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# An inclusive urban project for healthy cities

**Gonçalo Canto Moniz**

University of Coimbra, Centre for Social Studies,  
Department of Architecture

**Luís Miguel Correia**

University of Coimbra, Centre for 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Interdisciplinary Studies, Department of  
Architecture

## Abstract

**With the advent and rapid dissemination of the COVID 19 corona virus the world has found itself living in a new reality, one which has, to a great extent, revealed a different face of globalization, in which we are all connected by a network that goes far beyond that of the virtual world. Dealing with the current pandemic therefore requires a strategy that is universal and embraced by and for all, one that asserts the right to a more sustainable planet, containing territories that are more inclusive, co-creative and healthy. The city was, is, and always will be, for a variety of reasons, the place where these common purposes can be investigated and disentangled. Recent history shows, with rare exceptions, that urban territories have always found it difficult to conciliate the intransigent economic and financial needs imposed by the wider world with the policies of social and cultural cohesion desired by local populations, especially by those who live in conditions of greater vulnerability. The aspiration is towards a collective lifestyle which respects the management of natural resources. Our survival and that of the planet depends on this. Faced with this challenge it is up to us as inhabitants of this planet to participate in the change we know to be inevitable. URBiNAT – Urban Innovative and Inclusive Nature – is a European project promoting inclusive urban regeneration in seven European cities, aiming to prove that the practice of a process of co-creation, one that involves politicians, technicians and citizens, can create a pathway towards a space in which all are valued: a space that is both public and healthy.**

**Américo Mateus**

GUUDA, ISHIP – Research, Innovation &  
Entrepreneurship unit ISMAT

**José António Bandeirinha**

University of Coimbra, Centre for Social Studies,  
Department of Architecture

## Healthy Cities

Health has always been more associated with the countryside than with the city. In fact, it is to the countryside, the mountains, and the seaside that city dwellers look to find an environment that will have a positive impact on their well-being and which also brings health benefits.

Up until the nineteenth century, cities were not seen as centres of healthy living because they did not have to be. Their purpose was to bring people together; to serve the needs of the ruling classes, to facilitate trade, and to allow people to simply work or live. From the streets where artisans clustered to the “downtown” shopping or industrial areas, cities were places where the built environment was valued over and above public spaces.

In the nineteenth century, the influence of the hygiene movement began to be felt in the form of open streets and avenues, and parks created to deal with the effects of industrialisation. It was only in the twentieth century, however, that a modern discourse of the “Garden City” and the “Athens Charter” emerged to bring green spaces into the city, especially in residential areas and by means of urban parks. Unfortunately, these green areas were decorative rather than functional elements, and many were later abandoned.

More recently, the renovation of city centres saw the implementation of urban strategies based on the public space as a place for social interaction. Barcelona was one of the first cities to develop this approach, with its focus on hosting big events related to sports and culture. These public spaces were used for the expansion of tourism in the cities, rather than improving the well-being of citizens. In fact, citizens had to leave to the periphery due to the high cost of life

in the city centre. This urban policy was designed for the citizens (tourists) and not with the (local) citizens.

In this sense, it is urgently necessary to put citizens who are residents at the heart of the transformation of cities, because they are the ones who will create, use and maintain them. The process of co-creating urban spaces is in itself a promotor of well-being, as it supports people who contribute with their ideas, knowledge and experience to the construction of a better future. It ensures that the construction of new urban areas or urban regeneration will not only serve the interests of the state, municipalities or large companies, but will also be at the service of people, of their needs and their wishes.

### **The URBiNAT Project**

Launched by the European Community in 2014, the H2020 program funded both research and action, that made possible the creation of innovative ideas and businesses, which cross-generate with culture, the social economy and the environment. The URBiNAT<sup>1</sup> European project coordinated by the Centre for Social Studies fits exactly into this context of action: from the identification of an urban problem, another model of action is enabled, integrating, in an innovative and inclusive way, urban issues with nature-based solutions. The 28 partners, from Europe, Iran and China, identified urban housing areas on the outskirts of cities as one of the most challenging problems for the urban environment, having been permanently abandoned by the planning process, with poor housing quality, a lack of public space and badly integrated into the urban and social structure.

This is both a European and a worldwide problem, which stems from a process of extended urban growth during which the most deprived members of society were housed in the new suburbs, without access to the city. Although the problem was made visible by the social protest movement of 1968, solutions have either not been found or have not been properly implemented. In fact, the redemptive power of large-scale urbanization projects is no longer considered to be effective, and instead we are now focusing on more timely, mid-range strategies that have the capacity to actively involve people in the planning process.

The URBiNAT project will intervene on the outskirts of seven European cities – Porto, Nantes, Sofia, Hoje Taastrup (Copenhagen), Brussels, Siena and Nova Gorica – in areas of urban expansion planned between 1940-1960 and built over the following decades in the form of housing estates, predominantly for the most disadvantaged social classes. The intention was to guarantee a set of common characteristics between the neighbourhoods of these cities. On the one hand, they had in common a strong potential: the architectural quality of the housing estates, the quality of the urban environment due to the rural matrix of the land, the strong sense of community, the active presence of groups and the existence of cultural, social and sporting associations. On the other hand, less favourable aspects were also identified: limited access to the urban centre, limited access to schools, health and cultural complexes, a multicultural and elderly population, high unemployment amongst those of working age, low levels of schooling, and high rate of financial insecurity.

### *Healthy Corridor*

The aim of this project is to investigate and implement the concept of Healthy Corridors: corridors because they connect urban areas to each other by means of pedestrian and cycle paths, as well as through social networks; healthy because this infrastructure contributes to the well-being and health of the citizens who roam through and inhabit it, as an extension of their living and working spaces.

The healthy corridor is a public space created by each community that integrates spaces and places to qualify the natural, urban and human environment so that citizens can carry out leisure, cultural, social or economic activities, sharing life in community in an inclusive way. In fact, it does not solve all the challenges faced by the city, but acts as a motor to the generation of other methods for the development of an inclusive and innovative process of urban regeneration.

### *Inclusive Urban Project*

Analysis of the history of architecture, landscape and urbanism shows us the fundamental role of these disciplines in the organisation of space and in the necessary and essential relationship that must be established with life and mankind.<sup>2</sup> The urban project, in some situations referred to as urban plan, has been defined in contrast to the abstraction of

modern zoning and integral visions, assuming an intermediate and intermediary position. It stands in between: it is not a plan or a project of conventional architecture; it is a figure circumscribing a multiplicity of actors and issues, and which, despite its extended scale, finds an answer in design rather than simply in regulations and other abstract forms of administration and land management. Organisation of the city requires an inclusive plan of every area and every centre.

According to Manuel Solà-Morales,<sup>3</sup> the urban project must have: 1. Territorial effects beyond its area of intervention; 2. A complex and interdependent character of its content beyond mono-functionality, combining uses, users, temporal rhythms and visual guidelines; 3. An intermediate scale, likely to be executed within a maximum period of a few years; 4. The purpose of separating the architecture of the city from the architecture of the buildings; 5. An important public element in the investment and collective uses within the programme.

Cities are different moment by moment because the people and the relationships they encompass change every day, as people place their expectations within the cities, consequently (re)building physical structures better suited to their needs. The city and its experiences, even those in the virtual space, are the expression of our existence and of what has survived from other eras, including memories. Thinking about an urban project or urban regeneration immediately means understanding this juxtaposition of the past and the present.

Focused as it is on people, the urban project must offer the citizens of those areas of the city which are subject to intervention the opportunity for active participation, whether in drawing up the programme, collaborative establishment of working strategies, or the subsequent discussion of proposals. It is believed that this participatory input – the co-creation process – complements the 5 points previously mentioned, thereby providing the urban project with an intelligible human dimension which is closer to the actual social and cultural issues experienced by those populations. At a time when the survival of the planet and our own daily existence find themselves at risk, it also becomes imperative to endow these land-use planning resources with an environmental conscience, by adopting low-impact solutions, such as nature-based solutions

that promote the improvement of pre-existing environmental and social conditions.

It is the responsibility of every architect, urban planner and actors involved in urban projects or regeneration initiatives, particularly those endowed with decision-making powers, to defend these principles, as well as accepting the differences that characterise each place, represented by the people who live or simply go there. Taking care of the designed space and the environment automatically means taking care of people, and this is the challenge we face in the decades ahead. Responsible for the layout of the city, architects, urban planners, and politicians must look at their present situation and the demands being made of them, and use these as a base on which to create the leitmotiv of their practice.

### **Co-creation**

Given the widespread stigma suffered by the communities in these neighbourhoods, the intention is to reverse the decision-making and design process to enable the physical regeneration of the neighbourhoods and the city, contributing to the consolidation of social cohesion. That is, to develop mechanisms that ensure inclusive urban regeneration “by and with the people”, with effective participation that offers citizens control and cooperation, and abandoning the “for the people” as a pseudo-participatory process based on Assistencialism and Domestication.<sup>4</sup> A new understanding of community participation is that “focus on broader community-driven processes in the construction of the public realm provides a critical perspective with which to transcend the binary relation between professionals and users and the limited model of participatory design”.<sup>5</sup> This process, now called co-creation, aims to involve and empower citizens and local actors in its several different stages of dialogue, interaction and decision making.

The issue is not one of excluding the usual political and technical decision makers from the urban planning and design of the cities, but of including other actors who can bring objective contributions to these processes, thereby guaranteeing the effective success of the transformation process. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till in their book *Architecture and Participation* underline that “participation is not just a catalyst for the transformation of the role (and eventual lives) of

users, but also for the transformation of architectural practice".<sup>6</sup> In fact, Citizens, with their empirical knowledge, culture and experience, have the skills to bring social innovation to the design process, adding human capital, human-based solutions, and new domains of collective creativity. This collaboration can be developed in three stages: involvement – for diagnostics, preparation, learning culture and motivation; integration – supporting the process around validation, systematization, and purpose; interaction – to create space for users' dialogues, activation and connectivity.<sup>7</sup>

The process of the co-creation of urban spaces is itself a promoter of well-being, in the sense that it empowers the people who contribute with their ideas, their knowledge and their experiences for the construction of a better future. It also guarantees that the construction of new urban areas or urban regeneration will not only serve the interests of the state, municipalities or large companies but will also be at the service of people, their needs, expectations, and desires.

The aim of the project is then to contribute to the collective construction of alternative design methods and concepts, which integrate citizens' knowledge and experience. This particularly applies to the process of urban regeneration of the communities who inhabit the areas, enhancing their right to the city in terms of their experience, and also in its reconstruction through humanistic, democratic and environmental principles. In this sense, the space that is the Healthy Corridor is a democratic space that is open to experimentation and to dialogue between the community, urban planners and decision makers.

#### *The URBiNAT Co-creation process*

URBiNAT considers participation to be both a means and an end. We have therefore designed a model based on a four-stage approach: local diagnosis (co-diagnostic), characterizing the area of intervention in territorial, social and economic terms; the project (co-design), involving citizens in the process of building ideas and strategies, as well as in the design of solutions; construction (co-implementation), inviting citizens to participate in the production of solutions, through volunteer work or exchange of working hours; evaluation (co-

monitoring), challenging citizens to convey the benefits and harms of the implemented solutions.

The URBiNAT co-creation process model aims to support the creation of Communities of Practice or Communities of Interest while the project develops in the time period that is financed by the European Union. In this way, we leave the knowledge, tools, the social and solidarity economy businesses, the training and the self-governance model for active participation, to the citizens and the main stakeholders of these neighbourhoods, ensuring the continuity of co-creation in favour of the community after the completion of the URBiNAT project.

Based on these aims, the URBiNAT co-creation process / model has been designed in accordance with a logical sequence and flow of information: a) Engagement and Involvement of the Target Groups (citizens and city stakeholders); b) Running Local Diagnosis in two stages: (1) Secondary data collection and (2) Primary data collection; c) Gathering the Problems, Ideas and Solutions of Citizens and Stakeholders; d) Developing the Urban Plan through a participatory decision-making approach; e) Implementing the Healthy Corridor with citizens and other stakeholders; f) Defining and activating social and solidarity economy businesses; g) Creating an observatory for monitoring of the Healthy corridor, involving citizens and stakeholders.

An important component of our co-creation model is the transition point between each of the four main stages: the results and insights from local diagnosis are the starting point of the Co-design stage; the Healthy Corridor plan and participatory governance model is the starting point of the Co-implementation stage; the maintenance and sustainability model is the starting point of the Co-monitoring stage.

The URBiNAT co-creation model and process is in itself the result of an intense internal co-creation process. We combined the experience and expertise of the different teams and experts in the consortium: design for innovation experts (group dynamics techniques, playfulness and system-thinking gaming tools); social science experts (ethnographic techniques and tools for the empowerment of citizens); architects and urban planners (project development techniques

and modelling tools); landscape architects and city technicians (territorial techniques and timing frameworks); decision makers and politicians (decision making milestones and go/no-go project gates).

The following figures (1-4) presents the overall URBiNAT co-creation model and process. We also detailed the Co-design stage: It starts with understanding and reflecting on the Local Diagnostic findings and insights and framing the challenges, needs and opportunities (centered on the perceptions of citizens and stakeholders); self-projection of citizens towards the future Healthy Corridor (usage, roles and leadership); Future Scenario building; design of citizens' NBS proposals; preliminary plan development and validation; experimentation and prototyping of the final solution; development of the Governance Model and Co-implementation planning.

This methodology is being adapted by each city in accordance with its local participatory culture, urban design practice and legal framework, via the local partners who constitute a local Task Force between the municipality and the academic partners.

## Conclusion

Today, cities are focused on achieving environmentally sustainable goals relating to the quality of air, water, and soil as well as to the level of biodiversity. These policies will inevitably lead to cities becoming healthier environments.

With this project, we propose to look at the urban space using an even wider perspective; we need to be able to understand space itself, in its general sense, as a resource. Not as just another type of resource but as one of the most important. We therefore have to relearn how to save it and how to recycle it, in order to condense those types of space that are more commonly used by citizens – urban public spaces, squares, streets, avenues, parks and gardens – to allow free natural spaces around the cities to expand to the maximum. Humanity is growing more and more, and we keep on using space as if it was an endless resource.

We therefore propose to extend these strategies to include social goals, involving co-creation by citizens of their public space through inclusive urban planning.

We must also go on clarifying and amplifying the status of urban space as space that has common ownership; to have a strategy for the implementation of these healthy purposes we need to maintain the public character of urban space, without which the co-creation process would not survive.

In this sense, we are not only improving the physical health of the citizens, but also their social and mental health by promoting a sense of belonging to the community and the power to transform their future.

## Endnotes

1. This research is developed in the context of URBiNAT project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 776783. The URBiNAT project is a consortium of 28 partners coordinated by the Centre for Social Sciences, between 2018 and 2023. More information at [www.urbinat.eu](http://www.urbinat.eu). This text is based on the *URBiNAT Handbook on the theoretical and methodological foundations of the project*, coordinated by Gonçalo Canto Moniz, Isabel Ferreira, Beatriz Caitana Silva, Nathalie Nunes, with chapters from 50 URBiNAT researchers (Gonçalo Canto Moniz et al., *URBiNAT Handbook on the theoretical and methodological foundations of the project, Deliverable, URBiNAT Deliverables* (Coimbra: Centre for Social Studies, 2018, November)).
2. Fernando Távora, "Arquitetura e Urbanismo. A lição das constantes," *Lusíada*, no 2 (1952): 151–155.
3. Manuel Solà-Morales, *Progettare città / Designing cities* (Milano: Electa, 1999).
4. Henry Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 8.
5. Jeffrey Hou & Michael Rios, "Community-Driven Place Making: The Social Practice of Participatory Design in the Making of Union Point Park," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 57, no 1 (2003): 19.
6. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, *Architecture and Participation* (Routledge, 2013).
7. Susana Manuela Leonor, Américo da Conceição Mateus, and Sofia Martins, "Design Metasystem Research Project: From Linear to Non-Linear Processes Applied in the Improvement of Creation and Development of Start-Ups," *E-Revista LOGO* 6, no 3 (2017, December): 1–25.



Figure 1. Mapping together what citizens do, like, and want to change. Porto, kick-off event, October 2019. Photo: Barradas.



Figure 2. Understanding the challenges of the regeneration of public space by means of photovoice, in which pictures represent children's views and discourse. Falcão School, Porto, 2019. Photo: Maças de Carvalho.



Figure 3. Designing together the healthy corridor for Old Bazar in Khorramabad, Iran. Workshop with local stakeholders, October 2017. Photo: Canto Moniz.

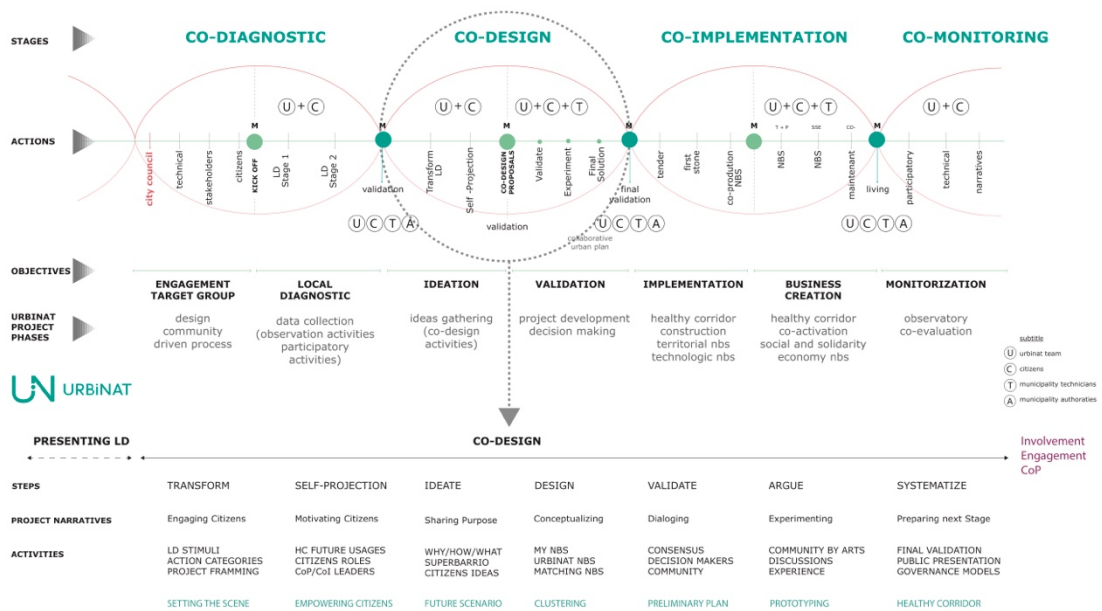


Figure 4. Chart presenting the stages, actions, objectives and phases of the URBiNAT co-creation process. GUDA and CES.