GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES

PARKS AND GARDENS

ResidentFirst

A better quality of life

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Contents

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1. Introduction

Parks and gardens are essential elements within our urban and rural localities, as green oases and potential community hubs. They provide environmental, social and economic benefits, and research consistently illustrates their contribution to residents' well-being. Commonly referred to as a city's 'lungs', these green spaces mitigate urban heat, improve air quality and enhance biodiversity. In Malta, the increasing pace of urbanisation has created a pressing need to preserve and expand green spaces to ensure a sustainable and liveable environment for current and future generations.

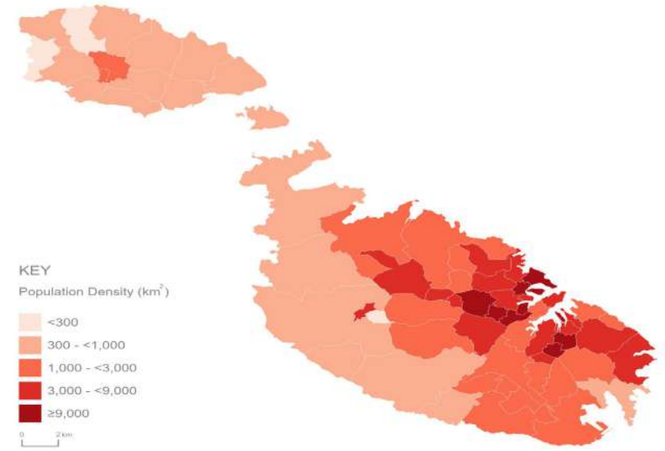
The history of green spaces in Malta reflects their cultural and social significance. From the gardens of historic residences to small functional pockets in urban centres, these areas have long provided spaces for recreation, relaxation and community gatherings. However, new and bolder approaches to green space planning are required to address Malta's development pressures and climate change issues, which are more strategic and innovative. In particular, Malta's geographic and climatic conditions and limited land availability amplify the need for resilient, adaptive and multifunctional green space.

This document aims to assist local councils, policymakers, urban planners, NGOs and community leaders envision and implement sustainable parks and gardens tailored to Malta's unique challenges and opportunities. Based on key pillars, including inclusivity, ecological balance and cultural relevance, this document seeks to inspire action to transform Malta's green spaces into valuable assets within individual localities, supporting resident and environmental health and well-being. The eight guiding strategies discussed later provide a roadmap for successfully implementing parks and gardens in our localities.

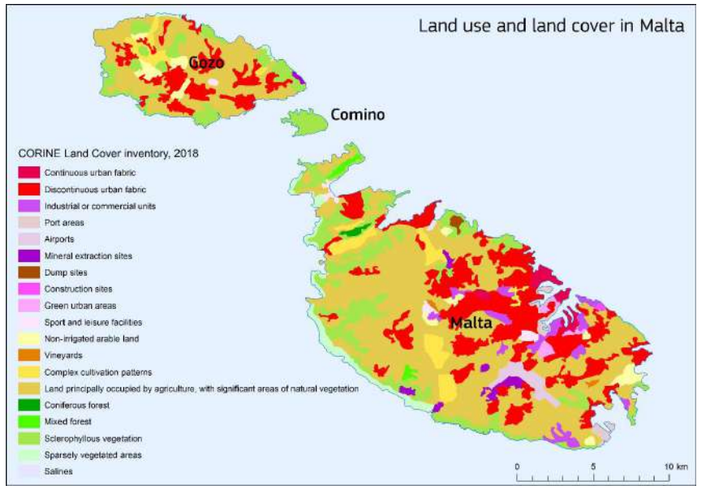
2. Malta

2.1 Density and Climate-Driven Realities

Malta's high population density (around 1,700 people per square kilometre), over-development and the competition for land resources, all have implications for green space availability, resulting in reduced opportunities for natural habitats and recreational green spaces. All this, along with Malta's unique climate conditions, necessitates a strategy that prioritises green public spaces and balances urban development with creating and preserving such spaces.



Population Density Map of Malta. Mapped out by NSO Malta



Map from the 2019 European Commission study indicates Malta's land use and land cover.

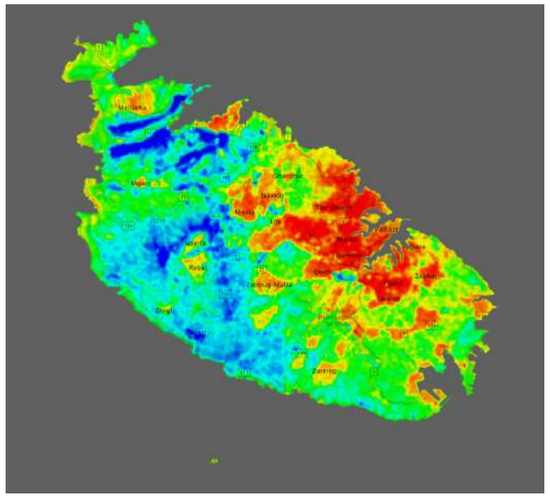
Michail Dementiev on Unsplash

In turn, supporting a vibrant and flourishing green infrastructure (GI) is difficult in Malta's climate, further exacerbated by rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall patterns and prolonged droughts due to climate change. This increases the need for climate-resilient green spaces that, with the right strategies, can adapt to the particularities of Malta's climatic realities.

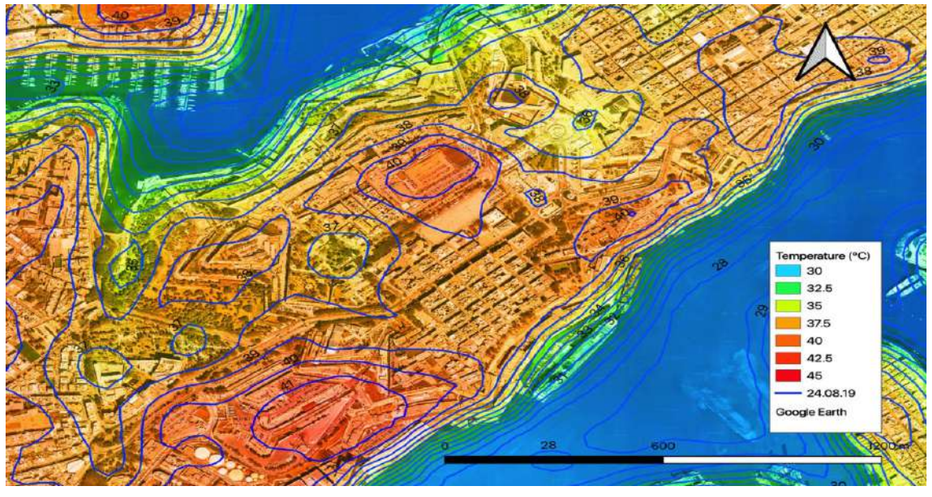
Climate-related concerns further highlight the urgency of creating parks and gardens that help to mitigate heat and support biodiversity. One such concern is the urban heat island (UHI) effect, a common consequence of densely populated regions, particularly in island environments. These green spaces become natural buffers against extreme climate temperatures by providing larger shaded areas to reduce urban heat, which may further encourage walking and cycling within our urban areas – an approach that aligns with Step 3 of Walkable Localities, discussed in the LCA's Guidelines on Sustainable Mobility – Walkability and Accessibility. The introduction of permeable surfaces may help to manage stormwater, reducing flooding risks. Native and drought-tolerant plant species further ensure these spaces are sustainable and ecologically significant.

2.2 The Importance of Parks and Gardens in Malta

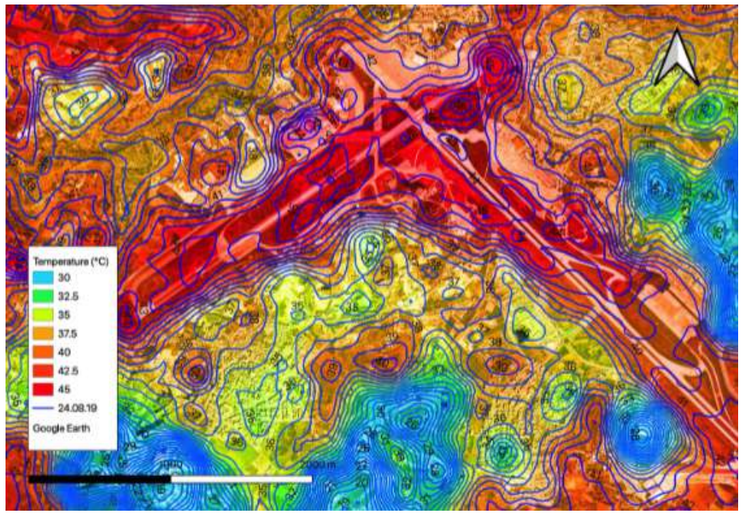
Malta's climatic conditions, particularly heat, combined with increased air pollution due to a growing population and tourism, underscore the urgent need for mitigation. Incorporating shade-providing trees in urban areas is necessary to cool urban spaces.



Malta Urban Heat Island map by Research Innovation Hub



LST map of Floriana and parts of Valletta during August 2019



LST map showing the Malta International Airport runway and the towns of Gudja & Luqa

Vegetation improves air quality by filtering pollutants like carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter, which are common due to vehicular emissions, industrial activities and construction. Trees and plants absorb these harmful pollutants through their leaves and bark, reducing their concentration in the atmosphere. This is particularly crucial in Malta, where high traffic density and increased tourism contribute to air pollution levels and consequently heat, especially in urban hubs such as Valletta, Sliema and St. Julian's.

Image by Chris Sant Fournier

Research has shown that well-planned urban greenery can reduce air pollution by up to 20%, highlighting the need to integrate green spaces into city planning. Furthermore, those tree species that possess a wide canopy are particularly effective at absorbing airborne toxins and improving overall air quality. One such example is the Olive Tree that is commonly found in Malta.

Water management is another important aspect, particularly in overly built-up areas wherein the prevalence of concrete, asphalt and other impermeable surfaces limits opportunities for natural absorption, leading to surface water runoff and increasing the chances of flooding. The presence of parks and gardens can help mitigate these risks by improving soil permeability, allowing water to be absorbed into the ground.

The strong presence of green infrastructure is also important for public health, mental well-being and social cohesion. Appropriately designed parks and gardens help to alleviate the stress and congestion of urban living. They offer quieter and slower-paced environments where individuals can relax, socialise and engage in physical activity such as walking, jogging and cycling, crucial in combating the country's high obesity rates. As Malta continues to urbanise, prioritising accessible, multifunctional green spaces will be even more essential. A good network of open green public spaces, comprising parks and gardens of various scales, may strengthen a culture of walking within our localities, together with better pedestrian initiatives.

Parks may also provide valuable educational opportunities. Specific typologies of parks and gardens, such as botanical gardens and nature reserves, can double up as outdoor classrooms for students to learn about local flora, fauna and sustainable practices. One notable example is the historic Argotti Botanic Gardens in Floriana, a site known for its diverse plant collections and educational commitment. Upgrades carried out in recent years have enhanced its role as a learning spot, wherein environmental awareness is promoted among students and visitors.. These upgrades include improved pathways, interpretive signage and sustainable irrigation systems.

Photo by Haonan Wei on Unsplash

Economically, parks and gardens are significant assets too. Well-maintained green spaces attract tourists and may potentially generate revenue. Properties located closer to green spaces tend to have a higher value. The natural cooling provided by parks may further help to reduce energy costs for these buildings during Malta's hot summer months.

Cassidy Woods on Unsplash

In recent years, new and innovative approaches to garden space have been introduced. One such example is the completed Valletta Design Cluster, which provides an important green space in the heart of the City and is one of the few public roof gardens in Malta.

Despite the country's challenging climate, where strong winds and salty air create harsh conditions for plant growth, this roof garden offers a peaceful retreat while doubling up as a hub for creative and cultural activities. This project illustrates the potential for urban green infrastructure even when in constrained and committed urban environments.

Before and After Aerial view of roof garden of Valletta Design Cluster.

Commissioned by European Capital of Culture Valletta 2018

Image by Doric Studio

Image by Damien Holmes for WLA

2.3 Cultural Heritage and Relevance of Malta's Gardens

As further discussed in the LCA's publication ***3.2 Historical Heritage, Urban Cores (Hubs) and Piazzas,*** design approaches should seek to strengthen Malta's heritage and cultural identity. In this respect, Malta's gardens are more than green sanctuaries — they are living records of the Island's layered history, bearing the imprint of its many cultural influences. From the Knights of St. John to the British, each period has shaped these spaces into symbols of national identity and pride. Notable examples include the Upper and Lower Barrakka Gardens, San Anton Gardens and Buskett Gardens.

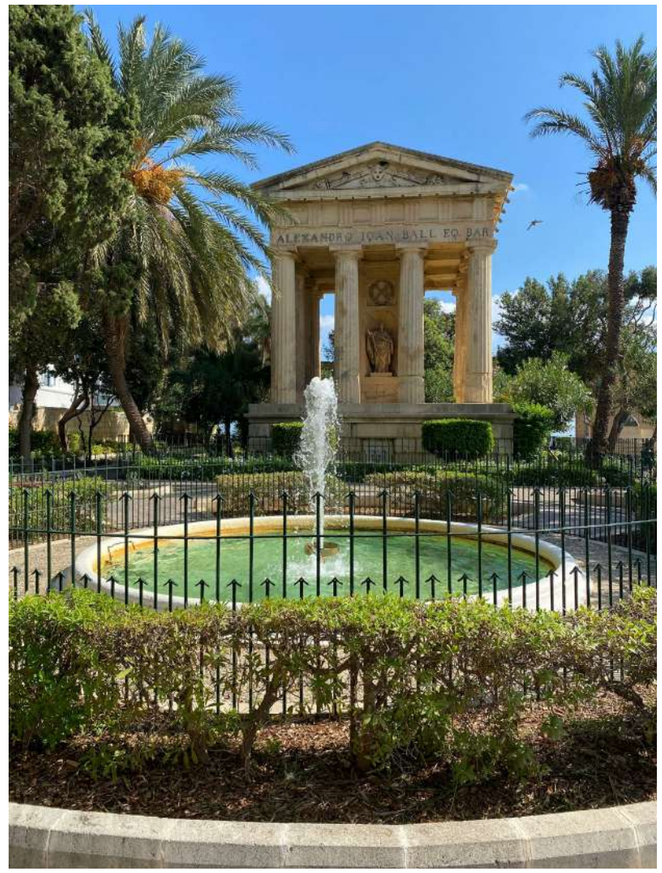
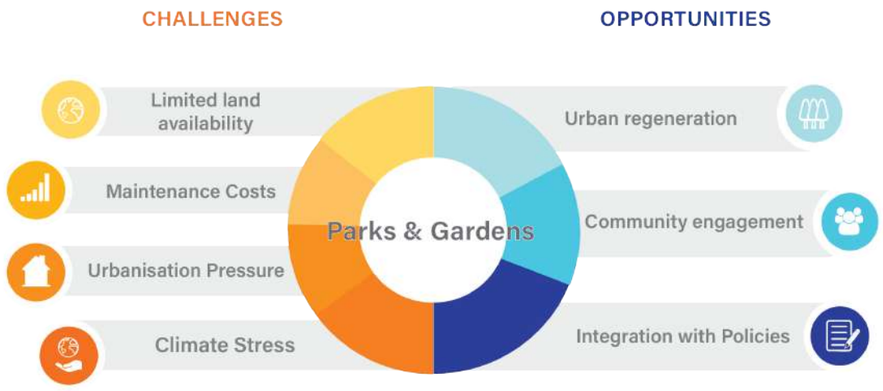


Photo by Lucas Degenhardt on Unsplash

2.4 Challenges and Opportunities of Implementing Parks and Gardens in Malta

Malta faces several challenges in both the development and maintenance of green spaces. A first challenge is actual allocation of space, due to physical constraints. A second is maintenance, due to the significant resources (both labour and funding) that are required. Such climate change realities imply that future challenges must address issues of water scarcity and extreme temperatures. This calls for more innovative approaches in terms of irrigation and plant selection.

A strategic and forward-thinking planning approach for the Maltese Islands should proactively preserve and expand upon green spaces, through a networked Green Infrastructure (GI) vision in line with broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through appropriate urban regeneration projects, vacant and/or underutilised sites could be transformed into potential pocket parks. Involving residents in both the design and maintenance of such green spaces would foster a sense of ownership and encourage the long-term care of such areas.



Challenges and Opportunities of the presence of parks and gardens.
Source: Studjurban

2.5 Stormwater management

Stormwater management in Malta is a critical consideration, particularly due to the high risk of flooding during the rainy season. This issue is exacerbated by overdevelopment, both due to the increase of impermeable surfaces within urban areas and due to inappropriate stormwater management systems.

In June 2022, the Ministry for Public Works and Planning issued the Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI) Guidance Manual, a framework designed to enable a more sustainable approach to urban planning, with a strong focus on rainwater administration. Since its publication, this manual has aimed to improve stormwater management across the country by integrating nature-based solutions into public spaces. GSI is an approach that mimics natural water cycles to enable more effective rainwater management. Unlike traditional drainage systems, which simply channel stormwater away as quickly as possible, GSI techniques help absorb, filter and slow down runoff. This reduces flood risks and improves overall environmental quality.

In Malta, incorporating general GI approaches into parks and gardens presents an opportunity to enhance sustainability while mitigating flooding. Key plans of action include the use of permeable surfaces, bioswales, rain gardens and tree pits — each playing a role in effective water absorption and filtration, as explained below.

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Photo by Vatroslav Bank on Unsplash

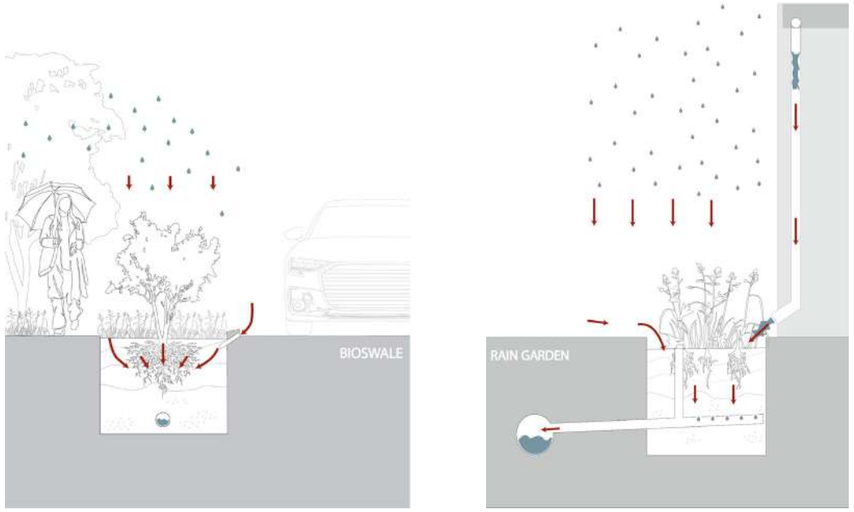
Permeable Surfaces, Bioswales and Rain Gardens and Tree Pits

The introduction of **permeable surfaces**, such as pavers, gravel, or porous asphalt, in walking paths and parking areas within green spaces facilitate passive water filtration. This helps reduce excess runoff and lowers the risk of flooding. When used with supported management of rainwater collection it could further help to alleviate issues in relation to water scarcity.

Another proposal is the introduction of landscape depressions in green areas to maximise rainwater collection. These are also known as **bioswales or rain gardens.** In an urban garden setting, such a rain garden may be strategically placed to collect runoff from nearby impermeable surfaces, such as rooftops or roads. This not only reduces the volume of water entering storm drains but also improves water quality by utilising soil and plant roots to naturally filter contaminants.

Incorporating **tree pits** with permeable borders and underground storage maximises water absorption and supports tree health. In a town or village square, for instance, installing tree pits with engineered soil and subsurface water retention systems enables rainwater to be captured and utilised by the trees, promoting their growth and reducing surface water runoff. This approach may also contribute to urban cooling. Tree pits may be preferred over raised planters as they allow better usage of the space's surface area, creating a more robust layout that may be utilised for different purposes by the residents and local community.

The above methods may help in developing more resilient urban environments while simultaneously addressing pressing stormwater challenges.



Diagrams to illustrate GI strategies. Source: Studjurban

Photo by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash

2.6 Community Gardens

The concept of community gardens is slowly picking up in Malta. Community gardens present a valuable opportunity to enhance social and community engagement, contribute to the local economy, encourage physical activity outdoors and expand the offer of green spaces within localities.

Residents and other community members work together to manage these allocated land pockets. Through this collaborative effort, residents develop a stronger connection to their neighbourhood. This reinforces the community spirit, encourages collective responsibility for the urban environment and fosters a greater sense of belonging with the locality.

There are numerous benefits to community gardens. First is the **potential cultivation of fruits and vegetables;** an important consideration in a country where fresh and organic produce can be costly due to high import rates. Growing food locally provides a cost-effective, healthy and sustainable alternative. Sharing or selling such produce within the community further strengthens local food networks, generating a small local economy and reducing food waste.

Engaging in gardening activities further offers **physical and mental health benefits,** such physical effort being a form of moderate exercise, which can improve cardiovascular health, enhance mobility and promote overall well-being. Gardening is also therapeutic, providing an opportunity for stress relief thanks to the calming nature of working with soil and plants.

Moreover, community gardens **transform underutilised areas** into vibrant green spaces, improving air quality and offering residents new serene environments to relax and interact socially. With other open green space typologies, they **help mitigate urban heat,** filter pollutants and enhance biodiversity. They also provide shaded areas where residents can unwind, engage in outdoor activities, or even host educational workshops on sustainable gardening practices and environmental conservation.

While community gardens are emerging concepts in Malta, notable examples include the **Qajjenza Community Garden** in Birżebbuġa, which transformed an abandoned area into a space benefiting over a thousand local families.

Case study of Community Garden in Birżebbuġa (Image by DOI)

3.Design Principles for Parks and Gardens

This section identifies some key design principles that should be adhered to when embarking on a design project for parks and gardens.

Accessibility and inclusivity

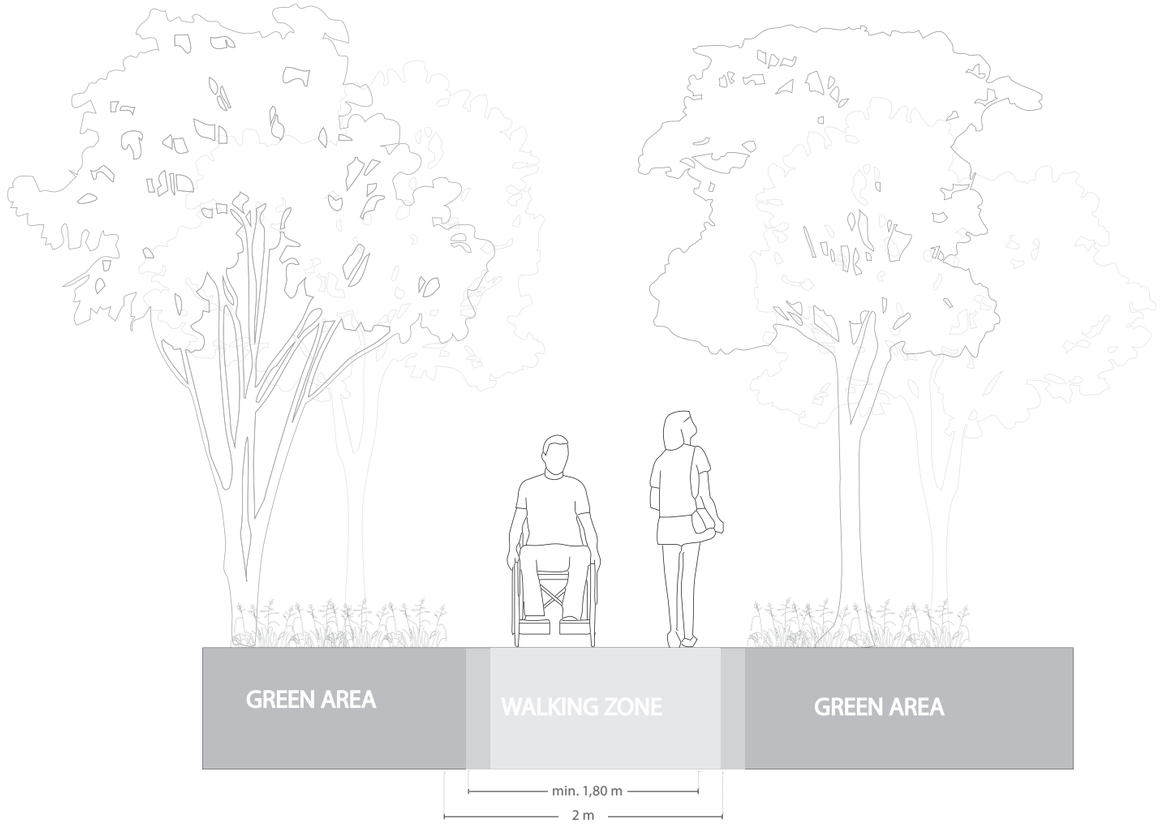
To ensure that parks and green spaces are enjoyable for everyone, they must be designed with inclusivity in mind, accommodating people of all ages and abilities. Accessibility should be a fundamental principle in park planning, allowing individuals with mobility challenges, visual impairments, or other disabilities to navigate and use these spaces with ease.

Universal accessibility

- In order to reach universal accessibility, incorporate gently sloped pathways and ramps in level changing cases that the landscape presents. In this way we may ensure smooth access for wheelchair users, strollers and individuals with limited mobility.
- To guide visually impaired visitors safely, tactile paving should be introduced in key points of the park or garden. High-contrast signage can also improve navigation within the space.

Photo by Egor Myznik on Unsplash

- Ensure that the width of pathways are reached to facilitate the transit of two wheelchairs or strollers to pass comfortably side by side. It is recommended to aim for a minimum width of 1.8m in walkways, especially those characterised by high-traffic areas.



Pathway width. Source: Studjurban

- Public facilities, such as public restrooms, water fountains and playgrounds should similarly follow universal design principles, with the inclusion of grab bars, non-slip surfaces and adaptive play equipment that allow an inclusive experience for all.

Photo by Sung Jin Cho on Unsplash

Malta's high tourism numbers and foreign residents (as of 2023 such residents constituted about 28% of the total population, approximately 158,368 individuals) suggest a significant probability of foreign visitors to public parks and gardens. This reality underscores the importance of implementing clear, multilingual signage within these areas to enhance orientation and accessibility.

Rest Areas

As part of a wider understanding of inclusivity, comfort should be provided to park and garden users of all ages. Adding sitting areas, at regular intervals of 50-100 metres, may provide a moment of rest and relaxation, especially for more elderly individuals and families with young children.

Photo by Denis on Unsplash

Lighting and Safety

Adequate lighting throughout a park or garden is essential, particularly along pathways, entrances and key gathering areas, both to enhance users' safety and to increase the potential for such spaces to be used during evening hours. Regular maintenance of lighting infrastructure is essential to prevent dark spots and ensure consistent visibility throughout the spaces. Additionally, well-maintained pathways are crucial for visitor safety and accessibility. Routine inspections and repairs of paving surfaces help prevent hazards such as crack formation, uneven terrain, or slippery areas, ensuring a secure and welcoming environment for all.

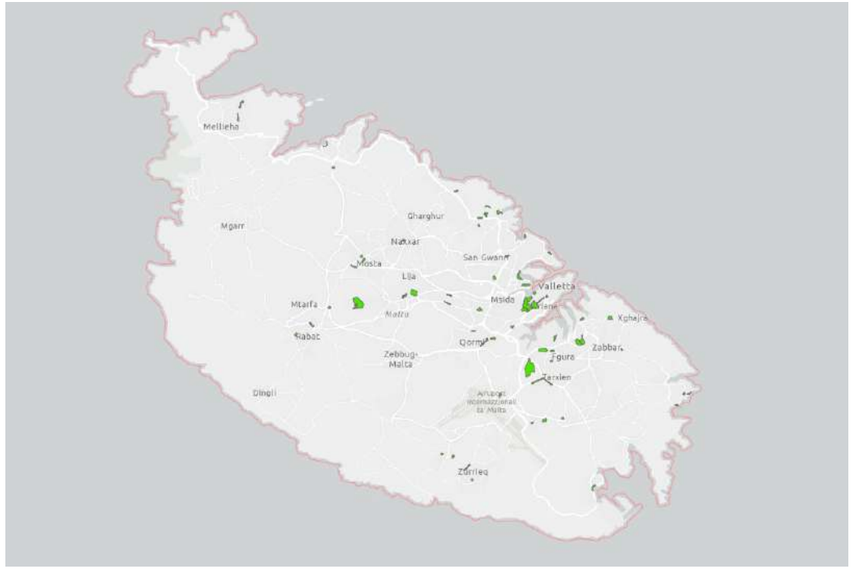
Inclusive Play Areas

When planning to incorporate children's playgrounds into the design of parks and gardens, ensure that the design of play spaces accommodates children with disabilities. The inclusion of sensory play panels and equipment such as wheelchair-accessible swings should be part of a holistic playscape vision (the concept of 'playscape' is discussed in further detail in the Local Councils' Association publication entitled ***3.5 Outdoor Sports***).

Sustainable Practices

Implementing sustainable practices in the development of Maltese parks and gardens should be part of a wider vision that supports national environmental conservation while also enhancing resource efficiency.

Sustainable park management further offers financial advantages by reducing long-term costs through the use of renewable energy sources and recycled water systems. By adopting environmentally friendly solutions, such as solar-powered infrastructure and water-harvesting techniques, maintenance expenses can be minimised while ensuring the longevity and resilience of green spaces.



Malta's green urban areas by the year 2020 by the European Environment Agency.

Native and Drought-Resistant Planting

Utilising indigenous, drought-tolerant species such as the *Olea europaea* (olive trees) and *Laurus nobilis* (bay laurel) reduces water consumption and supports local biodiversity. These plants are well-adapted to Malta's arid climate, requiring minimal irrigation and maintenance.

Olive trees photograph Photo by Kevin Martin Jose on Unsplash

Water Efficiency

Implementing drip irrigation systems delivers water directly to plant roots, enhancing efficiency by minimising evaporation and runoff. This method is already adopted in Malta's agricultural sector for its effectiveness in water conservation. Additionally, incorporating rainwater harvesting systems can further optimise water use by collecting and storing rainfall for irrigation purposes. The previously mentioned GSI guidelines (Section 2.5, Stormwater management) offer an important contribution to reach this goal.

Renewable Energy Integration

Malta is currently dependent on imported fossil fuels, from which most of Malta's energy is extracted. This current data alarms and encourages the installation of solar-powered lighting and energy-efficient water pumps.

For example, in the year 2022, the Rinella Park in Kalkara opened its doors to the public as the first carbon neutral garden in Malta. This project utilises solar pavers to power its lighting and irrigation systems, showcasing a successful application of renewable energy in a Maltese park.

Photo by TVM News

Waste Management

Providing strategically placed recycling bins and establishing composting facilities encourages responsible waste disposal. Composting organic waste enriches soil, promoting healthier plant growth. Clear signage and public education campaigns may further enhance the effectiveness of such waste management policies.

Carbon Sequestration

When the European Union realised its manifesto for Net-Zero gas emission in 2050, many plans of action started showing up in the conversation. One of them is carbon sequestration, which aims to collect and trap CO_2 emission generated by humans before they reach the atmosphere. Planting a diverse array of trees and shrubs enhances carbon sequestration, mitigating urban pollution. Urban parks with broad-leaved trees and closed canopy cover possess high carbon storage capacities. Selecting such species can significantly contribute to reducing atmospheric CO_2 levels.

Multi-Functionality

An important design aspect of park and garden design is the potential for such spaces to have multiple usage purposes, as further discussed in the Local Councils' Associations document entitled ***3.4 Open Space Re-use***. The following approach can be followed to accomplish a multi-functionality park and garden:

- Designate areas for various activities, including sports fields, picnic spaces, meditation zones, and educational workshops. In addition, play areas could be integrated that serve multiple age groups, including interactive play zones for children and fitness areas for adults.

Photo by Oakville D on Unsplash

- Create zones that support local wildlife, which may include butterfly gardens, bird sanctuaries, and pollinator-friendly plants.

Photo by Freecityguides.com

Jonathan Kemper on Unsplash

- Introduce community gardens where residents can grow fruits and vegetables, encouraging sustainable practices and food security. Integrate such areas to foster community interaction and promote sustainable living practices.

- Incorporate spaces for public art, outdoor exhibitions, and cultural performances that reinforce Malta's heritage.

- Include fruit-bearing trees and herbs that visitors may interact with, increasing community engagement and contributing to food security.

Cultural Relevance

Parks and gardens in Malta serve as more than just green spaces — they are also cultural hubs that reflect the nation's rich heritage and identity. Thoughtful park design can reinterpret traditional Maltese architectural elements in intelligent ways – not to slavishly copy and reproduce older features, but to retain a strong connection to our heritage and traditions, seeking inspiration from our history and ensuring that such spaces honour local craftsmanship, especially through the intelligent use of local limestone.

These spaces can also host a myriad of cultural events, including performances, artisan markets and traditional feasts, fostering a sense of appreciation for Malta's artistic and historical legacy. Parks and gardens may therefore become living representations of Maltese culture, preserving and strengthening our heritage.

Material Selection and Maintenance

The selection of materials for parks and gardens is crucial for long-term sustainability and ease of maintenance. Because it is also a green space, the relationship to, and performance of, the selected material within the natural conditions of the park or garden must be considered. Factors to consider include:

Image showing selection of materiality in an open space. Image by Krzysztof-Hepner

- Local sources and sustainable materials, such as Maltese limestone, to minimise transportation costs and environmental impact.

- Opt for materials with high durability and low-maintenance to reduce long-term maintenance costs. For coastal parks, anti-corrosion treatment ensures all metal fixtures are treated to resist corrosion from salt spray.

- Select materials that integrate cohesively with the natural environment and are aesthetically appealing, ensuring that the park's design enhances the surrounding landscape and enriches the urban context.

4. Steps to develop sustainable Parks and Gardens

Creating sustainable parks and gardens requires a well-defined approach that integrates community needs, environmental sustainability and innovative planning. The eight steps outlined here provide a comprehensive roadmap for stakeholders to address key challenges and opportunities in green space development. These steps aim to balance ecological resilience with human-centric design, ensuring that parks serve as vibrant, multifunctional spaces that enhance quality of life while addressing Malta's unique environmental and urban pressures.

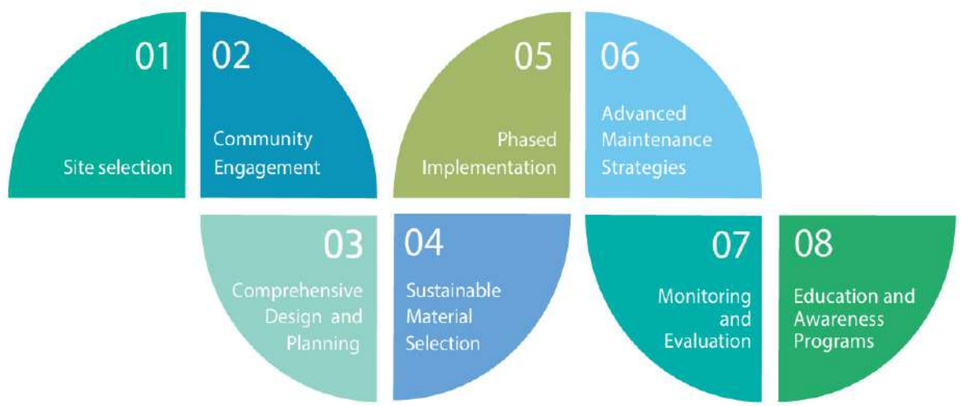
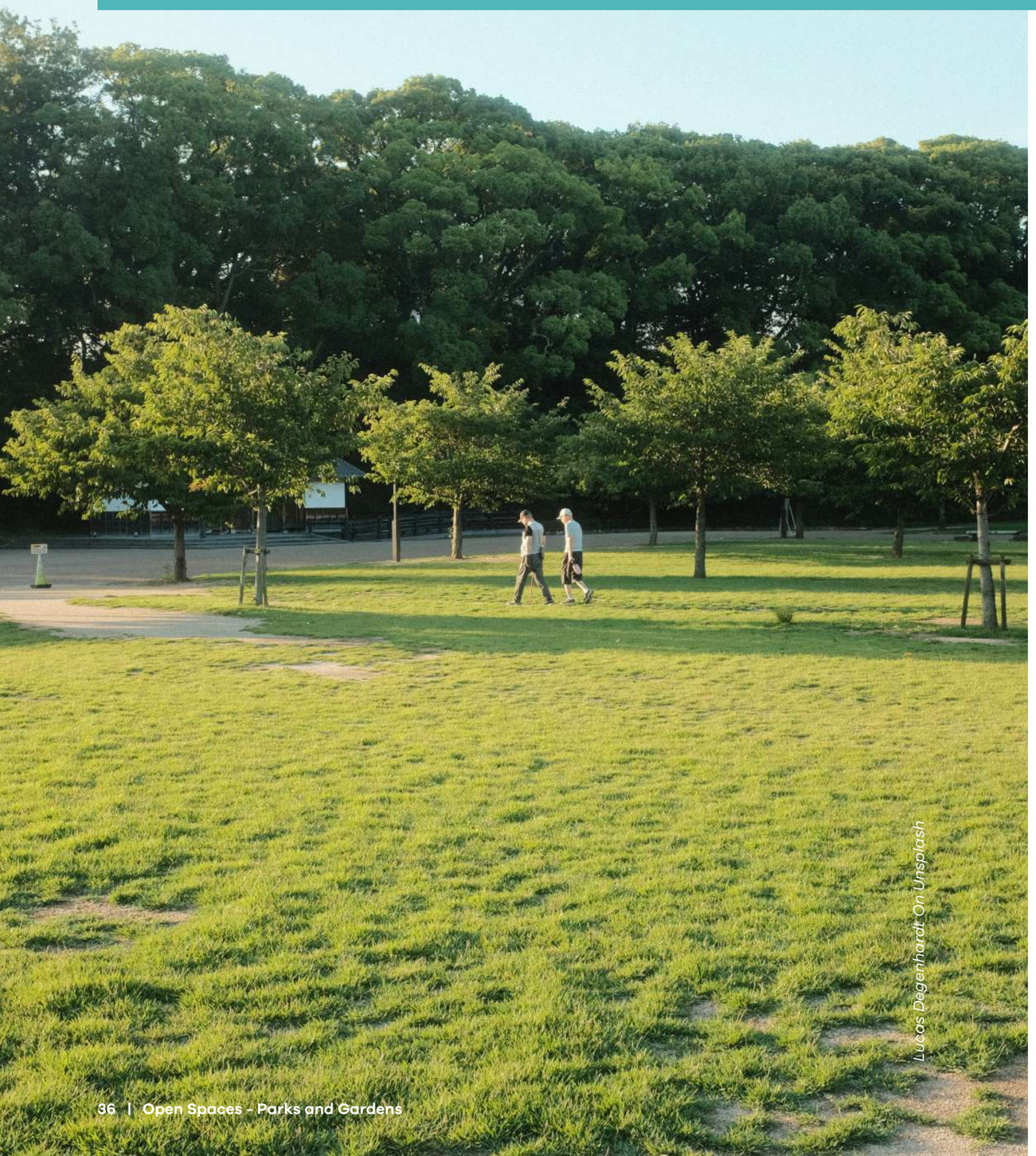


Diagram Steps to develop sustainable Parks and Gardens.
Source: Studjurban

Step 1
Site Selection



Lucas Degenhardt On Unsplash

- Conduct comprehensive feasibility studies, including **environmental impact** assessments.
- Prioritise **areas lacking green spaces**, such as densely populated urban centres.
- Ensure **proximity to public transportation** and pedestrian networks.
- Evaluate existing land-use patterns and **identify opportunities** for integrating green corridors.
- Factor in potential **climate risks,** such as flood-prone zones or areas exposed to high urban heat.

Step 2
Community Engagement

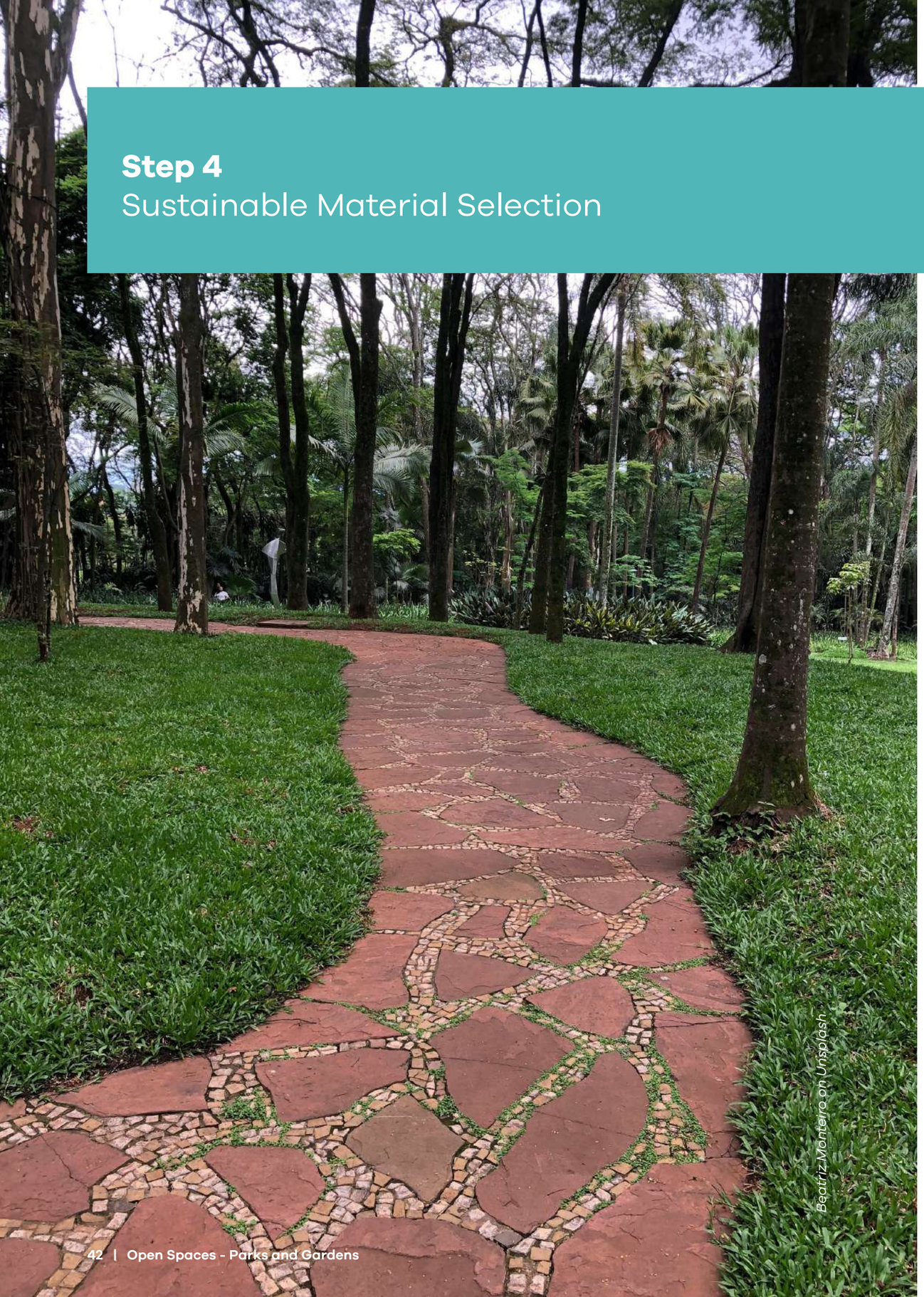
Damaris Azocar on Unsplash

- Organise town hall **meetings and online surveys** to gather community input.
- Involve schools and NGOs in **co-design workshops** to align designs with community needs.
- Establish **volunteer programmes** for park maintenance and include residents in long-term care plans.
- Conduct **focus groups** to better understand diverse community needs, especially for marginalised groups.
- Use **participatory budgeting** models to empower residents in decision-making processes.

Step 3
Comprehensive Design and Planning

Marian Mirea on Unsplash

- Integrate **shaded areas** using pergolas, mature trees and solar canopies.
- Incorporate **sensory gardens** for therapeutic and educational purposes, catering to individuals with sensory sensitivities.
- Use **modular park elements** to adapt to changing community needs over time.
- Designate clear zones for **active and passive uses,** ensuring minimal conflicts between activities.
- **Ensure connectivity** by linking parks to cycling paths, pedestrian routes and nearby facilities.
- Include **innovative features** when viable such as green walls, bioswales and rain gardens to enhance ecological functionality.

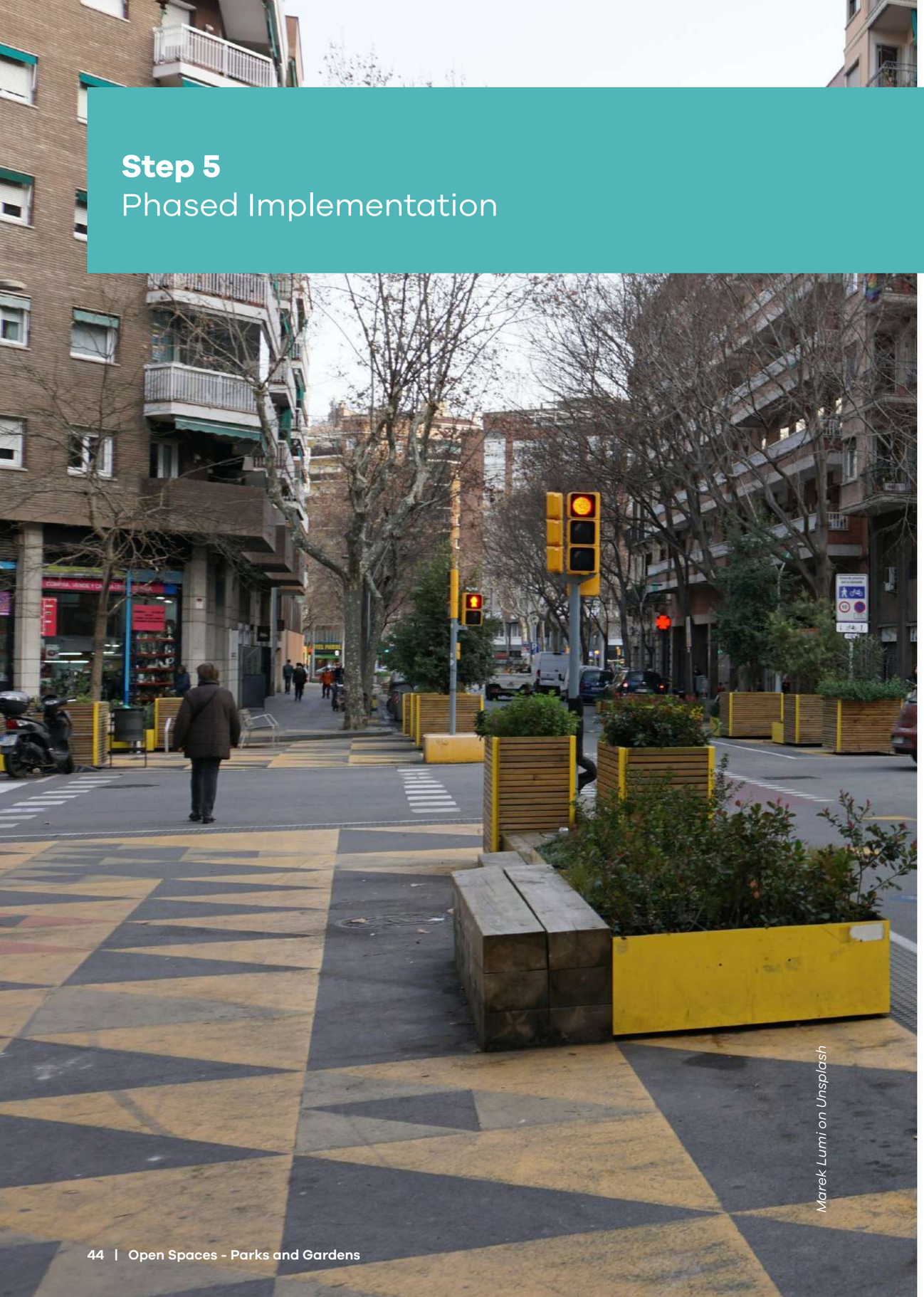


Step 4
Sustainable Material Selection

- Prioritise renewable and **recycled materials, such as reclaimed wood, crushed stone, and recycled rubber** for pathways.
- Use **anti-graffiti coatings** on surfaces to minimise maintenance costs and extend the lifespan of materials.
- Evaluate **lifecycle costs of materials,** balancing initial costs with long-term durability.
- **Explore innovations** like self-healing concrete for pathways to reduce repair frequency.

Beatriz Monteiro on Unsplash

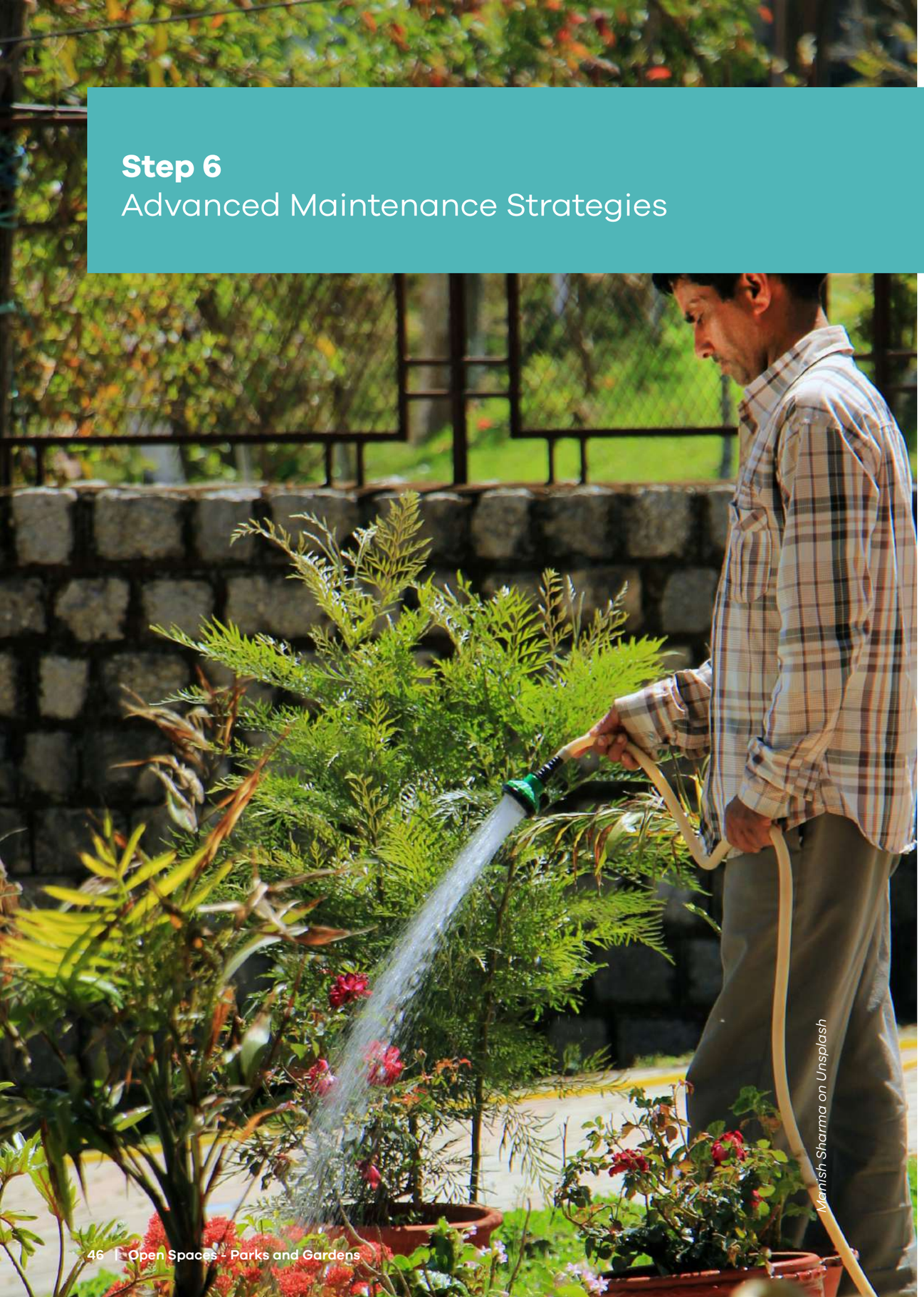
Step 5
Phased Implementation



Marek Lumi on Unsplash

- **Develop pilot zones** to test design concepts and **gather user feedback** before full-scale development.
- Plan **construction schedules** to minimise disruption during peak park usage times.
- Use **temporary installations,** such as pop-up green spaces, to maintain community engagement during construction.
- Coordinate phased rollouts with **infrastructure upgrades** like stormwater systems to optimise resources.

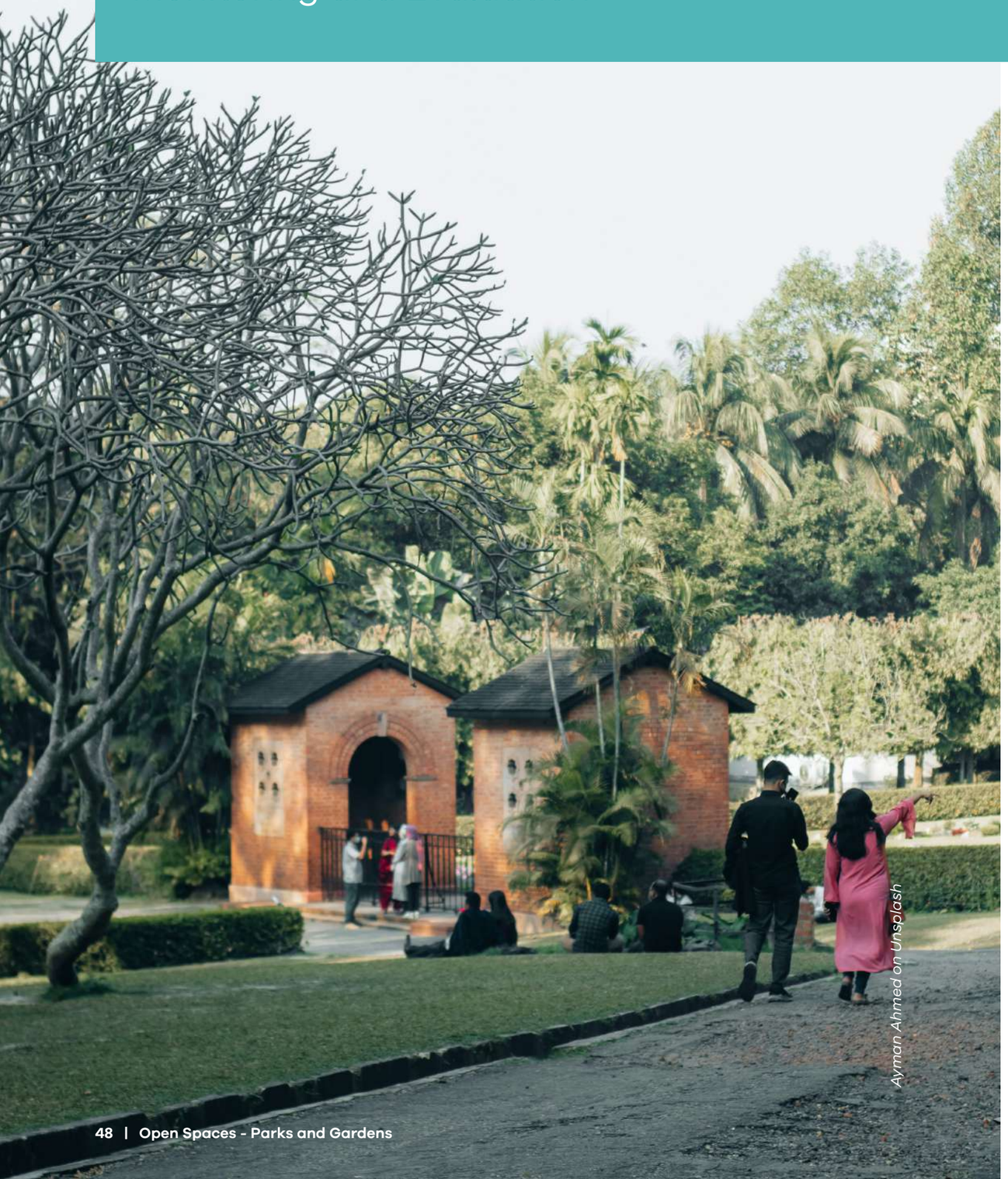
Step 6
Advanced Maintenance Strategies



Manish Sharma on Unsplash

- **Employ GIS mapping** for efficient maintenance scheduling and resource allocation.
- Smart irrigation systems can be used to **reduce manual labour and optimise water use.**
- **Train local maintenance staff** in sustainable practices, such as integrated pest management and organic fertilisation.
- **Regularly assess** infrastructure wear and implement proactive repairs to prevent major issues.

Step 7
Monitoring and Evaluation



Ayman Ahmed on Unsplash

- Install visitor counters and other means such as geotagged feedback kiosks to track usage patterns and gather **real-time insights**. Such data is critical in understanding a park's success and appeal.

- Conduct **annual biodiversity surveys** to measure ecological impact and guide future interventions.

- Publish **regular reports** on park performance metrics, such as user satisfaction, biodiversity indices and maintenance costs.

- **Partner with academic institutions** to develop innovative monitoring tools and methodologies.

The role of data cannot be underestimated. Local Councils should push for a national database to track green space availability and quality, to which they could contribute. This would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of greening initiatives, ensuring informed decision-making as new parks and gardens are planned or existing ones are rehabilitated and redesigned.

Step 8
Education and Awareness Programmes

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- Develop **interactive apps and QR** code-based trails to educate visitors about local flora, fauna and sustainable practices.
- Organise seasonal **events,** such as tree-planting days, eco-fairs and biodiversity-themed workshops.
- **Collaborate with schools** to integrate parks into environmental education curricula.
- Establish **interpretation centres or kiosks** within parks to provide information on sustainability and conservation efforts.
- Create park **ambassador programmes,** empowering residents to lead tours and foster community engagement.
- Develop **interactive apps** to educate visitors about local flora and fauna.

5. Current EU Programmes for Parks and Gardens – Funding and Research

As of 2025*, several EU programmes continue to support the development, conservation and innovation of parks and gardens across EU Member States. These initiatives offer funding opportunities, promote sustainable landscape practices and foster research in biodiversity, climate resilience and cultural heritage preservation. While international efforts — such as those led by the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) — also contribute significantly to the field, this section focuses specifically on those programmes under the umbrella of the European Commission.

**Information is accurate as of the time of publication 2025. Programmes may evolve, and additional initiatives may be introduced beyond the scope of this summary.*

LIFE - Nature and Biodiversity sub-programme

One of the main European Commission's programs focuses on environmental and climate action projects by providing co-funding. They look for initiatives that promote areas of environmental protection, sustainable development and combating climate change. Calls for proposals open annually.

Horizon Europe

This European initiative supports research and innovation projects, including sustainable urban development. It prioritises those that promote biodiversity and green infrastructure. The budget has also been distributed in sub-programmes that tackle different areas. This plan of action will be implemented until 2027. Further information regarding programme deadlines is available on the Horizon Europe website.

Alina Ex on Unsplash

European Regional Development Fund

The ERDF provides funding for projects aimed at improving regional development and promoting sustainable urban planning. This programme is set to run until 2027. Interreg Europe is the tool employed by the EU to facilitate cooperation among regions. Applications will be submitted through Malta's Regional Operational Programme (ROP), via the Planning and Priorities Coordination Division (PPCD).

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Eco-Schemes

The CAP supports sustainable agriculture with eco-schemes for a 2023-2027 agenda that incentivise environmentally friendly practices. This funding could support the Community Gardens initiative. Like the previous fund, CAP operates via Servizzi Ewropej f'Malta (SEM), which currently has open calls for different initiatives.

Research and Collaboration:

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA)

Funds pilot projects that propose creative solutions for urban challenges, including green infrastructure. Funding is ongoing.

Interreg Europe

Facilitates cross-border collaboration on sustainable urban planning and environmental management, as part of the European Regional Development Fund.

6. Policy Recommendations – pushing for robust and resilient parks and gardens in Malta

National level

Green development incentives, through grants and tax incentives, could encourage urban greening projects, making it financially viable for businesses and Local Councils to invest in green infrastructure.

At the strategic planning level, **stricter national and Local Plan policies** should be implemented to regulate urban sprawl and protect natural landscapes from overdevelopment, especially at the edges of the development zone and the interfaces with the Outside Development Zone (ODZ).

Another crucial step is enhancing **environmental education** by integrating it more centrally into school curricula, ensuring that future generations understand the value of green spaces and sustainability from an early age.

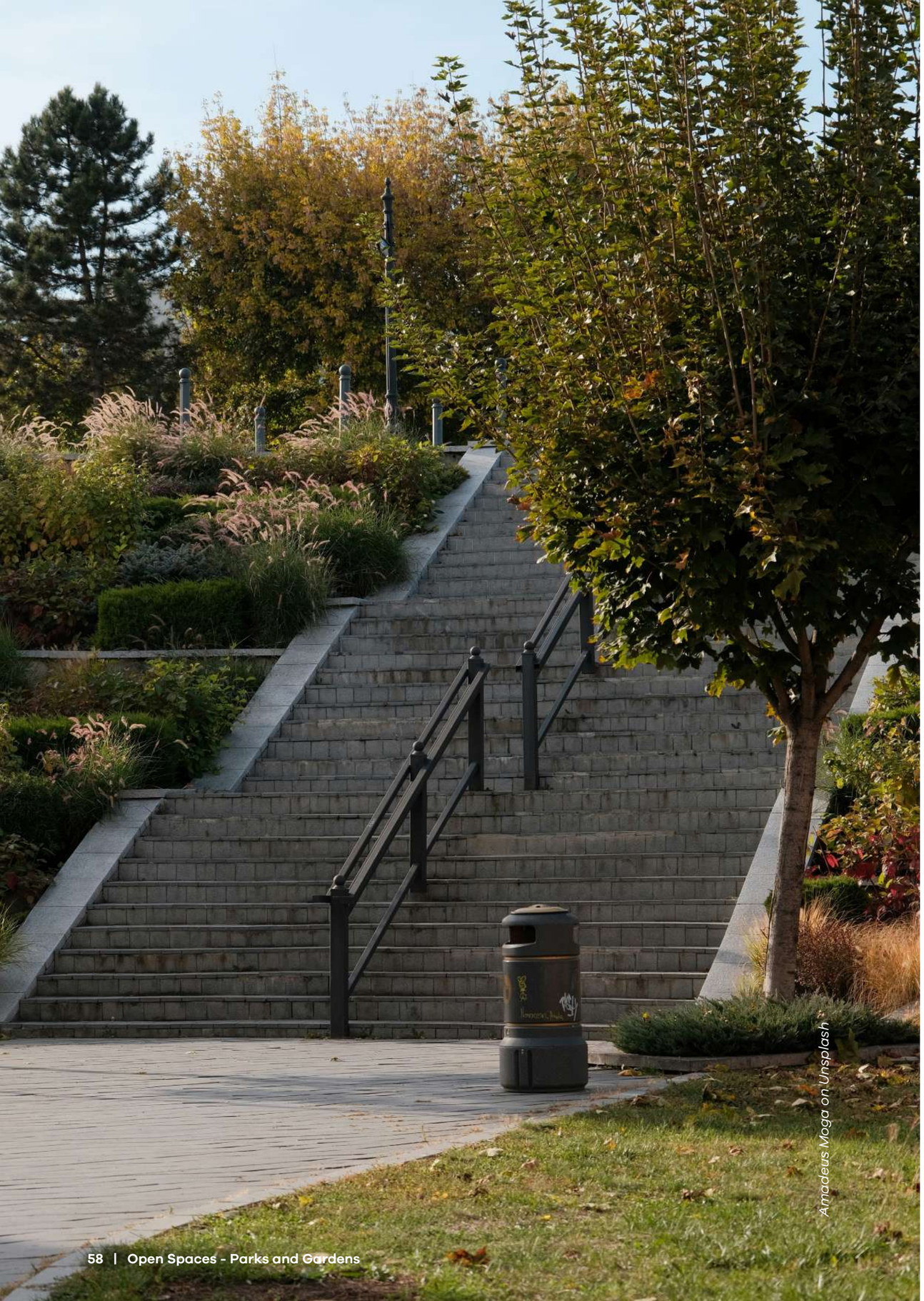
Regional and Local Councils

Local Councils play a fundamental role in shaping Malta's urban landscape. With the help of Regional Councils, they should **push for the production of Green Master Plans** that prioritise parks, gardens and recreational areas within urban development strategies produced by the Planning Authority. These plans must be backed by clear policies that promote the creation and maintenance of accessible green spaces. Furthermore, local authorities should **encourage public participation** by establishing resident advisory committees to guide park projects, ensuring that communities have a say in the design and function of their shared spaces. Additionally, a focus on **inclusivity is essential** — parks and public gardens should be designed to accommodate people of all ages and abilities, offering safe and accessible environments for everyone to enjoy.

Collaborative Actions

Achieving a greener Malta requires cooperation between various stakeholders. Government and Local Councils can **partner with the University of Malta** to conduct research on sustainable landscaping and biodiversity conservation, ensuring that green spaces are designed with long-term ecological benefits in mind. Engaging with **international research- and practice-based networks** may also open doors to knowledge-sharing and funding opportunities, allowing Malta to learn from international best practices. Additionally, collaborating with **private sector stakeholders** could help secure sponsorship and maintenance support for public green spaces, reducing financial strain on both Government and Local Councils while fostering corporate social responsibility.

Fostering **cross-sector partnerships** will be key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of parks and gardens, reinforcing a collaborative effort to preserve Malta's environmental and cultural heritage.



Amadeus Moga on Unsplash

Category	Recommended strategic decisions
National Level	• Incentivise green development through grants and tax incentives • Enforce zoning laws to prevent urban sprawl • Integrate environmental education in schools
Local Councils	• Implement Green Master Plans prioritising parks and gardens • Promote community participation via citizen advisory committees • Design inclusive, accessible green spaces
Collaborative Actions	• Partner with universities for research on sustainable landscaping • Join international networks for knowledge and funding • Collaborate with the private sector for sponsorship and maintenance
Future Direction	• Implement innovative green technologies • Promote green roofs and walls • Create a national green space database • Foster cross-sector partnerships • Preserve environmental and cultural heritage

Policy Recommendations.
Source: Studjurban

7. Conclusion

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This document sheds some light on the importance of parks and gardens in our localities, particularly in view of the rapid urban growth challenges of contemporary Malta.

The numerous opportunities provided by EU projects and initiatives demonstrate the importance of green infrastructure within the European agenda, in support of the development of green spaces. By embracing inclusivity, sustainability and multifunctionality, Malta may transform its parks and gardens into thriving ecosystems that cater for diverse community needs. These spaces serve as nature-based sanctuaries and become hubs of education, recreation and cultural expression, bridging the gap between ecological preservation and urban development.

To guarantee the success of these spaces, Local and Regional Councils, policymakers, urban planners and residents should maintain ongoing commitments. This commitment should be reflected in periodic monitoring, community engagement and adaptive or inclusive planning management. Moreover, implementing and optimising emerging sustainable technologies and materials will help maximise the use of limited resources and ensure that these spaces remain accessible and welcoming.

This document may provide a framework for developing and maintaining parks and gardens within our localities, but its impact ultimately lies in its application on the ground. The future of Malta's parks and gardens is driven by a collective responsibility and, through collaborative and visionary planning, it may be possible to create a greener, healthier and more connected island that thrives in harmony with its natural and cultural heritage. By adopting a strategic approach that prioritises inclusivity, sustainability and cultural relevance, different stakeholders can ensure that these green spaces meet the needs of both current and future residents.

By acknowledging the multifaceted benefits of parks and gardens and committing to their development, Local Councils may help set a benchmark for sustainable urban living within their localities.

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