New Governance Strategies for Urban Design

Urban Maestro

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME (UN-HABITAT)

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We should not underestimate the role of visions, narratives and images in the governance of urban design. Creating a common imaginary is an effective way for promoting the alignment of a large number of stakeholders towards the same objective. It acts as a soft coordination mechanism.

Frédéric Saliez
United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-Habitat

In cities we have regulations, planning laws and so on. They can help to avoid excesses and eliminate blunders, but they are not enough if we want to go for excellence. For that, we need 'soft power' mechanisms that promote interesting architecture and urban design in the cities.

Kristiaan Borret
Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte

If a place returns economic, social, and environmental value to its citizens, then that to me is a high quality place, and design is a critical part of ensuring that this value is maximised.

Matthew Carmona
University College London

To ensure the sustainability of social innovation initiatives in the long-term, we need to combine bottom-up and top-down processes and go beyond traditional policies. This might help to create enabling environments and empower citizens' initiatives while integrating the fundamental role of public authorities.

Cecilia Bertozzi
United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-Habitat

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What is Urban Maestro about?

The quality of the urban environment derives from various interventions and policy decisions over time and reflects the collective work of multiple stakeholders – public, private and community. While European cities have developed sophisticated laws and regulations ('hard power') to secure diverse public interest objectives through the governance of urban design, the quality of the resulting urban places can be disappointing. Often outcomes are not aligned with commonly shared objectives such as creating environmental sustainability, human scale, land use mix, conviviality, inclusivity, or supporting cultural meaning.

At its core, the coordination and support action Urban Maestro aims to understand and encourage innovation in the field of urban design governance through a better understanding of alternative non-regulatory ('soft

power') approaches and their contribution to the quality of the built environment. Far from limiting themselves to be simple regulators or even direct investors, many European countries and cities have developed these alternative approaches in order to enhance their ability to intervene as enablers or brokers in urban development. Through these means, they have initiated strategies to promote a high-quality built environment, often combining different formal and more innovative informal tools to guide, encourage, and enable better design.

For instance, a city may decide to promote quality by supplementing its zoning-based planning system with non-mandatory guidance, by organising architectural competitions, by setting up a process of peer review for design proposals, by instigating temporary urban interventions to demonstrate the potential of particular spaces, or by creating financial incentives linked to achieving certain design or other social objectives. Of these various strategies, financial mechanisms and their relationship to informal tools of urban design governance represent a particular focus of the project. It is hypothesised that, for example, synergies between such tools have the potential to make both approaches

more effective in attaining their desired outcomes.

Urban Maestro aims to capture and highlight knowledge about how such initiatives are used in practice, with what purpose, and with what impact on delivering better-designed places. Ultimately, Urban Maestro expects to contribute to the global urban debate and the realisation of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by enhancing practices of urban design governance within Europe and beyond.

Urban Maestro was launched in 2019 and completed in 2021 by three partners: the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA) and the University College London (UCL). It is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

Urban Maestro's methodology

The Urban Maestro project used a set of research and learning approaches to gather and capture information about the diverse approaches to urban design governance across Europe:

• **Analytical framework**: to structure the analysis and build a common understanding, the Urban Maestro team developed an analytical framework that took a 'tools-based' approach in order to classify a range of informal urban design governance tools, allowing a better understanding of how urban design governance was constructed, tested, and refined. At the heart of this, is a European typology of urban design governance tools.

• **Survey**: using the analytical framework to structure the questions, a Europe-wide survey of informal urban design governance practices was conducted, primarily at the level of nation states, with a questionnaire sent to 124 governmental, arms-length bodies and non-governmental agencies across Europe with responsibility for design. The survey covered 32 European countries (EU and EFTA) and received a response rate of 51%, including from 31 national level departments, giving invaluable information about the tools used and the structure of provision in each territory.

• **Panorama**: using the survey as a starting point and then supplementing it through a snowballing process, over 100 informal urban design governance practices were reviewed and in excess of 80 summarised in

a series of published fact sheets, spanning across Europe. The work was largely carried out based on published materials, leading to the publication of an online fact sheet for each practice, covering 30 countries. In addition to the cases identified by the team, an open call was made through the project website, with the suggested practices added to the panorama if they met key criteria: informal, innovative, and not already covered.

• **Case studies**: building on the panorama and selecting practices that were both innovative and representative of different informal urban design governance practices, a range of more in-depth case studies was undertaken. Some of these were undertaken by the project research team on the basis of analysing secondary documentation backed by interviews, and others were commissioned from experts associated with particular practices or research subjects. The intention was to gather greater insight into important practices and to feed into the final element of the methodology, the workshops.

Discussing the project methodology and approach to selecting case studies with the project's Support & Advisory Group., during the session that followed the Workshop 1 in Valencia, 2019 (c) Urban Maestro

Urban Maestro project launch
Feb. 2019 – Brussels, BE

Urban Design Governance
Jun. 2019 – Valencia, ES

Design Environment
Jan. 2020 – Porto, PT

Innovative Development Tools
Jun. 2020 – online

Urban Maestro Masterclass
Sep. 2020 – online

Actions for Future
Nov. 2020 – online

Urban Maestro final conference
Mar. 2021 - online

Kick-off event   **#1**   **#2**   **#3**   Summer school   **#4**   Closing event

• **Workshops** consisted of a series of carefully curated conversations with a diverse range of audiences (practitioners, academics, specialists, and others) across seven separate events, some online and others in person. This sequence of events throughout the lifetime of the project allowed practices to be unpacked, compared and analysed, and led to both the sharing of knowledge and practices between the invitees and a better understanding of the practices by the research team.

Finally, the scope of Urban Maestro's investigation was captured and presented on the project's website, which was structured to serve as a long-term knowledge platform that can be navigated and browsed in a variety of manners (tool-based approach, overall theme, free search by keywords, country-based list, alphabetical order, or a search by the type of documentation).

(next page) A snippet from the Workshop 2 session in Porto, 2020 (c) Urban Maestro

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The discussion on high quality urban development cannot be left in the hands of the public sector and the civil society only, it is fundamental to involve the real estate sector to make sure that the discourse and the 'reality on the ground' stick together. For this conversation to be productive, it is crucial that designers and real estate professions learn to speak the same language.

Frederik Serroen
Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte team

Innovating the ways we design cities requires a new sort of sensitivity, courage, and freedom to experiment, and is key to linking today's actions to future goals.

Simona Paplauskaite
Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte team

The behavioural concepts of nudging and intrinsically motivated agents' incentives helped us to understand that informal tools can be very effective where good design ideas already exist, even without explicit financial incentives attached.

Tommaso Gabrieli
University College London (UCL) - Bartlett School of Planning

Future living and working will require continuously evolving places which is why experimentation and indetermined, adaptive development processes will be central. Hence, we need to remain open for rethinking current planning practices, and embracing new ones.

Emilia Syvajarvi
United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-Habitat

The workshops have proven that the best way of convincing public authorities who are unfamiliar with and sceptical of experimental approaches is to introduce them to successful examples that they can learn from and be inspired by.

Colm mac Aoidh
Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte team

Acknowledging that the state is one of the major clients of the construction industry and one of the largest property owners, it should set an example by promoting good practices as owner, developer and user of public buildings.

Joao Bento
University College London (UCL) - Bartlett School of Planning

Innovation is, to a certain extent, context-dependent; we saw cases of very simple tools bringing fresh air to otherwise dysfunctional urban governance contexts. Similarly, transferability is tricky but certainly possible on a much wider level than currently practiced – but for that, it is essential to figure out the key elements of success, and not simply copy-paste a format or structure as is from one place to another.

Terpsi Laopoulou
University College London (UCL) - Bartlett School of Planning

The quality of urban environments derives from various projects, interventions, and policy decisions over time. They are the collective work of multiple stakeholders – public, private, and community – but are not always of a quality that we would aspire to see.

Urban Maestro examines how the soft (non-regulatory) powers of the state can shape the decisions that help to deliver better-designed places. These approaches often combine different, informal tools in order to guide, encourage, and enable better design.

European countries and cities apply these informal tools often in innovative ways; therefore, Urban Maestro aims to capture how these tools are put into practice, with what purpose, and what impact they have on real-life solutions.

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