



ECONOMY

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TRANSFORMING PUBLIC SPACE WITH USER-FRIENDLY OBJECTS

10

THEMES TO EXPLORE

over 300

USER-FRIENDLY OBJECTS

10

PROPOSALS

PUBLIC SPACES CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A DISTRICT OR A TOWN. AS PLACES THAT PROVIDE RESOURCES FOR GETTING ONE'S BEARINGS, RELAXING, HAVING FUN, EATING AND SOCIALISING, THEY HELP TO MAKE LOCAL AREAS MORE ATTRACTIVE. HOW CAN WE BRING USER-FRIENDLY FEATURES INTO THESE SHARED SPACES IN ORDER TO PROVIDE AN ENHANCED SENSE OF WELLBEING AND COMMUNITY SPIRIT?

Too much concrete, too much space devoted to vehicular traffic, characteristics that make it difficult to walk around comfortably or take a rest...today's public areas do not always provide the amenities required by the public or meet the goals pursued by local authorities. A lack of services (places to eat, toilets, drinking water fountains, etc.) and comfort and a feeling that they are dangerous or simply sad or "dead" areas are also negative factors impacting the life of the local community, attractiveness to tourists and economic development.

THREE HUNDRED INSPIRING OBJECTS

After focusing on mobile and temporary economic activities, the Institut Paris Region continues to explore micro-interventions in public space with a set of inspirational ideas for friendly public spaces based on "user-friendly objects"¹. These objects help to make spaces more attractive in several ways. They make areas livelier; they offer leisure and cultural activities; they provide beauty and colour; and they highlight the opportunities that exist in the neighbourhood. They foster social interactions among friends and families and provide opportunities for giving to others, talking to others and doing things together; they promote physical wellbeing by providing places to rest, exercise and play; they appeal to the senses; they bring nature and wildlife into the urban environment; they feel safer because they are lively, they make it easy to get your bearings, they provide somewhere to leave your bike, and they are well lit; they change people's perspectives and develop a sense of belonging; they send positive messages showing that local authorities care for neighbourhoods and communities. In order to offer a wide range of ideas, our study includes over 300 examples of user-friendly objects, most of which belong to familiar generic categories: street furniture, public art, signage, events, mobile commerce, the natural environment in the city, etc. Modes of use are associated with these objects: resting, drinking, relaxing, moving around, entertainment, social interaction, etc. A bench, for example, allows you to rest and to interact with others. The modes of use can sometimes be more complex: if it has a USB port, a bench can be used to charge your phone; if it has a cooling system

or is located in a “cooling-off area”, it provides somewhere to escape in hot weather. An object can also have different uses depending on your point of view. A climbing wall is used for exercise, but for passers-by it is also something entertaining to watch, a visual reference point, and a marker of quality public space.

In addition, the main use of an object can be enhanced by the presence of other objects nearby. For example, there might be different objects located around an exercise trail: a drinking fountain, a changing area with lockers, plantings to make the area more attractive, quiet spots where runners can relax, a food truck, and so on.

Last but not least, modes of use can be either individual (resting on a bench, grabbing a sandwich, enjoying an artwork, charging your phone, going rollerblading, etc.) or collective (chatting on a bench, having a picnic or kicking a ball around with friends, doing some gardening with your neighbours, exchanging books in a street library, etc.)

TEN USER-FRIENDLY THEMES

The objects have been arranged within ten themes that help to make public space more user-friendly: art, places to buy things, events, functionality, active mobility, nature, the senses, sport and play, sharing, and digital.

The beneficial effects of these themes on individual and collective wellbeing have been reported in scientific and sociological studies carried out by experts in urban issues. Psychologists and biologists have explored the benefits of trees on health and mental wellbeing in urban settings; health professionals recommend active mobility and sport as ways to combat the harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle; tourism professionals

have told us how artworks based on the identity of the neighbourhood appeal to local residents; and people running community associations point to the positive effects allotments and collective composting schemes can have on relationships between neighbours.

Digital is the only theme that is controversial. While phone charging facilities or wi-fi in public spaces are attractive to many users, data collection and the relevance of certain digital proposals are cause for concern. Moreover, digital in public space is more a way of offering additional services than an end in itself. A “digital” bus shelter is still primarily a bus shelter, but one that provides real-time information and allows you to charge your phone.

Main benefits of each theme²:

Active mobility. Walking and cycling are not only beneficial to health; they are also useful ways of reducing pollution, noise, and occupation of public space. These forms of mobility foster social interaction, reduce car use, and free up space for community activities.

Art. Reinforces the identity of a local area, provides spatial reference points, gives areas a soul, and creates a sense of wonder. Develops a sense of belonging, honours local memory, upgrades the urban landscape, changes people’s perspectives, enlivens public space, is fun, gives people the opportunity to discover new things.

Digital. Wi-fi hotspots in public areas, phone-charging facilities, coordinated services (transport, tourism, culture, shopping, etc.) and information on mobility and local events all make life easier for local residents and visitors.

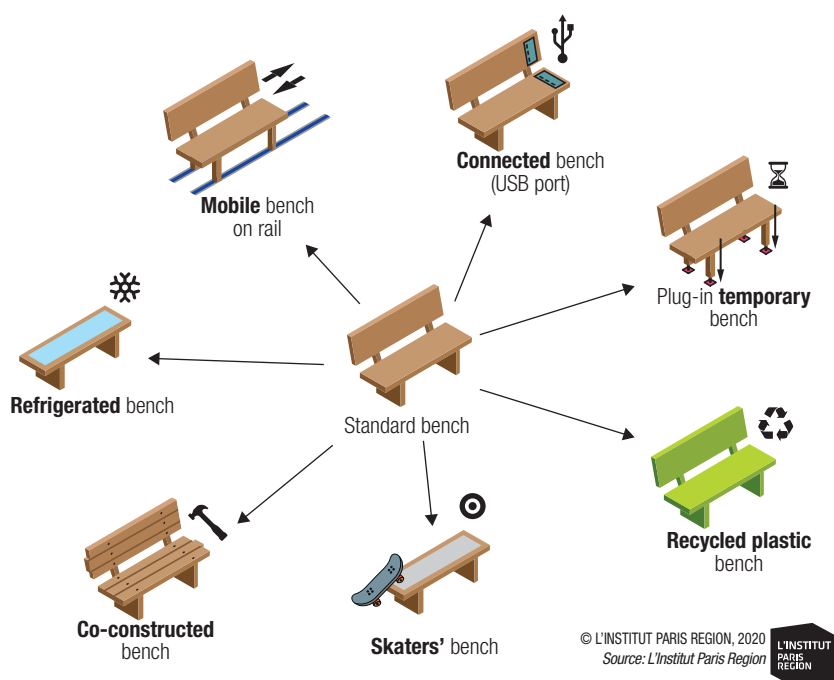
Events. Different types of events on different scales can create opportunities for having fun and engaging in social interaction in public space. Events can generate new amenities, breathe new life into areas of vacant sites, encourage people to explore their local area and interact with its key drivers, and make it possible for local residents to appropriate public space.

Functionality. This theme mainly involves street furniture that either fulfils basic everyday needs (rest areas, drinking water, waste disposal, toilets) or provides opportunities for leisure activities such as picnics or culture trails.

Nature. An essential factor in the quality of urban life and the attractiveness of urban areas. Trees, flowers and wildlife, temporary gardens, plantings in and around buildings, and gardening in public space all contribute to the wellbeing of local communities.

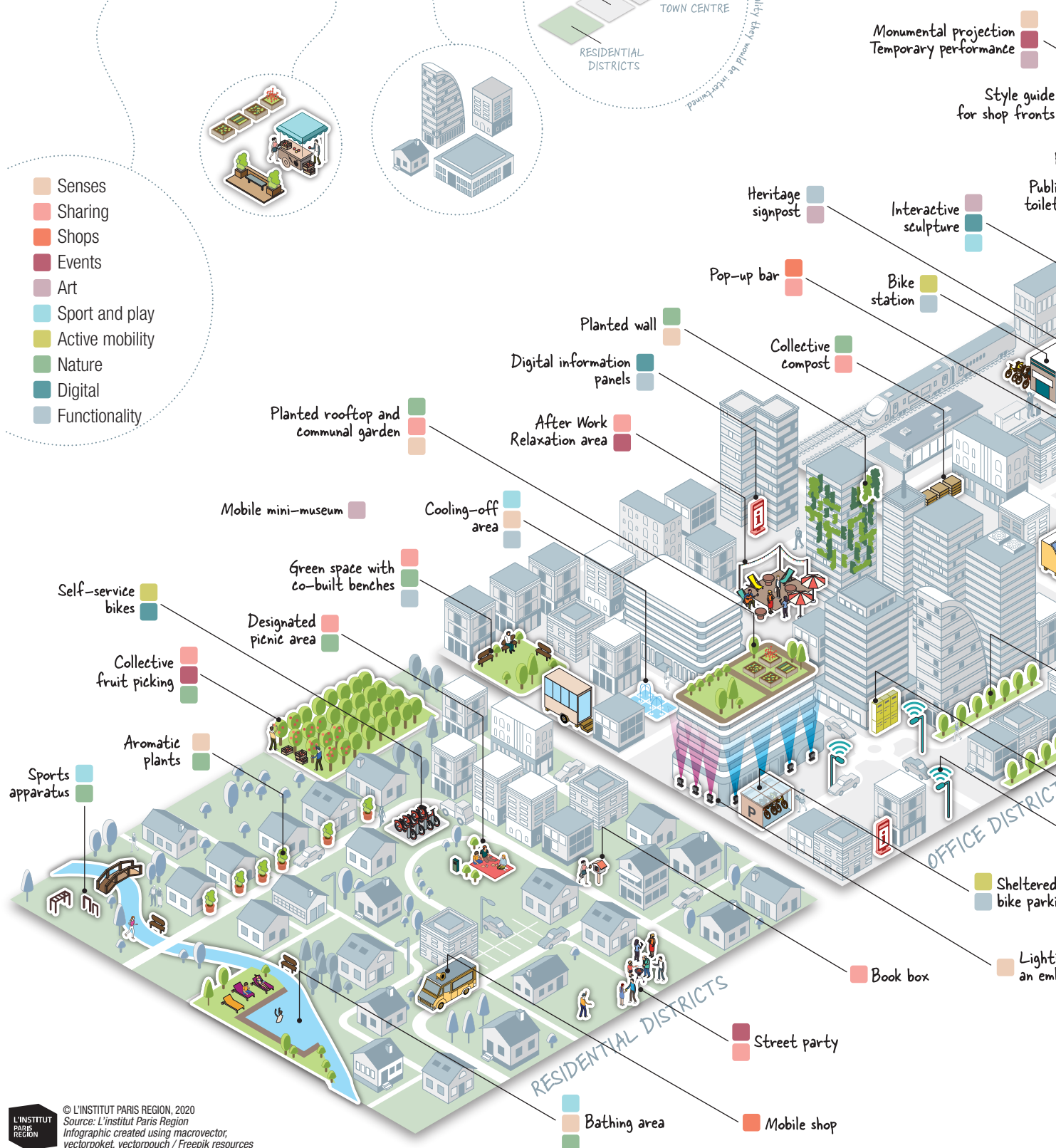
Senses. Things that appeal to the senses contribute to wellbeing in public space when people walk around or stop for a rest. This means it is interesting to consider elements such as water, light and shade, sounds, colours, smells, and different temperatures.

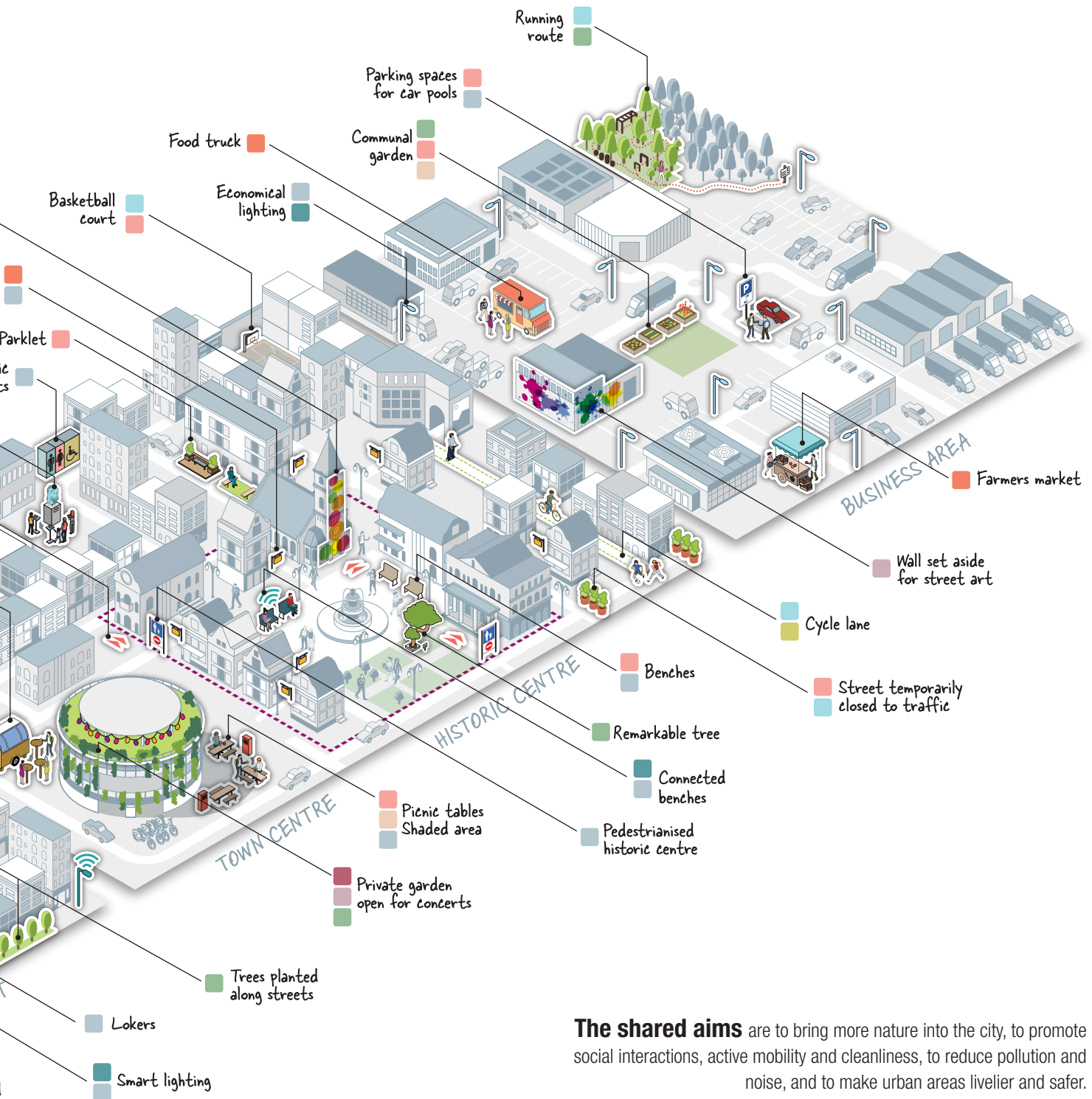
User-friendly objects: variations on a bench



MORE PLEASANT PUBLIC AREAS

This infographic is an **illustration** of the range of possible ways to **improve user-friendliness and wellbeing** in different types of neighbourhood. It offers different **user-friendly objects** for urban areas and **10 associated themes**.





The shared aims are to bring more nature into the city, to promote social interactions, active mobility and cleanliness, to reduce pollution and noise, and to make urban areas livelier and safer.

Each project is unique, and stakeholders take part according to their budget and their vision of overall well-being.

- 10 suggestions for how to proceed**
- Make use of what is already in place and local initiatives
 - Take uses into account
 - Think about vulnerable users of public space
 - Adopt a light touch
 - Test ideas before green-lighting them
 - Combine user-friendly environments
 - Adopt an environmentally friendly attitude
 - Prioritise humans over automated systems
 - Avoid conflicting modes of use
 - Strike a balance between different types of environment (lively / calm)



Pascale Leroi/L'Institut Paris Region



Odile Squadri/West Paris Region

Sharing. Although all the different themes we have identified promote social interaction, this theme directly concerns dialogue; the sharing of expertise and goods; solidarity; and collective approaches. This theme has three strands: facilitating spontaneous interactions; supporting community initiatives; and developing employment in public space.

Shops. Shops and other commercial businesses fulfil essential needs, make local areas livelier, and make people feel safer. A shopkeeper can provide welcome advice and is often simply someone to talk to, especially in rural areas where shops provide opportunities for social interaction that are especially valued by people who feel isolated and lonely.

Sport and play. Sports facilities, play areas and the opportunity to exercise in public space have a positive impact on users and also improve the overall atmosphere of streets and squares by making them both lively and safe. Sport interacts with other themes and helps to make public space more user-friendly.

NEW METHODS

The user-friendliness of a public area cannot just be written into a by-law, and it does not merely involve arranging objects in a particular space; the decision-making process needs to involve stakeholders. Many of the objects listed in this document are the outcomes of consultation, construction and decision-making processes in which several stakeholders have played a part. Plant containers, play trails, a pop-up art display, a composting station or a bench might be the result of concerted efforts made by local residents or community associations. Participatory budgeting in particular makes it possible to bring these types of initiatives to fruition.

Moreover, a single type of object may result from very different approaches. The Vitry-sur-Seine town council, for example, has decided to allow street art to flourish independently on the walls of

the town, while large murals on façades in the 13th arrondissement of Paris are the result of a well-established process involving the town council, an art gallery that selects the artists, and social landlords who place the walls at their disposal. Methods of fitting out public areas have shifted over the past twenty years. Councils have initiated conversations with residents' collectives and new practices have emerged. The range of different actors involved in projects is now more diverse: as well as councils and the usual urban development professionals, hybrid community collectives focusing on modes of use and the needs of local residents are now actively involved. The work carried out tends to be less intrusive, less costly, and often temporary, reusable or multifunctional, and proposals involving pop-up developments are not uncommon. User-sensitive, fun approaches designed to engage with ordinary users are becoming increasingly widespread. Last but not least, ecological and energy transition issues (e.g. reducing waste and greenhouse gases and fostering biodiversity) form an overarching framework for such initiatives that has had a profound effect on decisions made with regard to development and attractiveness-enhancing schemes.

TEN KEY ACTIONABLES

Today, most conversations on public space highlight actionables including increasing natural environments in cities, reducing pollution and noise, encouraging active mobility, organising public events, creating lively, safe town centres and cleaner cities, and so on. Councils then overlay these ideas with their own vision of what successful public space should look like as they make decisions and select solutions. Some have a "digital" approach to public space, while others place emphasis on human relationships. Obviously the amount of available cash also plays an important role. Moreover, current projects focus more than ever before on modes of use and are more closely aligned with real human behaviour and the specific characteristics of locales and their users.

Left: temporary installations to learn more about modes of use, Place Paul-Langevin, Montreuil.

Right: "sensitive walking", a tool for analysis and dialogue, Atelier Fnau 2020.

THE NOTION OF USER-FRIENDLINESS

In the European Urbact network, several cities are working together on pilot projects aiming to initiate positive change in the field of public space programming and design. In the European programme called "User"³, user-friendliness is associated with public spaces where people gather and meet easily in a spirit of tolerance and openness. In this article, user-friendliness has a broader meaning, including notions of wellbeing, relaxation and enjoyment as well as sharing, tolerance and inclusion.

Whatever the specific context, a number of actionables can form a framework for conversations taking place as part of user-friendliness initiatives:

- **Use what already exists**, for example community initiatives and the assets of a neighbourhood; leverage these initiatives and assets and provide a boost for places that already work.
- **Take modes of use into account**, ask yourself and others what the public really wants, particularly as regards the reasons why people use public space that is earmarked for change.
- **Think about users who are vulnerable** because of their age, gender or disabilities.
- **Adopt a light touch**. Mobile shops and lightweight constructions (containers, sheds etc.) can be used to develop services and public events, to test modes of use, and to provide premises from which collectives can operate.
- **Combine user-friendliness “themes”**. These themes are complementary and support one another; they can be combined by thinking about user journeys and lifestyles within a potentially dynamic locale.
- **Adopt an eco-friendly attitude** when choosing materials in order to minimise energy consumption and environmental impact.
- **Prioritise humans over automated systems** to encourage job creation, foster human contact, and reduce energy consumption.
- **Avoid conflicting modes of use** by clearly marking out roads, footpaths and cycle lanes to cater for different types of users.
- **Experiment**. Trial development projects, confirm or challenge presupposed modes of use, fine-tune proposals.
- **Strike the right balance**. Some neighbourhoods might lend themselves to a party vibe and buzzing nightlife, while others might be calm, peaceful and poetic.

These proposals provide insights into what local authorities, business leaders and ordinary citizens imagine to be ways of making public space more user-friendly and attractive by focusing on the day-to-day behaviour of real users. Each project is unique and must be designed in collaboration with local stakeholders who are in close contact with users and have in-depth knowledge of the specific context. ■

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1. Leroi Pascale, *Carnet d'inspiration pour des espaces publics conviviaux*, L'Institut Paris Region, June 2019.
2. The themes are listed in alphabetical order.
3. European Union, Urbact, User, Improving the use of public spaces in European cities, April 2015.

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