

based on the Erasmus+ project

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# Telling Your Story into the City

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Structured Exchange of Staff to  
Identify & Promote Best Practices  
of Outreach to Marginalised  
Communities via Arts & Urban  
Participation Methods

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Urban Casebook

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Key Action 2 – Small-scale  
partnerships in Adult Education

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We often talk about cities as hubs for developing human potential, with public spaces serving as platforms for dialogue that fosters mutual understanding and societal growth. However, many people are excluded from participating in public life. Their voices, interests, and concerns often go unnoticed—whether due to being newcomers, having physical limitations, or facing discrimination based on language, culture, or lifestyle. These residents, often labelled as marginalised communities, become invisible. This lack of visibility leads to misunderstanding, fear, and exclusion from the societal life of cities.

How can we help vulnerable people feel a sense of belonging in cities and become visible? How can cities benefit from engaging with them?

To support people excluded from urban life, a variety of programs, centres, and non-profit organisations employ diverse methods. Creative and unconventional approaches, beyond traditional adult education services, along with cross-sector collaboration, can be more effective in engaging marginalised groups, especially in urban settings. Storytelling is one of these approaches. We defined it as a set of tools that can empower vulnerable individuals, allowing them to be heard, seen, and recognised as full-fledged *cityzens*. Storytelling and open spaces for exchange strengthen connections between individuals and initiatives.

In this context, the project Telling Your Story into the City emerged. It provided an opportunity to explore, in collaboration with target groups and organisations, creative urban practices and methods as storytelling techniques to engage excluded individuals with their neighbourhoods and cities. Our interdisciplinary project team included four organisations: urban researchers and practitioners (CISR e.V. Berlin), a European project management & migrant-led NGO (CGE, Erfurt), urban participation and education providers Urban Foxes (Brussels), and the creative association Teatro Metaphora (Madeira). In particular, the consortium aimed to support the development of innovations in Adult Education, fostering more inclusive cities that reflect the needs and rights of their inhabitants. Our journey began with a kick-off meeting in Berlin (2023), followed by study visits to Madeira (2023) and Brussels (2024), and concluded with a discussion of the Urban Casebook and evaluation of project activities in Erfurt (2024).

This Casebook documents the best practices of the places and organisations we learned about in Madeira and Brussels, as well as the insights gained by project partners during these study visits. It is intended to provide other initiatives and institutions with access to a series of creative cases in outreach and participation in the context of adult education. We hope you find some practical inspiration for your own engagement within these pages.

Center for Independent Social Research (CISR) e.V.  
Berlin, Germany

Center for Independent Social Research (CISR) e.V. is a non-profit association founded in Berlin in 2015. CISR supports the development of civil societies in post-socialist states, as well as Eastern and Western Europe. We conduct social and urban research and lead projects in non-formal education, exchange, and capacity-building in areas such as urban and media activism, migration, peaceful conflict transformation, and many others.

Urban Foxes  
Brussels, Belgium

Urban Foxes is a multidisciplinary placemaking collective based in Brussels, with team members all over the world, creating and facilitating innovative & inclusive projects, workshops and giving lectures in different countries. Our aim is to improve urban health and wellbeing, focussing on the inclusion of neglected stakeholders, with an emphasis on free access, use and creation of high-quality public spaces and social interaction.

Culture Goes Europe (CGE) –  
Soziokulturelle Initiative Erfurt e.V.  
Erfurt, Germany

CGE Erfurt e.V. is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Erfurt, founded in 2005 and run by migrant-background professionals. Within the framework of non-formal education, CGE empowers participants and communities as active agents in their learning journey. For CGE, non-formal education is grounded in principles such as voluntary and active participation, a holistic approach, values-based education, learning-by-doing, and peer-to-peer learning within groups.

Teatro Metaphora – Associação de amigos das artes  
Madeira, Portugal

Teatro Metaphora – Associação de Amigos das Artes is a non-profit association founded in 2009 on Madeira Island, Portugal. Since then, the organisation has developed cultural, educational, and environmental activities aimed at benefiting community development. The organisation's activities are a vital component of Madeira's strategy to become a creative community, and the organisation itself is a meeting center for innovation and change.

# Study visit to *Madeira*



In Madeira we learned more about each other's organisations and, in particular, exchanged ideas on exploring creative participatory practices with our hosting organisation, Teatro Metaphora.

## *I.*

Teatro Metaphora –  
Associação de Amigos  
das Artes

Teatro Metaphora aims to develop the social and personal competencies of children, youth, and adults through non-formal education. The organisation seeks to contribute to an artistic and cultural program that enriches quality of life – not just through entertainment, but with deeper meaning. Teatro Metaphora's activities play a key role in the broader strategy to establish Madeira as a creative community.

The organisation promotes equal opportunities, inclusion, and active citizenship within its target groups. Both participants and volunteers engage in projects based on their interests and availability. Teatro Metaphora's main activities fall into three areas:

1. A diverse range of activities and workshops focused on sustainable development, natural heritage, recycling, climate change, and environmental best practices.
2. National and international projects supported by local, national, and European programs (Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, Creative Europe, and others).
3. Producing and participating in cultural activities across various artistic disciplines, contributing to the development and promotion of cultural heritage.

Learning on site about Teatro  
Metaphora



## *II.*

The Social Solidarity  
Association Crescer  
Sem Risco

Founded in 2009 in the municipalities of São Vicente and Ribeira Brava, the Crescer Sem Risco Association addresses the lack of social services available to children and youth. It focuses on supporting young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities, by providing them with the tools and resources needed

to succeed. The Association serves as a vibrant extracurricular hub, offering a safe and inclusive environment for study, play, and creative expression. Activities include crafts, pottery, cooking, and other skill-building sessions aimed at fostering both personal and social development.

In addition to its work with youth, Crescer Sem Risco also engages the broader community through workshops and cooking sessions for local adults, creating strong intergenerational bonds and reinforcing social cohesion. By offering such diverse opportunities, the Association plays a pivotal role in strengthening community ties and fostering a sense of belonging. Expanding its reach beyond the local level, Crescer Sem Risco provides students with opportunities to participate in European exchange programs, broadening their horizons and exposing them to new cultures and perspectives.

Founded in 1973, “Casa do Povo de Câmara de Lobos” has been dedicated to fostering cooperation and developing projects that serve the community’s common interests. Over the years, it has become a central pillar in promoting cultural, sporting, and educational activities within the region. One of its events is the Festa de S. João at Praia do Vigário, alongside numerous other community celebrations that strengthen local traditions and bring residents together. In the social sector, Casa do Povo offers technical and professional training courses aimed at enhancing employability and preserving traditional skills. The courses, covering various subjects, are accessible to participants for a symbolic fee of just 1.50 euros, with the institution providing both qualified instructors and the necessary facilities. This initiative not only promotes lifelong learning but also ensures that valuable local knowledge and traditions are passed down through generations, contributing to the cultural heritage of the community.

Vila Viva Community Center, in Alameda do Mercado, Estreito de Câmara de Lobos opened on February 3, 2020, this center is a clear demonstration of the municipality’s commitment to the needs of the municipality’s elderly population. Its main objective is to provide a wide range of services that aim to

### III.

Casa do Povo de Câmara de Lobos

### IV.

Centro Comunitário “VILA VIVA”, Estreito

Group sewing workshop at Casa do Povo



keep the elderly in their socio-family environment of Estreito, promoting active and healthy aging. The Day Center offers a diversified activity plan, which covers artistic activities, physical activities, preventive and recreational activities, and personal and social development activities. All of this is possible thanks to a dedicated and diverse team, who work tirelessly every day for the well-being of users. During the visit, we learned about the “Sintido” do Velho project, an initiative that aims to transmit regional traditions, uses, and customs to younger generations. In this context, the Day Center develops activities that value and preserve the cultural richness, identity, and knowledge of older generations, addressing customs and traditions from a perspective that is not only regional but also national and European. This work is fundamental to keeping cultural heritage alive and enriching the lives of everyone involved.

The “Olho-te” Association supports the local community through creative initiatives. It is an organization that goes beyond mere observation, actively understanding and addressing surrounding needs with actions that illuminate and transform lives. As a beacon of hope and a shining example, it demonstrates how a commitment to excellence and solidarity can drive significant change.

The Association plays a crucial role in the neighborhood by promoting artistic education through unconventional approaches, aiming to make art accessible to everyone, especially those facing social challenges. Its central mission is to use art and culture as powerful tools against social exclusion while encouraging active participation in building stronger citizenship. Additionally, the Association fosters understanding and collaboration between different generations, strengthening the social and cultural ties that unite society. It also strives to share its knowledge and best practices with similar organizations, contributing to a broader movement for arts education and social inclusion.



Associação “Olho-te”

Community art project of the Associação “Olho-te”

VZ.  
Sociohabitafunchal, E.M.

Centro Comunitário Palheiro Ferreiro Sociohabitafunchal is known for successful projects, which are realized by committed individuals. Sociohabitafunchal manages the housing stock of the municipality of Funchal, integrating social inclusion policies and supporting families in need while promoting local economic development. It is committed to conducting demographic studies to support the construction of new homes and analysing related costs. The organization is dedicated to rehousing disadvantaged families, improving housing management, promoting good neighborly relations, and preventing social risks through education. The company also focuses on inclusion through architectural solutions that facilitate mobility and the requalification of the housing stock, including the eradication of asbestos, improving energy efficiency, and enhancing public health. Its comprehensive strategy includes the rehabilitation of public heritage and urban revitalisation while maintaining cultural identity. Finally, Sociohabitafunchal promotes the training of public agents and citizens and ensures the availability of green spaces in housing areas.

From an education project by Sociohabitafunchal, E.M.



**Learning points**  
Carla Molteni/Project Coordinator,  
CGE Erfurt

Teatro Metaphora has made significant efforts to include people in their artistic projects. The main method involved engaging individuals through volunteer work in various artistic projects created by the organisation's leadership and members. The goal of each project or installation was to enhance the city's appearance, making it more beautiful and colorful compared to previous years. However, it was challenging for the organisation to keep volunteers engaged throughout the entire duration of each project, and even more so across different projects, as motivations and time availability, varied among participants.

Sociohabitafunchal is an impressive example of integrating vulnerable adults and families into society. The organisation focuses on addressing the urgent needs of the most vulnerable segments of the population, providing essential needs and basic education. Their approach was more aligned with welfare and social assistance, offering families and individuals housing, furniture, clothing, and food. In terms of education, they taught basic skills such as not littering, maintaining furniture, preparing for job interviews, and training for careers like hairdressing.

**While their work in improving living conditions was commendable, incorporating participatory methods could further enhance the fostering of critical thinking and empowerment among citizens.**

**Learning points**  
Nancy Apraez/Project member,  
CGE Erfurt

Considering that the main goal was to identify interesting practices using interdisciplinary approaches applied to integration and non-formal education, as well as cohesion work with marginalised communities in the urban context, the Madeira visit revealed: In Madeira, there are spaces that provide adults and marginalised communities with opportunities to integrate, strengthen community bonds, and develop skills. Most initiatives seem to be organised in a top-down format, where organisations offer certain programs, services, or events, and citizens adapt to them. While this approach can be effective for short-term engagement, long-term sustainability and higher engagement would likely be achieved if citizens were involved in the planning phase, and if programs were designed to account for their preferences and needs.

**Providing context: Reflections**  
Lilia Voronkova/Social anthropologist,  
curator, project coordinator, CISR Berlin

The social issues and needs of the residents of Madeira are largely placed on the shoulders of civil society, activists, and state and non-state non-profit organisations. They work to support people in various situations that arise due to the failures in the functioning of society and global influence.

Based on meetings with representatives of organisations, we identified a number of problematic issues, including:

- numerous lonely and elderly people who require care and attention;
- displacement and gentrification caused by the island's transport development and the influx of foreign property buyers and tourists — displaced people lose connection with their communities and need help adapting to new places;
- the island's isolation from the rest of Europe and the inaccessibility of some settlements limit people's access to information and diverse qualitative formal and informal education;
- low levels of civic engagement and participation in the life of cities and communities.

Organisations in Madeira have shown us examples of how to deal with such problems. The foundation of almost all projects and methods is engaging people in public life and giving them a «voice» in the public space. How can one be heard? How can one share their problems or achievements? How can one become part of the local community and take care of their city? How can one pass on family stories and traditions? How can one learn to communicate with the outside world beyond the island, and in which language?

**Unconventional and creative methods are proving to be the most attractive for engaging people: storytelling, placemaking, engagement through art, creative and participatory practices, crafts, shared meals, non-formal education, tours, friendly gatherings, and many other methods are being used by local actors from the civil sector to help solve the social issues that exist in Madeira.**



Street art work focused on ecological topics



## Learning points

Lilia Voronkova, CISR Berlin

Perhaps the most interesting example of engaging people in the public and cultural life of the city comes from the experience of the “Teatro Metaphora” projects.

Every year, they create a vibrant local festival, inviting local residents (both young people, and adults) to help prepare for the festival together. They use materials that would mostly end up as waste or trash: old washing machines, tin and plastic cans, bags, and more. Through free workshops, people learn new skills, get to know each other, and express themselves creatively while caring for the city.

Reusing materials becomes an eco-education that, in an accessible and visual way, encourages environmental care and waste reduction. The festival’s objects themselves, such as street-wall collages made from cans on street walls, reference both global art and local life. For example, one of the most

popular mosaics collage—portrays a local homeless man who, thanks to this artwork, has become a hero with his own story. Interestingly, the street with such artwork has become a tourist attraction and a source of pride for the locals.

The most impressive example for me of how one can work with elderly people is the Centro Comunitário “VILA VIVA” in Estreito. We attended an exhibition based on the biographical stories of the center’s members – senior people. This heartfelt exhibition, co-created with authors, showcases texts from interviews and memories of older people, along with photographs, handmade items, and household objects from previous generations. Schoolchildren are often brought to this museum – a wonderful opportunity to connect generations. One of the exhibit’s heroines and authors gave us a tour. This is an excellent example of how organisations can help people share their stories and pass them on to future generations.

The association “Associação Olho-te” in Funchal is a good example of how to work with the community and the city. Located in a not-so-prosperous neighbourhood, the organisation’s founders decided to invest their efforts in empowering the local community and changing the image of the area. Through informal education, art, theatre productions, and neighbourhood research, they encourage residents to tell the story of this place and their lives within it. They also managed to implement street art projects in the neighbourhood, involving both local residents and experienced artists. According to the organisers, this project helps reveal the identity of the

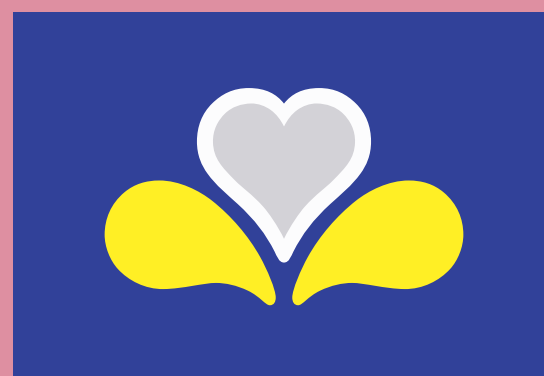
place, making it more attractive, and the residents feel a special pride in it. Moreover, many of the works contain local stories and memories. In addition, thanks to the association’s work, many residents have started communicating with each other and becoming more active in the public life of their neighbourhood and community.

Unfortunately, it’s important to add that organisations representing the civil sector and attempting to address social issues are quite vulnerable both financially and organisationally. They are typically funded through grants or receive small amounts of state funding. This money is usually insufficient to adequately pay the staff involved and to systematically implement projects, which reduces efficiency and leads to difficulties among the organisers. The organisations working on these issues seem to survive thanks to highly motivated, charismatic leaders who, in essence, are the heroes and activists of their cause. They implement innovative methods and inspire their colleagues and volunteers with their example, supporting local communities and their cities. It would be great if such projects were more sustainable, as their contribution to the social life of society is evident.

“We hired someone to teach how to create the tiles. We made an open call, and many young people, as well as adults, came to make at least one tile each. Some participants even made several. Once all the tiles were ready, we collaborated with the township to install them on the stairs. The participants were proud to be part of the project. José Rodrigues / Director of “Teatro Metaphora”



# Study Visit to *Brussels*



During five days, we learned about seven exciting projects, all of which exemplify practices of outreach to marginalised communities through storytelling, art, and other participatory methods.

## TRACK

TRACK is a Brussels-based social incubator focusing on urban regeneration through cultural programming and community engagement. This consortium of 8 socio-cultural partners, based in the old Train Museum in Brussels' North Station, aims to revitalise this space by transforming it into a vibrant cultural hub that encourages local participation and creativity. TRACK collaborates with artists, cultural organisers, and local communities to curate events and installations that reflect the diverse cultural landscape of Brussels. The goal is to make culture accessible to all and to use it as a tool for social and urban renewal. TRACK's collaboration with local artists and communities provides a dynamic platform for newcomers to share their experiences and cultural narratives, enriching the urban culture of Brussels.

## La Fournia

La Fournia, a cooking and socio-cultural project, serves a flatbread and vegetable dishes from around the world. But it is more than a nice place for a quick lunch: La Fournia shines a light on the talent of women with immigrant roots. Through empowerment, participation, co-creation, and the sharing of knowledge and skills, they build self-confidence and grow further. With their engagement, they break boundaries and let you embrace cultural diversity. Their goal is to empower women from other backgrounds. At TRACK they offer cooking workshops "Learn the secrets to making MSEMEN, the well known Moroccan flatbread. Together with the women of La Fournia, you will need, fold and roll out the dough into very thin layers. While the msemen are resting and rising, we make vegetarian fillings. Finally, we bake the msemen, and do a tasting".

## Duo for a Job

Duo for a Job is an intergenerational and intercultural mentorship program based in Brussels that connects young jobseekers with an immigrant background with older professionals who share their knowledge and networks. The program aims to support the professional integration of young immigrants, by providing them with guidance, support, and access to employment opportunities. These mentors offer guidance on job search strategies, CV development, and interview preparation over a six-month period, meeting a few hours each week. It highlights the value of diversity and promotes social cohesion through personal connections and shared experiences. This mentoring program not only helps young immigrants professionally but also culturally, by facilitating deep personal connections across different generations and cultures. This aids in the storytelling process, as it allows newcomers to share their experiences with a wider audience, enhancing their integration and understanding within the community.

**Vaartkapoen: Cultural Center** Vaartkapoen is a well-known cultural center and music venue in Brussels, renowned for its vibrant concerts, workshops, and community events. Located in the Molenbeek district, it plays a crucial role in the local cultural scene by offering a diverse range of activities that cater to a wide audience. Known for its support of emerging artists and cultural diversity, Vaartkapoen is a vibrant venue where newcomers can engage with the local culture and express their own stories through music and art. Its wide range of cultural activities makes it an ideal place for newcomers to connect with others and share their personal narratives.

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**KUUMBA** Kuumba is the Flemish-African House located in the Anderlecht, serving as a cultural and meeting center that focuses on promoting African culture and fostering social inclusion. Kuumba organizes a variety of cultural events, workshops, and exhibitions that celebrate the richness of African heritage and its influence in Belgium. It acts as a bridge between the African diaspora and other communities, aiming to increase mutual understanding and cooperation through cultural exchange and education. As a cultural hub for the African diaspora, Kuumba offers a direct connection to African culture and facilitates integration through cultural exchange. It is an exemplary model for how cultural centres can serve as bridges between newcomers and local communities, enabling newcomers to share their heritage and stories, thereby fostering mutual understanding and respect.

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**Grow-funding** Growfunding is a civic crowdfunding platform based in Brussels that supports local projects aimed at fostering community development and social cohesion. The platform allows citizens to financially support initiatives ranging from cultural events to social enterprises and urban innovations. Growfunding not only helps raise funds but also strengthens the sense of community by encouraging residents to participate actively in the improvement of their neighborhoods. This platform supports community-driven projects, including those that facilitate storytelling and cultural sharing. It empowers residents to contribute to projects that make their neighborhoods more inclusive and welcoming for newcomers, thereby playing a critical role in community development and social cohesion.

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**Cultureghem** Cultureghem is an innovative social project in Brussels that transforms public spaces into areas of social interaction and cultural activity. Located primarily in the area around the Abattoir market in Anderlecht, Cultureghem organizes activities such as collective kitchens, urban agriculture projects, and markets for reclaimed goods. Their initiatives are designed to foster community cohesion and sustainable living within a highly urbanized environment. By transforming public spaces into zones for social and cultural activity, Cultureghem promotes community cohesion. Its activities provide practical venues for newcomers to actively participate in the community, share their stories, and learn about sustainable urban living, making it a key player in social integration.

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**Recyclart** Recyclart is a creative space located in Brussels that focuses on the arts, crafts, and recycling. The organization runs various workshops and events in fields such as woodworking, metalworking, and photography, often using recycled or repurposed materials. Recyclart also hosts exhibitions, concerts, and other cultural events, serving as a platform for artists and creatives from diverse backgrounds to showcase their work and engage with the community. With its focus on arts and recycling, Recyclart is perfect for newcomers to express themselves creatively and share their cultural backgrounds. It provides both a physical space and the community support necessary for newcomers to tell their stories through various artistic mediums, contributing to the vibrant cultural mosaic of Brussels.

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**Museums of Belgium** MOB engages in social projects like workshops by young Palestinian refugees, demonstrating how newcomers can go beyond traditional roles to actively participate in community education and social inclusion. For newcomers, MOB offers a platform to connect their personal histories with the broader historical and artistic narratives of Belgium, enriching the cultural tapestry of the community. MOB's engagement with cultural education and social projects, especially its workshops with young Palestinian refugees, showcases how newcomers can play an active role in community integration. By allowing newcomers to relate their individual stories to broader historical contexts, MOB helps to weave these narratives into the fabric of Belgium's different groups and organizations.

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Foto from the results presentation of the project Wake Up! cities focusing on Place-making



Cooking and socio-cultural project, La Fournu, ready to receive guests



Presentation on the Duo for a Job mentorship program



Kite workshop led by young people from the initiative Museums of Belgium

## Providing Context: Reflections

Oleg Pachenkov  
Sociologist, project  
coordinator, CISR Berlin

Lilia Voronkova  
Social anthropologist, project  
coordinator, CISR Berlin

Brussels is a city with a vast diversity of people from various cultures, speaking different languages, and having different needs and interests. This diversity makes the city culturally rich and vibrant, but it also presents challenges such as discrimination, racism, and integration issues among newcomers.

In Brussels, numerous non-profit organisations, initiatives, and activists are deeply concerned with uniting people, providing space for communication and expression, increasing tolerance towards different cultures, and helping more vulnerable individuals find their voice and place in society.

During our visit to Brussels, we observed many innovative approaches and practices employed by local non-profit organisations to address these issues. It is fascinating to see how “soft power” – including creativity, dedication to the cause, smart solutions, and collaboration between organisations – can engage numerous people in their activities and assist vulnerable citizens in finding their voice and confidence for the future.

## Learning points

# TRACK is a great example of how collaboration between NGOs, the government, foundations, and businesses can create a vital cultural hub for both a neighbourhood and a city.

NGO representatives developed a clear plan for the space, both in terms of its content and financial structure, transforming part of the station into a community and cultural centre. TRACK opened in 2023 at Brussels North Station, in a section that was a railway museum.

The TRACK project itself is the result of extensive networks of initiators, such as Urban Foxes: none of the organisations and NGOs could have renovated and then rented the space on their own! The project was made possible through cooperation between NGOs, which received funding for renovations, and an architecture studio that occupies the top floor and covers about 90% of the rent. This partnership made the financial model workable. Additionally, the project benefited from the NGOs’ strong networks and their initiatives with Flemish government institutions. TRACK, which currently hosts 8 organisations, not only cuts costs by sharing space but also promotes networking, collaboration, and an exchange of audiences.

The context of the Nord railway district is well known in Brussels for its bad reputation, namely poverty, criminalisation and general

marginalisation are common issues here. TRACK aims to change this image by involving local residents in activities, offering them a space to share their stories and skills. At the same time, TRACK is located within an active railway station, where thousands of people pass by every day, providing a potential audience for the space.

The TRACK team is learning how to make the space welcoming for both passers-by and local residents. For example, one of the organisations, La Fourna, encourages co-creation, knowledge sharing, and mutual learning.



TRACK space at Brussels-North railway station

We really like the smart approach of the mentoring program in the DUO FOR A JOB (DfJ) project! The core idea is that experienced local Belgians over the age of 50 mentor and support young Belgians with migrant backgrounds (whether migrants themselves or Belgian-born) in finding employment. The project is not only about individual support, but also about helping people

integrate into Belgian society and use their talents to contribute to it, while also finding ways to achieve personal fulfillment. A key role is played by local Belgians who are willing to help young people. By providing coaching and sharing their knowledge and connections, mentors gain a renewed sense of social value, which they might feel has diminished after retirement.

# Sharing life stories, mutual psychological support, and building social connections are all additional benefits of the DfJ program.

DfJ has developed its own coaching methodology, which includes learning Flemish (Dutch), acquiring skills to overcome institutional and cultural barriers (such as adapting foreign educational documents to Belgian standards), and practical tips like writing CVs and cover letters. In the 10 years since its launch, DfJ has organised 7,600 mentoring “duos,” with 70% of mentees finding employment in Belgium, and 80% of mentors repeating the experience. That sounds like a great result, doesn’t it?

However, one of the main challenges DfJ faces, besides securing stable funding, is the complexity of the problems migrants face. Job searching is often just one of many interconnected issues, including finding housing, dealing with psychological trauma from their home countries, health problems, and language barriers. To tackle these, DfJ collaborates with a wide network of organisations, offering services ranging from language and IT courses to medical care.

There are various ways to struggle with discrimination in society. «Vaartkapoen» is a space and project that, through theatre, music, and community gatherings, provides a platform for vulnerable people to express themselves. Founded 35 years ago by women of Moroccan origin, the NGO initially focused on the empowerment of North African women through theatrical performances. The primary goal was to offer opportunities for self-realisation to women who had limited chances for this in their traditional family roles.

The project's objectives include advocating for women's personal freedom and their place in society, promoting decolonisation discourse and perspectives, and supporting feminist values. For instance, one recent initiative is to name streets, bridges, and other public spaces after non-European women.

Initially 30-40 years ago women visited theatre classes secretly. Since then, the project has grown and gained recognition, now featuring gender-diverse staff and performances. The underlying idea is that individuals who experience discrimination along one axis (such as gender) are often more empathetic to other forms of discrimination (such as ethnic, racial, or sexual).

**As a result, what began as a project for women from North Africa has expanded to embrace all vulnerable groups, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, with a firm stance against all forms of discrimination.**

Another excellent example of amplifying the voices of discriminated individuals is the African cultural and community centre KUUMBA, which means «creativity» in Swahili. This grassroots organisation focuses on providing a space for people of African descent to express themselves creatively.

In their introductory statement, they outline their goals as follows: "We help people be themselves and regain their confidence – especially those who feel out of place in their current society. We assist them in finding their place. It's a space where people from Africa can share their stories."

**Through cultural events such as meetings, educational programs, music performances, and creative youth gatherings, KUUMBA offers a range of opportunities for different groups and generations to engage with the centre's activities.**

For instance, traditional ethnic cultures hold significant value for older individuals, while the younger generation shows strong interest in thematic activities like creative writing. KUUMBA's events are highly valued by people with African roots, as they play a crucial role in addressing racism and xenophobia.

In conversation with representatives of KUUMBA



Exploring an exhibition at Vaartkapoen





### Valuable Learnings for Teatro Metaphora

José Rodrigues, director of the association

The project «Telling Your Story into the City» aligns with Teatro Metaphora's mission of using the arts for social inclusion. It focused on integrating marginalised groups, such as the long-term unemployed, disconnected youth, and forced migrants, through participatory art and urban engagement. Our aim was to foster collaboration between arts organisations and urban participation specialists, creating lasting partnerships for knowledge exchange. The project reinforced our belief in art's power to break barriers and foster dialogue. We gained valuable insights into engaging marginalised groups through storytelling and urban participation. Key achievements included the creation of a casebook on innovative practices and the formation of lasting partnerships that will influence both our work and the broader adult education sector. Looking ahead, we will incorporate these methodologies into our programs, strengthening the impact of our work in the intersection of arts, education, and urban participation across Europe.

# Placemaking as a participatory approach to *creative cooperation with local communities and newcomers*

An Interview with  
Bram Dewolfs (Co-Founder and Director, Urban Foxes/Brussels)  
by Anastasia Puschkarewa (Project Coordinator/CISR Berlin)

Placemaking as an urban practice can also serve as a form of storytelling for initiatives and new *cityzens*. Urban Foxes (UF), our host organization in Brussels, has been successfully active in the field of placemaking for many years. During our study visit, we engaged in some discussions and informal conversations with UF about effective outreach and participatory approaches. In order to gain further insights into the field of placemaking and creative cooperation with young adults and communities, we decided to make an interview with Bram Dewolfs, co-founder and director at Urban Foxes.

**Bram, how can we effectively engage young adults as new citizens in placemaking initiatives, encouraging them to share their stories, needs and ideas in public spaces?**

We can engage young newcomers by giving them a physical and metaphorical space to be, join activities and let them be a part of the process and possibly the organisation. One could design creative, engaging and low-threshold non-formal activities where fun does not mean excluding content and contribution. At Urban Foxes we believe that activities need to be fun and attractive in order to foster engagement, and that we should focus on what unites us instead of what separates us.

**Could you share any valuable experiences or tools from your work? For instance, you mentioned during our Study Visit a participatory youth budgeting – can you elaborate on that?**

In the last 10 years we have experimented with a wide range of ideas and tools in order to empower and engage young people. In order to create real participation and ownership, it is highly beneficial to enhance the sense of agency of the participants. This could mean stimulating youth ideas to become reality, involving youth in decision-making processes and leadership, as well as creating stimulating instruments, such as participatory youth budgeting, that can instigate young eco-social entrepreneurship and thereby facilitate the realisation of the ideas youth has into improving their city. Thereby also creating a project-based learning process in which the participants will almost certainly be extremely motivated as he/she/x is the leader of the process.

**We also got some insights here into the situation of diverse linguistic communities. How are they currently engaging with local and regional stakeholders, and what opportunities exist for enhancing this cooperation?**

The linguistic aspect is definitely one that should not be undervalued when working with local communities. In Brussels, it's estimated that over 100 languages are spoken. While French and Dutch are the official languages and English is commonly used, many other languages from around the world are spoken by various immigrant and expatriate communities. This should be considered when embarking on funded projects in a multilingual context, such as Brussels, where regions and funding mechanisms are linguistically divided. This complexity is particularly challenging, especially knowing the significant amount of work the organising entity must do in bilingual communication when applying for funding in the Brussels region. There are various ways to stimulate cross-regional partnerships, but this would also require that the different member regions establish a funding mechanism to support this collaboration. Fortunately, when projects reach the implementation stage, especially in public spaces, it's encouraging to see that these differences fade away, as we all strive to connect.



Luckily, when projects actually reach the level of implementation, especially when using the public space, it is nice to see that these differences disappear as we all want to make an effort to connect. Brussels, the capital of Belgium and the European Union, is a highly diverse city with a significant number of nationalities and languages. Brussels is home to over 180 nationalities. In Brussels, due to its cosmopolitan nature and the presence of a large international community, it's estimated that over 100 languages are spoken. While French and Dutch are the official languages and English is commonly used, many other languages from around the world are spoken by various immigrant and expatriate communities. We can say that French and English are used the most as lingua franca in public spaces.

**What strengths and gaps, based on your experiences, exist in the placemaking field, particularly in Brussels, Belgium, or Europe? Are there areas — such as structures, resources, or policies — that could benefit from further development? Perhaps through initiatives like a Bottom-up Placemaking Hub or other ideas we've discussed?**

In the placemaking field, particularly in Brussels, Belgium, and across Europe, there are several strengths and gaps that exist (see below) . These areas offer both opportunities for growth and challenges that need to be addressed. While the placemaking field in Brussels, Belgium, and across Europe is rich with creativity, grassroots engagement, and youth involvement, there are still significant gaps that need to be addressed. Sustained funding,

stronger policy support, enhanced cross-sector collaboration, and more opportunities for capacity building are essential for the long-term success of placemaking initiatives.

Initiatives like a Bottom-up Placemaking Hub could play a pivotal role in addressing these gaps, providing a platform for collaboration, advocacy, and resource sharing that could benefit placemaking efforts across Europe. By building on existing strengths and addressing current challenges, the placemaking field can continue to grow and have a lasting impact on urban development.

**Thank you for a detailed analysis! Apart from these factors, which competencies are important for a successful “placemaker”?**

To be an effective placemaker, certain competencies and qualities are essential.

First and foremost, **humility** is crucial. Successful placemakers understand that community members—especially locals and youth—are the true experts of their environment. Approaching them as equal partners and site-experts, and valuing their knowledge and perspectives, is key to creating meaningful and inclusive spaces.

**Creativity** is another vital quality. Designing fun and engaging activities that encourage participation requires innovative thinking. Placemakers must find creative ways to involve people in the co-creation process, making it enjoyable and accessible for everyone.

Being **resourceful** is equally important. Placemakers need

to be adept at identifying and securing financial resources, crafting compelling project ideas that can attract funding and support from various sources. This resourcefulness is essential for bringing ideas to life.

**Flexibility and resilience** are also necessary in the ever-changing world of co-creation. Placemakers must be able to adapt to shifting circumstances and be open to modifying their original plans. Often, these changes lead to even better outcomes. Resilience is critical when facing challenges or setbacks, helping placemakers stay on course. A sense of **humor** and the ability to **build trust** are powerful tools in creating a safe and welcoming space for youth and community members. Humor can break down barriers and make people feel comfortable, while trust-building fosters strong, positive relationships within the community.

Effective **communication and inclusion** are key when engaging youth. Placemakers must communicate with young people on their terms, listening to their ideas, reminding them of their roles, and ensuring they are included in every step of the process—from planning to execution.

**Empowering youth** by giving them real control over projects is essential. Whether it's managing the budget, filming, organizing events, or handling social media, treating young people as true partners fosters their engagement and growth.

Finally, **networking and collaboration** are fundamental.

A good placemaker is well-connected, with a strong network that includes key players, experts, and policymakers. These connections are vital for mobilizing support and resources, ensuring the success of placemaking initiatives. By embodying these competencies, placemakers can effectively engage communities, especially youth, in transforming public spaces. This approach not only enhances the quality of the spaces created, but also fosters a deep sense of ownership and pride within the community.

Learning about the Cultureghem placemaking project with Bram Dewolfs



## Strengths in the Placemaking Field

### 1. GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

**Strong Local Networks:** There is a vibrant culture of grassroots placemaking initiatives, particularly in cities like Brussels, where local communities actively engage in shaping their urban environment. (Urban Foxes Brussels wants to contribute to this strength by working closely with youth and other community members to co-create public spaces)

**Inclusive Approaches:** Many placemaking efforts emphasize inclusivity, ensuring that diverse voices, including those of young people and marginalized communities, are heard and represented in urban development.

### 2. CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES:

**Co-creation Tools:** The use of creative co-creation tools, such as participatory design workshops, mapping, and hands-on building, has allowed for more dynamic and responsive placemaking. These tools help translate community ideas into tangible outcomes.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** In multicultural cities like Brussels, placemaking efforts often prioritize cultural sensitivity, ensuring that public spaces reflect the diversity of the population.

### 3. SUPPORT FROM EUROPEAN PROGRAMS:

**Funding Opportunities:** European Union programs like Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Projects provide crucial funding and resources to support youth-led and community-driven placemaking initiatives. These programs have helped bridge the gap between ideas and implementation for many grassroots projects.

**Cross-border Collaboration:** International mobility and exchange programs foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing across Europe, enriching local placemaking efforts with new perspectives and practices.

### 4. YOUTH EMPOWERMENT:

**Youth Involvement:** Increasingly, young people are being given a central role in placemaking efforts. By involving them in decision-making and leadership roles, projects benefit from fresh ideas and ensure that public spaces meet the needs of future generations.

## Gaps in the Placemaking Field

### 1. SUSTAINED FUNDING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT:

**Inconsistent Funding:** While there are opportunities for project-based funding, there is a lack of sustained financial support for long-term placemaking initiatives. This makes it difficult for organizations to plan for the future and maintain momentum beyond individual projects.

**Resource Allocation:** Limited financial resources often mean that placemaking efforts are constrained by budget, which can limit the scale and impact of projects. There is a need for more consistent and substantial funding streams dedicated to placemaking.

### 2. POLICY SUPPORT AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION:

**Lack of Formal Recognition:** While grassroots placemaking is thriving, there is often a lack of formal recognition and support from government policies. Placemaking is still seen as a supplementary activity rather than a core component of urban development strategies.

**Policy Gaps:** Policies that actively encourage and facilitate bottom-up placemaking are often missing at the local, regional, and European levels. This limits the potential for community-driven initiatives to influence larger-scale urban planning processes.

### 3. CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION:

**Limited Collaboration:** While there are strong local networks, there is often a lack of collaboration between different sectors, such as government, private sector, and civil society. This can result in siloed efforts, where placemaking projects do not fully benefit from the expertise and resources available across sectors.

**Need for Multi-level Partnerships:** Strengthening partnerships between local communities, regional authorities, and European institutions could enhance the impact and scalability of placemaking initiatives.

### 4. CAPACITY BUILDING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT:

**Limited Training Opportunities:** While there is a growing interest in placemaking, there are still relatively few opportunities for training and capacity building in this field. Professionals and community members alike would benefit from more structured learning opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge in placemaking.

**Youth Empowerment Beyond Involvement:** While youth involvement is growing, there is a need for more structured pathways that turn participation into long-term empowerment. This includes providing training, mentorship, and professional development opportunities for young people involved in placemaking.



Placemaking projects by Urban Foxes

Repurposed cans for street plants:  
an art and ecological project by  
Teatro Metaphora



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