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Author:
Frederik Spinnewijn
UIA Expert



The Urban Lab of Europe !

The 5 Bridges project Journal N° 2

Project led by the City of Nantes



**URBAN
POVERTY**



The 5 Bridges Project

The **5Bridges** project looks at breaking the circle of social and spatial polarisation, targeting the city's homeless and socially excluded population. The project will tackle the interrelated causal factors of urban poverty by creating a one-stop-shop in a new neighbourhood providing comprehensive and tailored services interconnecting different social groups. Designed as a multifunctional area, the one-stop-shop will propose and test new jobs, provide housing and health-related services based on a participatory approach to foster social integration and empowerment (including a neighbourhood restaurant, urban farm, solidarity shop, temporary and social housing and low-threshold-care). Prior to the completion of the building, small-scale labs will be set up allowing the homeless population to test and co-design the activities and user involvement approaches. It will permit this group to participate and connect to the neighbourhood, therefore changing the perception of socially excluded groups. Together with the partnership, social NGOs, public services for employment, housing, health and police, as well as neighbourhood associations will be involved in the project implementation.

Partnership:

- Ville de Nantes
- Nantes Metropole - Organised Agglomeration
- Association Les Eaux Vives - NGO
- Société Anonyme des Marches de l'Ouest - Public/Private Company
- Société d'Aménagement de la metropole ouest atlantique (SAMOA) - Public/Private Company
- Association Emmaus 44 - NGO

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1. Executive summary

After a slow start, the 5Bridges project is now in full implementation. The construction has finally started, which will allow the project leaders to make the *software* (social and community activities) and the *hard ware* (the building of the infrastructure) of the project to coincide and interact better. That should give a boost to the project dynamic. The key features of the project – the social restaurant and the urban farm – are taking concrete shape on the *drawing table*. This allows for more constructive interaction between the partners, and with the local community and the future residents. The participatory nature of the project is impressive. All relevant partners are involved in the design and implementation of each stage of the project. The promotion of the project is effective and has provoked quite a bit of interest from other cities in France and abroad. It increases the pressure on the project partners to deliver the outcomes and impact

as anticipated. The project keeps its innovative and daring features although some unforeseen costs have forced the project leaders to revise the initial architectural plan. With the gradual implementation of the project it becomes clear that it should not only fill a gap in existing service provision for the homeless but play a role as lever to transform the way homelessness is addressed in Nantes. That will require the project leaders to reach out to some key stakeholders that are currently not or only superficially connected to the project. A key challenge remains the securing and sustaining the support of grass root workers from the homeless sector who are worried the strong emphasis on the empowerment of the homeless service user might undermine the value of their professional expertise. The project partners are now devoting enough attention to this challenge.

2. Leadership

In spite of some major challenges related to the delays with and changes to the actual construction of the 5Bridges site, the partnership remains strong under the skillful leadership of the city of Nantes. The different partners all have a stake in the project and want it to succeed. The coordinator and her colleagues from the city of Nantes and Les Eaux Vives (LEV) have managed to establish a collective ownership of the project.

The problems related to the project are not to be underestimated. The fact that the building land was contaminated came as a surprise. The treatment to allow construction on the polluted land took much longer than anticipated and was very costly. The architectural ambitions had to be scaled down a little to allow for some important savings. This could have put the idea of the 5Pont project as an architectural landmark of the city in jeopardy. The city, the contractor, the social housing company, the architect, and LEV as the main NGO working with homeless people have all worked constructively together to minimise the impact of the cost savings on the spirit and the quality of the project.

The construction of the 5Bridges site has now started and this has created space for easier and more relaxed cooperation between the partners which is now more focused on the social aspects of the project. The fact that the frequency of the coordinating meetings between key partners has been reduced to one meeting every two months is an indication that cooperation runs smoother than before.

It is also important to stress that political support from the public authorities for the project remains strong. The support goes beyond the authorities involved in the project as lead partners. The Region and the State are also enthusiastic about the project. The political coalition governing the Region changed recently but the commitment to invest an additional €1 million in the 5Bridges project remained. It shows that from the right to left of the political spectrum there is a strong belief that the original and daring aspects of the 5Bridges project are likely to initiate a new and more effective dynamic to address homelessness.

3. Public procurement



5Bridges project logo

As the 5Bridges project is a large construction project, public procurement is an essential part of the work. The partners involved have abundant experience with public procurement and it does not pose any major problems. But not only the work related to the actual construction is being procured, also important parts of the social and community work are allocated through public procurement.

Recently the project leaders selected a consortium of providers to create an interactive community around the 5Bridges project involving the residents. This has been a challenging and complex piece of work to tender out. It was difficult to anticipate and to cost all activities required to effectively interact with the local community as some of the local dynamics will grow naturally. An innovative feature of this piece of public procurement was the active involvement of all relevant project partners and other actors in the development of the tender specifications and the selection of the provider. It helped to sustain and further

develop the collective dynamic underpinning the success of the 5Bridges project.

It is clear that public procurement helps to insert in an effective way creativity and innovation into the 5Bridges project. Another example is the tendering out of the development and management of the urban farm that will be a key feature of the project. The tender has been awarded to a provider that has been able to transform the high expectations into a financially viable proposal. Public tendering will probably also allow for a creative solution for the social restaurant in which both social and commercial ambitions have to be reconciled.

The city of Nantes also tendered out some support for the actual management of the project in as far as it relates to rules and financial regulations imposed by the UIA framework. The support is provided by a Dutch company and has helped the city to find a proper balance between the need for sufficient flexibility to adapt to local dynamics and expectation and the European regulatory framework.

It is interesting to note that the stakeholders involved in fight against homelessness which are not involved as partners in the 5Bridges project have not really used the many public tenders to *break in* to the project. Maybe the city should have encouraged them a little more, because the transformative impact of the 5Bridges project on the way homelessness should be addressed in the future would probably be even greater if some of the other big actors from the homelessness sector were involved in one way or another.

There might be a slight risk of too much public tendering. It could slow down the progress with the project which is to be avoided as important delays have already accumulated. And for some activities there are very few organisations, sometimes only one serious candidate,

interested in and/or capable of delivering on the tender in the wider Nantes area. But public procurement laws have to be respected, and it seems that rules on public tendering as applied in Nantes are much stricter than what European Directives prescribe.

4. Organisational arrangements

One of the key players in the 5Bridges project is LEV. LEV was the driving force behind the idea to create a dedicated interactive site to better address the issue of chronic homelessness in Nantes. Other project partners count on the creative and intellectual leadership of LEV to turn the project into a success. But some major staff changes in LEV and a prolonged leave of a leading staff member has impacted negatively on the dynamic underpinning the project – especially as regards the parts related to social service development and community engagement.

The coordinator of 5Bridges had to step in and reorganise the way of working with the many partners to ensure the initial enthusiasm did not come to a standstill. She worked hard to make the project less dependent on a few key individuals and to ensure sufficient collective ownership of the project dynamics. Much progress has been achieved through better sharing of information. The project partners now use Basecamp and Dropbox to ensure better communication, proper planning, and effective monitoring of progress. The new communication tools helped the partners to better understand how their activities related to the wider dynamics of the project.

There might however be a risk that the new communication tools could lead to an overload of

information and make cooperation between partners too formal. Many project activities need to be further developed during the time of the project and sufficient informal interaction and space for brainstorming is key to achieve this. There is a risk that the introduction of the new management approach based on better communication and reporting turns the progress expected too much into a ‘tick box exercise’ and hampers the collective dynamic of the project.

The change of culture which the 5Bridges project wants to install is quite radical. The idea underpinning the project is that homeless people, even those with very complex needs, can transition quickly and successfully to housing. Provision of night-only shelter hampers such transition. The 5Bridges project wants to rethink shelter as a trampoline to housing and social inclusion by integrating shelter, social integration services and housing in one single site. It seems as if the project leaders, and LEV in particular, have underestimated how difficult it is for organisations and their grassroots staff to make the required culture shift. Some external expertise from somebody that has knowledge of or experience with successful transition processes towards a Housing First approach to homelessness might be useful to ensure all partners can stick to the initial commitments which are essential for the success of the project.

5. Participatory approach

The participatory approach is a key element of 5Bridges. There is not only a wide range of partners involved in the project, but there is also a strong commitment to work closely with the end beneficiaries which are mainly homeless people and the local community. Especially the empowerment of homeless people as co-designer of the construction site and the way services will be delivered is considered to be of utmost importance for the success of the project. Several activities are being rolled out to ensure proper involvement of homelessness people and effective interaction between the homeless and the professionals involved in the project such as peer research, focus groups, and experimentations. Atypical approaches such as the participation methodology developed by ATD Fourth World are used for this purpose.

But the involvement and empowerment of homeless people turns out to be a challenging and burdensome endeavour. There is some scepticism, and sometimes also actual resistance, from professionals regarding the key role of homeless people in the project. The project leaders might also be somewhat naive about the power of participation of homeless people. There is a risk that the professional expertise of grassroots social workers gets unnecessarily devalued in the design and delivery of the

services on the 5Bridges site. There is room to strike better balance between the lived experience of homeless people and the knowledge and experience of the professionals of the different partners involved in the project.

Also the mobilisation of the local community is more complex than expected. This would probably have been easier if the interaction with the neighbours could have happened on the actual site of the 5Bridges project but the short time of the project (3 years) and the different timetables for the construction of the site and the development of social services make this impossible. There is interaction with the local community, but the number of neighbours involved remains limited. And sometimes the interaction between the homeless clients and the neighbourhood is problematic. After a violent incident, the project leaders decided to temporarily interrupt the experimentation with the community vegetable garden. Even if such incidents should be taken seriously, the nature of the experimentation involving homeless people makes some errors unavoidable. That is why the project leaders are determined to continue the experimentations, but also to take more time and organise the empowerment of homeless people in smaller steps.



Study visits

6. Communication

Much progress has been made in the areas of communication and promotion.

Presentation leaflets and roll ups summarising the key features of the 5Bridges project are now available. These tools are useful as there is a lot of interest in the 5Bridges project from other cities in France and abroad.

A regular newsletter is published to inform in an easy and accessible way the wider public, mainly local stakeholders, about the state of progress with the project.

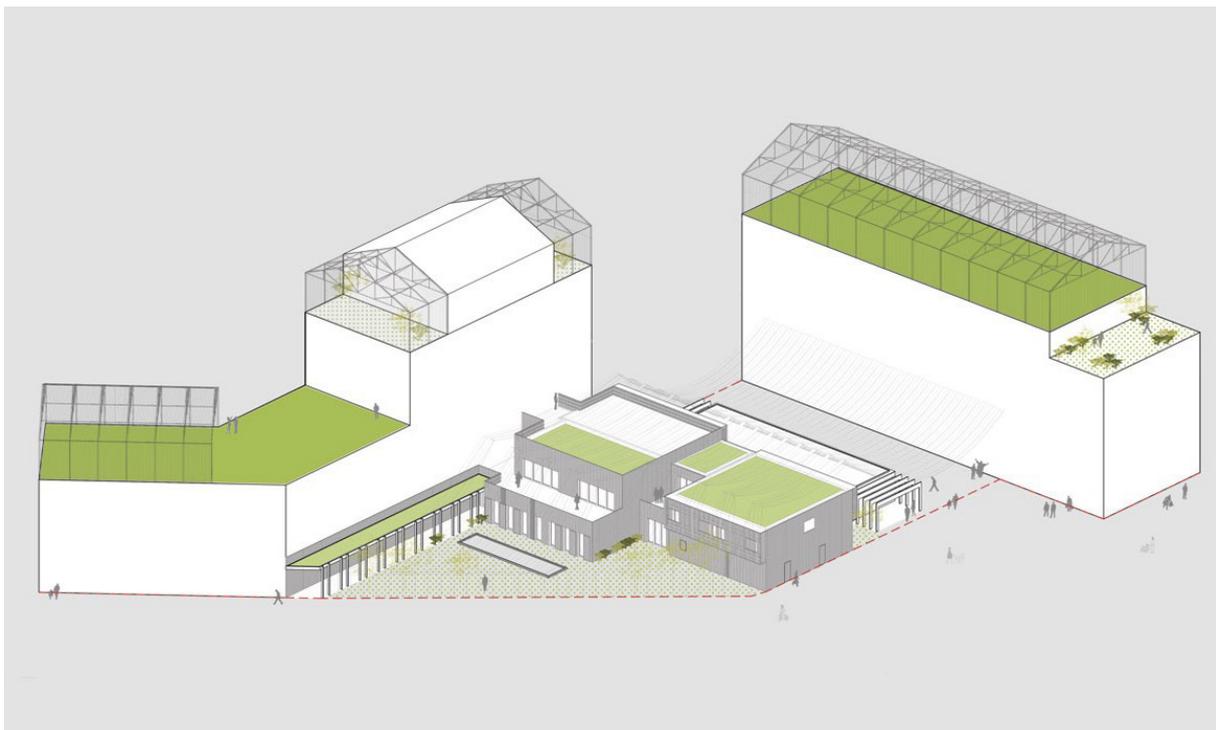
Several promotional videos, which make the project much more tangible, have been made available on the website. The website is easy to navigate and gives an excellent overview of what the project is all about.

The project has been presented at several local events which allows the local community to

familiarise itself with project. The 5Bridges projects has also been presented at several national and international events and conferences.

Up until now the project leaders have only received very positive reactions on the 5Bridges project.

The question that arises is whether the promotion comes a little bit too early. Most of what the project is all about is still in the planning phase and there is no absolute guarantee that the project will be an actual success that deserves to be replicated elsewhere. It is of course understandable that policy makers want to showcase projects they launch, but the partners in the 5Bridges project should be aware that they are showcasing still an idea rather than an evidence-based good practice at this stage.



7. Monitoring and evaluation

There are monthly progress reports which report in detail about the progress made. The project coordinator keeps track of all activities in great detail and tries to stick as much as possible to the original project proposal as submitted to UIA for funding.

The project leaders are complementing with the partners and professional external help the output indicators to measure as objectively as possible the future success and impact of the 5Bridges project.

It would be useful to further develop the qualitative assessment of the project considering the broader local and national policy context related to homelessness. An interesting question in this regard could be the extent to which the 5Bridges project is likely to contribute to the Housing First and Housing-led approaches that are being promoted by the French government.

8. Upscaling

The communications and publicity work of the project leaders bear fruit. The 5Bridges project appears regularly in specialised and mainstream (mainly local) press. The project also gets international exposure with presentations at international conferences.

The city of Nantes does not have the intention to turn the project in a specific policy approach and to actively promote its replicate in other cities in France or abroad. But the city is keen to showcase the project to anybody who is interested. There are plans to reserve more time and financial resources for this.

9. Some project features with great potential

The architectural features of the project are impressive. The modern design of the shelter and services such as the social restaurant and the farm are innovative, but the fact that the 5Bridges project is at the centre of a much larger urban redevelopment project where very different layers of the society will interact makes it probably unique in Europe. The urban farm on the roof of some of the building and also on the ground make the site truly exceptional. It also makes the project quite expensive, but if the homeless transition rapidly to housing probably cost-effective.

In France social restaurants are often for socially excluded people. The social restaurant that will be part of the 5Bridges project aims at a much wider audience and should become financially self-sufficient. It will employ homeless and formerly homeless people, but the quality of the food and the service will be high. The restaurant should become an attractive option for locals (and maybe even tourists) to have lunch or dinner. If successful, the restaurant can become a model for other social restaurants in France and abroad.

10. Some project developments that require attention

The national government is actively promoting the Housing First approach to homelessness. There are now national resources available to fund Housing First projects modelled after the original Pathways to Housing model from the US and to fund more general Housing First projects aimed at a wider part of the homeless population. Even if the 5Bridges project is based on the Housing First logic and wants to move homeless people as quickly as possible from emergency accommodation to long-term housing solutions, it is not yet entirely clear if and how the project will fully exploit the current national Housing First dynamic. The shelter of the 5Bridges project could be the main place (or in the longer term maybe even the only) where homeless people get referred to housing options. That would require a rapid and easy outflow out of the shelter to housing solutions and therefore more social and private housing providers would need to get involved in the project. More cooperation with

the part of the homeless sector not currently involved in the project would also be needed to allow the 5Bridges project to play a genuine transformative role regarding the fight against homelessness. The next ZOOM will look into this question in greater detail.

Another issue of concern is how the project will relate to the growing problem of homelessness among migrants, especially undocumented migrants, in Nantes. It is unclear to what extent undocumented migrants and 'trans-migrants' will have a place in the 5Bridges project. The 5Bridges project will most probably offer high quality services which will attract a large part of the homeless population in Nantes, including homeless migrants. The question is whether the project will be able to offer sufficient solutions to all homeless seeking help without jeopardising the envisaged positive interaction with the neighbours and the local community.

11. Learning points

These are the main learning points from the project so far:

- Political leadership is of key importance to make an innovative, and to some extent a disruptive, project like the 5Bridges project a success and ensure maximum impact.
- Participation and empowerment of people who are homeless is a welcome feature of the project, but pragmatism and realism are required to make it work.
- A focus on a very poor target group does not necessarily go hand in hand with poor quality services and poor infrastructure. The 5Bridges project shows that investing in a high-quality site for homeless people is likely to facilitate their integration and the interaction with the local community.
- Cooperation between stakeholders from different sectors (housing, urban planning, homeless shelters, public authorities, social economy...) is a precondition to make the integration of homeless people a success.

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

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Urban Innovative Actions

Les Arcuriales
45D rue de Tournai
F- 59000 Lille

+33 (0)3 61 76 59 34
info@uia-initiative.eu
www.uia-initiative.eu

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and on **Facebook**.