



Urban Pathways

factsheet

Liveable Neighbourhood –
activities to regain public space
and foster social cohesion



**Wuppertal
Institut**

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

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The Urban Pathways project helps delivering on the Paris Agreement and the NDCs in the context of the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. It has established a facility in close cooperation with other organisations and networks active in this area to support national and local governments to develop action plans and concrete implementation measures to boost low-carbon urban development. This builds on UN-Habitat's role as "a focal point on sustainable urbanisation and human settlements including in the implementation and follow-up and review of the New Urban Agenda". The project develops national action plans and local implementation concepts in key emerging economies with a high mitigation potential. The local implementation concepts are being developed into bankable projects, focusing on the access to urban basic services to create a direct link between climate change mitigation and sustainable development goals.

The project follows a structured approach to boost Low Carbon Plans for urban mobility, energy and waste management services that deliver on the Paris Agreement and the New Urban Agenda. The project works on concrete steps towards a maximum impact with regards to the contribution of urban basic services (mobility, energy and waste management) in cities to global climate change mitigation efforts and sustainable and inclusive urban development. This project makes an active contribution to achieve global climate change targets to a 1.5°C stabilisation pathway by unlocking the global emission reduction potential of urban energy, transport and resource sectors. The project will contribute to a direct emission reduction in the pilot and outreach countries, which will trigger a longer term emission reduction with the aim to replicate this regionally and globally to make a substantial contribution to the overall emission reduction potential.

This project implements integrated urban services solutions as proposed in the New Urban Agenda providing access to jobs and public services in urban areas, contributing to equality and social coherence and deliver on the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. This is the first dedicated implementation action oriented project, led by UN-Habitat to deliver on inclusive, low-carbon urban services. Securing sustainability and multiplier effect, the project aims to leverage domestic and international funding for the implementation projects that will follow from this initiative.

Urban Pathways

Project concept

Project aims

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In brief

A liveable neighbourhood is a neighbourhood in which streets and public spaces invite to stay, sit, roam and play, e.g. on park-like elements or pedestrianized zones, and where walking and cycling is encouraged. Above all, it is a neighbourhood where neighbours know each other, kids can play on the streets and where everyone feels safe and welcomed. Over the past decades, however, infrastructure was built in a car-centric manner, favouring high volumes of motor vehicles and dedicating only very little space to people. Traffic-choked roads have become reality in many cities, road safety is a concern and the climate is deteriorating. Alongside negative health effects such as air and noise pollution, this decreases significantly the liveability of cities. It is now increasingly being recognized that attractive, well-functioning public spaces help revitalizing communities, increase safety, and jumpstart economic development. Against this background cities and citizen-led initiatives started recently to take action in an attempt to reclaim public spaces. These activities are also called placemaking, and are emphasized by the New Urban Agenda. Placemaking is defined as a collaborative process of shaping the public realm in order to maximize shared value (UN Habitat 2015).

While placemaking can also comprise measures that involve capital investments to permanently reshape the urban environment (see Factsheet liveable neighbourhood 2, Graaf & Holzwarth 2019), an important – and many times first step – is to start with activities that help getting people involved in reimagining a possible transformation of their city. This means initiating activities (also called: tactical urbanism, guerrilla urbanism) that bring people together and make them experience positive change and set free the creative energy of the community i.e. including temporarily blocking a street for cycling and other activities or painting a grey façade on an underused public space while having a cultural event on this plaza. These placemaking interventions mean temporarily experimenting with public space, which lowers risks and costs when resources are limited, because they allow for piloting an idea in real time and – if necessary – adjusting it later (Lydon & Garcia 2015). If people like the experiment / activity it may well lead to permanent change (i.e. turning a temporary bicycle lane into an actual cycle track) (see also NACTO).



Examples/ Measures

There is a variety of different activities, that if commonly planned and implemented, help to regain public space in order to make a neighbourhood more liveable (the list below is not a comprehensive one but rather exemplary).

- **Blocking the passage for car traffic by setting up flowerpots or barrier tape** and encouraging activities of all kinds on the closed street or plaza, like cycling, walking, outdoor cafes or cultural events (e.g. "Ciclovía", see below)
- **Moving the curb and reduce the number of car lanes/ on-street parking through colourful paint, chairs and/or other objects** in order to decrease the speed of cars, improve safety and comfort of cyclists and pedestrians and / or use the reclaimed public space for seating options and as place to play and roam.
- **Setting up shared street pilots**, where pedestrians, cyclists and cars are all sharing the same space on the street, thus leading to a reduction of car speed and to mutual consideration. Often this goes along with painting the street, setting up tables and chairs, etc. (e.g. "Calle Compartida" en Chile or Panama)
- **Using low cost objects to upgrade** a small plaza or parking space: this can be done for example by setting up timbered chairs (e.g. "Chair Bombing Movement") or other informal seating solutions, planting flowers or putting flowerpots or painting a grey façade of a house or wall with an appealing design.

The Open Street Initiative is one example where closing of streets for car traffic has led to regularly occurring events (e.g. International Car Free Day on 22nd September or the so called "Ciclovías" in many major cities of Latin America that take place every Sunday), encouraging physical exercise, environmental campaigns and social interaction. Another example is "el Gran Malón" in Chile, where closing the streets for car-traffic is used once a year for community gathering, when streets turn into one big dining room (Ciudad Emergente, n.d.)

Results

Most placemaking activities, that involve banning of cars and providing space for active mobility, will result in immediate effects, such as less noise and air pollution, positive health effects (e.g. if cycling and walking is encouraged), enhanced safety for pedestrians and cyclists as well as social interaction and integration (e.g. if more space to play, meet, sit is provided). There is evidence that illustrate these benefits. For instance, in Paris in 2015, the levels of nitrogen dioxide dropped by up to 40% during a car-free day (e.g. in Paris in 2015, PPMC 2015). Another example from Ruiru, Kenya, illustrates that during the placemaking week in 2016, the average PM2.5 level was nearly halved to 75.70 µg/m3 as compared to average readings of over 140 µg/m3 in the following weeks (UN-Habitat, 2015).

A study calculating the cost-benefit ratio of four different Ciclovía events (closing of major streets for cyclists) concludes that for every dollar spent, between 1,23 to 4,26 dollars in direct medical costs were saved by increasing overall fitness rates (Montes et al 2012). It also says that the total benefit could be underestimated, as recreational, social capital development and improvements in the population's quality of life were not taken into account (ibid).

Studies have also shown that while shop owners initially oppose the closing of streets, because they fear less customers, pedestrianization and bicycle paths actually lead to economic opportunities (NCY DOT 2013). In the city centre of Madrid, where cars were banned in 2018, the profit went up by 9,5 percent (PayStats 2019) (see Factsheet liveable neighbourhood 2, Graaf & Holzwarth 2019).

It can be argued, however, that the most important result of placemaking activities is to raise awareness on how public space can be used differently, and the sense of self-efficacy that arises from having transformed a public space. In the long run, these temporary events help to create an environment in which the benefits can be understood and exploited, because the placemaking activity has either become permanent or has helped to reframe existing infrastructure-planning and implementation.

Technical and financial considerations

The good news is that upfront investment costs as well as implementation costs of placemaking activities are rather little: all that is needed is paint for striping the crosswalk or traffic signs for an experimental Zone 30, setting up flower pots to prohibit entrance of cars, etc. Instead of hiring workers, citizens most often want to participate in re-designing these new spaces, and the used materials are often pre-existed objects that are subject to reuse (Silva 2016).

Planning and implementing this type of interventions requires the support of the community. Time and resources are needed to design, plan and conduct workshops, public dialogues, or neighborhood meetings. Some funding also needs to be allocated to communication and outreach activities i.e. for announcements on social media, news articles or printing of fliers and banners. In addition, sufficient resources need to be set aside for impact evaluation to quantify benefits, solve emerging issues (e.g. concerns of gentrification), and maybe plan replication or extension of the intervention.

Policy/legislation

The most important aspect is **flexibility** in existing laws (traffic, special planning, etc.), allowing for temporary experimentation and implementation of such activities.

This can be supported by **national, regional or local strategies** that include goals on creating liveable neighbourhoods and public spaces, lowering speed of motor vehicles or reducing air pollution. One example is Copenhagen's goal, that in 2015 people spent 20% more time in public spaces (City Council Copenhagen 2015, p. 7); New York has set out a goal to carve a new "public plaza" out of existing street space in each of the 59 community board districts and a corresponding Funding programme (PPS 2012, NYC Plaza Program); Brazil apparently had an initiative that aimed at the development of 800 "public squares" in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities across the country (PPS 2012, p.14).

Moreover, progressive Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (**SUMP**), considering the transformation of underutilized spaces or infrastructure (such as carriageways or parking) towards pedestrian-friendly spaces, can be a point of reference for placemaking activities. One of such examples is a Zone 30 pilot project in Belo Horizonte that was launched against the background of a SUMP recommending Zone 30 measures in the whole city.



Institutions

Placemaking activities can be – and are often – citizen-led, but can be initiated by the local government as well. In any case city governments and municipalities do have an important role to play: to take up and support existing initiatives, grant funding, organizational and logistical support, and removing bureaucratic obstacles to quickly implement the activity. The latter being probably most important when it comes to low-cost improvements that can be made in a matter of hours. If it is decided to turn the intervention into a permanent transformation, the local government will most often be in charge of implementation.

The lead agency on municipality level will usually be the entity for public space and / or transport department. However, it is helpful to strongly collaborate with other departments, e.g. public health, sports or environment departments (e.g. PPS advices to link a public health agenda to a public space agenda, PPS 2012, p 11). It is indeed one of the success factors when cross departmental alliances support placemaking activities and point out the different co-benefits (health, security, environmental protection, etc.).

For the success of the activity other partners are critical, e.g. local institutions, museums, schools, formal and informal neighbourhood groups, business associations, or transport operators (PPS 2012). If those groups are involved from the start, also in the planning process, they help getting a project on the ground and keeping it going (ibid.).

The best way to make placemaking activities effective is when local governments, NGOs and citizens can work collaboratively in a democratic process (PPS 2012). Working together on short-term changes can help build bridges between city agencies as well as to citizens, benefiting long-term implementation and maintenance as well (ibid.).

Transferability

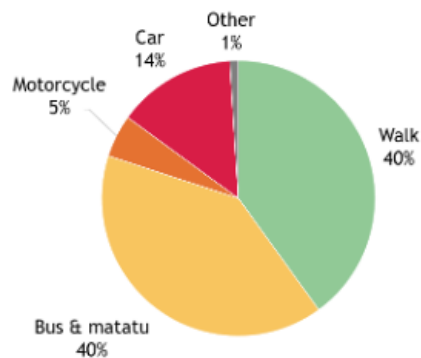
The above-mentioned placemaking activities can be planned and implemented in any kind of city, also and especially for cities with limited financial resources. However, every culture needs to find the tools and approaches that work best for them.



Case Study: Nairobi's Placemaking Week – bringing the community together when closing a major avenue for motorized traffic for four days

Context

Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, is a rapidly growing metropolitan area with approximately 4 million people living or working within its city boundaries. According to the World Population Review, by 2030, the population may grow to as much as 7 million. However, Nairobi has been largely unprepared for the consequences of this rapid population growth. Besides the increasing motorization rate, more than 40% of the urban residents in Nairobi still rely on walking and cycling, with an increase in the share for cycling. And even for those that use public transport or their private means of motorization, walking for short trips is still part of their daily mobility patterns.



Modal Share Nairobi (source: JICA, 2014)

However, pedestrians in Nairobi do not necessarily walk because they want to walk, but because they cannot afford any other means of transport. In this perspective, the poor quality of the provided infrastructure for walking and cycling sends a message that these are the “past” modes of mobility in terms of transport planning, policies and investments. Most roads in the city lack or have inadequate NMT (non-motorized transport) infrastructure, and in areas where these do exist, the majority of them have potholes and obstructions, lack protection from the sun, are not protected from speeding vehicles, and lack the all-important continuity to link destinations.

There remains a disproportionate investment towards the car-focused infrastructure that does not ‘invite’ people to walk and cycle when going about their errands in the city. On the other hand, considering that the majority of the citizens are walking and cycling, means that the city has a great cycling and walking potential, which if tapped into, can revolutionise mobility.

It is against this background that the placemaking week was established to demonstrate the benefits and potential for walkability and bikeability in Nairobi, and the relevance of creative, participatory methods in advocating for safer, inviting and sustainable spaces for people.



Placemaking Week Nairobi, 2016
Jevanjee Garden



Placemaking Week Nairobi, 2017
Banda Street



Placemaking Week Nairobi, 2018
Luthuli Avenue

In action

For the 3rd time, Nairobi has facilitated what is called a “Placemaking Week” in November 2018 on Luthuli Avenue in collaboration with UN-Habitat. Luthuli Avenue is one of the most vibrant commercial streets in downtown Nairobi. The street is part of a larger pedestrian desire-line linking downtown with the Central Business District. The street has had multiple identities since the founding of the city in 1899. Initially a mixed-use area, popular with Indian shops, it has grown gradually to become home to wholesale and retail shops for various merchandise, particularly electronics. Previously, the street was known for hotels and restaurants as well as offices, photo studios and other commercial businesses.

Over the years, the street has degenerated into a congested space, polluted space, and contested space between pedestrians, matatus, trolley pushers and motorbike riders. It had become an unsafe space where one has to dodge speeding and rowdy minibuses (so called matatus), motorbikes maneuvering their way through the street and pick-pockets and muggers preying on unsuspecting pedestrians.

The placemaking week formed part of a larger pilot project on regenerating Luthuli Avenue that followed a participatory process of designing and implementing a pedestrianized street (see Factsheet 2). As part of this larger project, and prior to the placemaking week, an Street Charrette had taken place on Luthuli Avenue in August 2018 to give daily users of the street an opportunity to share thoughts on how the street should be transformed, identify problem areas, exchange views and ideas with each other and feed into the vision for transforming Luthuli avenue.

The ideas that came out of the Street Charrette were taken up during the placemaking week and were temporarily tested by employing a mix of creative and tactical placemaking.

During the course of the placemaking week, parts of Luthuli Avenue were closed down for motorized traffic, but opened up for Nairobi residents to walk, cycle, play and interact. The event turned Luthuli Avenue into a great shared street – where urban safety and security, air quality, health and wellbeing, as well as road safety were temporarily improved. With the help of low cost materials including paint and flower pots, the street was transformed into a real public space for four days, where passer-bys were invited to re-envision and re-imagine Luthuli Avenue as a place for co-creation, community, and cohesion.

Within the pedestrianized area, an urban exhibition was organized showcasing the city’s transformation over the last decades. The temporary activation of Luthuli Avenue also provided space for arts, culture and dance performances.

The Placemaking Week culminated with the Critical Mass bicycle ride on Saturday, where inner-city street lanes were taken over by a group of more than 100 cyclists, advocating for shared urban roads.

Embarking on this event, a future of Nairobi was being discussed, that is welcoming to all people, disregarding of age, income or ability – a city where policies and decisions on urban issues are embracing inclusivity on a human-scale.



Results

The placemaking week had turned Luthuli Avenue into a real public space for four days. Experiencing the contrast of Luthuli Avenue on a “normal” day, in comparison to the traffic calm setting during the placemaking event, had a great effect on participants and enabled passerbys, visitors and city officials to reflect, compare and discuss alternative scenarios for the space. The event was able to communicate what we all crave in our cities at the very core of our essence of being human: dignity when moving around our cities and social interaction.

The placemaking week leveraged on low-cost, immediate and temporary interventions which helped plant the seeds for the longer-term, more permanent physical interventions under the larger urban regeneration project (see factsheet 2). The following key results were achieved through the placemaking event:

- 1) Increased level of acceptance of the plans to transform Luthuli Avenue into a people-centered street:** Particularly interesting was the shift in mindset of the business community that had initially opposed the project, but through the placemaking week welcomed the proposed intervention of permanently redesigning Luthuli Avenue as part of the larger project
- 2) Improved understanding of a “Livable City”:** There has been tremendous improvement in the understanding of the role of design in improving walkability, air quality, road safety and urban safety and security, particularly among ordinary people.
- 3) Enhanced capacity of city government** to experiment with design ideas prior to construction and implementation
- 4) Improved knowledge on the value of participatory design processes** to build trust between city and residents

Besides providing technical support to Nairobi County Government on its annual Placemaking Week, UN-Habitat and partners have supported placemaking events/ Open Street Days in other cities including Kampala (Uganda), Belo Horizonte (Brazil), Kathmandu (Nepal), Cape Town (South Africa), Maputo (Mozambique), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Ruiru (Kenya). Among the lessons learnt for successful implementation are:

- Planning sufficient time for engagement and mobilization of stakeholders prior to the event is essential (at least 2 months)
- Carefully select the event location i.e. a street/ inner-city area; choose an already vibrant street with businesses (i.e. cafes) on the ground floor, high volumes of pedestrians and a certain level of motorized through-traffic
- Share the concepts of “Streets as public spaces” and “Pedestrians first” with all stakeholders prior to the event
- Link the placemaking event to a SUMP, urban regeneration project or plans for NMT infrastructure; this will help the city to utilize the event for advocacy and sensitization of ongoing projects
- Ensure strong commitment from local government for facilitating logistics (i.e. approvals to close street) and to achieve longer-term impact (turning temporary design features into permanent implementation); engage with multiple departments of the city (transport, planning, health, environment, sports etc.)
- Organize the event in a collaborative effort including all stakeholders (business owners, transport operators, neighborhood associations, city government, civil society, academia etc.) and strongly engage with the local population
- Allow for spontaneous street activities in the course of the event
- Ensure that “something interesting” is going on at all times during the street closure; possibly also organize activities in the evening (i.e. movie nights)
- Provide a feedback opportunity for people in the location of the placemaking event (i.e. on a flipchart)
- Organize a Mobility Dialogue with all stakeholders after the event to share feedback, lessons learnt and discuss next steps
- Make sure that the event is covered by media; engage with journalists that are sympathetic towards the activity as positive messaging is important

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