GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES -
OPEN SPACE RE-USE

Resident First

A better quality of life

Contents

Image by Kouji Tsuru on Unsplash

1. Introduction

Open spaces are the living rooms of our communities, the piazzas, parks, gardens, and streets where public life naturally unfolds. Reusing and revitalising these spaces are emerging as key strategies for sustainable urban development, especially in dense, car-centric environments where public space is increasingly scarce.

The "open space re-use" concept transforms underutilised or vehicle-dominated areas into vibrant, flexible environments designed for people. This approach supports global goals for creating liveable cities and addresses urgent local needs in Malta, where accessible public spaces have become a rare luxury. According to a 2022 Eurobarometer survey, Maltese residents have some of Europe's poorest access to green open spaces. 21% of Maltese reported walking over 30 minutes to reach a green space, compared to 3% across the EU. These stark statistics highlight the urgent need to reclaim and enhance our urban open areas. This need is also echoed in the LCA's document entitled 3.5 Outdoor Sports, which emphasises the value of integrating recreational opportunities into different typologies of urban spaces.
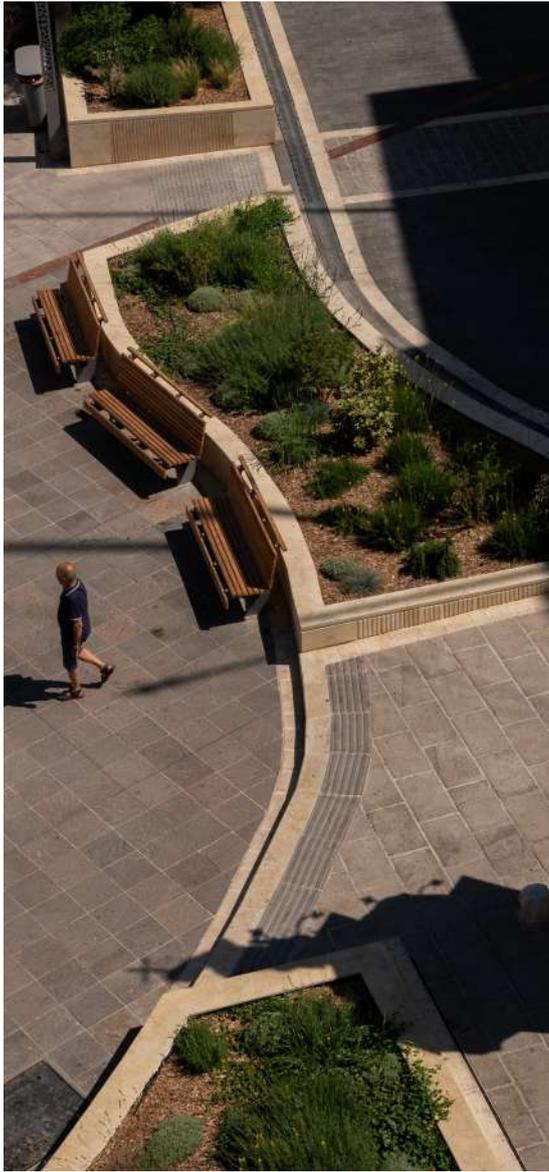

Illustration by Studjurban

MALTA   EUROPE

Maltese residents are 7x more likely to walk over 30 minutes to reach green spaces

Image by Jacob Pretorius on Unsplash

Birgu Piazza.
Image from Studjurban By Sean Mallia.

This document is a practical guide to evaluating, redesigning, and better utilising open spaces. It draws on academic theories, case studies from Malta and abroad and EU initiatives to empower policymakers, NGOs, Local Councils and residents.

Building on the approach of LCA's previous **Sustainable Mobility** documents and other **Open Spaces** guidelines, it begins by outlining methods for assessing the existing network of public spaces, linking proposed improvements to Malta's tradition of piazzas and historical urban cores. It stresses the importance of flexible, multi-functional design, considering how the use of spaces changes throughout the day, the week and the year. Special focus is given to Malta's specific urban challenges, like high population density, car dependence and heritage preservation and opportunities including strong community ties, tourism growth and EU funding. Key design principles and an eight-step action plan encourage low-cost, experimental interventions before committing to significant changes.

Case studies such as Mosta Rotunda Square and Birgu's Victory Square demonstrate how careful evaluation, community engagement and tactical improvements can transform traffic-dominated spaces into more vibrant, inclusive community hubs. The document encourages open space rejuvenation to drive towns and villages to become more sustainable, liveable and resilient. In Malta, Local Councils may achieve much better open spaces by reviewing their town centres' and neighbourhoods' spatial dimensions, cultural aspects and community engagement.

2. Advantages of Robust and Flexible Open Spaces

Better open spaces have two qualities: robustness and flexibility. In urban design theory, a robust space can host varied activities, evolving while never losing its core purpose. A flexible open space is like a flexible stage supporting different 'performances' from everyday casual use to special events or impromptu gatherings.

International Case Study: Place de la République, Paris, France

Once a major traffic intersection, Place de la République was redesigned into one of Paris's largest pedestrianised spaces. It is a robust open piazza for daily leisure – people sitting, skateboarding and meeting friends – but it is also very flexible, hosting political rallies, concerts, festivals and temporary exhibitions. This multifunctional transformation reflects principles outlined in the LCA's 3.5 Outdoor Sports document, where adaptable spaces support spontaneous activity and organised recreational use.

Images by Rames Quinerie (Left) and Carl Campbell (Right) on Unsplash

Local Case Study: Pjazza San Franġisk, Rabat, Malta

MORNING

NOON

AFTERNOON

EVENING

"Time of the day" illustration by Studjurban

This space is a historical square located in the heart of Rabat, near St Paul's Church. Previously a quiet gathering place, it has been revitalised in recent years to better serve everyday community life and special events. The square now supports daily activities, both formal and informal – socialising, outdoor dining and resting, while also easily adapting to religious processions, local feasts and cultural events, such as open-air concerts and artisan markets.

Designing robust and flexible spaces offers numerous benefits across the social, economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions. Flexible open spaces naturally encourage inclusive use by diverse groups at different times of the day and week. A nicely made public square, for instance, might provide a lunch break spot for nearby employees, change into a play area after classes, and become a lively night market or cultural place.

Strong design ensures that one area can serve many needs, reinforcing lively social interaction across different ages and interests. Social scientists such as William H. Whyte have stated that places welcoming many actions tend to draw more people, which helps raise both liveliness and safety because this increases the amount of"eyes on the street" (in turn, a celebrated phrase by Jane Jacobs), or natural surveillance.

Many piazzas already play this multi-functional role in our localities: they often serve as car parks on ordinary days and then transform into feast venues, for instance. Designing with flexibility through movable seating or modular elements enables these transitions to happen easily, strengthening a sense of community ownership and connection. When streets and squares are designed to accommodate markets, festivals and outdoor dining in a flexible manner, they drive foot traffic and support local businesses.

Research shows that attractive, active public spaces can increase property values and stimulate local investment. A rejuvenated and well-maintained piazza in a historical core frequently draws tourists, boosting the local economy, cultural landmarks and urban vitality.

Take the revitalisation of Birgu's Victory Square, which has been turned into a people-centred place. A robust design helps future-proof such investments: a square that can host a Christmas market one season and a historical re-enactment the next creates diverse opportunities without requiring major alterations. Over time, robust open spaces also reduce costs by eliminating the need for frequent, expensive redesigns or new infrastructure for each new use.

Adaptable spaces contribute to environmental sustainability and public health. A plaza primarily laid out for gatherings can still incorporate green infrastructure such as trees, rain gardens and permeable surfaces that help absorb rainwater and provide cooling through shade. Such adaptations are vital in Malta's increasingly hot summers, offering
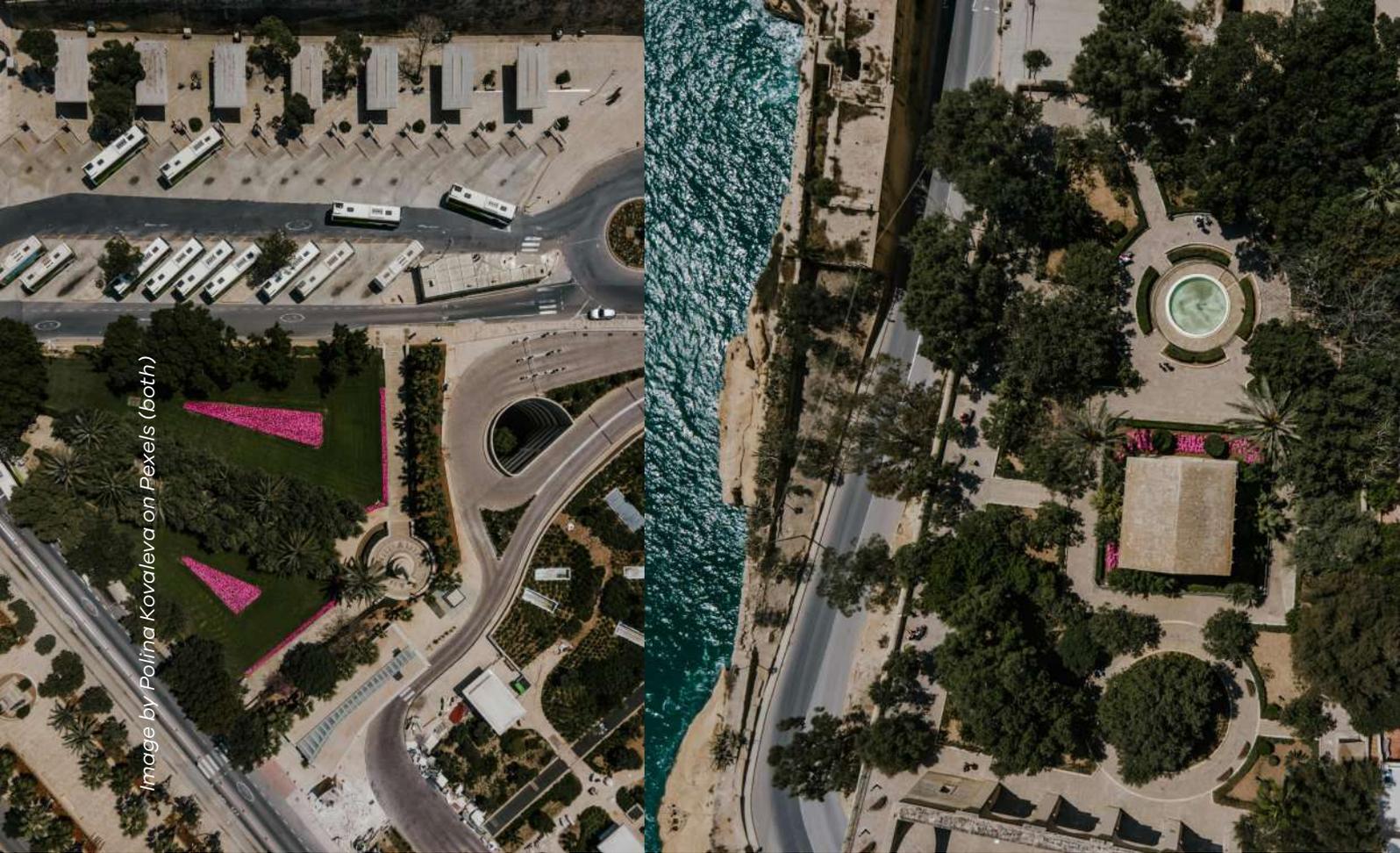
respite during heatwaves and encouraging active, outdoor lifestyles year-round. A greater design flexibility allows spaces to adapt to seasonal changes: a car-free summer piazza filled with trees and umbrellas could revert to allow some limited winter traffic if necessary, or vice versa.

By concentrating various uses in existing areas, it becomes less necessary to purchase additional property for parks or other amenities, which helps prevent urban sprawl and promotes walkable town centres. The "malleable city" concept promoted in various cities abroad, which maximises the potential of existing places rather than continuously expanding outward, aligns with this strategy. These cities effectively manage land, energy and social life.
Strong open spaces provide a

means of honouring the past while allowing for current life in Malta, where layers of history can be found on every street corner. While allowing for modern activity nearby, flexible design may highlight historical features – again, the recently completed Victory Square in Birgu has integrated the footprint of the historic clock tower in the new paving design, preserving a physical connection to the town's past even as the square's everyday use changed. Careful design keeps heritage sites relevant and active, promoting management and community pride rather than turning them into static museum exhibits.

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Aerial photo from Studjurban by Sean Mallia

Urban design theories such as the celebrated "responsive environments" theory suggest that places supporting flexible, personal uses tend to empower residents to feel a stronger sense of ownership. This is particularly powerful in heritage contexts – revitalised piazzas and squares become everyday stages for both memory and modernity, ensuring that history remains a living part of community life.

In summary, robust open spaces offer resilience because they are better equipped to adapt to changing community needs, evolving economic conditions, environmental stresses and even unexpected events, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. During this crisis, we all experienced how adaptable public spaces became essential: streets turned into restaurant terraces, parking lots became testing centres or outdoor gyms. These quick adaptations demonstrated how vital flexible infrastructure is for urban life, a concept further discussed in the LCA's *3.5 Outdoor Sports* document.

Image by meruyert-gonullu on Unsplash

Urban theorists such as the French geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski advocate for embracing "temporary and temporal urbanism", planning cities that may adapt space according to time-based needs. This idea is embodied in a flexible open space, which always places people at the heart of design while serving as a platform for creativity, resilience and urban vitality.

3. The Temporal Dimension of Open Space Usage

Open spaces are not static; they evolve across hours, days and seasons. Their usage and character constantly shift. A piazza that appears underused on a weekday afternoon could become a bustling marketplace on Sunday mornings. A quiet neighbourhood park at midday might transform into the community's social hub by the evening. Understanding and planning for this temporal dimension is essential for successful open space re-use. It allows designers and councils to "time-share" space, enhancing flexibility and the value of public areas across different time frames. Recognising these rhythms prompts critical planning questions: *When is this space active and idle? Who uses it at various times? What activities flourish or falter depending on the time of day or year?*
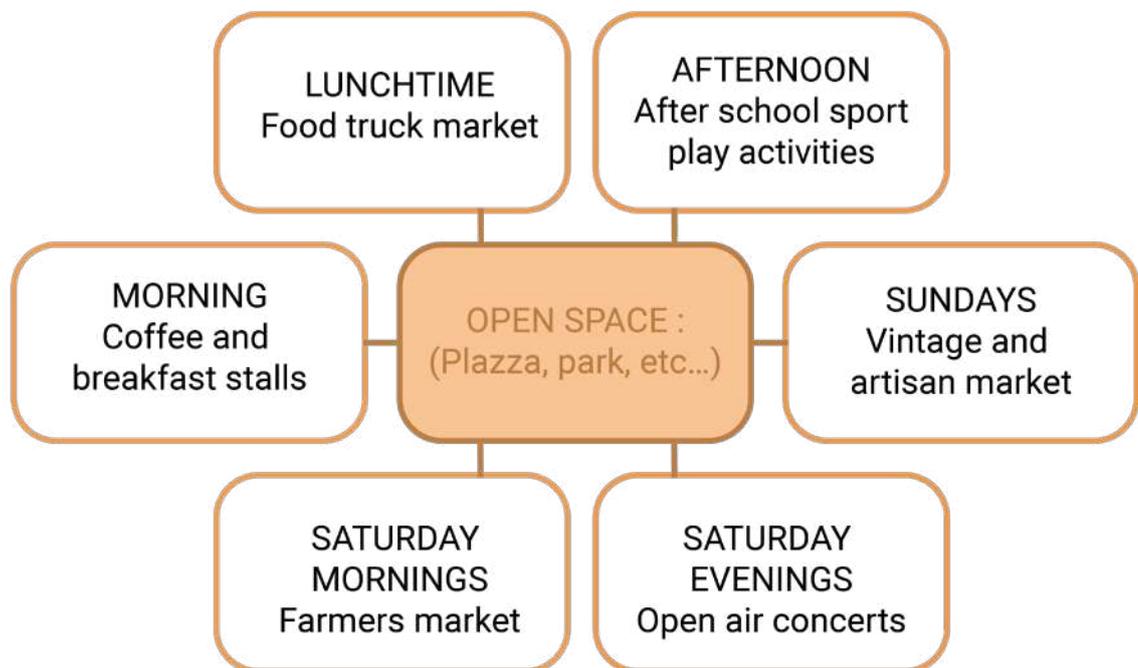
Temporal dimension of open space. Source: Studjurban

VIRGINI · SYDERIBVS · RESTITVTAE · T · H · MVSTENSES · FF · A · S · M · CCM

Mosta square re-use Source: Studjurban (photos by Michaele Zammit)

Open spaces can, and should, adopt different "personalities" depending on the day. Weekend pedestrianisation is a pertinent example. In cities worldwide, authorities close key streets to vehicles on weekends, transforming them into pedestrian promenades catering to leisure rather than work commutes.

Mosta's reimagined main square embraces this idea. While allowing weekday traffic to meet daily needs, the design includes removable bollards and planters, enabling full pedestrianisation on weekends or for special events. This flexibility reflects an important lesson: urban life is no longer synchronised, and planning must adapt to new rhythms.
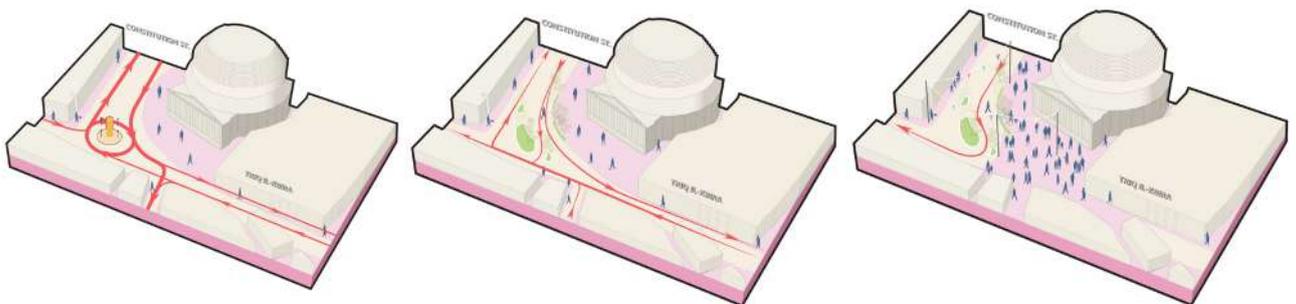
Mosta Square – reclaiming back urban space.
Source: Studjurban

Mosta square reutilisation. Source: LCA.

Seasonality presents another temporal challenge. In Malta's hot summers, open spaces must offer cooling shade, greenery and water features, while in mild winters, sunny, open areas become assets. A flexible piazza might include temporary structures: canopies or misting systems in summer, open piazzas for Christmas markets or spring flower festivals.

Temporary events also dramatically shift a space's character. A quiet square can burst into life during a festa, carnival, or night market. Rather than treating these as one-off disruptions, Local Councils should be open to the prospect of designing for event readiness: providing electrical hookups for stalls, anchoring points for decorations and durable surfaces to handle crowds. The careful design of Victory Square in Birgu has allowed for the smooth accommodation of major annual celebrations without compromising daily functionality.
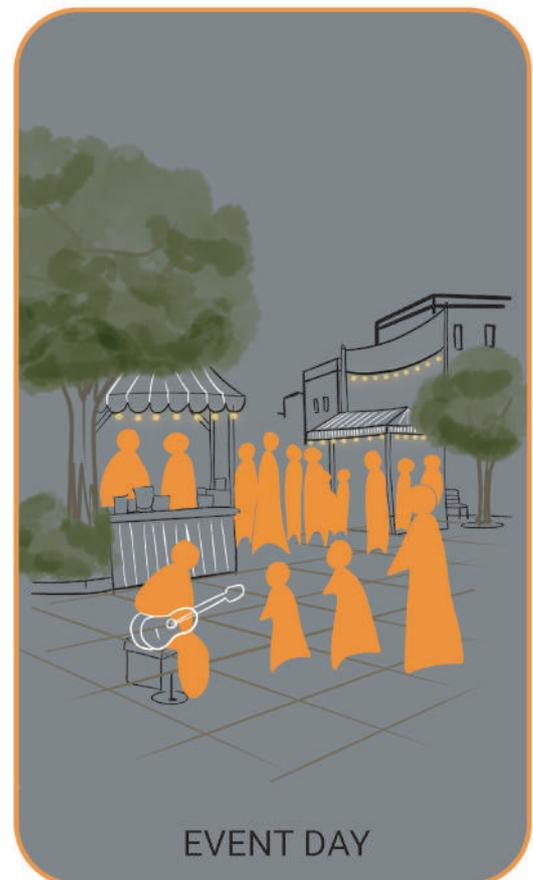
Everyday vs celebration.
Source: Studjurban

ROAD CLOSED
EVENT IN PROGRESS

Temporary urbanism, using short-term installations as pilots for long-term change, is a powerful tool. For example, a vacant lot might host a pop-up garden or become a temporary piazza. If these temporary applications prove effective, they have the potential to develop into long-term changes.

The Slow Streets project throughout Malta and Gozo, initiated by the Local Councils' Association during the COVID-19 pandemic, examined how temporary restrictions on through-traffic could transform residential streets into semi-public community areas or play streets. Some Local Councils have considered making some of the proposed modifications permanent after experiencing safer and quieter streets. Communities can directly witness the advantages of temporary tests, which lessen opposition to long-term changes.

Planning for temporal use requires active management and policy alignment. Clear communication is crucial: signage should indicate when spaces shift roles (e.g., pedestrian-only hours, school playground times). Flexibility must be coordinated, not chaotic.

Some cities appoint "night mayors" to oversee nighttime economies. In Malta, Local Councils can create dedicated committees to manage open space programming throughout the year, ensuring a lively and orderly schedule of activities, as discussed in the LCA's document **3.3 Open Markets.** Time, like space, must be designed and curated.

This does not come without its challenges:

- **High Urban Density and Limited Land:**
  Malta's dense urban fabric leaves little space for new public areas. Reclaiming space from car use such as parking or traffic lanes often meets resistance. Balancing parking needs with open space creation demands careful negotiation and clear demonstration of benefits. It cannot be seen without considering parking management in the broader context, which is amply discussed in the LCA's *Parking Projects* document as part of the *Sustainable Mobility* series.

- **Car Dependency and Culture:**
  Decades of car-centric planning have entrenched a dependence on vehicles, as discussed in the LCA's *Sustainable Mobility* documents. Shifting towards pedestrian-first environments involves a cultural and mindset change. Open communication, trial programmes and public education are crucial to combat this scepticism.

- **Heritage Restrictions:**
  The preservation of archaeological artefacts and the respect for traditional aesthetics are primary considerations in the rehabilitation of historical towns and villages. This needs to be factored into a project's timeline and budget, even though this is often somewhat of a shot in the dark. Ultimately, these aspects will increase the value of a historical piazza, positively impacting tourist numbers, resident pride and economic vitality.

- **Climate and Environmental Conditions:**
  Intense heat, limited water resources and flash floods complicate open space design, especially when there are significant topographical and terrain challenges. Climate-resilient planning, including shading, permeable paving and stormwater management, must be at the core of any intervention.

- **Governance and Maintenance:**
  Effective reuse requires coordination between Local Councils, residents, government agencies and sometimes private stakeholders. Long-term maintenance must be planned from the outset to avoid beautiful spaces falling into neglect.

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Car Dependency and Culture
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Intense heat, limited water resources, and flash floods complicate open space design.

CHALLENGES

Governance and Maintenance
Coordination between councils, government agencies, andsometimes private stakeholders. Long-term maintenance must be planned.

Heritage Constraints
Historic towns present both opportunities and hurdles. Protecting archaeological finds and respecting traditional aesthetics increases costs and timelines.

Open Space Re-use — some key challenges.
Source: Studjurban

Image by Adriend Olichon on Unsplash

At the same time, numerous opportunities exist.

- **Strong Cultural Traditions:**
  Malta's rich culture of feasts, gatherings, and street life implies that once urban spaces are improved, people will be ready to use them enthusiastically.

- **Governmental and Financial Support:**
  Initiatives led by the Local Councils' Association, individual Local Councils, government agencies such as Project Green and Infrastructure Malta, together with the prospect of EU funding (discussed later in this document), have given rise to unprecedented financial backing for public space projects. Local Councils have both the mandate and the means to act boldly.

- **Successful Local Precedents:**
  Recent projects in several localities throughout Malta and Gozo show that transformation is possible. These examples reduce fear of change and offer templates for success.

- **Growing Public Demand:**
  Awareness of the need for green, sociable urban environments is rising. Residents increasingly demand a better quality of life and public leaders at different scales of governance can tap into this momentum to champion new projects.

OPPORTUNITIES

Strong Cultural Traditions

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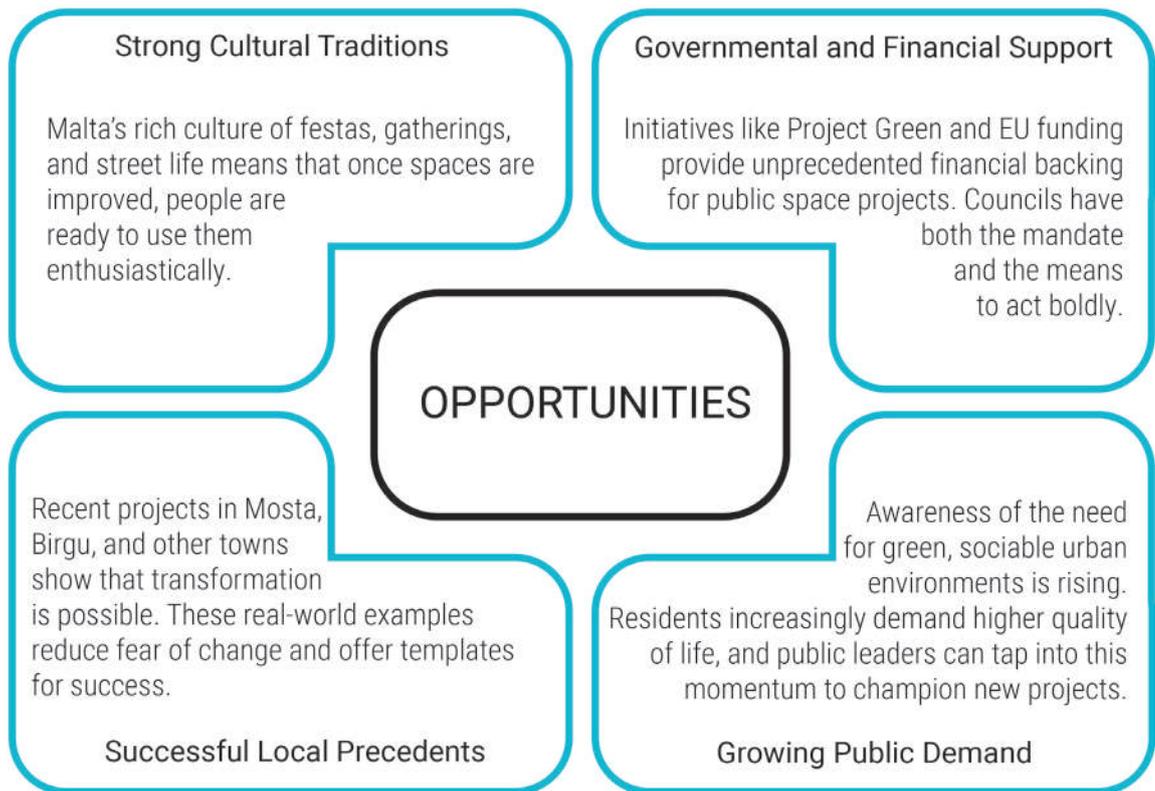
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Recent projects in Mosta, Birgu, and other towns show that transformation is possible. These real-world examples reduce fear of change and offer templates for success.

Successful Local Precedents

Awareness of the need for green, sociable urban environments is rising. Residents increasingly demand higher quality of life, and public leaders can tap into this momentum to champion new projects.

Growing Public Demand

Open Space Re-use — some key opportunities.
Source: Studjurban

Every successful pedestrianised street, recovered piazza, or regenerated park enhances the area's aesthetic appeal and liveability for its residents. In Malta's tightly woven urban landscape, where every square metre matters, planning for the fourth dimension – time – becomes a vital strategy. An open space that works across hours, days and seasons is one that maximises its community value.

4. Key Design Pointers for Multi-Use Open Spaces

Image by andry-sagatelov on Unsplash

Designing an open space that serves multiple purposes over time is an art and a science. Whether shaping a small neighbourhood piazza or a grand town square, the goal is the same: to create places that are welcoming, durable, adaptable, alive and liveable. These principles, rooted in international urban design best practice and Malta's unique spatial and cultural context, may guide Local Councils and designers toward implementing resilient, people-first public spaces. Here are some key design pointers to keep in mind.

Image by jordy-munoz on Unsplash

1. Universal Accessibility: Designing for Everyone

Anybody, regardless of age, ability, or mobility, must be able to enter a truly public environment. Physical obstacles must be removed, starting with level surfaces throughout, tactile pavement for people with visual impairments and gently sloping ramps in place of (or in tandem with) stairs. Due to their historical background, numerous Maltese piazzas are elevated or uneven; nonetheless, thoughtful redesign can integrate accessible pathways and entrances while maintaining their charm.

Entrances should be wide, clearly defined, and without bottlenecks, ensuring smooth flow during daily use or large events. Accessibility also means thinking beyond mobility, for example, creating welcoming environments for older people, families with children and individuals with sensory sensitivities. A truly inclusive space considers how everyone enters, moves through and experiences it.

2. Quality Ground Surfaces: The Foundation of Flexibility

The paving is more than just a finish, it is the operational floor of the space. High-quality, durable materials that withstand both constant foot traffic and occasional vehicle loads are essential. Where service or emergency access is needed, paving should be laid to support that weight without damage. For example, thicker interlocking stone pavers in certain areas may accommodate delivery trucks and/or emergency vehicles.

Visually, a consistent paving treatment that blurs the line between former roads and pavements helps signal that the space now belongs primarily to people. Subtle design features such as changes in texture, colour tonality, or embedded lighting can indicate zones for event setups, evening markets (as discussed in LCA's publication 3.3 Open Markets) and outdoor catering areas. The latter aspect deserves particular

attention – clear masterplans should demarcate such areas and they should not be allowed to grow at the expense of the pedestrian space being generated.
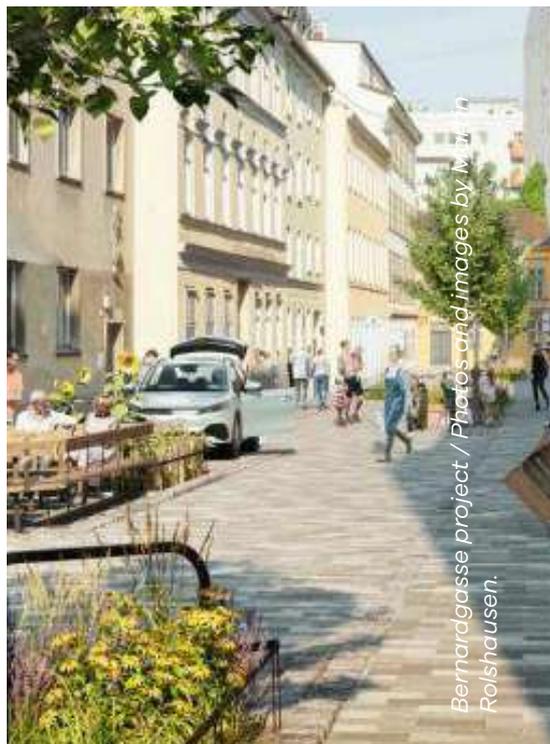
Bernardgasse project / Photos and images by Martin Folshausen

Image by nerea merino sesarino on Unsplash

3. Greenery and Shade: Comfort and Character

Integrating proper green infrastructure is essential even in piazzas primarily composed of paved surfaces. Trees offer invaluable shade, improve air quality and soften the visual impact of hard materials such as stone and concrete. When soil depth is limited (due to underground commitments, for instance), creative solutions like large planters or modular green structures may accommodate smaller trees or large shrubs.

The strategic pairing of seating and shade, whether from trees, canopies, or tensile fabric structures, ensures comfort during Malta's hot summers. Green elements can also act as informal boundaries, defining play areas or buffering pedestrian zones from traffic without resorting to fencing. In this way, greenery becomes both a functional and aesthetic infrastructure.

4. Modular Street Furniture: Supporting a Range of Activities

Street furniture should be as adaptable as the space itself. While fixed benches are essential along shaded edges, movable tables and chairs empower people to arrange their immediate environment, a principle long championed by urbanist William H. Whyte. Movable furniture invites flexibility: a group of friends can gather under a tree, a solo visitor can find sun or solitude and a space can be cleared entirely for an event or performance.

Permanent elements can also serve multiple purposes. Wide ledges, low walls, or steps can double as casual seating or impromptu amphitheatres. Varying seating types with and without backs, both within shaded areas and in direct sunlight, could make the space more inclusive and comfortable for different users at varying times of the day and year.

5. Flexible Traffic Management: Open When Needed, Closed When Desired

In many town centres, full pedestrianisation may not always be practical. Instead, controlled access through removable bollards, retractable posts, or aesthetically integrated planters allows spaces to shift between pedestrian and shared use depending on the time or day of the week. For instance, a square might permit slow-moving cars on weekdays but be completely pedestrian-only on feast days or weekends. To preserve the visual integrity of the urban space, especially within a historical setting, it is crucial to ensure that barriers are portable and aesthetically compatible with the area.

6. Lighting and Infrastructure: Enabling Evening Use and Events

A well-lit square invites evening activity. Lighting should balance function (for safety) and atmosphere (for beauty). Pole lights, wall sconces and integrated ground lighting may define edges, highlight specific design accents and make the space feel secure and inviting after dark.

Open spaces must be event-ready to allow for diverse usage, such as markets, performances and community events and include elements such as strategically placed built-in electrical connections (concealed in lockable floor boxes finished with the same paving material). Planning for such elements at the design stage prevents future retrofitting challenges. In high-use areas, access to water — for temporary fountains, cooling features, or cleaning of the urban space — further expands its programming potential.

7. Purposeful Zones Without Rigid Separation

Designers can suggest different character areas within an open space without physically segregating it. A cluster of trees and benches forms a quiet corner; an open paved section invites performances or markets; and edges near cafés may host outdoor catering areas, if carefully planned (recall earlier discussions regarding the over-encroachment of OCAs within the public space).

Where possible, design should play into the space rather than isolate it. Instead of a fenced playground, use sculptural play elements, hedges, or green mounds that appeal to children and serve other purposes (artistic elements, informal seating, etc.), while still ensuring the safety and security of the play area. This also avoids leaving areas underused when one age group might not be present and makes the space more visually appealing and functionally integrated.

8. Safety and Legibility: Spaces That Make Sense

An open space should be easy to understand at a glance. Clear sightlines across the space, free of visual obstructions, help people feel secure and orient themselves quickly. Boundaries between pedestrian zones and traffic lanes should be clearly indicated through texture, slight elevation changes, or visual cues.

In certain situations, a shared space approach is suitable, in which vehicles may be permitted to travel at relatively slow speeds and preference given to people. This strategy promotes a calmer, safer environment by encouraging drivers to pay additional attention and respect pedestrians and cyclists. Emergency access must always be retained; collapsible bollards and broad paved areas ensure fire engines or ambulance services can reach buildings when necessary.

Image by Patrice SAUCOURT on Loevenbruck

9. Materials and Maintenance: Designing for the Long Haul

Multi-use spaces are subjected to more wear and tear so materials should be robust, repairable and chosen with long-term upkeep in mind. Modular pavers allow for ease of replacement and well-finished metals and treated hardwoods or engineered wood can withstand the elements. Trees and plants should be selected not only for beauty, but for their hardiness in the local climate.

Wherever possible, design with future adaptation in mind. A water element, for instance, might later need to make way for a community pavilion. By embedding flexibility into construction using removable elements, reserving service connections, or allowing for modular reconfiguration, the space may evolve with community needs.

Temporary installations can also serve as early activations: painted games on the ground, pop-up planters, or modular seating can quickly transform a space and ideas may be tested before committing to a more permanent solution. As outlined in the LCA's **3.5 Outdoor Sports** document, such interim solutions can also encourage physical activity and community interaction from the outset, helping to build early momentum and support for long-term reuse. This approach allows communities to experiment, respond to changing preferences and grow public support over time.

Designing a space for multi-use means designing for change. A truly successful public space is not one that rigidly dictates behaviour, but one that invites diverse uses, adapts to daily and seasonal rhythms and continues to evolve alongside the people it serves.

Whether it is a morning market, an evening concert, a festival, or a quiet afternoon chat among residents — the same urban space should be able to host them all with ease. The design principles above are about creating the physical framework for this flexibility. But as with any open space, what truly brings it to life is the human energy — the programming, maintenance and community care that sustain it long after construction ends.

Source: Studjurban

5. Eight Practical Steps for Re-using Open Spaces

It takes a systematic, collaborative and iterative process to turn underutilised open spaces into lively, welcoming public areas. Local Councils can successfully negotiate the challenges of open space renewal by using best practices and toolkits like the EU's Urban Agenda Reuse Roadmap. From early scoping to long-term stewardship, the eight steps provide a clear, pragmatic route that deploys tactical urbanism and community participation to guarantee that the outcomes are successful and welcomed.

01 Mapping and Assessment

02 Community Engagement and Visioning

03 Envisioning and Development of Design

04 Tactical Urbanism

05 Decision and Refinement

06 Financing and Funding

07 Implementation and Mainstreaming

08 Monitoring and Evaluation

Steps for Re-using Open Spaces.
Source: Studjurban

Step 1
Mapping and Assessment:
Establishing the Baseline

The first step is to take stock of all potential public spaces within a locality. This includes piazzas, vacant lots, parking areas, side streets, neglected gardens and leftover spaces; effectively, any area with the potential to serve a public function. Examine each site's size, ownership, use, surrounding context and historical value using tools such as Geographic Information System (GIS), on-the-ground observational research and data gathering. Pay close attention to areas where services and key amenities might be lacking. Verify results against local planning policies, development applications and other relevant planning documents. Following this initial assessment, the objective would be to shortlist potential interventions within various sites.

Step 2
Community Engagement and Visioning:
Co-Creating the Future

Listening is the first step towards effective transformation. Through workshops, surveys and on-the-ground walkabouts, involve residents, business owners, young people, the elderly and community organisations. Individuals should be empowered to graphically communicate their views using participatory mapping within dedicated workshops or design charrettes, which reveal both issues and opportunities. Engagement should be ongoing – consider forming an advisory council or working group in this respect. Try to express a common vision for the area by the end of this phase. Stakeholders are more likely to support and uphold a vision when they have a say in its creation.
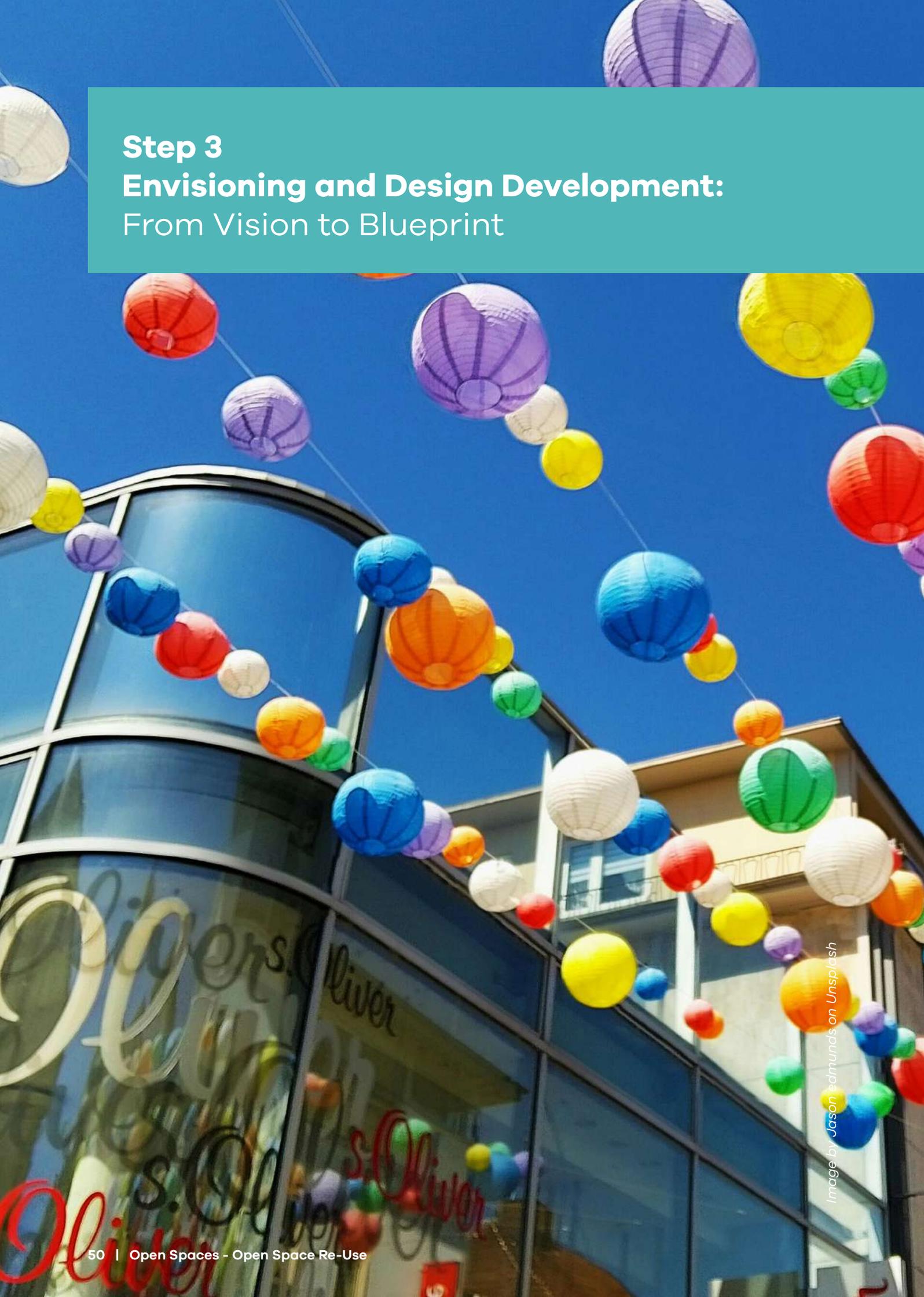
Step 3
Envisioning and Design Development:
From Vision to Blueprint

The design process can start if a vision has the community's support. Architects and urban designers can then visually and graphically convert such concepts into a tangible form. Options that take into account both immediate (temporary) experimentation and long-term (permanent) objectives may be discussed, working closely with stakeholders, and importantly, including service and utilities providers, NGOs and traffic engineers. The outcome should be a master plan that balances ambition and viability, considering accessibility, flexibility and the intended uses (and resultant users) across time (e.g., weekend markets vs. weekday leisure).
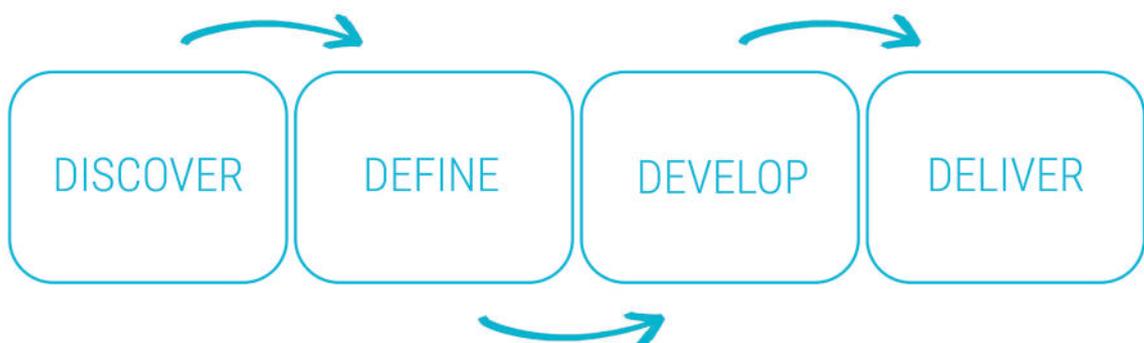
DISCOVER   DEFINE   DEVELOP   DELIVER

Illustration by Studjurban

Step 4
Tactical Urbanism:
Testing Through Action

Image by Marek Lumi on unsplash

Before committing to permanent changes, experiment with temporary interventions. These small-scale, low-cost pilots — hallmarks of tactical urbanism (discussed amply within the LCA's **Slow Streets** project) allow ideas to be tested in real-world conditions. Create a pop-up piazza for a weekend, reroute traffic temporarily, or animate the space with art and programming. Use inexpensive materials like painted asphalt, movable furniture and shading elements. These temporary initiatives provide useful information, highlight unanticipated difficulties and foster public support. For example, a street closure trial might show the effects on traffic and gauge community interest (or opposition). Record results with images, endorsements, usage figures and comments. These outcomes are essential for improving the finished design.
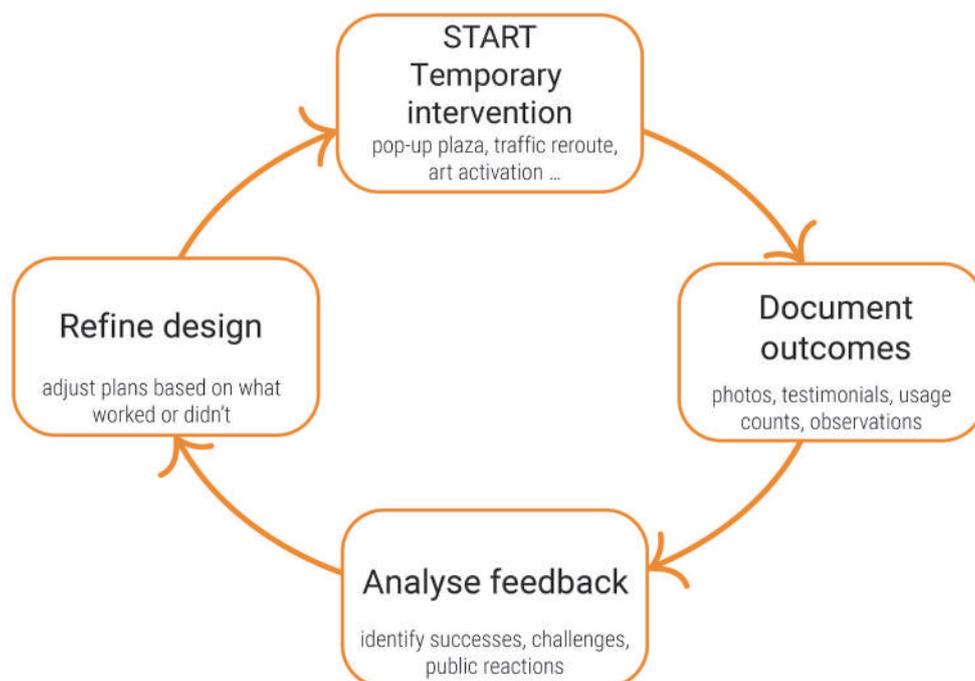
START
Temporary
intervention
pop-up plaza, traffic reroute,
art activation ...

Document
outcomes
photos, testimonials, usage
counts, observations

Analyse feedback
identify successes, challenges,
public reactions

Refine design
adjust plans based on what
worked or didn't

Illustration by Studjurban

Step 5
Decision and Refinement:
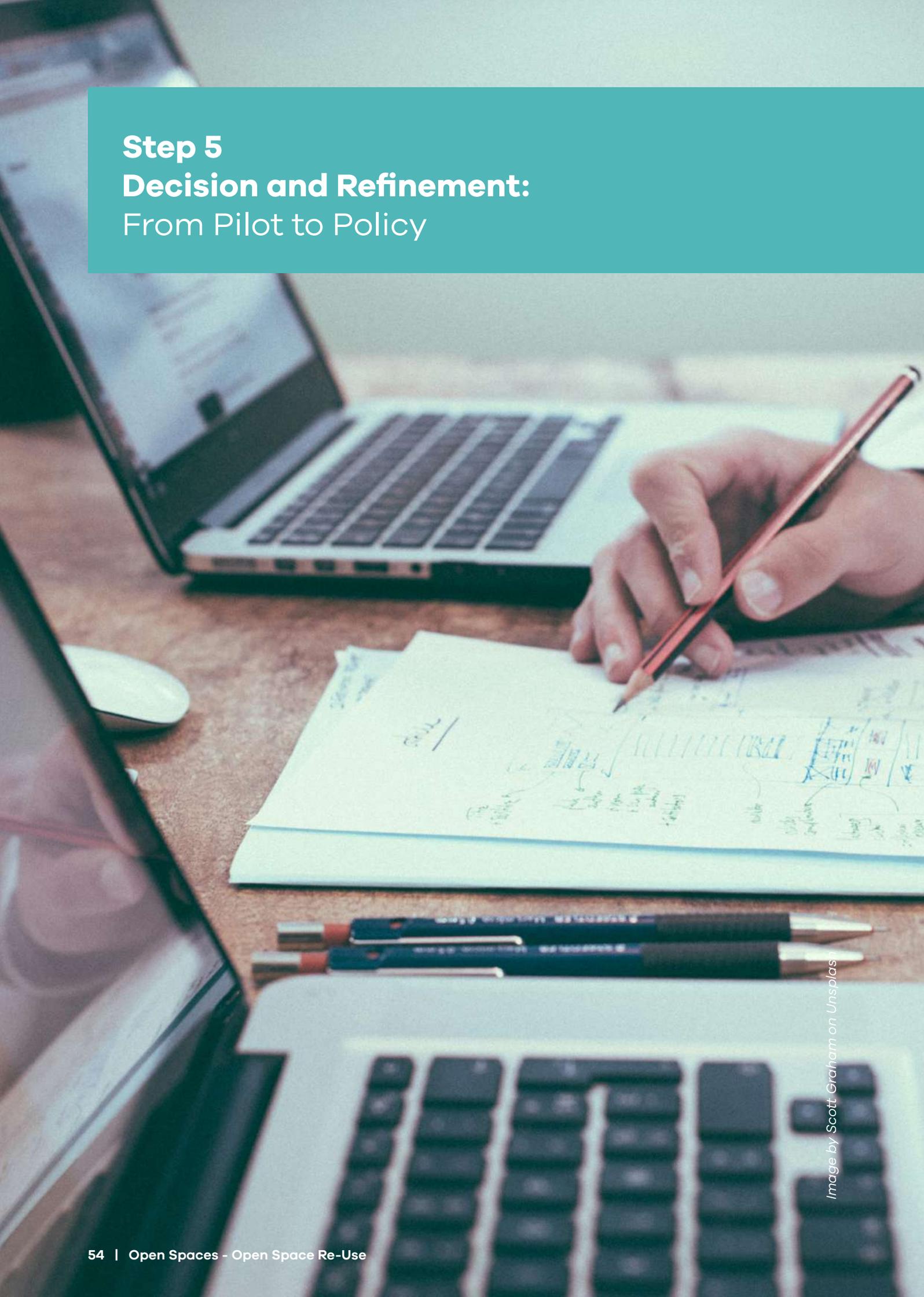### From Pilot to Policy

Armed with feedback from tactical experiments, the project enters a decision-making phase. Analyse what worked, what did not and what needs to change. Adjust the design and management plans accordingly. This step also includes obtaining formal approvals — from all Local Council councillors, transport authorities and planning, heritage and environmental bodies. Use the evidence gathered to make a compelling case: community endorsements, usage data and before-and-after comparisons. Finalise partnerships, secure maintenance commitments and lock in stakeholder roles. Not every pilot will result in full implementation, but obtaining such knowledge with (relatively) minimal resources is better than with (costlier) permanent solutions. Making well-informed, data-based decisions that balance viability and bold visions is what counts.
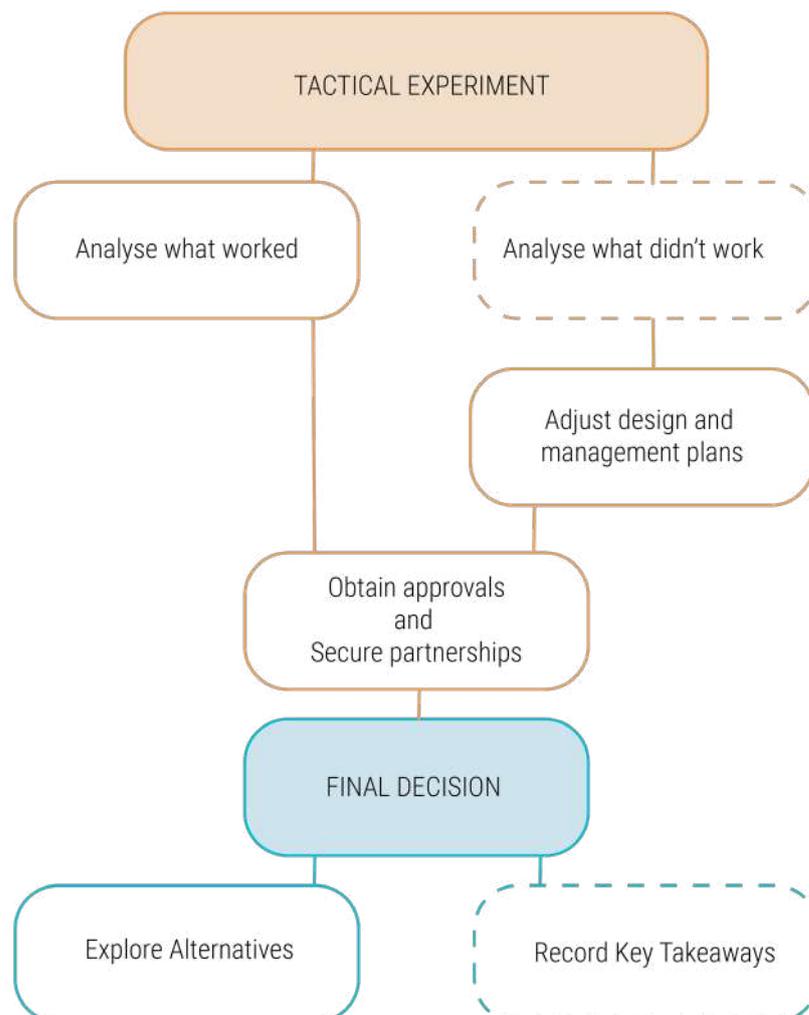

Illustration by Studjurban

Step 6
Financing and Funding:
Resourcing the Vision

Image by Marek Lumi on Unsplash

The cost of open space initiatives varies, ranging from full-scale makeovers to low-cost tactical urbanism interventions. Develop a funding strategy that incorporates private donations, EU initiatives (such the European Regional Development Fund or those linked to Urban Agenda Initiatives, discussed further later), national grants (through appropriate agencies or authorities) and Local and/or Regional Council finances. Take into account Horizon Europe research funding if the project incorporates innovation (such as digital features or nature-based solutions). Look into community fundraisers, public-private partnerships and sponsorships, particularly for fixtures or urban furniture elements. Keep in mind maintenance, programming and upkeep costs. Previous phases are essential at this phase since funding readiness will depend on the degree of design development and the community's support.

Step 7
Implementation and Mainstreaming:
Bringing the Space to Life

Image by leo_visions on Unsplash

Implementation starts after plans are finalised and financing is obtained. Employ contractors, phase construction to minimise disturbance and use updates and signage to notify residents and the public at large. After construction is finished, integration and activation become the main priorities. Work with local organisations to create a schedule of events that will maintain the venue vibrant and current, such as markets, performances and fitness or sports-related activities. To preserve the space's future usage, understand the longer-term implications on mobility patterns and incorporate any modifications into future plans for the locality. To manage operations and collaborations, consider forming a stewardship group (similar to the formation of committees proposed in other LCA documents, such as organising open markets) or hiring a placemaking manager.

Step 8
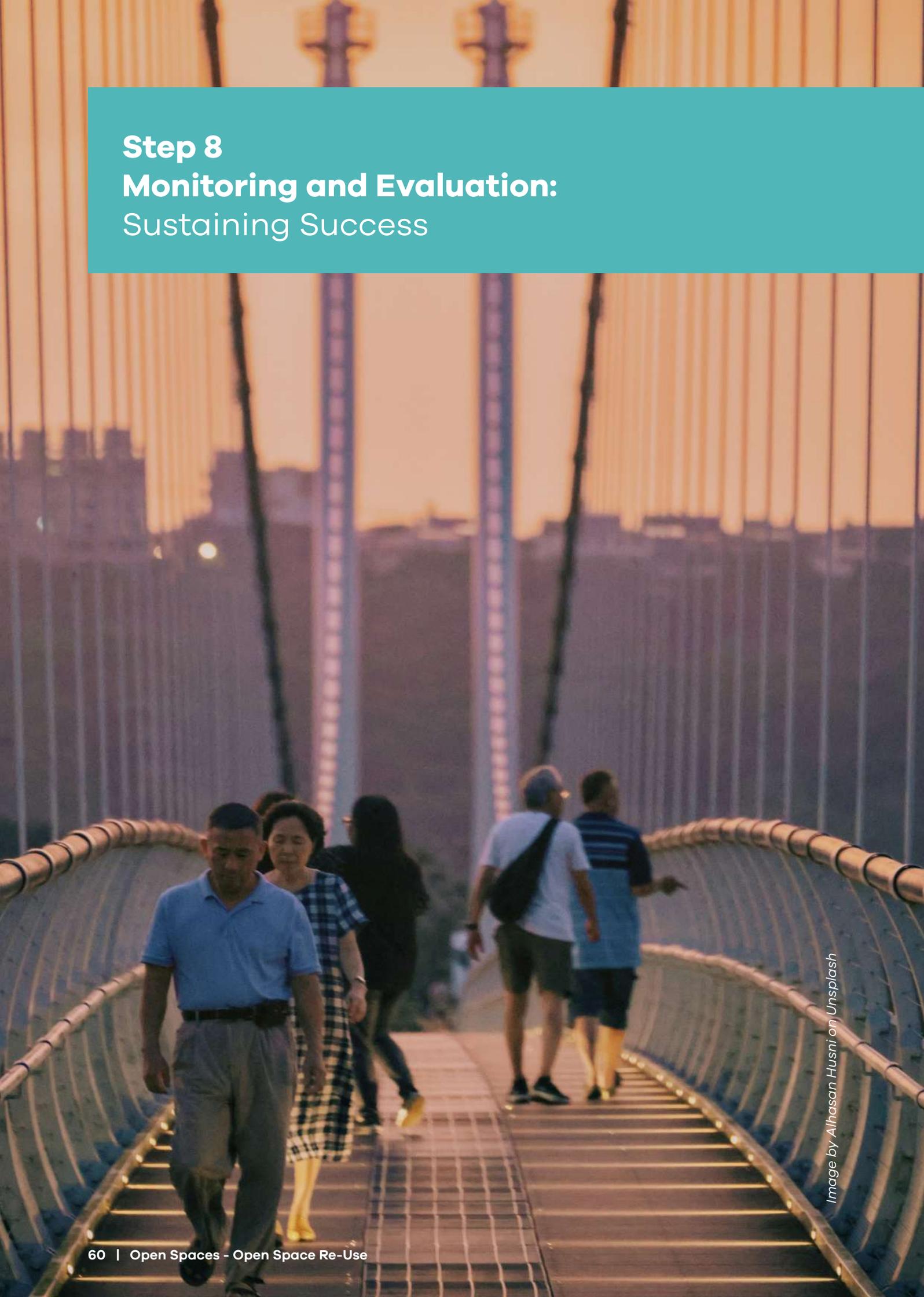# Monitoring and Evaluation:
Sustaining Success

The true test of a public space lies in its continued relevance and use. Set clear metrics for footfall, community satisfaction, event frequency, safety improvements and evaluate performance over time. Use a mix of observational studies, digital sensors and direct feedback channels to obtain the most appropriate data. Document and share findings with the community, funders and other Local Councils. Use evaluation results to fine-tune management, adjust programming, or inform future projects. A vibrant square today could inspire a park, street, or other urban space tomorrow. Ongoing monitoring not only improves performance but also builds resilience into the process and contributes to the learning curve on such open space transformations. Such evaluation may feed back into design process in the future.
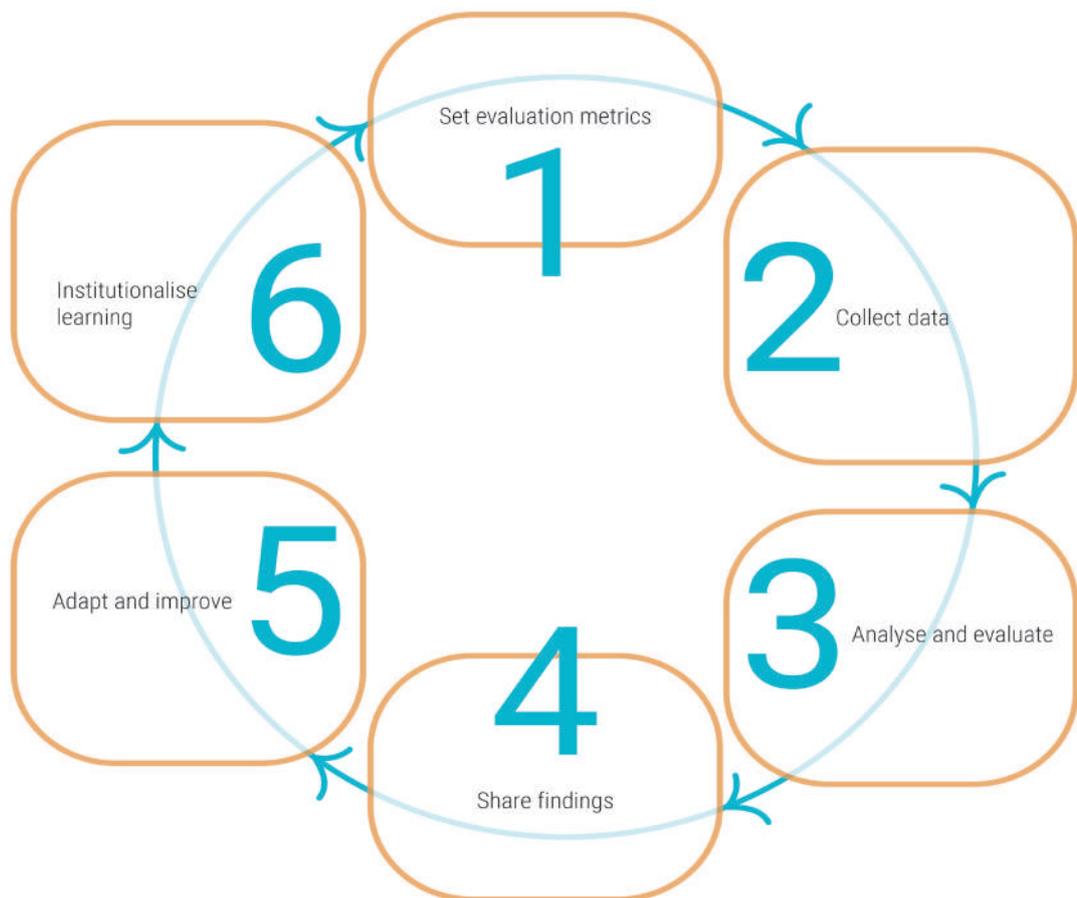

1 Set evaluation metrics
2 Collect data
3 Analyse and evaluate
4 Share findings
5 Adapt and improve
6 Institutionalise learning

Illustration by Studjurban

6. EU Projects and Funding Opportunities

Rethinking open spaces fits well with the EU's larger goal of creating inclusive, sustainable and culturally dynamic cities. In order to encourage open space reuse and placemaking activities, the EU has started a number of projects and funding streams between 2020 and 2025 that Maltese local authorities may directly access, participate in, or learn from. The most pertinent EU initiatives, case studies and new prospects for Malta are highlighted in this section.

6.1 EU Urban Agenda & URBACT Networks: Resources for Strategic Planning

Through its Public Spaces collaboration, the EU Urban Agenda has created policy guidelines and toolkits that guide the revival of underutilised urban areas. A notable resource is the **"Toolkit for the Reuse of Dismissed or Abandoned Open Spaces" (2021),** which provides a practical roadmap similar to the reuse process outlined in earlier sections.

Meanwhile, the **URBACT programme,** Europe's leading city-to-city learning network, offers hands-on support and peer exchange. Previous networks like **REFILL** (temporary use of vacant spaces), **Space4People** (public space and mobility) and **MAPS** (repurposing military sites), have generated transferable knowledge for Malta. Although Malta did not participate in those networks, their resources remain publicly accessible. **Under URBACT IV (2021–2027),** Maltese towns can apply to join new networks focused on placemaking, green infrastructure, or heritage-led regeneration. Participation enables expert facilitation, action planning and potential seed funding.

6.2 Horizon 2020 / Horizon Europe: Innovation in Public Space and Heritage

The **Horizon 2020** and **Horizon Europe** research programmes have funded a variety of projects tackling urban public space through innovation, culture and green infrastructure. Examples include the **ROCK** (Regeneration and Optimisation of Cultural heritage in creative and Knowledge cities) project (2017–2020) that also explored the adaptive reuse of piazzas; and **GreenSURGE** and **Urban GreenUP** that focused on nature-based solutions such as converting paved lots into pocket parks or urban gardens.

In turn, the **New European Bauhaus (NEB) Facility,** anchored in Horizon Europe and funded from 2025 to 2027, promotes projects that combine sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion within urban neighbourhoods. In addition, under the **Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission,** cities like Valletta may access funding for open space interventions linked to decarbonisation, such as pedestrianisation, green corridors, or smart infrastructure. In May 2025, the EU Mission Label was bestowed upon 39 cities; 92 cities now have this label.

6.3 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) & Cohesion Funds: Funding the Transformation

EU structural and cohesion policy has long supported urban improvement in Malta. The 2021–2027 programming period includes priorities such as greener towns and villages, sustainable mobility and tourism and heritage preservation. Open space projects that deliver on these goals, such as creating parks, upgrading the public realm, or reusing historic sites, are strong candidates. Local Councils should coordinate early with agencies and authorities such as Infrastructure Malta, Transport Malta, the Malta Tourism Authority and the Planning Authority to package their ideas into larger, fundable proposals. The **Just Transition Fund** and the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** established post-COVID also support public realm improvements and urban greening.

6.4 LIFE Programme and Environmental Grants: Greening the Urban Landscape

The **LIFE programme (2021–2027)** funds urban climate adaptation and biodiversity projects. Local Councils with open space visions that emphasise ecological value, such as rain gardens, pollinator corridors, or stormwater parks, may apply for LIFE co-funding.

Other relevant EU instruments include:

- **Erasmus+** and **Europe for Citizens** - support knowledge exchange, youth engagement and participatory planning (e.g., town twinning on specific subjects such as playground design).

- **Creative Europe** - funds cultural programming in public spaces, such as art installations in redesigned squares or performances in reactivated heritage areas.

6.5 European Case Studies: Inspiration from the Continent

Maltese localities can draw inspiration from successful EU-funded projects across Europe:

- **Paris: "Rues aux écoles"** - converting streets near schools into child-friendly, car-free zones. This model addresses both public health and mobility.

Source: 'Le Journal du Grand Paris

image by Christophe Belin

- **Barcelona: 'Superblock' model -** reconfiguring city grids to reduce traffic and expand pedestrian space. Although Malta's urban form and scale differ, reconfiguring and restructuring public streets and other urban spaces while integrating traffic calming measures has potential in numerous towns. The Superblock model seeks to limit extraneous traffic to peripheral areas to liberate internal urban pockets from such traffic, prioritising spaces for residents and sustainable mobility patterns.

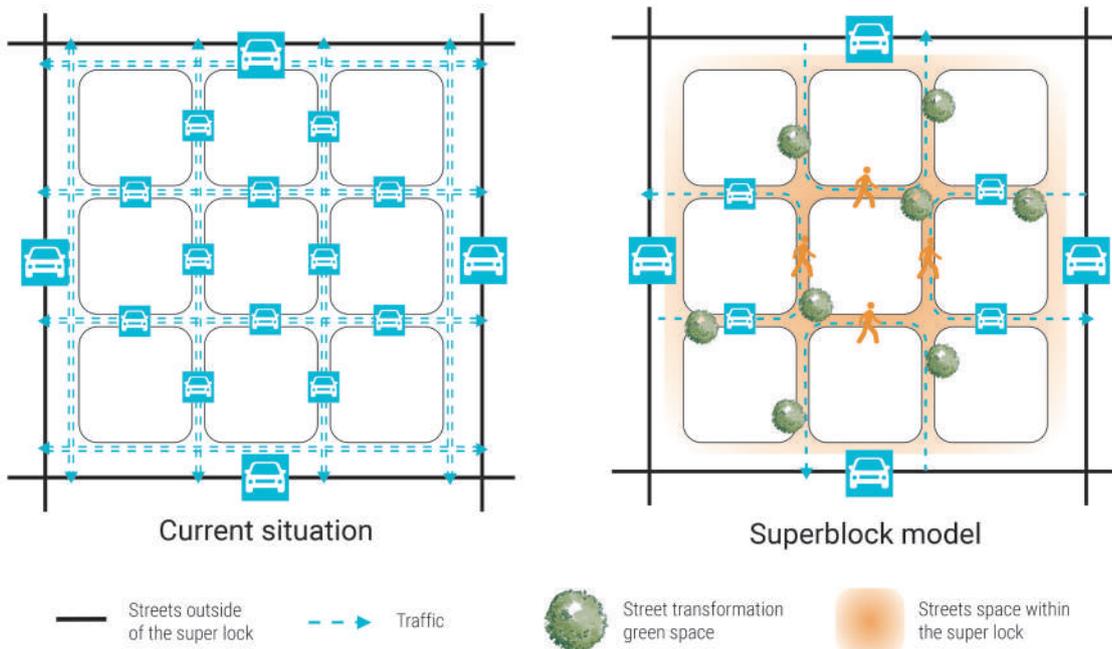*Source: Hans-Christian Rößler - Frankfurter Allgemeine*

Current situation

Superblock model

— Streets outside of the super lock

- - -> Traffic

Street transformation green space

Streets space within the super lock

Illustration by Studjurban

6.6 Leveraging EU Networks and Awards: Visibility and Knowledge Sharing

Membership in EU-wide initiatives enhances credibility and access to know-how:

- The **Covenant of Mayors** and the **Green City Accord** both promote public space, sustainable mobility and nature-based solutions.

- **European Week of Mobility** is a platform to trial street closures or host open space activations. Cities that engage in this programme may receive EU recognition or be invited to participate in best-practice exchanges.

- EU awards such as the **European Green Leaf, New European Bauhaus Prizes** and Mobility Week Awards can bring small funding grants and international exposure even for smaller towns and villages.

Horizon Missions and Future Calls: What's Next for 2025–2030

Looking forward, Horizon Europe's **Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change** will support cooler, more resilient cities. Meanwhile, any extension of **RRF-style instruments** in response to new challenges (e.g. energy transition or tourism recovery) could provide further avenues for public realm investment. Open space projects enhancing liveability and economic vitality can be considered crisis-response infrastructure.

6.7 **Strategic Alignment and Readiness:** Positioning Projects for EU Success

To compete for EU funds, Maltese Local Councils must align proposals with major EU goals, including Climate neutrality (Green Deal), Social cohesion and inclusion, Digital transition and Public health and resilience. A redesigned square, for example, might tick all four boxes, offering green infrastructure and stormwater management (climate-related), public space for all ages (cohesion-related), introduction of adequate technology (digital transition) and enhancing the possibility of outdoor exercise (health-related). Applications should cite these contributions explicitly and link to the UN's SDGs, especially SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

Preparation is key. Local Councils should develop clear concepts, secure community backing and prepare technical documentation in advance, with support from other entities such as XjenzaMalta, the Regional Councils, the LCA, together with relevant agencies and authorities. One task could be keeping a registry of ready-to-fund open space projects that align with upcoming EU calls. The EU has provided financial tools, inspiration, knowledge, and networks to improve public space.

Most of Malta's challenges in reusing open spaces have likely been tackled elsewhere in Europe. By engaging with these networks, joining programmes, and applying strategic funding bids, Malta can leapfrog barriers, share knowledge from previous projects and potentially lead by example.

7. Concluding Thoughts

Re-using open spaces is not just a design choice; it is a strategic investment in Malta's future. In a country where land is limited but cultural richness abounds, reclaiming underused areas is both urgent and full of opportunity. Piazzas, alleys, traffic-dominated streets, unstructured leftover urban spaces and forgotten corners can be transformed into vibrant public spaces at different scales that enhance quality of life, build communities and boost climate resilience.

This document has outlined a practical, participatory roadmap for Local Councils starting from identifying spaces and engaging communities to piloting interventions, securing funding and ensuring long-term success. The approach is adaptable and actionable and may further be inspired from, and guided by, European best practices. Local Councils may continue building on the current momentum of public space rethinking and reshaping that has occurred in a number of localities. Successes in Mosta and Birgu show that even dense, historic areas can be reshaped for people, not just cars. They demonstrate that healthier, more vibrant localities are possible when public spaces prioritise people and community life.

Access to EU projects and knowledge-sharing networks provides Maltese Local Councils with tools and resources, with the Local Councils Association providing ongoing collaboration and support.

Tangible improvements alone will not bring about true change. This calls for a shift in culture, community ownership and long-term stewardship. Investing in resident-led projects, flexible rules and placemaking expertise will be crucial. The LCA's document **3.5 Outdoor Sports** further supports this vision, highlighting how re-used spaces may actively promote healthier lifestyles, inclusivity and everyday community interaction through sport and movement. Repurposing streets and creating more accessible open spaces within walking distance of every home should also be strengthened through targeted policy.

Success will be fuelled by adaptability and experimentation using a tactical urbanism approach. Not all pilots will be successful right away, which is a plus. By experimenting, learning and making adjustments, Local Councils can design areas that accurately represent the community's needs and goals.

This document aims to inspire action at all levels, given that the benefits are clear for all — everyone gains from safer, greener and more vibrant neighbourhoods. We must reimagine Malta's urban future as consisting of towns and villages that are more resilient, inclusive and accessible.

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