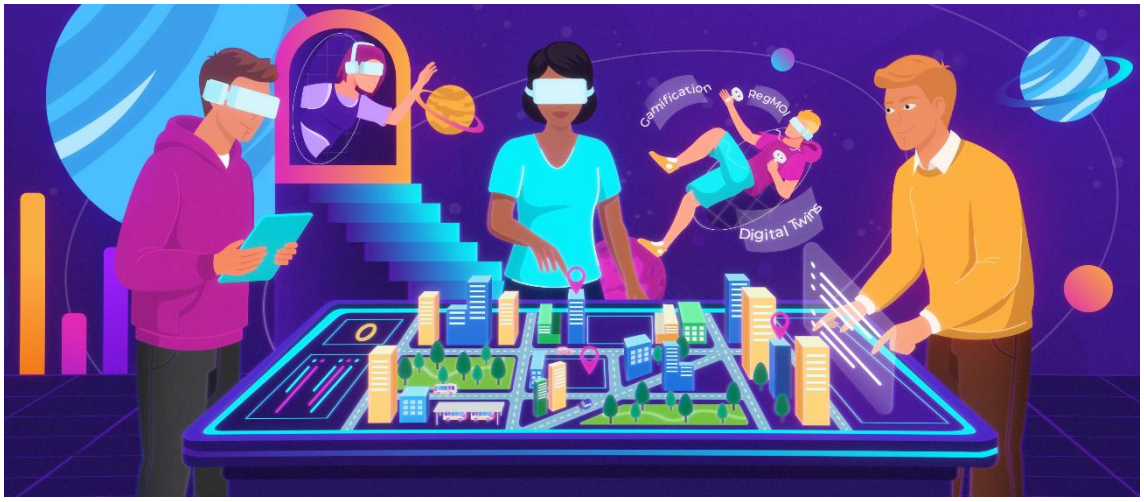

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The Dream Square

Interreg
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Northern Periphery and Arctic

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1 The Dream Square

1.1 General Information

- Title of the Good Practice: The Dream Square
- Region / Municipality: Ostrobothnia, Nykarleby
- Country: Finland
- Contact Organisation: City of Nykarleby, Åbo Akademi University
- Contact Person & Role: Kimmo Rautanen, researcher/project manager, Åbo Akademi University Experience Lab.
- Email / Website: kimmo.rautanen@abo.fi www.explab.abo.fi
- Date of Implementation: (Start–end or ongoing) URBACT MetaCity pilot 1.1-31.12.2025, ongoing development work planned

1.2 Summary of the Good Practice

The challenge:

The municipal urban planning processes are outdated and don't live up to civic and stakeholder expectations of participation, inclusion and influence, especially in the face of technological transformation such as the use of advanced visualization tools.

The solution:

Introducing interactive, VR or online design events to allow citizens and stakeholders to interact with the plans and provide both comments and their own suggestions in dialogue with planning offers and decision-makers

The digital innovation:

Testing a visual solution allowing for participatory exercises and interaction with the plans through a combination och a VR model and a game engine to allow co-creative exercises on planning specific areas

The main outcome:

A more shared ownership of shared places and environments in the community, a more responsive and collaborative governance process and greater resident satisfaction with the state of democracy and governance in the municipality through timely and user-oriented services.

1.3 Context and Challenges Addressed

- What territorial challenge or opportunity did the region face?

The local planning process is outdated; the municipal planning process is conducted in a traditional, inward-looking way, and the windows for participation are not designed with maximal participation in mind, leaving little room for dialogue and civic feedback. As the region faces challenging demographics and tries to identify and establish new selling points for attracting new residents and business, factors such as a well-functioning governance mechanism that takes stock of the needs and expectations of all parties while ensuring smooth yet legally viable processes may be an important factor.

Both changing expectations from citizens and stakeholders and the introduction of new legislation and directives requiring more transparency and inclusivity from public actors are forces that suggest a need for new measures. For small municipalities the resources to introduce or even pilot new processes may be challenging; this calls for establishing new networks and exchanging GPs to test new possible approaches.

- Why was digital innovation relevant in this context?

The idea of visualizing the effects of planning in a specific area in an accessible and understandable way requires animations as the bottom line, and 3D through VR offer the best visual experience, while digital tools offer possibilities for real-time interaction and collection of feedback in direct dialogue with citizens.

- What specific community or stakeholder needs were identified?

The idea of collecting civic feedback though co-creative design of the town square was well liked, and generated a number of suggestions for implementation as well as ideas for developing the dialogue mechanism.

1.4 Objectives

- Participatory and inclusive planning processes to ensure that every resident may feel that they are seen and can contribute
- User testing of a digital solution viable for a small municipality
- Introduction of co-creative measures to support decision-making and develop governance
- Support the innovative capacity of municipal staff
- Support the inclusion of different groups in society and its development

1.5 Description of the Practice

1.5.1 Activities Implemented

The practice was built on the following points of departure:

Municipal strategy work within the city's strategic leading group as well as through the Urbact Metacity network and its network of stakeholders, laying down the baseline for the process and anchoring the development in the municipal strategy 2040, which is the foundation for all development actions.

Choice of the town square and its nearest surroundings as a testbed, as it's been highest on the development agenda for a while and engages almost everyone living or working in the city centre to some extent

Co-creative exercises and demonstrations with different groups of citizens and stakeholders, including general demos and ideation exercises at big events in the city as well as a bespoke design process where young residents were chosen as target group, as a shared safe space for young people was one of the foremost priorities.

Aligning different sectors of city hall to create a common goal and agree upon the measures, including to secure funding for the planned shared space and the resources of the technical department to realize the designs.

Choice of an existing platform pilot, developed by ULG stakeholders Åbo Akademi University and Novia UAS in a previous EU-funded project, to be refined for use in the Dream Square process. This included combining the photometric data used to create a 3D version of the square with a game engine allowing for simultaneous interactive design by up to ten people at once

Collection of different kinds of data relevant to the process, including existing municipal data, different kinds of user feedback from the test sessions, an analysis of the innovation readiness of the municipal organization and the critical points for aligning the pilot procedure with the municipal strategy as well as other ongoing participatory mechanisms planned or introduced during the project period.

1.5.2 Stakeholders Involved

- ☒ Local/regional authorities
- ☐ Civil society organisations
- ☒ Youth organisations
- ☐ Businesses / SMEs

☒ Universities / research centres

☐ Digital innovation hubs

☐ Other (please, name)

1.5.3 Resources Used

- Human resources

Project staff from Åbo Akademi University, Novia UAS and the town of Nykarleby

- Technical resources

An earlier prototype of a modelling tool, developed by ÅAU and Novia in a previous ERDF project Computers with enough capacity, VR glasses and large enough monitors to allow for people following the design process on site

- Funding sources (EU, national, regional, private sector)

EU (URBACT, ERASMUS+), Åbo Akademi University's and Nykarleby's own budgets, project support from the Ministry of employment and the economy,

1.6 Thematic Categorisation (Tick all that apply)

A. Digital Technologies

☒ Digital platforms for participation

☐ Open data solutions

☒ Digital twins / GIS / mapping tools

☐ AI supported

☒ Immersive tech (VR/AR) for community engagement

☒ Gamification

☐ Other (please, name)

B. Co Creation Methodologies

☒ Digital platforms for participation

☒ Participatory design

☐ Living labs

☐ Citizen assemblies

☐ Hackathons

☐ Digital consultation tools

☒ Collaborative prototyping

☐ Other (please, name)

C. Youth / Minority Groups Engagement

☒ Digi Tailored outreach to youth tal platforms for participation

☐ Inclusion of minority or marginalized communities

☐ Capacity-building for underrepresented groups

☐ Mentorship or ambassador programmes

☒ Co creation activities specifically targeting these groups

☐ Other (please, name)

1.7 Results and Impact

1.7.1 Quantitative Results (if available)

Number of participants

- 50 active participants testing the tools hands-on
- 100 people watching the design exercises, commenting on the case and the tools

Number/percentage of youth or minority participants

- Approximately 50% of active participants

Digital tools deployed

- CivicHub (the actual tool)
- Minecraft Education (pre-designs in an early stage)

Data/outputs generated

- A number of design suggestions created on the basic Civic Hub model
- A number of observations and insights that support the further design of the public planning process and the tools required, as well as the capacity building needs of municipal staff as well as the citizen

1.7.2 Qualitative Results

The experiment went some way towards widening the perspectives of public servants and elected decisionmakers on participatory methods and their potential. The citizens expressed feelings of being heard and the ease of use of the tool. A special goal of the project was to create conditions for young people to co-create with the municipality on topics that matter to them – and the town square is a natural meeting point for the youth In town. The young people participating appreciated the initiative and put expectations on the municipality to proceed to implementation.

1.8 Innovation and Added Value

- What is innovative about the approach or technology?

The technology was unique in the sense that similar applications are only provided by commercial actors, with price models that rule out commitment from smaller municipalities.

- How does it differ from traditional community engagement?

Even though the pilot was realised through an event, it could also be designed as a virtual community co-creating through a shared platform, given that the public servants in charge are present and communicative.

- What elements could inspire replication by other EU regions?

Experiences from this process (in URBACT Metacity) and earlier participatory designs (I e in URBACT IoTXChange) have in fact influenced some project partners to integrare some elements in their designs.

Thus, the expectation is that it could be replicated in any place-based development, as long as the cases are based on small(ish) areas. The participatory measures, including the tech-supported ones, are not in themselves unique, but the mechanism of choosing the right combination of tools and actions given the case, the possible effects of cultural, economic or environmental background could be replicated.

1.9 Lessons Learned

- What worked well?

The reception of the tool, even though still in a beta version, was by and large good, even by people who expressed a preference for face-to-face rather than virtual co-creation.

- What challenges were encountered?

At the main demo event it was apparent that the possibility to test VR-based interactive design for some people was overshadowed by the possibility to test VR in general.

- What would you do differently?

While not realizable in a small pilot project, and even though this kind of co-creation can be done even from home if one has a good internet connection, ideally a showroom or meeting point should be dedicated to a testing station with support available, preferably in a low-threshold public place (public libraries were mentioned).

1.10 Transferability and Scalability

- Which aspects can be replicated elsewhere?

Basically, both the technology and the co-creation process can be replicated anywhere given the available resources and the buy-in of the municipality and the civic sector/people in general in the process.

- What conditions (resources, policy environment, partnerships) are needed for transfer?

A dedicated tech provider that doesn't expect profit from day one. A municipality with a staff that is interested in truly letting the citizens influence the political process and concrete planning actions.

1.11 Links and Supporting Materials

- Website
- Video
- Tools/datasets
- Reports, publications
- Photos/images