the EU Agenda Partnership on **“Water sensitive cities”**, and others).

Consistent to the methodology applied in Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T, the reflection leading to the proposed **Urban Lab** was itself organised as a co-design process: the main difference from the original practice is the direction that co-design took, opting in this case for the internal structures and component of the Municipal body, instead of opening the dialogue with the local groups and communities. An initial Urban Local Group brought together several municipal departments, elected representatives, municipal agencies, civil-society organisations and technical experts. Because the first discussion remained too broad, the group was deliberately reduced to a smaller core team in order to clarify the problem and **translate an initially abstract Urban Lab concept into concrete functions**. In this phase URBACT and its structured approaches/methods of work helped the Municipality of Chalandri guide the participants in the **identification of structural rather than project-specific obstacles**: organisational silos, lack of coordination mechanisms, fragmented data, limited staff resources and the absence of institutionalised connections between evidence, participation and policy design. The exercise therefore transformed the discussion from **“which new project should be created?”** into **“which capacities and routines are missing from everyday municipal governance?”**

The next step was deliberately experimental. Rather than defining the new service only institutionally, the group decided to start **testing its working method on a concrete, and transversal policy problem**: walkability. Municipal services and external experts jointly identified datasets, indicators, participatory methods, and developed a GIS-based database and policy dashboard covering pavement continuity and width, crossings, accessibility, lighting, greenery, thermal comfort, noise and other variables. Residents then discussed the findings in a neighbourhood workshop, while a second workshop asked municipal staff from different departments to interpret the same evidence together. The exercise demonstrated an important principle inherited from Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T.: **quantitative information and lived experience are treated as complementary evidence**. Residents’ assessments broadly confirmed the spatial data but also helped identify which problems most affected daily life and therefore which interventions should be prioritised.

The experiment also generated **organisational learning**. Municipal **participants identified cross-departmental collaboration as one of Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T. ‘s most durable legacies** and considered the new digital tool potentially applicable beyond walkability, including mobility, parking, green spaces, public spaces, infrastructure and municipal asset management. At the same time, they highlighted insufficient staff capacity, unclear responsibilities for maintaining datasets and weaker collaboration during policy design than during project implementation. These findings directly informed the architecture of the proposed service.

Legacy and perspective(s)

The testing phase helped establish a **core group of committed people** interested in expanding and exploring the concept of the Urban Lab, as a methodology first, and possibly - later on - as a possibility to establish a new service/organization/institution accompanying, supporting and strengthening the urban policy making process, its effectiveness, its capacity to respond to local needs and bring larger issues in the local context. To achieve this goal, the Continuity pathway undertaken by the Municipality of Chalandri adopts the perspective of **incremental implementation rather than immediate institutionalisation**.

Ongoing European projects are to become “living laboratories” in which the Urban Lab methodology can be repeatedly tested on a variety of different topics and policy fields; the existing ULG progressively evolves into a cross-departmental working group, learning common action, sharing responsibilities, and operating between silo and silo; the GIS dashboard expands into a shared municipal knowledge infrastructure, designed for technical purposes, but also potentially capable to become the baseline for a larger use and access; training and peer-learning strengthen internal capacities, and let a new sense of belonging and contribution emerge in the technical bodies of the City; participation, engagement and co-design of actions and policies in the city start becoming the new normal, and not anymore “the one special occasion” built in the framework of a single financing opportunity. Then, only later, a dedicated operational team and potentially a physical neighbourhood interface are established.



Testing action in Chalandri - July 2026

This approach highlights how **scalability** does not mean simply enlarging a successful pilot: it **means progressively separating the methodology from its original subject matter**, applying it across policy fields, building institutional ownership and transforming temporary project practices into a **permanent enabling and acceleration service** connecting data, departments, experts, citizens and local organisations.

As the process is still ongoing, and foresees its development in the forthcoming years, several questions nevertheless remain open and are to be taken into account. Incrementality reduces the risks of imposing a new structure before its usefulness has been demonstrated, and the Continuity Plan explicitly argues that **organisational change requires time, trust and ownership**. On the other hand, this very same strategy could create vulnerabilities. As an example, if experimentation continues mainly through externally funded projects, the Urban Lab could remain dependent on the project-to-project logic it intends to overcome. Maintaining datasets, coordinating departments and organising meaningful participation require stable staff time and clearly assigned responsibilities, both already identified as weak points.

Political continuity and administrative leadership are enabling conditions much more than guaranteed resources. In this sense, the incremental development of the Urban Lab has to grow hand by hand with institutional learning and with the capacity of the political framework to understand its functionality and the opportunity to use it: **the Urban Lab should not become a parallel administrative structure intervening in ordinary municipal functions**. Rather, it could be “switched on” when a challenge requires cross-departmental collaboration, experimentation, new forms of participation or work across policy silos (any time some innovation is required: may it be in the process, in the policy, in the methodology, in the technical tools, etc.). As it collects the legacy of previous actions and capitalizes the effects of innovative actions over the city, producing a “technical” acceleration, at the same time the Urban Lab should take good care of the balance between municipal ownership and operational autonomy. In fact, it should not appear either as a body replacing municipal departments or as an independent external actor. Instead it should be clearly understood as a tool created and politically mandated by the Municipality, while retaining sufficient operational autonomy for experimentation. This requires a **strong political accountability, to be nurtured, continuously negotiated and maintained for a long time**. Nevertheless flexibility, agility and the capacity of the Urban Lab to accelerate and innovate processes should not remain detached from the Municipality’s policy agenda: **the agency’s strategic priorities should remain connected to the Municipality’s political vision, while citizens and stakeholders proactively contribute local knowledge, needs and perspectives**.

Finally, the balance between technological institutionalisation and citizen participation remains unresolved: the Plan itself warns that dashboards, databanks and other digital instruments should not marginalise participatory processes, but rather integrate, strengthen and root them locally. The critical implementation challenge is therefore to determine when, and to which extent, repeated experimentation has generated enough evidence, ownership and organisational capacity to **justify permanent mandates, staffing and resources**. The success of the incremental approach will ultimately depend on whether each successive pilot leaves behind not only knowledge, but durable routines, responsibilities and institutional commitments. In this sense, at these stages of the process to establish the Urban Lab, the incremental institutionalisation trajectory should be made even more explicit. Similarly to what happened with Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T., pilots should not be undertaken “for the pilot’s sake”, but rather **introduce new policy fields, identify new arenas of debate, activate and expand the local system of stakeholders and finally produce both a concrete policy result, multifaceted organisational learning and new skills that can be reused elsewhere**. Learning by doing, testing, adaptation, replication and progressive expansion are all necessary ingredients for the Urban Lab to be **firstly recognized as a methodology, and only later - and more robustly - to be seen as a stable, necessary, locally embedded organisation or institution**.

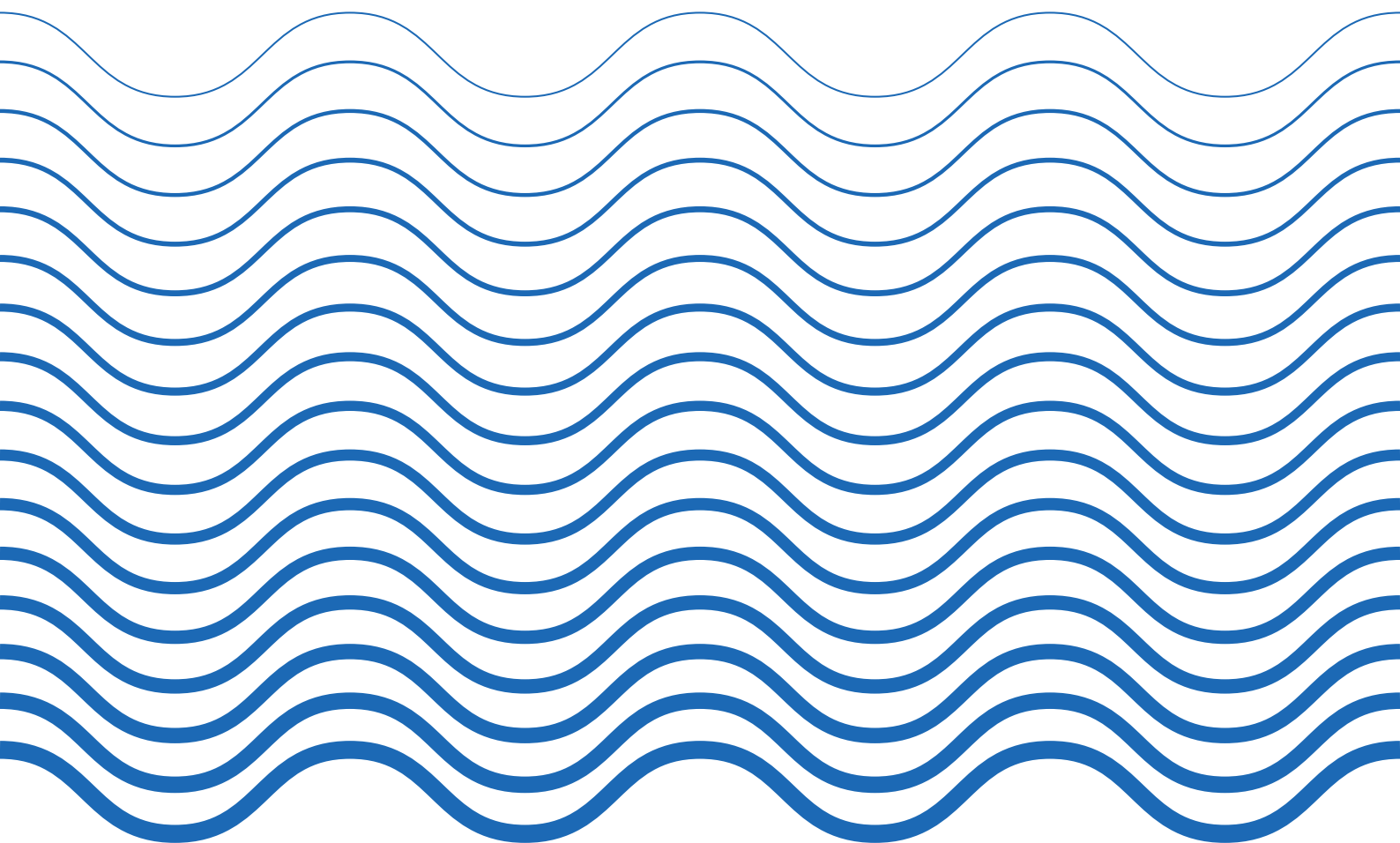
What the plans resolve, and what they expose

Across all cities the plans are generally strongest in explaining why hydro-heritage matters and describing what cities would like to do but they are less even when moving into delivery arrangements, diversified funding and monitoring.

Public and European resources dominate the funding outlook. This is understandable because many proposed actions concern public infrastructure, protected heritage and collective environmental benefits. Yet only limited attention is given to private, philanthropic, cooperative or community-based resources. In this respect, diversification should not be pursued for its own sake, but the funding model needs to reflect the mixture of hard investment and softer activities that gives each plan its integrated character.

Governance is an equally persistent issue, as several plans identify partners without fully defining who decides, who coordinates implementation and who remains accountable over time. However, these are not reasons to discount the plans, and they are precisely what serious planning makes visible. Indeed, a plan cannot manufacture political commitment, settle ownership questions or guarantee future funding, it can only expose where these are missing and distinguish long-term ambition from the next credible step.

The five cities don't leave Hydro-Heritage Cities with projects of equal scale or readiness, but with different routes from testing towards implementation. Their next test will be whether the plans remain final and archived documents, or become instruments that are revised, negotiated and used.



Enlarging the framework, or why Hydro-Heritage Cities is relevant for the EU debate

For more than two decades, European water policy has been structured principally around the **Water Framework Directive**, whose integrated river-basin approach seeks good ecological and chemical status for surface and groundwater bodies. This framework has been fundamental to set a system of rules and a shared perspective, but **its territorial logic does not automatically make water a central organising principle of urban planning**. As the six Hydro-Heritage Cities have clearly shown, urban water responsibilities remain frequently distributed among utilities, drainage authorities, environmental agencies, spatial planners, public works departments and emergency-management structures.

The climate crisis, and its growingly impactful effects on our cities, makes this separation increasingly problematic as EU cities are simultaneously confronted with **too much water, too little water, water of insufficient quality, water becoming more and more a matter of equality and democratic access to basic services**. River and pluvial flooding, prolonged drought, increasing demand, declining groundwater availability, heat stress and pollution, rising temperatures and the severe implications of the climate crisis have pushed a gradual **reframing of water resilience as a question of socioeconomic resilience, security and preparedness, alongside environmental protection**. The 2025 **European Water Resilience Strategy** marks an important shift in this direction: its objectives include restoring and protecting the water cycle, increasing water efficiency, improving retention through water-smart practices and green infrastructure, modernising networks, digitalising water systems and strengthening governance, investment and public awareness.

In recent years, a significant development in the establishment of linkages between water, water management and water in cities occurred within the **Urban Agenda for the EU**. It is not by chance that two out of six cities of the Hydro-Heritage Cities URBACT network (Chalandri and Elche) stand together with Member States, the Commission, stakeholders and other Urban Authorities within the Partnership dedicated to Water Sensitive Cities. Launched in 2024, the **Water Sensitive City Partnership**, explicitly aims to **place water at the centre of urban development**, responding simultaneously to scarcity, excess water and competing demands and identifying seven interconnected areas of intervention: common indicators for water sensitivity, enabling regulation, Water Sensitive City plans, innovative financing, digitalisation of urban water systems, knowledge and capacity building, and citizen science and community engagement.

As it is seen from the perspective of cities - physical and complex bodies hosting and conditioning the life of people the ground for the economic, social and cultural development of communities - this perspective on water and water sensitive approaches to urban processes opens a rather new field of reflection, action and experimentation. On the one hand it brings us to consider water conservation, reuse, rainwater harvesting, infiltration, storage, ecological quality and flood management as **a comprehensive system connected with the built environment and green infrastructure**. On the other hand, it highlights how streets, squares, parks, schoolyards, buildings and former industrial areas can become components of the urban hydrological system: retaining rainfall, reducing runoff, supporting groundwater recharge, cooling neighbourhoods and providing space for public life are more and more often functions we expect urban spaces to provide to our communities.

Seen under these perspectives, the many efforts delivered by Chalandri within the Cultural H.ID.RA.N.T. project, and more recently by the partner cities of the Hydro-Heritage Cities URBACT ITN, pave the way for a

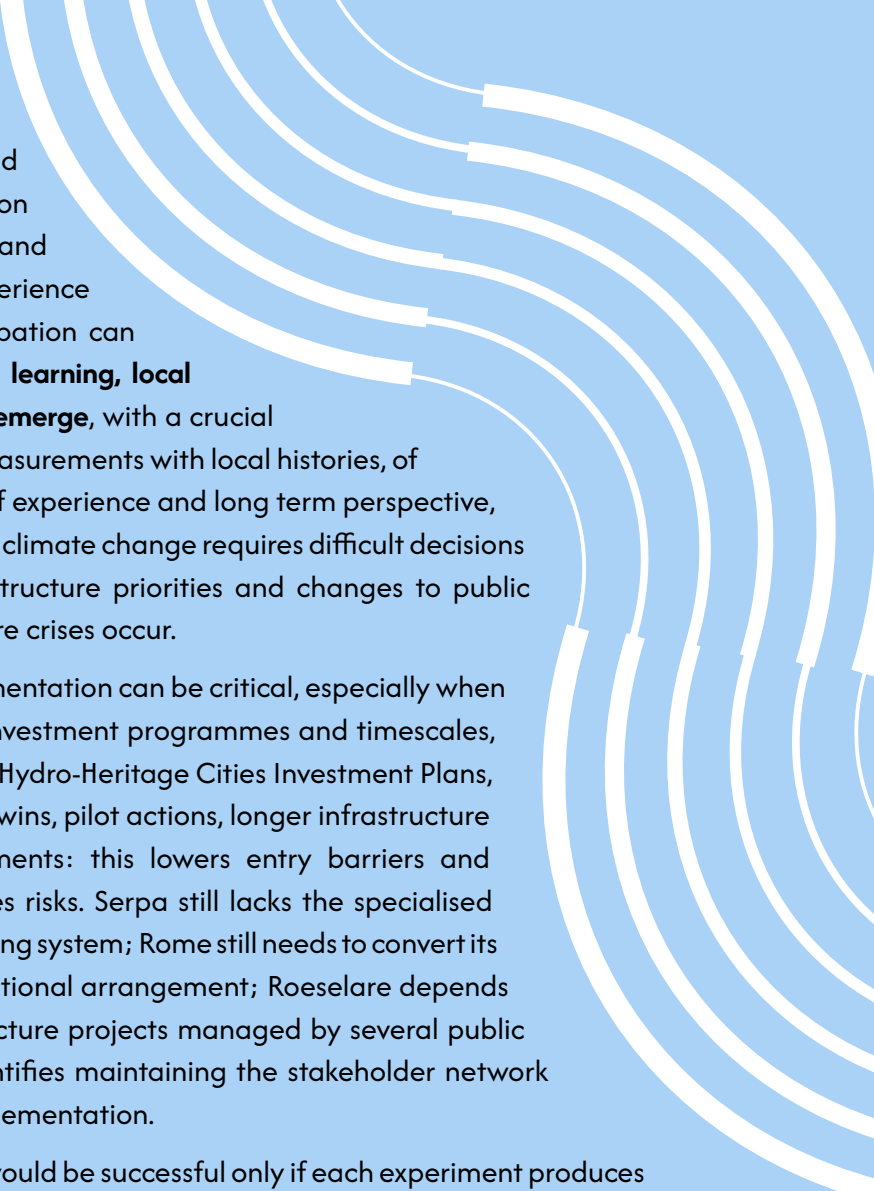
further expansion of the reflection brought about so far, introducing new elements. The most relevant, and common to all the partner cities, is the demonstration that **historic water infrastructures, water heritage and a new water culture embraced by urban communities can help reconnect areas of policy that are normally siloed and managed independently**. The perspective offered by the Hydro-Heritage Cities network outcomes show how significant it is to think of water heritage as a catalyst for integrated projects towards water: the next step forward is to **make water a permanent organising layer of urban policy**. This might mean defining for every substantial urban transformation, how water enters the project, which role it could play, in which way it could intercept the manifold urban issues our cities face every day (i.e. where rainfall goes; how much potable water is required; which non-potable resources could be reused; whether soil permeability and storage capacity can be increased; how green infrastructure can contribute to cooling and biodiversity; and how historic water systems and local knowledge can inform contemporary solutions, etc.).

Such an approach would clearly **change the scale at which hydro-heritage is considered and becomes relevant**: in all cases the aqueduct, canal, waterwheel or irrigation system would no longer be primarily the object of intervention, while instead becoming an **entry point into the wider urban water cycle**. Elche's acequias could connect heritage policy with the future irrigation and climatic resilience of the Palmeral; Sombor's canal could be read simultaneously as transport infrastructure, ecological corridor, water reserve and public landscape; Roeselare's underground streams could become the basis for integrating drainage investments with urban redevelopment; Rome's rainwater harvesting could become part of a larger network of water-sensitive public facilities. The logic already visible in the Investment Plans could therefore be **scaled from individual heritage systems to neighbourhood and city-wide water strategies**.

This extension is consistent with Europe's increasing emphasis on the necessity to implement effective, impactful and multiscalar climate adaptation measures and climate mitigation solutions (i.e. nature-based solutions). As an example, EU climate-adaptation policy recognises solutions such as river and floodplain restoration, urban greening, soil protection and natural water retention as multi-benefit interventions able to address flooding, drought and extreme heat while also supporting biodiversity and social value. The crucial point, however, is that **such measures should not simply become another catalogue of technical solutions, but the very triggers of a more comprehensive paradigm shift into planning, investment and governance systems**.

The European discussion on water resilience is understandably dominated by efficiency, infrastructure, regulation and risk. The Hydro-Heritage Cities Investment Plans demonstrate that **water also has a powerful capacity to produce narratives, identity and collective ownership**, and adds something distinctive (and generative) to the debate: **culture and participation**. Historical irrigation practices, canals, forgotten streams and aqueducts make the urban water cycle tangible and understandable to citizens, stimulating a cultural dimension that can therefore act as **an interface between technically complex adaptation policies and everyday urban experience**.

Seen from this perspective, the transferable lesson is not simply that water projects should become more integrated. A more ambitious proposition would be to make **water sensitivity a criterion of urban governance itself**. This could imply incorporating a water perspective into spatial plans, regeneration programmes, public-space design, building regulations, mobility projects and public investment assessments; creating common urban water datasets and indicators; and establishing permanent cross-departmental groups connecting planning, environment, infrastructure, heritage and social policies. This strongly resonates with **Chalandri's evolution towards an Urban Lab, where the original water-centred experiment becomes a broader governance mechanism**.



Participation would also need to move beyond consultation, and the more explicit connection between resilience, community engagement and citizen science should be recognized. The experience of Hydro-Heritage Cities suggests that participation can additionally ignite processes of **sense-making, learning, local development and let new skills and capacities emerge**, with a crucial role played by the combination of technical measurements with local histories, of everyday practices and perceptions of water, of experience and long term perspective, etc. This may become increasingly important as climate change requires difficult decisions regarding water allocation, restrictions, infrastructure priorities and changes to public space, helping build social understanding before crises occur.

As in many other cases and policy fields, implementation can be critical, especially when it implies to cross administrative boundaries, investment programmes and timescales, or organisational structures. Going back to the Hydro-Heritage Cities Investment Plans, it is clear how they deliberately combine quick wins, pilot actions, longer infrastructure works and progressive governance arrangements: this lowers entry barriers and allows partnerships to mature, but also creates risks. Serpa still lacks the specialised technological partner required for the water-lifting system; Rome still needs to convert its ULG-based collaboration into a stable organisational arrangement; Roeselare depends on coordinating cultural actions with infrastructure projects managed by several public and private actors; and Sombor explicitly identifies maintaining the stakeholder network created during planning as a condition for implementation.

In all of these cases incremental development would be successful only if each experiment produces **institutional accumulation**: responsibilities, funding, datasets, maintenance arrangements, skills and participatory routines that survive individual projects. In all of these cases water is the common ground from which integrated urban governance is progressively constructed, as much as the ground where sectoral responsibilities are cyclically broken and reconstructed on a different base (and with different actors).

Framing water as an integrated policy requires permanent coordination, shared indicators, maintenance responsibilities and financial mechanisms capable of valuing multiple benefits rather than funding drainage, heritage, greening and public space separately. What experimented by the Hydro-Heritage Cities is important precisely because it **challenges regulation, planning, indicators, financing, digitalisation, capacity and participation as interconnected problems rather than focusing only on physical/practical solutions**. For Hydro-Heritage Cities, and as a lesson learnt to be shared Europe wide, this provides a possible longer-term trajectory: **from recovering water heritage, to using water heritage as a demonstrator of integrated urban policy, and ultimately to treating the urban water cycle as a structuring component of planning, programming and governance**. Under accelerating climate change, this evolution would make the transfer from Chalandri more ambitious than the replication of successful hydro-heritage interventions: **water would become both an infrastructure to manage and a lens through which cities rethink resilience, public space, heritage, social inclusion and the nexus between urban development and natural systems**.

What other cities (and future transfer networks) can take from Hydro-Heritage Cities

Hydro-Heritage Cities' value lies in showing why an innovation transfer recipe would be misleading. *The five transfer cities started their journey with the same innovative practice and followed the same network dynamic, yet they have arrived at substantially different propositions, and this is not a weakness in the process but evidence that the practice has been interpreted through real places, institutions and communities.*

Some lessons are specific to hydro-heritage, but most extend beyond it and concern how cities learn from one another without pretending that local conditions are interchangeable, and how a time-limited European project can leave something more durable than a collection of activities and a final document.



Transfer the logic before the solution

Cities naturally gravitate towards the visible parts of an innovation and, while these elements make a practice easier to explain, they are not necessarily what made it work.

The early “hack and chop” exercise in Hydro-Heritage Cities has helped separate the underlying principles of Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. from its context-dependent expression in Chalandri. Future networks could take this further by **asking receiving cities to state, in simple terms, what they believe the original practice is trying to change, why its components belong together and which relationships are essential to its success.**

This should happen before cities select actions, otherwise, transfer can become a catalogue of appealing tools detached from the logic that gave them meaning. Fidelity should be sought in the ambition and relationships of the practice, not in the reproduction of its most visible outputs.



Begin with local meaning, not only local assets

Every Hydro-Heritage Cities city has been able to identify water-related assets easily, while the more difficult task has been to explain why they matter now. A canal, fountain, aqueduct or underground river does not become a contemporary policy concern simply because it is old, it must be connected to present needs and possible futures.

The transfer has started to make more sense when cities have moved from inventories to integrated propositions. Future transfer cities should therefore be encouraged to formulate their local question early. What can this innovation help us see or do that we could not see or do before? A clear answer gives direction to stakeholder participation, testing and planning.



Use testing to reduce uncertainty

Testing actions are sometimes treated as smaller versions of the final project. Hydro-Heritage Cities suggests a more useful role, namely, reducing uncertainty before cities make larger commitments.

A test might examine whether residents recognise a particular narrative, whether an unusual partnership can work, whether a place attracts new users or whether an artistic intervention can change perceptions and this requires the question behind the action to be stated in advance. Equally important, afterwards, cities need time to interpret the results and decide what should change.

Future networks could **make this learning loop even more explicit** with a short record of the initial assumption, what happened, what was learned and what entered the plan would be more valuable than an extensive event report.



Let the ULG evolve with the work

The Hydro-Heritage Cities ULGs have shown that there is no ideal stakeholder composition and that the people who help a city understand an innovation may not be the same people needed to test it, finance it or manage it later. ULGs should therefore be treated as evolving ecosystems rather than fixed committees established at the beginning of a network.

Future networks should pay greater attention to the distance between attending, contributing, influencing decisions and accepting responsibility, in some instances a broad group can remain largely passive, while one committed organisation can carry a disproportionate share of the work and both situations create risks.

As implementation approaches, **the group should be reviewed deliberately** to check who holds essential knowledge, controls assets or budgets, who has legitimacy with communities or even who could convene the partnership after URBACT.



Test integration through decisions

Hydro-Heritage Cities confirms that integrated policy is not achieved by mentioning culture, environment, inclusion and digitalisation in the same document, nor does inviting several municipal departments to a meeting guarantee that they will work differently.

The practical test is whether integration changes a choice, for example: Did heritage knowledge influence an infrastructure design? Did community participation alter a priority? Did environmental objectives affect the proposed use of a site? Were responsibilities or resources shared across departments?

Future networks could use such questions throughout the process, rather than assessing integration mainly at the planning stage. This would also make the relationship between the three URBACT pillars more visible in a closely connected process where participation introduces different knowledge, integration brings it into the policy response, and action-oriented learning tests whether the combination works.

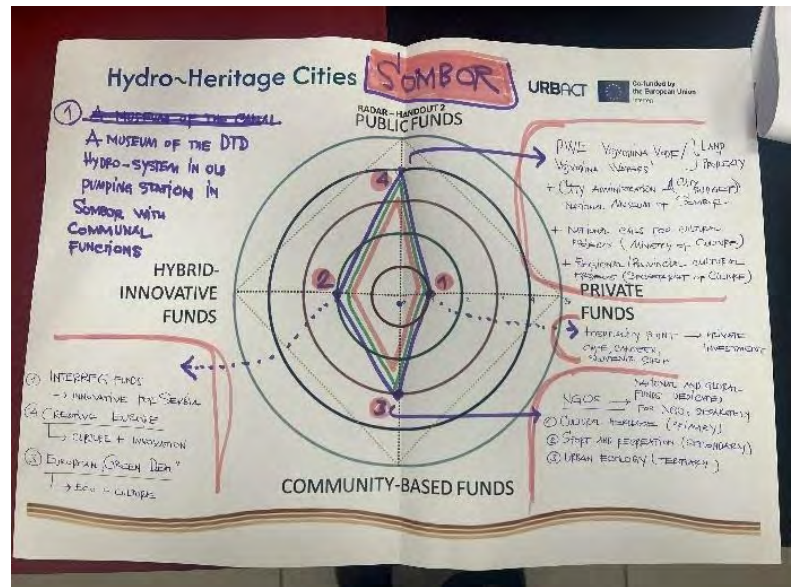


Bring implementation into the conversation earlier

Political ownership, governance, funding and monitoring often become urgent when the final plan is drafted, but by then, cities may have developed an attractive vision without the actors or evidence needed to deliver it.

Investment readiness should not be confused with having every resource secured, in this sense, it means knowing which decisions remain unresolved, who must make them and what the next credible step is.

The Hydro-Heritage Cities Network shows the value of introducing these questions earlier, without allowing them to suppress experimentation. Even a preliminary exercise like the “funding radar” can reveal excessive dependence on public or European grants while a simple governance discussion can expose whether a project relies on one motivated person and early indicators can clarify what a testing action needs to observe.



Accept different forms of success

The plans produced by Hydro-Heritage Cities vary in scale, precision and political readiness but comparing them as if they were competing versions of one model would miss the point. A successful transfer may result in a major territorial framework, the cultural reframing of an existing infrastructure investment, a feasible first phase around one site or a new alliance that makes later action possible.

Future networks should make room for these differentiated outcomes while remaining honest about their limitations because adaptation is not automatically success, just as ambition is not the same as readiness.

The final question is whether the receiving city has created a locally meaningful proposition and acquired greater capacity to pursue it.



The course continues

At the end of Hydro-Heritage Cities, it would be tempting to look for a simple verdict... what was transferred, what worked and which plans will be implemented, but the network leaves behind something less tidy and perhaps more valuable.

Cultural H.ID.R.A.N.T. helped each of the five transfer cities see a familiar landscape differently where watercourses hidden beneath streets become part of civic memory, canals are reconsidered as cultural and ecological corridors, aqueducts and waterwheels begin to speak not only of the past, but of scarcity, resilience and future use.

Some of these ideas are already connected to investments while others still depend on political decisions, technical studies, funding or more durable governance. The plans are, more than anything else, records of changed perspectives, new relationships and choices that the cities are now better prepared to make.

The two-year journey also confirms both the strength and the limits of the URBACT Method. Participation can bring overlooked knowledge into view, integration can connect problems usually managed apart, and testing can turn discussion into practical learning, yet none of these automatically secures implementation. The passage from a temporary project to ordinary institutional practice remains the most difficult part of innovation transfer, which happens only at the end of the Network's official end.

I think again of the Tiliment river, and of these late summer afternoons beside it. Its course is never completely fixed, channels divide and reunite and water leaves traces even where the riverbed appears dry, what looks like disappearance may be movement below the surface, waiting for the conditions to emerge again – beyond URBACT.

Maybe innovation transfer should be understood in the same way because its success cannot be measured only by whether the original practice arrives intact or every planned action happens immediately. It also lies in the paths opened, the connections formed and the new ways of seeing that remain in a city after the formal journey has ended.

**The work of the cities now is to recognise the course they have begun...
and keep it open. Water finds a way.**

