

Daring Cities - Final Network Report

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Executive Summary

The URBACT IV Innovation Transfer Network **Daring Cities** represents an effort to adapt and scale a pioneering model of collaborative urban regeneration across diverse European municipalities. Based on the achievements of the Ravenna Municipality's Urban Innovative Action project DARE, implemented between 2020 and 2022, the network counters traditional top-down masterplanning by promoting an innovative paradigm of "**strategic incrementalism**". This methodology empowers citizens to transition from passive recipients of municipal planning to active protagonists through three core pillars: **collaborative urban regeneration**, a **bottom-up data ecosystem**, and **choral storytelling**. Between 2024–2026, this transfer framework was deployed across six partner cities—Altea (Spain), Den Helder (The Netherlands), Dunaújváros (Hungary), Kragujevac (Serbia), Olomouc (the Czech Republic), and Piraeus (Greece)—uniting them around shared struggles such as post-industrial transformation, demographic decline, and climate change. The transfer process functioned as a reciprocal design where Ravenna formulated its own continuity plan by drawing on the peer feedback and local innovations pioneered by its transfer partners.

To bridge international learning with local implementation, the network utilized a **dual-model transfer methodology** combining the **Carousel Model** of sequential physical transnational meetings with the **Radial Model** of tailored bilateral expert support. This process structured a clear, four-stage trajectory that chronologically guided partners from forming a strategy to preparing open calls, clustering proposals into tactics, and translating selected tactics into detailed Implementation and Investment Plans. These efforts were driven locally by **URBACT Local Groups (ULGs)** conforming to the multi-sectoral **quadruple helix model** of public administrations, academia, businesses, and civil society. The consortium utilized highly experiential and collaborative formats, such as structured critical walks to diagnose urban divisions and intense peer review sessions to consult host municipalities on site reuses. The continuous feedback loop between local workshops and transnational learning events ensured that community inputs directly shaped the project's transfer trajectory.

The physical and social impact of this transfer is illustrated by how each partner city adapted the "soft" DARE methodology to its own territorial needs. Local testing actions ranged from Altea's seafront spatial gamification and Den Helder's child-safety covenants to Dunaújváros's community-led green governance at the Bido office. Concurrently, Kragujevac activated its industrial heritage at the Military-Technical Institute through digital virtual tours, Piraeus began redeveloping an abandoned railway station while deploying citizen science to mitigate urban heat islands, and Olomouc scaled participatory mobility data across its regional metropolitan agglomeration of 174 municipalities. These localized pilots generated powerful network-wide synergies, including a shared focus on youth-centered placemaking, collaborative climate adaptation, and the creative adaptive reuse of abandoned infrastructure.

Despite administrative challenges such as traditional top-down municipal habits, short deadlines, and political or management turnover, the network successfully built the capacity needed to secure long-term project sustainability through "**urban diplomacy**". Ultimately, the legacy of Daring Cities lies in preparing partners for a major paradigm shift in future European public funding. In the post-2028 EU programming period, which will favor prepared, partnership-backed project pipelines under strict, performance-based models, these cities are uniquely positioned to immediately absorb capital-intensive cohesion investments.

Introduction

The **URBACT IV Innovation Transfer Network Daring Cities** was designed to adapt and scale a pioneering model of collaborative urban regeneration across diverse European municipalities. This network is based on the achievements and methodologies of the Ravenna Municipality's Urban Innovative Action (UIA) project DARE, implemented between 2024 and 2026, to address the complex physical and social regeneration of its Darsena district. By replacing traditional, top-down masterplans with an innovative paradigm of "**strategic incrementalism**", DARE successfully involved residents to become active protagonists capable of co-designing and co-managing their own local projects.

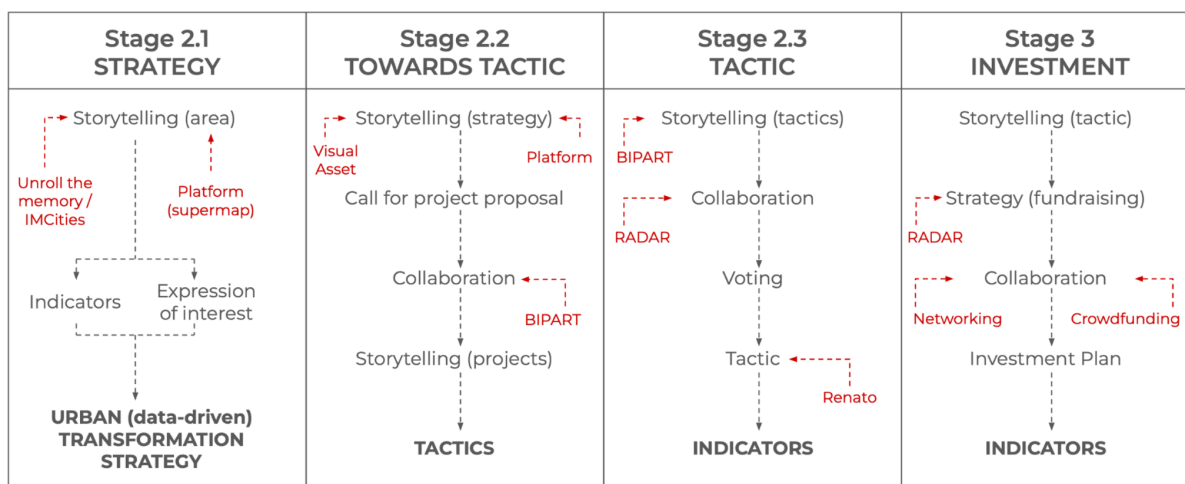
The Daring Cities network extended this methodology to six European transfer partner cities—Altea, Den Helder, Dunaújváros, Kragujevac, Olomouc, and Piraeus—uniting them around shared struggles such as post-industrial transformation, demographic decline, and climate change. This **Final Network Report** documents the chronological journey of these partners as they adapted DARE's three core pillars: collaborative urban regeneration, a bottom-up data ecosystem, and choral storytelling. Far from a unidirectional transfer, this report showcases a reciprocal design of mutual learning. Ultimately, by combining strategic regional coordination, citizen science, and collaborative co-governance, this document serves as a replicable blueprint to prepare participating municipalities for future European public funding opportunities.



Visiting Ravenna's Darsena. Photo by Levente Polyák

From DARE to Daring Cities: The Genesis of a Transnational Network

To understand how Daring Cities builds upon DARE, it is necessary to examine the core mechanics of the original UIA project's trajectory. Under DARE, the procedural framework guided local stakeholders through a **step-by-step path** that translated a high-level strategic vision into medium-term "tactics," which were defined as integrated sets of feasible projects corresponding to specific development scenarios.



The Daring Cities logic. Graphics by DARE

Ravenna involved local stakeholders in a **collaborative urban regeneration** process organised around the phases of mapping, call for initiatives, matchmaking, clustering proposals into tactics and voting for the winning tactic, or ensemble of projects for the future Darsena. The software and hardware of DARE's bottom-up data ecosystem and choral storytelling also served as a blueprint for Daring Cities. Ravenna established a **horizontal data ecosystem** utilizing sensors, smart cameras, and digital "totems" to capture environmental metrics and track quality of life indicators. This technical system was rendered accessible to the public through creative digital art installations, such as "pneumOS"—an artistic "digital lung" that translated real-time air quality data into human-like breathing patterns to educate citizens on environmental health. Concurrently, **choral storytelling** was coordinated by a dedicated editorial team, the DARE Redazione, which utilized the digital platform "Darsena Ravenna Approdo Comune" to compile citizen narratives, historical archives, and civic journalism. This storytelling acted as an embedded device that bridged technical urban planning with the collective imagination of the citizenry, reshaping the neighborhood's self-image and mobilizing active participation across different project phases.

The Daring Cities transnational network builds directly on this foundation by attempting to transfer DARE's methodologies, tools, and procedural steps to **six European transfer partner cities**: Altea (Spain), Den Helder (The Netherlands), Dunaújváros (Hungary), Kragujevac (Serbia), Olomouc (the Czech Republic), and Piraeus (Greece). While these cities differ greatly in size, geographic distribution, and socio-economic context, they are united by shared urban struggles such as post-industrial transformation, demographic decline, climate change, and a common desire to

establish new, inclusive spaces of sociability. Under the guidance of the Lead Expert, the network provided a **structured procedural pathway** that mirrored Ravenna's strategic-to-tactical trajectory. Each transfer partner adapted this trajectory to resolve its own local challenges: Altea focused on overcoming the urban fragmentation caused by a railway line and a national highway; Den Helder targeted childhood inequality and youth delinquency in its vulnerable Visbuurt neighborhood; Dunaújváros integrated green governance and socialist architectural heritage; Kragujevac planned the adaptive reuse of its historic Military-Technical Institute brownfield; Olomouc sought data-driven solutions for public space and railway station regeneration; and Piraeus prepared the redevelopment of a disused train station into a cultural museum and climate laboratory.

Crucially, the transfer process was not merely a unidirectional flow of knowledge from Ravenna to the partner cities. Ravenna participated in Daring Cities to design its own "continuity plan" for its next tactical cycle, revising its methods based on the peer feedback and local innovations developed by the transfer partners. For instance, Ravenna drew on citizen science and climate-adaptation approaches pioneered in Piraeus and Dunaújváros, integrated tourist data strategies from Altea, and explored agglomeration-level planning inspired by Olomouc. This **reciprocal design** allows the entire network to test DARE's tools across multiple urban scales and administrative structures, thereby validating the universal transferability of the DARE model while refining its limits.

The formation of the Daring Cities transnational network was structured around a **dual-model transfer methodology** that combined the "Carousel Model" and the "Radial Model". The Carousel Model ensured that all partner cities participated in sequential, physical transnational meetings held in each host city, allowing partners to experience local contexts firsthand and offer immediate peer review feedback on host challenges. This was balanced by the Radial Model, which enabled the Lead Partner and Lead Expert to provide tailor-made, bilateral technical support to address the unique socio-cultural and administrative constraints of each city. Chronologically, the network's collaborative journey was organized into distinct stages linked to transnational meetings.

	Den Helder meeting	homework 1	Altea meeting	homework 2	Piraeus meeting	homework 3	Dunaújváros meeting	homework 4	Olomouc meeting	homework 5
placemaking	Essentials of placemaking and adaptive reuse	map spaces, ideas and potential interest	Preparation of "call for action" with forms of public-civic partnership	design call and invite initiatives	Clustering initiatives and building synergies for adaptive reuse	cluster initiatives and build synergies towards tactics	Defining the one tactic and test actions to activate places	define governance model and select tactic	introduction to different funding sources	investment plan
storytelling	Essentials of storytelling and tools for storytelling	collect memories and ideas and identify comms platforms	Storytelling the "call for action" towards defining tactics	invite narratives / communication	Narration of the collected projects and creating synergies	connect narratives to tactics	Storytelling tactics and testing actions	support tactic with narrative	Storytelling to support fundraising	stories to support the investment plan
data management	Essentials of data management and quality of life indicators	Establish life quality indicators and map available data	Data management system based on indicators	create a data management system	Using citizen science to support new activities and spaces	call for citizen data	Data education: how to bring citizens closer to data	organise a data education process	Indicators and data supporting the investment plan	data to support the investment plan
local theme	youth placemaking + mapping + storytelling + missing services + relevant data		reconnecting areas + gender perspective + investment plan draft		citizen science + adaptive reuse of railway area		cultural and natural heritage + tree cadaster + local festivals		regional scale + mobility + railway spaces	

The Daring Cities trajectory. Graphics by Levente Polyák

During Stage 2.1, transfer partners were invited to focus on forming a Strategy, utilizing mapping, memory collection, and expressions of interest to build a shared territorial vision. In Stage 2.2, they were planning open calls for placemaking and transformation to invite citizens to submit project ideas. In Stage 2.3, the partner teams were meant to cluster these proposals into development tactics, establish data-informed evaluation indicators, and coordinate public voting to select the priority tactic. Finally, Stage 3 focused on translating the selected tactic into a detailed Implementation and Investment Plan, supported by networking and matchmaking with potential funders. This collaborative logic encouraged partners to transition away from top-down, bureaucratic management styles and open up decision-making power to local community groups.

To bridge the gap between international learning and local implementation, the network established a robust **feedback loop** through the formation of URBACT Local Groups (ULGs) in each partner city. These local groups comprised a diverse array of municipal experts, political representatives, academic institutions, private businesses, and active civic associations, adhering to a multi-sectoral quadruple helix model. Local project coordinators synchronized their ULG sessions with the transnational meetings, holding local workshops both before and after each international event. The inputs from local stakeholders directly informed the focus of transnational discussions, while the expert insights and case studies shared at the transnational level were fed back to the ULGs. This synchronized feedback loop allowed the coordination team to adapt the learning trajectory and introduce ad-hoc experts to address specific challenges such as regional transport, placemaking for children, or citizen science.

As the Daring Cities project transitioned **from theoretical exchange to tangible testing actions**, the network focused heavily on ensuring the long-term sustainability and political durability of its local interventions. Partners engaged in "**urban diplomacy**" to secure political buy-in from local leadership, including mayors and vice-mayors, to guarantee that their investment plans could survive administrative transitions. The culmination of the network's journey at the Olomouc meeting in July 2026 was designed as a public event to showcase finalized Investment Plans, sharing the network's collective findings with local and international audiences.

Urban Regeneration, Data and Storytelling: the Three Pillars in Action

The **three main pillars** of the Daring Cities network—collaborative urban regeneration, the bottom-up data ecosystem, and choral storytelling—represent an integrated methodology designed to transform how European municipalities approach local development. These pillars were originally conceptualised, tested, and refined during the DARE project, introducing the participatory model of strategic incrementalism. This model invests heavily in the "software" of civic capability and digital culture, empowering residents to actively engage with the "hardware" of urban infrastructure. By combining these three core pillars, DARE inspired citizens to become active protagonists of their neighborhood's physical and economic future. In the Daring Cities network, this tripartite structure served as the foundational logic that guided the six European transfer partner cities as they adapted Ravenna's tools to resolve their own localized challenges.

The first pillar, **collaborative urban regeneration**, was derived directly from the procedural framework that DARE established to coordinate the step-by-step development of Ravenna's Darsena district. Under DARE, this process began with an exhaustive territorial analysis and

extensive stakeholder mapping, involving over four hundred and fifty participants to define five key development themes and three distinct future scenarios: the Darsena Laboratory, the Cosmopolitan Darsena, and the Green Darsena. The city then launched open calls for physical and entrepreneurial proposals, which were subsequently published online to encourage collaboration and alliance-building among the project initiators. These individual proposals were clustered into three corresponding "tactics" representing integrated sets of feasible projects. To secure the readiness and financial sustainability of these projects, DARE organised a real estate forum known as RADAR, which brought project proponents together with property owners, private investors, and municipal administrators to align public and private interests. This intensive participatory trajectory culminated in September 2022, when Ravenna's citizens voted via an online democracy platform to select the "Green Darsena" as the winning tactic for the area. Following this vote, the DARE partnership supported the selected green interventions by leveraging public recovery funds and facilitating crowdfunding campaigns.



Walk in Ravenna's Darsena. Photo by Levente Polyák

The second pillar, the **bottom-up data ecosystem**, originated in DARE from the belief that data must not remain a closed administrative tool but must function as an enabling condition for strategic planning. Ravenna established a horizontal data management platform supplied by a diverse network of sensors and smart cameras that monitored air quality, meteorological status, and traffic flows. Smart objects, such as Wi-Fi-connected benches, and digital "totems" were installed to provide citizens direct, physical access to the municipal platform. Importantly, DARE focused on building **digital literacy and data education** through creative and visceral community engagement. This was most prominent in the "pneumOS" project, an artistic digital installation that translated real-time air quality sensor data into human-like breathing patterns. By experiencing the

relaxed or anxious breathing of the digital artwork, citizens could intuitively interpret the air quality of their city without needing to analyze complex technical charts. DARE also tracked energy consumption in social housing and generated a Quality of Life Dashboard based on citizen perceptions of safety and sustainability.

This data-driven pillar structured the logic of Daring Cities by ensuring that urban regeneration is grounded in credible evidence and quality-of-life indicators rather than subjective emotions. Transfer partners utilized these tools to standardise data systems and integrate participatory data collection to justify municipal investments. Within the network, this data logic manifested across various scales. Olomouc managed data at a large agglomeration scale, utilizing temporary pressure and visual sensors to track pedestrian and cyclist intensity to justify infrastructure spending, while mapping environmental risks and delivery logistics. Dunaújváros leveraged high school students as external data collectors to map trees and park furniture, feeding into a digital tree repository used to address climate change impacts. Piraeus integrated citizen science campaigns to gather granular "middle data" on urban heat islands and street-level microclimates, engaging volunteers to record temperature variations and using the findings to inform schoolyard greening measures.



dare / webtalk

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Flyer of the DARE project. Graphics by DARE

The third pillar, **choral storytelling**, was derived from DARE's effort to accompany physical urban regeneration with a profound shift in the self-image and public reputation of a historically stigmatized district. Conceptualized as an "embedded device" integrated directly into transformative urban processes, storytelling acted as an active and continuous component of change. Coordinated by a dedicated governance body called the DARE Redazione, which functioned as a multi-partner editorial board, choral storytelling assembled a **choir of diverse resident voices** to tell the story of the Darsena's transition. The primary interface was the digital platform "Darsena Ravenna Approdo Comune", which was used to crowdsource, compile, and showcase citizens' personal stories, historical archives, and memories. By utilizing civic journalism

experts to help residents author their own narratives, the project allowed individual actions to find their place in a broader narrative framework, helping citizens recognize patterns and opportunities in the area's transformation.

In Daring Cities, choral storytelling structured the communication, dissemination, and engagement logic of the transfer process, helping partners move residents from mere spectators to active protagonists in local transformation. Storytelling was designed to change configuration and support different objectives throughout the project's chronological stages. In the Strategy phase, centralized storytelling provided an informative and evocative narrative of past and future transformations. In the Tactics phase, storytelling shifted toward promotional and collaborative formats to encourage participation in open calls, and enabled storytelling provides a common format for sharing and comparing project proposals. In the final Investment phase, promotional storytelling was conceived to support crowdfunding and matchmaking events to engage potential developers. Partners adapted this storytelling logic to heal urban scars and build collective identity. For example, Dunaújváros worked with its local library to scan historical archives and produce videos tracing its green evolution, turning its post-war socialist modernist architecture from a stigmatized past into a source of civic pride.

Shared Challenges and Synergies

The transnational collaboration within the Daring Cities network has evolved from a collection of individual municipal projects into a deeply integrated ecosystem of shared learning, where unexpected synergies and horizontal exchanges have restructured how partners adapt the core DARE methodology. This collaborative evolution has allowed the participating cities to move past a unilateral transfer of knowledge from the lead city, Ravenna, and instead construct a rich, **multidirectional flow of tools, practices, and strategic insights**. By testing the limits and potentials of the original DARE framework across different scales, administrative settings, and geographical contexts, the network has surfaced powerful commonalities that unite otherwise diverse municipal realities.



Visit to Den Helder's Blue School. Photo by Levente Polyák

The most prominent network-wide synergy centers on a **shared focus on youth and children**, which emerged organically across all six transfer partner cities. Altea, Den Helder, Dunaújváros, Kragujevac, Olomouc, and Piraeus have all actively targeted younger demographics in their local tactical interventions. This alignment has driven a collective interest in learning about **child-friendly placemaking** and using gamification as an entry point for resident engagement. For instance, cities have exchanged experiences on non-traditional participatory tools, such as Den Helder's critical walks where children use cameras to map their neighborhoods, Altea's role-playing games where secondary students adopt specific vulnerability personas to evaluate physical safety, and Dunaújváros's partnership with high schools to map trees. This shared focus allows partners to exchange playful, non-intimidating methods of civic engagement, moving youth up the ladder of participation from being passively informed to becoming active co-designers of the city.

Another significant and highly technical synergy is developing between Olomouc and Ravenna regarding **planning at the metropolitan or agglomeration level**. Olomouc manages its territorial development at a massive regional scale, representing one hundred and eighty municipalities, whereas Ravenna is exploring how to scale its localized Darsena-level data and tactical methodologies to a broader functional urban area. By collaborating on linking Olomouc's strategic investment plan with Ravenna's continuity plan, the two cities have explored how to implement participatory, data-driven governance structures across multi-municipal networks. This exchange has also extended to discussing the joint mobilization of specialized ad hoc experts to resolve complex regional adaptation and metropolitan transport challenges.

Horizontal sharing of localized methodologies has further solidified these inter-city linkages. Partners have generously offered their own successful, on-the-ground tools to the wider network to enhance collective capacity. Altea's structured "**critical walk**" methodology for resident engagement has been widely shared and adapted by other cities to explore their own urban challenges. Similarly, Olomouc has shared its data analysis activities, showing how municipalities can combine hard technical datasets with **qualitative citizen "feeling maps"** to justify infrastructure spending and public space improvements. This cross-pollination has even shaped the lead city's path, as Ravenna plans to integrate climate-focused citizen science from Piraeus and Dunaújváros, tourist behavior analysis from Altea, and metropolitan insights from Olomouc into its own future tactical planning cycles.

Thematic alignments have also crystallized around **climate adaptation and citizen science**, particularly between Piraeus, Dunaújváros, and Ravenna. As climate change intensifies severe weather events like droughts, heatwaves, and flooding across Europe, these cities are aligning their digital and physical toolkits to build environmental resilience. Piraeus and Dunaújváros have championed the use of citizen science to gather granular environmental data, with Piraeus stakeholders mapping street-level urban heat islands to design schoolyard climate gardens, and Dunaújváros mobilizing volunteers to build a digital tree repository to monitor forest health. These practical exercises provided Ravenna with a valuable model for expanding its own bottom-up data ecosystem to incorporate climate metrics and citizen-led environmental mapping.

Furthermore, several cities were bound by the shared physical and social challenge of **managing abandoned infrastructure and physical urban divisions**. Altea, Olomouc, and Piraeus are all confronting spatial fragmentation caused by railway lines or heavy transport corridors that cut

through their urban fabrics, creating distinct "urban wounds" that separate historic centers from coastal or surrounding areas. During transnational site visits, such as the peer review of Piraeus's disused train station, partners from across the network recognized a shared "sense of freedom and indetermination" in these abandoned terrains, drawing on their respective experiences to suggest creative adaptive reuse strategies. These discussions have linked the physical conversion of train tracks and station buildings with cultural programming, such as Piraeus's proposed Rebetiko Museum and Kragujevac's revitalization of the historic Military-Technical Institute.

Finally, a powerful, network-wide alignment has emerged around the practical challenges of **urban diplomacy** and **future financial sustainability**. All partners share a collective need to communicate the long-term value of "soft" participatory processes to local political leadership, ensuring that project roots remain durable across administrative transitions. This common concern has driven a shared interest in producing **accessible communication materials**—such as brief overview data sheets and promotional videos—to secure high-level political buy-in. Concurrently, as these cities move toward finalizing their investment plans, they are actively engaging in horizontal dialogues about **attracting private investments**, applying artificial intelligence to calculate the cost-effectiveness of nature-based solutions, and navigating the increasingly complex, performance-driven frameworks of **post-2028 European Union funding**. Through these diverse layers of technical, social, and thematic exchange, Daring Cities has established a resilient peer-supported network where local actions are continuously enriched by a shared European perspective.

Transferring the Good Practice: Activities in Partner Cities

In Daring Cities, six European transfer partner cities—Altea (Spain), Den Helder (The Netherlands), Dunaújváros (Hungary), Kragujevac (Serbia), Olomouc (the Czech Republic), and Piraeus (Greece)—followed Ravenna's trajectory to address their own distinct urban, social, and environmental challenges.

By utilising Ravenna's strategy-to-tactic trajectory, these partner cities have transitioned from theoretical learning to concrete, localized **pilot projects and testing actions**. Rather than acting as passive recipients of municipal policies, citizens and local stakeholders were engaged as active protagonists through co-design, co-management, and co-governance frameworks. Each partner city established a multi-sectoral **URBACT Local Group (ULG)** conforming to the quadruple helix model of innovation, uniting public administrations, academic institutions, private businesses, and civil society. The resulting testing actions represented low-cost, low-tech, and highly tactile experiments designed to **test ideas** in the "here and now," building public trust and gathering crucial soft and hard data before committing to permanent, capital-intensive investments. This chapter explores the specific pilot projects, experimental testing actions, and open calls implemented by each of the six partner cities throughout their collaborative journey.

Altea: Reconnecting the Fragmented Urban Fabric through Gamification and Critical Walks

The coastal municipality of Altea, located on Spain's Costa Blanca, faces a severe historical challenge of **spatial fragmentation**. For decades, the town's growth has been disjointed, with a physical rupture separating the historic centre on the hill from the lower coastal strip and seafront. This division is aggravated by the presence of the national N-332 highway and the Ferrocarriles de la Generalitat Valenciana railway line, which act as formidable physical barriers that restrict transversal mobility, diminish social cohesion, and isolate the economic hub along the second beach line from the cultural core of the old town. While Altea launched a Seafront Regeneration Strategy in 2017 to reclaim public space and promote sustainable mobility, the municipality joined the Daring Cities network to integrate citizen collaboration, data-driven planning, and narrative-building into its urban design.



Urban fragmentation in Altea. Photo by Levente Polyák

Altea's primary testing actions focused heavily on direct, physical exploration of this urban wound. In September 2025, the local team organised a **critical walk** with regional government officials, land owners, and public space experts, to explore the physical barriers created by the railway and tram lines. During this walk, technicians evaluated eleven key points along the railway "scar," gathering spatial data and assessing gender-sensitive public space design. Participants completed detailed questionnaires, adding their subjective impressions of safety, accessibility, and comfort to a growing spatial dataset. To build on this physical exploration, Altea implemented a creative gamification and role-play session in November 2025 with secondary school students. Using an analog card game, students assumed specific "personas" representing vulnerable groups, such as elderly citizens with reduced mobility, blind individuals, or foreign immigrants. By navigating the

path to their school under these profiles, the youth identified daily spatial obstacles that they had previously ignored as routine. The out-of-the-box solutions generated by the students were converted into qualitative datasets for future spatial design. The municipality plans to digitise this card game and integrate it with Google Street View to allow broader public navigation and feedback on urban nodes.



Critical walk in Altea. Photo by Levente Polyák

Because the land surrounding the railway is owned by the regional government, Altea's planned open call in this phase was highly focused on technicians and regional stakeholders to secure the necessary administrative mandate for physical transformation. In parallel, Altea prepared a technical architectural report to satisfy regional requirements, while keeping an Ideas Market as a localized open call option to collect community designs for a problematic square.

Den Helder: Cultivating Equal Opportunities and Safe Spaces for Children in the Visbuurt

Den Helder, located at the northernmost tip of the Netherlands, is a regional capital that grapples with severe socio-economic struggles, housing issues, and concentrated poverty. The city's Visbuurt neighborhood, traditionally a close-knit fishermen's quarter with strong ties to maritime professions, has suffered from global economic shifts, leading to physical deterioration, energy poverty, and a rising threat of youth delinquency. Because the streets are frequently perceived as

unsafe and the neighborhood lacks green spaces, parks, and recreational areas, children and young people are often isolated at home or drawn to criminal groups in the city centre. In response, Den Helder's participation in Daring Cities focused on the "Vulnerable Neighbourhoods" programme, aiming to reverse the historical urban preference for cars and provide equal life opportunities for children.



Critical walk in Den Helder. Photo by Levente Polyák

A monumental milestone in this effort was the **signing of the Vulnerable Neighbourhoods Covenant** in June 2025 on Willemsoord, the historic former shipyard of the Royal Navy. This covenant legally aligned the municipality, the Den Helder Housing Association, the police, the Municipal Health Service (GGD Hollands Noorden), local schools, welfare organizations, and the KopGroep Libraries Foundation to turn local vulnerabilities into opportunities. To bridge this policy with grassroots action, Den Helder designed a primary testing action centered on a **critical walk with children**. This action involves temporarily closing parts or all of the Visbuurt neighborhood to car traffic, allowing children to reclaim the streets. Armed with cameras, the children document where they play, where they meet friends, and which streets they feel safe in, mapping the "story of the neighborhood" through their own eyes. This critical walk is designed to be repeated at least three times, focusing on both the wider urban network and specific local spaces. Additionally, data is gathered from school children who create drawings and texts illustrating their spatial likes and dislikes.

To foster intergenerational skills and social integration, the local ULG inaugurated **new community venues** within Visbuurt, including a former church temporarily converted into a community center and a "Blue School" that integrates sea-related environmental education. Den Helder's planned open call is directly linked to these testing actions, inviting parents, children, and local residents to submit projects to make the Visbuurt more child-friendly. This call goes beyond seeking ideas; it seeks to identify "caregivers" who will dedicate their own time, expertise, and manual work to manage and maintain these newly co-created community spaces.



The signing of the Vulnerable Neighbourhoods Covenant. Photo by Levente Polyák

Dunaújváros: Bottom-up Green Governance, Tree Repositories, and Citizen Science

Dunaújváros, built in the 1950s as a pioneering "socialist city" around the massive Dunaferri steelworks in Hungary, is undergoing a painful post-industrial transition. The closure of the steelworks has triggered demographic decline, rising unemployment, and deep environmental degradation, including historical soil pollution and severe air quality issues. Concurrently, the city is heavily affected by climate change, experiencing prolonged summer droughts followed by torrential rains that cause severe soil erosion on its loess plateau. These climate stresses have led to the widespread death of the city's green infrastructure, particularly its iconic pine and birch trees. Despite Dunaújváros possessing a unique architectural fabric inspired by the Bauhaus movement and an exceptionally high ratio of green spaces, local residents historically lacked awareness regarding climate risks, prompting the municipality to establish a model of community-led green governance.



Socialist realist architecture in Dunaújváros. Photo by Levente Polyák

To operationalise this vision, Dunaújváros established a dedicated physical **community space and governance hub** called the Bido, or Biodiversity Office. Managed by a volunteer facilitator, the Bido hosts public debates, green markets, and environmental workshops to bridge the gap between municipal experts and citizens. The primary testing actions implemented by Dunaújváros leverage high **school students as external data collectors** to photograph and map the city's environmental assets. Using specialized software, the students mapped thousands of trees, trash bins, and benches, constructing a digital tree repository to track ecological health and target restoration efforts. Although budget constraints necessitated narrowing the initial scope to 2,000 trees, this database remains a vital tool for climate-adaptation planning. To deepen public engagement, the Bido organized "BioBlitz" events utilizing the iNaturalist mobile application, allowing citizens to photograph and map local biodiversity in real-time. This was creatively paired with "Spoi," a competitive Japanese trash-collecting sport, and "Soil Blitz" paper-based soil analysis, gamifying environmental protection to attract a wider demographic.

Dunaújváros also pioneered inclusive, hands-on environmental actions. Through the **House of Generations** initiative, vulnerable residents—including individuals with rare diseases, physical mobility limitations, or psychological challenges—worked alongside volunteers to construct cheap insect hotels. To embed these practices in the local education system, the project trained schoolteachers to transform classrooms into green labs, launching the compost bucket challenge. This highly successful initiative engaged busy parents through their kindergarten children in a class competition to collect organic food leftovers for school composting. To celebrate the city's 75th

anniversary in 2025, the local library, József Attila Library, scanned historical archives and biodiversity records to construct a comprehensive environmental database, producing a video tracing the city's green evolution. This was paired with a **heritage trail** project featuring 51 sculpture-linked stations equipped with QR codes to provide historical and ecological information in the steel statue park. Dunaújváros designed two distinct open calls: a call for stories and photos from citizens regarding their emotional relationship with local trees, published in the local newspaper, and an open call to transform an unused school green area into a community garden, inviting school communities to become long-term green caregivers.



Critical walk in Dunaújváros. Photo by Levente Polyák

Kragujevac: Activating Industrial Heritage at the Military-Technical Institute through Digital Innovation

Kragujevac, the historic nineteenth-century capital of the Principality of Serbia and a long-standing industrial leader of the Šumadija region, faces a profound challenge in brownfield regeneration. The city's primary focus is the Military-Technical Institute, the largest brownfield zone in the city, which represents an industrial heritage site of national and international significance. This massive complex includes several architecturally valuable buildings, such as the Second Technical School—the first vocational school in modern Serbia, built to educate arms industry workers, which has been abandoned since 2018 due to structural and security concerns. The lack of an integrated planning and management model, combined with complex public-private property structures and the national government's leverage over the site, has historically left these historical assets vulnerable to decay, industrial pollution, and physical destruction.



Inside the Military-Technical Institute. Photo by Levente Polyák

To overcome these barriers and generate a new urban identity, Kragujevac designed four highly innovative, digitally-driven testing actions to engage the public and envision the site's future. First, the local team collaborated with university gaming students to develop a **digital tour** of the "Star Limit Museum". This immersive virtual experience allowed citizens to explore the restricted industrial heritage of the MTI complex and connect with its history. Second, the municipality launched an art contest titled "My factory of the future," targeting elementary and high school students. The students submitted **creative artworks** illustrating their vision for the adaptive reuse of the mechanical workshop building, and the selected pieces were displayed in a public exhibition to stimulate civic dialogue. Third, Kragujevac created "Digital Horizons," a presentation that utilized augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mobile applications to **showcase the city's cultural, industrial, and tourism potential** to external investors. Fourth, the city launched an **industrial legacy online campaign**, utilizing a dedicated digital platform to crowdsource stories and memories from former factory workers, building a collective narrative of the city's working-class history.

Concurrently, the municipality has been preparing a **detailed pre-feasibility study** offering three distinct technical solutions for the mechanical workshop and the public square in front of it. As the local government nears a political decision to fund the physical reconstruction of the complex using green bonds, these technical options are vital for aligning municipal investments with community needs. Kragujevac's planned open call is strategically timed to coincide with the conclusion of the reconstruction process, when the building's exterior is visible to the public. The open call will specifically target civic organizations, creative associations, cultural initiatives, and private entrepreneurs wishing to settle in the reconstructed spaces. Because the municipal framework mandates that sixty per cent of the renovated space must be dedicated to public, cultural, or educational purposes, this open call will serve as a crucial matchmaking mechanism to ensure the complex becomes a vibrant, self-sustaining educational-creative hub.



Visit to the Military-Technical Institute. Photo by Levente Polyák

Olomouc: Mobility Data, Feeling Maps, and Participatory Station Regeneration

Olomouc, the historic capital of Moravia and the sixth largest city in the Czech Republic, serves as the core of a massive metropolitan agglomeration comprising 174 municipalities. As EU cohesion funding decreases, the city faces intense pressure to develop integrated, data-driven territorial development solutions at this functional urban scale. Historically, urban regeneration projects in Olomouc were executed on an ad-hoc, isolated basis, lacking an integrated approach. To address this, the city's Daring Cities trajectory focused on establishing a **data-driven decision-making model** for mobility, waste management, and public space regeneration that can be scaled across the entire metropolitan region.

At the local level, Olomouc focused its testing actions on two problematic pilot sites. The first is the Místní Nádraží, a **local railway station** in the nearby municipality of Prostějov. When the national railway announced the demolition of this historic, centuries-old station, the local community successfully organized a petition to protect the building, which was subsequently transferred to municipal ownership. The second pilot site is a largely unused, city-owned **military barracks** located near the cultural monument and military hospital of Klášterní Hradisko in northern Olomouc, which suffers from a negative reputation and derelict structures. To diagnose these areas, Olomouc's primary testing action involved a **comprehensive public survey** that generated over fifty responses in its first week, utilizing qualitative "feeling maps" and temperature maps where citizens marked areas where they felt safe, endangered, or exposed to heat.



The Prostějov railway station. Photo by Levente Polyák

To validate this soft data, the metropolitan coordination office deployed temporary pressure and visual sensors across the agglomeration to track pedestrian and cyclist intensity, providing objective data to justify municipal infrastructure spending. They also mapped environmental flooding risks and delivery box pickup locations to establish urbanistic guidelines. However, this high-tech analysis also revealed the limits of purely quantitative tracking; the team identified a major anomaly in mobile operator data, which missed thousands of daily commuters because it failed to account for corporate phone plans. To bridge this data with community participation, Olomouc designed a series of hands-on workshops and exploratory walks with NGOs, local schools, and families in the railway zones to observe public reactions in situ. They also organized spring markets in the railway zone in partnership with local seed and plant companies to temporarily activate the space. Crucially, the team utilized a GIS Story Map, combining interactive maps, text, and photos, to **present these findings to the public** in a highly accessible format. Olomouc's open call will utilise its existing web application to invite associations, companies, and community groups to submit proposals for short-term creative events or broader physical projects to be included in the final metropolitan Investment Plan.



Presentation at the final meeting in Olomouc. Photo by Levente Polyák

Piraeus: Redeveloping Disused Rail Infrastructure into a Museum and Climate Laboratory via Citizen Science

Piraeus, the prominent port city of Greece and a major metropolitan hub within the Athens agglomeration, faces severe environmental and spatial challenges. The city experiences intense urban heat island effects, characterized by accelerating temperatures and a rising frequency of tropical nights that threaten public health. Concurrently, the city contains valuable abandoned infrastructure, most notably a disused railway station near the harbor that has been abandoned for over a decade. Piraeus joined the Daring Cities network to execute a dual strategy: redeveloping this abandoned railway corridor into a multi-purpose park and a Museum of Rebetiko (a traditional Greek musical style), while simultaneously deploying advanced citizen science to implement climate-adaptation measures across vulnerable local schools.

The testing actions in Piraeus represented a powerful **fusion of cultural narrative and environmental science**. The local team conducted a collective walk with the community, university researchers, and the municipal development agency to survey the abandoned railway station, balancing along the tracks to collect initial ideas for green spaces and pedestrian pathways. Following a peer review of the site, partners envisioned an "open house" rather than a traditional museum. This concept includes flexible indoor spaces with removable walls to house youth associations, and a municipal "DIY park" outdoors where community members can gather freely. To manage noise pollution from adjacent harbor traffic, planners proposed locating loud rehearsal spaces and recording studios on the building's upper floors. They also planned a new mobility network, reducing traffic lanes to construct a cycle path connecting the station to the city. To

address a large, structurally hazardous tree on the site, the community proposed recycling its wood to build benches and workshop tables, helping locals process the loss. The outdoor space is also envisioned to host a student-designed large-scale photograph exhibition to tell the history of refugees who lived in abandoned train wagons on the site for decades.



The Piraeus train station. Photo by Levente Polyák

For its environmental track, Piraeus was inspired by the Athens-based NGO Common Space, led by Eleni Mougiakou, pioneering **citizen science for climate adaptation**. Common Space created a massive, three-year citizen science campaign in metropolitan Athens, deploying mini weather stations on cars, bikes, and municipal vehicles to collect "middle data"—granular, street-level temperature and humidity metrics. Volunteers recorded over 368,000 data points, revealing that coastal areas, which appeared cool on satellite imagery, were street-level heat hotspots due to concrete trapping heat. It also highlighted severe health risks, such as synthetic turf in local sports stadiums reaching temperatures of 65°C. This data directly informed thirteen schoolyard mapping workshops, where students, parents, and teachers acted as local experts to map microclimates. The resulting visualizations successfully secured two specific climate-adaptation measures in the regional plan, paving the way to turn asphalt schoolyards into green climate gardens. Piraeus planned its open call to invite community initiatives and local musical associations to propose **cultural activities inside the future Rebetiko Museum**, ensuring local ownership before the physical construction tender begins.



Critical walk at the Piraeus train station. Photo by Levente Polyák

Forms of Knowledge Exchange

The Daring Cities project utilised a variety of exchange formats designed to generate ideas and translate abstract transnational concepts into actionable local practices. To maximize the value of these physical study visits, the network structured meetings around experiential, collaborative, and peer-supported learning formats that actively bridged the gap between international expertise and local community stakeholders.

To ground the partners in the specific spatial realities of each host city, meetings typically opened with an informal **evening walk** led by the Lead Expert or local municipal team. These preliminary walks allowed participants to grasp the broader structural, cultural, and economic context of the city, highlighting historical tensions and planning challenges before formal discussions began. This was subsequently elevated into a highly structured **critical walk**, which served as a primary hands-on diagnostic tool. During these walks, transnational delegates joined forces with local residents, shop owners, regional representatives, and municipal public servants to traverse problematic areas—such as the physical "urban wound" created by Altea's coastal railway line. Participants recorded their spatial observations and emotional responses in detailed questionnaires, directly converting their lived experiences into qualitative datasets that local planners could use to inform spatial designs.



Critical walk in Altea. Photo by Levente Polyák

These experiential field visits fed directly into intense **peer review sessions**, which functioned as a collective, multi-city consultation format for the host municipality. During these reviews, partners analyzed the host city's most pressing challenges—such as Piraeus's struggle to adaptively reuse an abandoned, decade-old train station or Dunaújváros's need to protect its post-war socialist modernist architectural heritage. Transnational partners offered instant, structured feedback, drawing on their own local experiences with linear parks, recycling centers, or creative storytelling to suggest out-of-the-box programming and risk-mitigation strategies. This collaborative format allowed host cities to evaluate the potential of their target sites through a rich European lens, transforming local planning issues into shared network challenges.

To engage younger demographics and bypass participation fatigue, the project pioneered gamified formats such as **role-playing persona games**. In Altea, this analog format was deployed with secondary school students who adopted specific vulnerability profiles—such as elderly citizens with reduced mobility, visually impaired residents, or immigrants—to evaluate the accessibility and safety of the physical paths leading to their schools. This playful approach not only raised students' awareness of the urban barriers in their daily environments but also generated highly valuable qualitative insights that planners could transform into design criteria. Similarly, other cities adapted gamified citizen science formats, such as Dunaújváros's use of competitive trash-collecting sports and mobile biodiversity mapping to make ecological monitoring inclusive and engaging.

The partners' local events were supported by thematic **online learning events and interactive webinars**—such as sessions on child-friendly placemaking or storytelling plans—to build specific municipal capacities across the network.



Citizen science game in Dunaújváros. Photo by Levente Polyák

Challenges Along the Path

The journey of the partner cities within the Daring Cities network has revealed a diverse spectrum of **logistical, structural, and institutional challenges** as they transition from theoretical learning toward the practical application of Ravenna's DARE model. Although there is a high level of enthusiasm for peer-to-peer learning across the network, translating a complex, multi-year, and highly integrated innovation action into different local urban contexts has proven to be a difficult administrative undertaking.

The primary hurdle identified by transferring partners is the **sheer scale and complexity of the original DARE methodology**. Combining collaborative urban regeneration, bottom-up data ecosystems, and choral storytelling into a singular, unified framework was initially very difficult for partners to digest, particularly regarding how to define and coordinate local pilot actions. This conceptual challenge was compounded by **severe time constraints, short deadlines, and a persistent lack of municipal staff capacity and local resources**.

The **rigid timescales** of the project framework did not comfortably accommodate the highly ambitious initial goals of some cities, such as producing multiple, complex local investment plans. Consequently, cities like Olomouc were forced to reprogramme their targets to be more realistic,

scaling down their focus from three separate zone plans to a single zone and a broader agglomeration scale to match their limited municipal capacity. Furthermore, the progress of the **URBACT Local Groups (ULGs) was highly uneven** across the partnership, with some groups maintaining strong, active community momentum while others required much more intensive, ongoing support to prevent stakeholder stagnation.



Public event in Olomouc. Photo by Levente Polyák

Beyond operational limits, deeply ingrained **cultural and administrative practices within municipal offices** presented a significant barrier to collaborative governance. A key obstacle in transferring the DARE model was a **traditional, top-down management style** in some partner cities, characterized by an institutional reluctance to open up decision-making processes and share power with citizens, community groups, and local associations. This traditional planning approach often treats public participation as a brief, consultative exercise that ends once a decision or vote is cast, rather than a long-term commitment to co-management and co-governance. Overcoming this administrative inertia and convincing municipal officials to delegate actual responsibility to citizen "caregivers"—such as volunteers maintaining local green spaces or co-managing community buildings—demanded a profound shift in municipal identity that many local administrations found difficult to navigate.

These administrative challenges were frequently exacerbated by **unstable political dynamics, local negotiations, and management turnover**. Negotiations over specific land areas, internal structural changes, and the shifting interests of local politicians frequently stalled municipal progress. In cities like Den Helder, institutional challenges arose directly from rapid management turnover and staffing shortages. Such vulnerabilities highlighted the critical need for constant **"urban diplomacy"** to better communicate the long-term value of "soft" participatory processes to changing political leadership. Coordinators frequently struggled to secure durable political buy-in from mayors,

vice-mayors, and aldermen, seeking concise, visual tools—such as brief data sheets and short introductory videos—to protect project roots from being severed during political transitions or local elections.

From a technical perspective, implementing the **bottom-up data ecosystem and digital participation tools** revealed distinct digital and structural gaps. While Ravenna's digital platforms provided a replicable structure for collaborative project submission and public voting, generating active community discussions and comments on these dedicated spaces was exceptionally challenging, as most citizens preferred using established mainstream social media. Partners also reported a general lack of enthusiasm among local stakeholders for online collaboration, preferring physical interactions. At a larger geographical scale, such as Olomouc's metropolitan agglomeration of 180 municipalities, traditional data collection methods like standard questionnaires proved entirely insufficient to capture "soft" qualitative data from massive commuter populations, necessitating the development of more advanced, quantitative-qualitative citizen mapping tools.

Finally, **complex land ownership, financial uncertainties, and hazardous physical site conditions** slowed the transition from strategic planning to physical implementation. Cities faced a notable technical gap in knowing how to attract private investments and navigate the increasingly performance-driven, milestone-heavy funding systems of the European Union to realize their final investment plans. Locally, spatial execution was often blocked by multi-governance bottlenecks. In Altea, transforming the railway path required securing slow, complex political mandates from the regional government, which actually owned the railway land. In Piraeus, although the disused railway station possessed immense narrative and cultural potential, its highly dilapidated physical state presented a severe risk. The station required immediate, costly structural safety interventions and tree removals before the municipality could host any public participatory events, pop-up exhibitions, or tactical pilot actions on-site, demonstrating how physical decay can directly stall civic empowerment.

A Joint Learning Trajectory

The educational and capacity-building journey of the Daring Cities network was significantly enriched by a series of learning sessions delivered by the Lead Expert and several specialized ad-hoc experts. These lectures and interactive workshops provided the transfer partners with the theoretical frameworks, diagnostic tools, and international case studies required to transition from abstract municipal strategies to concrete, participatory local actions. By focusing on collaborative governance, spatial connectivity, youth-centered placemaking, citizen science, and the co-management of green and cultural heritage, these experts helped the participating cities systematically unpack and adapt the core methodologies of Ravenna's original DARE project.

During the Altea transnational meeting, the Lead Expert addressed the fundamental administrative challenges of collaborative urban regeneration, focusing on the critical theme of **opening transformation processes to citizens and community groups**. He argued that a major obstacle in transferring innovative municipal frameworks is a deeply ingrained administrative reluctance to share decision-making power. To counter this, the presentations emphasized the benefits of genuine, long-term participation over conventional, short-term consultative models. Traditional

public consultation typically ends once a decision or vote is cast, which often encourages citizens to demand what public administrations should do rather than taking direct responsibility themselves. True co-design, co-management, and co-governance require guiding local communities to actively assume long-term responsibility for the maintenance and daily programming of public spaces. Through this "participation by doing," citizens develop advanced coordination, deliberation, and conflict-resolution skills, transforming contested urban assets into self-sustaining community hubs.



Presentation in Piraeus. Photo by Piraeus Municipality

To support Altea in resolving its severe spatial fragmentation, ad-hoc expert **Jon Aguirre Such** presented on **reconnecting fragmented urban fabrics** and **gender-sensitive public space planning**. Using examples from his architectural and urban planning work in Spanish cities, he demonstrated how heavy transit infrastructures—such as tram lines, railways, and highways—can be physically and socially bridged. He shared methodologies from public space designs in San Sebastián, research on covering the railway tracks around Chamartín in Madrid, and a collaborative participatory process surrounding the covering of rail lines in Vitoria. Jon's work illustrated how municipalities can combine technical spatial engineering with inclusive, resident-led design to heal

physical "urban wounds," improve transversal mobility, and ensure that newly designed public realms are safe and accessible to all genders and vulnerable demographics.

The theme of **youth and child-friendly placemaking** was comprehensively developed by ad-hoc expert **Vivian Doumpa** during a dedicated online learning event and subsequent workshops in Piraeus. Vivian anchored her framework in the vital distinction between physical "space" (*horos*) and meaningful "place" (*topos*), defining the latter as an environment safe and comfortable enough for people to express vulnerability. She presented a holistic three-part model for successful placemaking consisting of hardware (physical design), software (programming and activities), and orgware (co-creation and management processes). To engage younger demographics who often suffer from participation fatigue, Vivian championed **tactical urbanism**, which deploys temporary, low-cost, and playful interventions to test spatial concepts in the "here and now" before committing to permanent, capital-intensive investments. She shared practical tools to guide partners through different phases of community engagement, including the **Place Game** for physical site evaluations, the **Time Machine** for mapping the socio-political history and future desires of a neighborhood, and gender-sensitive **Treasure Hunts** to help youth identify safety and wayfinding issues. Her presentations also detailed how to move up the "ladder of participation" toward complete community empowerment, illustrating this with a Thessaloniki initiative, which converted closed schoolyards into active neighborhood centers.

Vivian and the Lead Expert also co-presented on the **dynamic role of museums in urban regeneration**, demonstrating that cultural institutions can serve as active instruments for local democracy rather than static historical repositories. They examined how the **Museum of Józsefváros** in Budapest utilizes a "coral storytelling" approach, crowdsourcing everyday objects and personal memories from residents to co-create a historical narrative from the bottom up. Other international case studies showcased how institutions like the **Urban Lab in Turin** use mapping and public walks to guide city planning debates, while the **Rosa Lab** in Paris and **Oliva Artés** in Barcelona use contemporary exhibitions to give visibility to marginalized industrial histories and housing struggles. To ensure the financial and social sustainability of these spaces, they introduced the concept of **triangulation**—clustering diverse activities to foster social interaction—while warning planners to use early programming during renovations to evaluate physical design and prevent cultural initiatives from inadvertently accelerating neighborhood gentrification.

In Piraeus, the technical integration of data and planning was advanced by **Eleni Mougiakou** of the NGO Common Space, who presented on the use of **citizen science for climate adaptation and urban heat island mitigation**. Eleni explained how her interdisciplinary team co-produces environmental knowledge by treating local residents, students, and parents as "local experts" of their microclimates. She highlighted the **Cultural Hidrant** project, where school communities conducted hundreds of workshops to map heat, vegetation, and schoolyard functionality to directly shape municipal construction plans. Her work also pioneered the collection of **"middle data"**—the highly granular environmental information that exists between satellite imagery and ground-level surveys. By mounting mini weather stations on cars, bicycles, and municipal vehicles, volunteers captured over 368,000 temperature and humidity data points during severe heatwaves. This research revealed critical environmental anomalies, showing that coastal areas often function as street-level heat hotspots due to heat-trapping infrastructure, and that synthetic grass in sports stadiums can reach dangerous temperatures of up to 65°C. Ultimately, this bottom-up data

collection was used to directly inform and rewrite regional climate adaptation policies, proving that citizen science is an essential tool for evidence-based urban planning.

Finally, during the Dunaújváros meeting, the Lead Expert delivered two presentations exploring the co-management of green commons and the politically charged nature of post-war architectural heritage. His lecture on **green area management and citizen science** highlighted community-led models that bypass municipal resource limitations. He analyzed various governance scales, including a community garden in Budapest managed entirely by citizen volunteers under a public contract, the mobilization of New York's Central Park volunteer networks to drastically reduce municipal maintenance costs, and Rome's **Lago Bullicante**, where intensive citizen activism successfully preserved a natural lake and led to a decade of volunteer-run park management. He also discussed **Vacaresti Park** in Bucharest, where an abandoned communist-era concrete dam was reclaimed as a wild urban rainforest, resulting in a new national law to protect urban nature reserves.

In his presentation on **cultural heritage and memory politics**, the Lead Expert examined the socio-cultural struggles surrounding modernist and postwar socialist realist architecture in post-socialist Europe. He analyzed the aggressive wave of "memory cleansing" in Hungary, where the historicist regime systematically demolished modernist landmarks—such as a prominent electric power station in the Buda Castle and the National Radio building—to erase this era from the physical landscape. He contrasted this destruction with creative forms of **citizen protest and reappropriation**, showing how Warsaw's **Centrala** design group made modernist pavilions fashionable on clothing, and how Krakow's **Nowa Huta** district was reclaimed as a trendy cultural destination. Polyák concluded by emphasizing that the socialist urban planning model often provides a remarkably high quality of life by organizing neighborhoods into self-contained, green, 3,000-person units, urging partner cities to use temporary interventions and multi-stakeholder partnerships—such as the successful revitalization of Bratislava's **Old Market Hall**—to reclaim this built heritage as a powerful source of local identity and social cohesion.

Legacy and impact

The legacy and impact of the Daring Cities network are fundamentally defined by a profound shift in how European municipalities approach urban planning, proving that **flexible, human-scale co-governance** can successfully replace rigid, top-down masterplanning. Building directly on the innovative methodologies tested during Ravenna's original DARE project, the network has left a lasting institutional legacy by demonstrating the value of "strategic incrementalism"—an approach that allows local administrations to take **gradual, successive steps toward a long-term strategy** while continuously adjusting to changing local contexts. This represents a significant evolution in administrative culture, challenging traditional top-down bureaucracy and encouraging municipal officials to share actual decision-making power and daily management responsibilities with community groups and citizen "caregivers". By structuring local regeneration into a synchronized trajectory—moving from strategic visioning, through the co-design of medium-term tactics, to citizen-voted implementations—the network has validated a highly replicable, democratic blueprint for urban transformation. Locally, this was operationalized through the establishment of URBACT

Local Groups following the quadruple helix model, creating durable, cross-sectoral coalitions of public officials, academic institutions, private enterprises, and active citizens that continue to drive local initiatives.

The physical and social impact of this transfer process is vividly demonstrated by the **tailored, localized actions** realized across the partner cities, where abstract transnational learning was converted into tangible community assets. In Den Helder, the network catalyzed the signing of the historic Vulnerable Neighbourhoods Covenant, aligning key actors from civil society, housing associations, schools, and social services to create equal life opportunities and safe, child-friendly spaces in the Visbuurt district. In Altea, the project supported the seafront regeneration strategy, utilizing playful spatial gamification with secondary school students to generate rich qualitative datasets that help designers physically and socially bridge the urban fragmentation caused by the regional railway line. In Dunaújváros, the legacy is anchored in community-led green governance centered around the newly established Bido office; here, vulnerable residents, student volunteers, and teachers collaborate on digital tree mapping, intergenerational soil and composting challenges, and creative storytelling to protect their 1950s socialist modernist architectural fabric from systemic historical erasure.

In Kragujevac, the network developed clear strategic pathways for the adaptive reuse of the historic Military-Technical Institute brownfield, mobilizing university gaming students, art contests, and digital online campaigns to rebuild the city's proud industrial identity. For Piraeus, the project generated concrete design solutions to transform a disused, dilapidated railway station into a vibrant municipal cultural park and Rebetiko museum, while simultaneously pioneering citizen science campaigns to collect street-level environmental "middle data" to mitigate urban heat islands and turn schoolyards into climate gardens. Concurrently, Olomouc successfully scaled these data-driven participatory methodologies to a regional scale, draft-planning for its metropolitan agglomeration of 180 municipalities and demonstrating how qualitative "feeling maps" can be combined with hard sensor data to justify regional infrastructure spending.



Group photo in Piraeus. Photo by Piraeus Municipality

Beyond these localized interventions, Daring Cities has established a major policy legacy by aligning municipal planning with the core objectives of the European Union, demonstrating strong contributions to Cohesion Policy goals, the EU Urban Agenda, and Integrated Territorial Development principles. The network's insistence on using **"soft" planning phases** to build robust coalitions, conduct **low-cost "tactical urbanism" experiments**, and **map genuine territorial needs** before executing physical works has provided partner cities with an invaluable training ground. By moving from raw ideas to consensus-backed, stakeholder-supported Investment and Continuity Plans, the participating cities have transitioned to highly prepared, active actors. They are now strategically positioned to navigate and exploit the performance-based, milestone-heavy post-2028 EU public funding landscape, possessing mature project pipelines that are ready to absorb capital-intensive funding from sources like the European Fund for Competitiveness, the Connecting Europe Facility, or the New European Bauhaus.

Finally, the enduring legacy of the project is preserved in a suite of permanent, public-facing communication and learning products designed to advocate for collaborative governance across the European continent. The different communication outputs produced by the project ensure that the collective wisdom generated by Daring Cities will continue to inspire and guide municipalities across Europe for years to come.

The Next Steps

The Daring Cities Network Methodology guided participating cities along a clear trajectory designed to transition them from forming an urban and societal strategy to defining medium-term development tactics and ultimately establishing concrete investment and implementation plans. This step-by-step path, modeled closely on the original DARE project in Ravenna, ensures that citizen-led proposals and local needs directly inform the final capital investments.

To successfully transition from the tactical planning phase to **tangible local investments and implementation**, cities must overcome several key operational hurdles. As cities advance towards finalizing their investment plans, their immediate priorities shift toward attracting private investment, managing financial uncertainties, and navigating complex European Union funding mechanisms. A critical risk during this phase is the intense time pressure of the project framework and the limited staff capacity within local administrations, which can make initial, highly ambitious goals difficult to achieve. To keep processes on track, the Lead Partner and the Lead Expert recommend a multi-level strategy that combines structural flexibility, realistic goal reprogramming, and targeted expert mobilization. For instance, cities with limited capacity may choose to focus on a single geographic zone or specific agglomeration challenges rather than trying to deliver multiple, complex plans. Furthermore, the network mobilizes specialized ad hoc experts to resolve technical gaps in complex areas like regional transport, resident engagement, and agglomeration-scale planning.

Securing the **long-term sustainability** of these projects also requires a significant focus on urban diplomacy to build lasting political commitment and protect the roots of local initiatives from administrative transitions. Local coordinators are encouraged to actively engage high-level political leadership, such as mayors, vice-mayors, and aldermen, to secure their ongoing support. To

facilitate this, the project coordination team produces accessible materials, including data sheets and short introductory videos, to clearly communicate the value of the innovation to local politicians. Simultaneously, municipal administrations must continue to transition away from traditional, top-down bureaucratic structures and dare to share decision-making power with community groups, ensuring that citizens remain active co-designers and caregivers of the transformed spaces. Operationally, cities can use Ravenna's RADAR Real Estate Forum methodology to conduct matchmaking workshops that align project proponents with property owners, private developers, and municipal officials to verify feasibility and secure spaces. Storytelling also shifts to enabled and promotional formats to support crowdfunding campaigns, using rewarding systems to incentivize citizen contributions and secure co-financing for local projects.

Beyond localized efforts, the final steps of the Daring Cities network are designed to prepare partner municipalities to **navigate a major paradigm shift in future European public funding**. In the post-2028 EU programming period, funding will transition to performance-based models heavily inspired by the post-pandemic Recovery and Resilience Facility, which mandates strict milestones, reforms, and a rapid twelve-month decommitment rule. This shift will place intense pressure on managing authorities to initiate projects quickly, heavily favoring prepared, integrated, and partnership-backed projects that already have active project pipelines in place. Soft planning programs like URBACT perform the essential preliminary work of helping cities build these solid coalitions and implementation frameworks before large capitals are allocated. Transnational networks act as a critical training ground, helping local staff master cross-border cooperation, strategic regional coordination, and sophisticated communication.

From Knowledge Exchange to Investment: The Value of URBACT

The transnational value of the URBACT programme is fundamentally anchored in its capacity to construct an **active, collaborative learning environment** that transcends national boundaries, enabling European cities to escape territorial isolation and collectively tackle shared structural challenges. Within this framework, the primary mechanism of value creation is the facilitation of **direct, personal interactions** through physical study visits and transnational meetings. These on-site encounters serve as a powerful engine for **local capacity building**, allowing participating municipalities to observe innovative, real-world solutions in situ and adapt them to their own unique administrative and spatial contexts. For a Lead Partner city, hosting peers and systematically explaining its local methodologies acts as a powerful validation of its own urban development journey, while simultaneously forcing municipal staff to clarify and refine their future strategic objectives through the critical, constructive gaze of their international counterparts. Conversely, for transferring partner cities, these visits are indispensable tools for motivating local decision-makers, demonstrating to cautious politicians that ambitious, participatory regeneration models are not merely theoretical ideals but functional realities. This cross-border exchange is characterised by a **reciprocal flow of knowledge**, where partners actively share and transplant successful local methodologies.

Beyond the immediate benefits of inter-city learning, the URBACT programme serves as a crucial catalyst for deep institutional reform within participating local governments, challenging entrenched administrative habits. Traditional urban planning has historically relied on top-down, non-human-scale masterplans that "copy-paste" aesthetic and spatial solutions across different geographical contexts, frequently failing to meet the genuine needs of local populations. URBACT directly counters this outdated paradigm by providing the methodology and "soft" infrastructure necessary to transition toward inclusive models of **co-design, co-management, and co-governance**. For many European municipalities, sharing power with civil society is a highly challenging transition, often restricted by a legacy of top-down management styles that are reluctant to open decision-making processes to the public. Through its structured trajectory, URBACT guides local administrations in breaking down institutional silos, encouraging them to share power with community groups, resident initiatives, and vulnerable populations. This democratic evolution is operationalised locally through the formation of **URBACT Local Groups**, which adhere to a multi-sectoral quadruple helix model that unites municipal experts, political representatives, academic institutions, private enterprises, and active citizens. To prevent these local groups from operating in a vacuum, URBACT establishes a highly synchronised, continuous feedback loop between the international and local levels. Local project coordinators facilitate workshops both before and after each transnational meeting, ensuring that on-the-ground insights from local stakeholders directly shape the international agenda, while the expert knowledge and peer feedback gathered transnationally are immediately fed back to guide local action plans.



Group photo in Kragujevac. Photo by Kragujevac Municipality

A central tenet of the URBACT philosophy is the rigorous insistence on knowledge transfer, capacity building, and collaborative strategic planning as mandatory **prerequisites before executing large-scale, capital-intensive physical investments**. Committing substantial public or private funds to massive infrastructure projects without first aligning local coalitions, mapping genuine territorial needs, and testing spatial assumptions carries an unacceptably high risk of financial and social failure. URBACT addresses this risk by funding the "soft" phase of urban development, performing the essential heavy lifting of helping cities gather diverse stakeholders, build trust, and co-design a resilient strategic vision. A vital bridge within this trajectory is the deployment of **tactical urbanism**, which integrates short-term, low-cost, and low-tech testing actions within a long-term strategic vision. Because citizens and younger demographics often suffer from participation fatigue and need to see immediate, tangible results to build trust in municipal processes, these temporary interventions—such as pop-up events, exploratory walks, or artistic spatial modifications—allow cities to trial ideas in the "here and now". Temporarily opening neglected or heritage sites to the public serves as a low-risk experimental laboratory to evaluate spatial designs and gather soft data on how people actually use and experience their environment. This active participation-by-doing fosters a powerful sense of **community ownership** and **shared responsibility**, ensuring that when permanent investments are eventually made, the resulting spaces are already socially integrated and supported by active community caretakers.

This emphasis on pre-investment strategic preparedness is becoming increasingly critical due to an impending, fundamental paradigm shift in the funding mechanisms of the European Union. As cohesion policy transitions into the post-2028 programming period, the regional funding landscape will move away from traditional, passive grant allocations toward performance-based models heavily inspired by the post-pandemic Recovery and Resilience Facility, characterised by strict milestones, reforms, and a rapid twelve-month decommitment rule. In this highly demanding environment, managing and funding authorities will heavily favour municipal projects that possess active, integrated, and partnership-backed project pipelines ready for immediate execution.



Group photo in Altea. Photo by Altea Municipality

URBACT networks act as an **invaluable training ground for this transition**, equipping local administrations with the skills in transnational communication, cross-border cooperation, and urban diplomacy required to successfully navigate and lobby within these complex financial structures. By using the "soft" planning phase to develop mature, consensus-backed Investment and Continuity Plans, participating cities move towards actively securing diverse funding streams, blending national and regional partnership plans with directly managed EU programs like Horizon Europe, or leveraging private capital and innovative financial instruments. Ultimately, the transnational value of the URBACT programme lies in its power to transform municipal administrations from isolated, bureaucratic entities into daring, highly connected, and strategically prepared actors, ready to successfully lead their territories through the ecological, digital, and social challenges of the twenty-first century.