

GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES



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This document has been authored by Dr. Antoine Zammit for studjurban, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association Malta.

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This publication is dated Janaury 2026 and is one of 24 documents being produced as part of the Local Councils' Association's ResidentFirst vision 2024, under the pillar of Open Spaces.

The examples of EU funding programs and events mentioned in this book were relevant at the time the study was conducted. As policies, funding opportunities, and events may change over time, readers are encouraged to consult official EU sources for the most up-to-date information.

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Foreword



The open spaces of Malta and Gozo embody the everyday dimension of community life. They are the settings where heritage, ecology, recreation and social exchange intersect – shaping the collective experience of place and defining the quality of life within our localities. This collection of five Open Spaces guidelines – encompassing *Parks and Gardens*, *Historical Heritage*, *Urban Cores and Piazzas*, *Open Markets*, *Open Space Re-use* and *Outdoor Sports* – forms part of the Local Councils’

Association’s *ResidentFirst* vision. Together, these documents offer a cohesive framework for reimagining and managing the public realm as a shared and enduring civic asset.

At a time when Malta faces the dual pressures of urban densification and environmental vulnerability, the need to reclaim, reconfigure and reinvest in open spaces is both urgent and transformative. Each guide presents actionable frameworks, grounded in research, contextual understanding and local experience, to help Local Councils, policymakers and residents strengthen the quality, diversity and resilience of open spaces in Malta and Gozo. This research is rooted in the Maltese context yet it aligns with broader European and Mediterranean urban agendas.

The first volume, **Parks and Gardens**, establishes the environmental foundation for this series. It underlines the role of green infrastructure as an ecological system that supports biodiversity, mitigates urban heat and enhances air quality, while also serving as a space for recreation, education and well-being. Within Malta’s constrained climatic and spatial realities, the document calls for resilient, adaptive and multifunctional design strategies that balance ecological resilience (living systems that support health and biodiversity) with social inclusion.

Historical Heritage, Urban Cores and Piazzas, the second document, turns its attention to Malta’s historic centres – the symbolic and functional hearts of community life. It reasserts the role of the *piazza* and the traditional urban core as spaces for encounter and belonging, advocating interventions that respect and reinterpret their cultural and architectural legacies while returning them to people. Through placemaking strategies, pedestrian-priority design, traffic calming, and sensitive design approaches, the document proposes an urban future in which heritage is not simply a static legacy but an active resource for liveable, inclusive, and economically vibrant communities.

The third document, **Open Markets**, explores the marketplace as a vital element of open space – an interface between the economy, culture and community. It positions markets as catalysts for local entrepreneurship, cultural expression and tourism, while emphasising their essential role as platforms for social connection, intercultural dialogue, and urban vitality. Building on both Malta's historical traditions of exchange and the Mediterranean tradition of street life, it demonstrates how contemporary market design can revitalise public life, strengthen local identity and sustain economic vibrancy within urban cores.

In turn, the fourth volume, **Open Space Re-use**, advances the discourse toward innovation and adaptability. It introduces the principles of tactical urbanism and time-based design, promoting temporary, low-cost and community-led interventions as precursors to long-term transformation. By emphasising low-cost, experimental approaches, it empowers Local Councils to test, evaluate, and refine interventions before permanent transformation. This process-based approach to spatial regeneration underlines the importance of co-creation, where communities become active participants in shaping their environments.

Finally, **Outdoor Sports** situates health, inclusivity and active living within the open space agenda. It underscores the need to integrate physical activity into daily urban life through accessible, multi-generational, safe and environmentally responsive sports spaces. These (formal or informal) facilities serve as instruments for well-being, social interaction and environmental awareness, reinforcing the role of open space as a cornerstone of sustainable community development.

Collectively, these five documents articulate a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach to the planning, design and governance of open spaces in Malta. They advocate for a transition from fragmented interventions to integrated networks; from spaces of transit to spaces of encounter; from car-oriented urbanism to human-centred design. More importantly, they position open spaces as the connective tissue that binds together environmental stewardship, cultural continuity and social resilience.

In bringing these works together, the *Open Spaces* series offers more than a set of technical guidelines – it presents a vision of stewardship grounded in collaboration, inclusivity and long-term thinking. It invites Local Councils, professionals and residents to see every park, street, square and market not as isolated amenities but as interdependent components of a living civic landscape. In doing so, it affirms that the design and management of open spaces lie at the very heart of creating sustainable, equitable and truly liveable places.

Dr Antoine Zammit
Founder and Director, STUDJURBAN

Key Insights from the Five Documents

Document 1: Parks and Gardens: Reclaiming Green Infrastructure

Parks and gardens form the ecological and social backbone of sustainable localities. Within Malta's compact and climate-challenged context, these spaces are essential in mitigating the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, supporting biodiversity and offering respite from dense built environments.

Key insights include:

- Green infrastructure must be designed as a connected network that balances ecological, recreational and educational functions.
- Native and drought-tolerant planting enhances environmental resilience while reducing maintenance costs.
- Parks and gardens act as both social condensers and educational platforms, reinforcing community well-being and environmental stewardship.
- Strategic site selection, community participation and long-term maintenance planning are fundamental to their sustainability.

Document 2: Historical Heritage, Urban Cores and Piazzas: Revitalising the Civic Heart

Malta's historic centres and piazzas represent the social and cultural core of its towns and villages. However, decades of car dominance and fragmented development have compromised their accessibility and civic function. This document calls for their reactivation as vibrant, people-oriented spaces that celebrate heritage while supporting contemporary needs.

Key insights include:

- Urban heritage must be integrated into daily life rather than preserved as a static relic.
- Returning space to people – through pedestrianisation, traffic calming and shared-space design – is critical to restoring vitality and inclusivity.
- Successful piazzas combine cultural continuity with flexibility, enabling use for daily social interaction and community events alike.
- Heritage-led regeneration enhances economic activity, local identity and tourism sustainability.

Document 3: Open Markets: Strengthening Local Economies and Social Life

Markets are portrayed not only as sites of trade but as essential public spaces that foster community interaction, local entrepreneurship and cultural expression. In Malta's increasingly urbanised environment, open markets can reanimate public squares and reconnect producers and consumers.

Key insights include:

- Open markets function as platforms for local economic development and social cohesion.
- Design and governance must balance resident needs with tourism, maintaining authenticity and inclusivity.
- Markets contribute to urban resilience by activating underused spaces and encouraging temporary or periodic use of streets and squares.
- Effective market planning requires careful stakeholder coordination, logistical planning and phased implementation, from pilot to policy.

Document 4: Open Space Re-use: Embracing Adaptability and Tactical Urbanism

The re-use of open spaces underscores a shift toward a more agile and resource-efficient approach to urban transformation. It emphasises robust and flexible design principles that allow spaces to evolve with changing community needs.

Key insights include:

- Tactical urbanism and temporary interventions are valuable tools for testing ideas before permanent investment.
- Multi-functionality enhances the social, economic and environmental performance of open spaces, maximising their use value over time.
- Reuse strategies reduce land consumption, promote walkability and revitalise heritage sites without compromising their integrity.
- Community engagement is not a phase but an ongoing process that builds stewardship and ensures lasting success.

Document 5: Outdoor Sports: Designing for Health, Inclusion and Everyday Activity

Outdoor sports spaces extend the open space discourse to public health, inclusivity and lifestyle. By integrating opportunities for movement within the public realm, this document calls for a cultural shift that embeds physical activity in daily urban life.

Key insights include:

- Outdoor sports facilities – both formal and informal – contribute significantly to physical and mental well-being.
- Integrating recreation within mobility networks encourages walking and cycling, supporting sustainable transport goals.
- Designing for inclusivity, intergenerational use and environmental responsiveness creates equitable and climate-resilient spaces.
- Maintenance, stewardship partnerships and community activation are essential for long-term success.

Overarching Themes

Across all five documents, several overarching principles emerge:

- **Holistic Integration:** Open spaces should be planned and managed as interconnected systems that link environmental health, cultural heritage, social well-being and economic vitality.
- **Human-Centred Design:** The quality of open space is measured not by its aesthetic appeal alone but by how it enables people to meet, move, and belong.
- **Flexibility and Resilience:** Robust, adaptive design and governance models allow spaces to respond dynamically to changing urban, climatic and social conditions.
- **Community Co-Creation:** Sustainable open spaces depend on continuous engagement and shared ownership between Local Councils and their residents.
- **Sustainability and Stewardship:** Ecological performance and long-term management are as vital as physical design, ensuring that spaces remain vibrant, safe and inclusive over time.

Towards a Shared Vision for Open Spaces

Taken together, the *Open Spaces* guidelines articulate a comprehensive and forward-looking framework for the sustainable transformation of Malta's public realm. They offer Local Councils and stakeholders adaptable, evidence-based strategies to enhance liveability, inclusivity and environmental performance within towns and villages.

Beyond serving as technical manuals, these documents collectively express a vision for the Maltese urban landscape – one grounded in collaboration, stewardship and an understanding that open spaces are essential infrastructure for community life. They propose an ethic of shared responsibility, in which public space serves as a medium for simultaneously advancing environmental health, cultural heritage and social connection.

Ultimately, this compendium reaffirms that the future of Malta's localities depends on reimagining open spaces not as residual gaps between buildings, but as the connective fabric that sustains people, nature and place. Through integrated planning, thoughtful design and inclusive governance, these spaces can continue to evolve as living frameworks for resilience, identity and collective well-being.

Foreword

by the President of the Local Councils' Association



Local Government is most effective when it is firmly anchored in the everyday lives of residents. Local and regional councils are uniquely positioned to shape the spaces where people live, interact, and build their sense of belonging. For this reason, improving quality of life is not an abstract concept but a practical responsibility, one that demands vision, long-term planning, and the courage to rethink how our communities function and evolve.

It was with this responsibility in mind that the Local Councils' Association launched its strategic vision, **"Residents First – Better Quality of Life,"** in 2018. This vision was deliberately designed as a comprehensive and forward-looking framework, recognising that residents' well-being depends on multiple, interconnected factors. It is structured around four strategic pillars; **Sustainable Mobility, Open Spaces, Urban Green, and Smart Cities**, each addressing a fundamental dimension of contemporary local living.

The Association's commitment to this vision is unwavering. Our objective is not only to improve services, but to strengthen the relevance of local and regional councils by empowering them to lead change, embrace innovation, and place residents at the heart of policy-making. To ensure that this vision translates into meaningful and implementable action, the Association commissioned in-depth studies across all four pillars, drawing on local realities, international best practices, and evidence-based policy approaches.

Following the launch of the first pillar, **Sustainable Mobility**, which focuses on safer, more accessible, and people-centred movement within our localities, we are now proud to present the second pillar: **Open Spaces**. This publication should be read in close conjunction with the Sustainable Mobility study, as both pillars are intrinsically linked. The way residents navigate their locality directly influences how they experience public spaces. Likewise, well-designed open spaces encourage walking, social interaction, and a sense of community. Together, these publications form part of a coherent strategy, which will be further completed in the coming months with the launch of the **Smart Cities** and **Urban Green** pillars.

Open spaces represent the physical and social fabric of our communities. They are the settings in which residents of all ages live, meet, play, trade, celebrate, and express their identity. Making the best possible use of these spaces is therefore both a strategic priority and a social obligation. Above all, this pillar affirms that public spaces must prioritise residents, children, youth, adults, and senior citizens, ensuring accessibility, safety, inclusivity, and a sense of shared ownership.

This publication addresses **Open Spaces** in a comprehensive and multidimensional manner.

Mr. Mario Fava

President
Local Councils' Association, Malta

Resident-Centred Approach: Enhancing Quality of Life

Parks and Gardens

Parks and gardens are among the most tangible expressions of a community's commitment to well-being and quality of life. Beyond their visual and environmental appeal, they function as essential public infrastructure that supports physical health, mental resilience, and social interaction. Well-designed green spaces encourage everyday physical activity such as walking, jogging, and informal play, while also providing calming environments that reduce stress and improve emotional well-being. For children, parks and gardens offer safe and stimulating spaces for play, exploration, and social development. For families, they serve as shared environments that strengthen bonds. For older residents, they provide accessible areas for rest, exercise, and social contact, helping to combat isolation.

From an environmental perspective, parks and gardens act as vital green lungs within increasingly dense and built-up localities. They contribute to improved air quality, urban cooling, biodiversity, and climate resilience, while also mitigating the effects of heat islands and surface water runoff. Importantly, their value is maximised when they are planned inclusively, maintained sustainably, and distributed equitably across communities. Investing in parks and gardens is therefore not merely an aesthetic choice, but a strategic investment in public health, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion, reinforcing the role of local councils as stewards of livable and resilient communities.

Historical and Heritage Sites, Urban Cores, and Piazzas

Historical and heritage sites, together with urban cores and piazzas, represent the cultural, social, and symbolic centres of our towns and villages. They are spaces where collective memory is preserved, where identity is expressed, and where the continuity between past, present, and future is most visible. These environments reflect the unique character of each locality and play a central role in fostering local pride and a sense of belonging among residents.

At the same time, heritage spaces must remain living, functional environments that respond to the contemporary needs of the community. This publication underscores the importance of striking a careful balance between conservation and adaptation, protecting architectural and cultural value while ensuring accessibility, safety, and active use. Revitalised urban cores and piazzas can host cultural events, civic gatherings, and local commerce, transforming them into dynamic public spaces that encourage interaction and social life. When thoughtfully managed, these areas move beyond being static monuments and instead become inclusive civic stages where daily life unfolds, reinforcing their relevance within modern local governance and community development.

Open Markets

Open markets are among the most vibrant and socially embedded components of local public space. They are not only places of trade, but also powerful engines of social interaction, cultural continuity, and local economic resilience. By supporting small traders, farmers, and artisans, open markets strengthen local economies, promote short supply chains, and reduce the environmental impact associated with large-scale distribution systems. They also play a crucial role in sustaining traditional practices and fostering intergenerational exchange within communities.

This publication recognises that open markets must evolve in response to changing economic, social, and regulatory contexts, while retaining their authenticity and accessibility. Modernisation efforts, such as improved infrastructure, better accessibility, enhanced hygiene standards, and integration with surrounding public spaces, can significantly improve their attractiveness and functionality. When embedded within broader urban planning strategies, open markets contribute to lively town centers, increased foot traffic, and stronger community ties, ensuring they remain relevant and valued assets for both residents and visitors alike.

Open Space Re-use

Open space re-use embodies a progressive and sustainable approach to local development, rooted in innovation, efficiency, and community empowerment. Across many localities, underutilised, abandoned, or neglected spaces represent missed opportunities, often contributing to urban decay, safety concerns, or social disengagement. However, with vision and strategic planning, these same spaces can be transformed into catalysts for regeneration and social renewal.

Through adaptive reuse, local councils can transform disused sites into multifunctional public spaces that directly respond to community needs, whether as recreational areas, cultural venues, community gardens, youth spaces, or social hubs. This approach promotes efficient land use, reduces pressure on undeveloped land, and aligns closely with principles of sustainability and circular development. Importantly, involving residents in the reimagining of these spaces fosters a sense of ownership, strengthens civic participation, and ensures that regenerated spaces genuinely reflect local priorities. Open space re-use thus becomes a powerful tool for inclusive development and long-term community resilience.

Outdoor Sports and Recreational Spaces

Outdoor sports and recreational spaces play a fundamental role in promoting active lifestyles, social inclusion, and community cohesion. Accessible and well-designed facilities encourage regular physical activity, contributing to improved physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life across all age groups. For children and young people, these spaces support healthy development, teamwork, and discipline; for adults, they provide opportunities for stress relief and social interaction; and for senior citizens, they offer safe environments for maintaining mobility and active ageing.

Beyond individual health benefits, outdoor sports spaces function as important social connectors within communities. They bring together diverse groups, foster intergenerational interaction, and strengthen community identity and pride. This publication emphasizes the importance of integrating sports and recreation into open space planning in a holistic manner, ensuring equitable geographic distribution, universal accessibility, and adaptability to diverse abilities and needs. By doing so, local councils can ensure that outdoor sports facilities are not isolated amenities, but integral components of vibrant, inclusive, and people-centred public spaces.

Conclusion

As we move forward, the Local Councils' Association remains fully committed to advancing this strategy and embedding its principles within Local Government practice. We are equally committed to challenging outdated perceptions and changing mindsets that still underestimate the value of resident-centred, people-first planning. The benefits of this vision, stronger communities, healthier residents, and more resilient localities, are clear, measurable, and long-lasting.

In the coming months, the Association will complete this strategic framework with the launch of the Smart Cities and Urban Green pillars. These forthcoming publications will focus on leveraging digital innovation to improve services, participation, and governance, while simultaneously strengthening green infrastructure and environmental stewardship at the local level. Notably, the progress achieved through this vision has attracted significant interest from foreign stakeholders and international partners, many of whom have proactively reached out to collaborate, exchange expertise, and explore partnerships inspired by the work being undertaken by the Association.

In conclusion, this publication represents another important step in the implementation of "Residents First – Better Quality of Life." It is a call to action for local and regional councils to rethink public space as a shared asset, to prioritise residents in every planning decision, and to embrace a holistic, integrated approach to local development. Together with the Sustainable Mobility publication and the two forthcoming pillars, it forms part of a coherent strategy aimed at shaping communities that are inclusive, sustainable, and truly centred on the people who call them home.



GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES PARKS AND GARDENS



This document has been authored by Dr. Antoine Zammit, Kirsty Borg and Claudia Chanduvi for studjurban, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association Malta.

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Aboodi Vesakaran on Unsplash

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

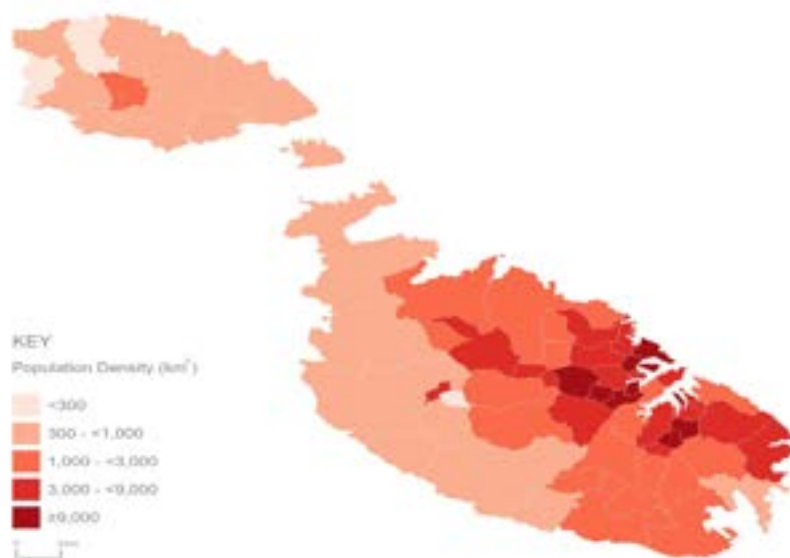
Malta's development pressures and climate change issues, which are more strategic and innovative. In particular, Malta's geographic and climatic conditions and limited land availability amplify the need for resilient, adaptive and multifunctional green space.

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.

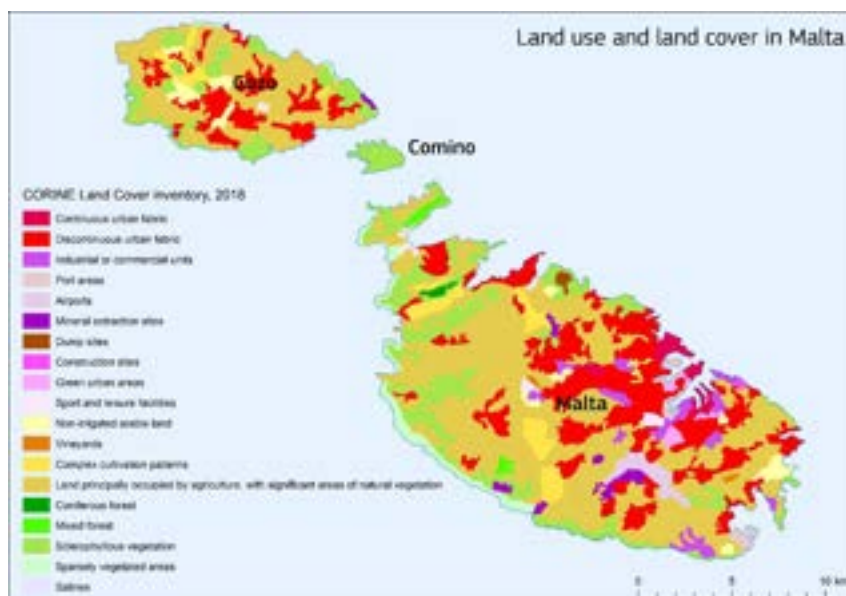
2. Malta

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.



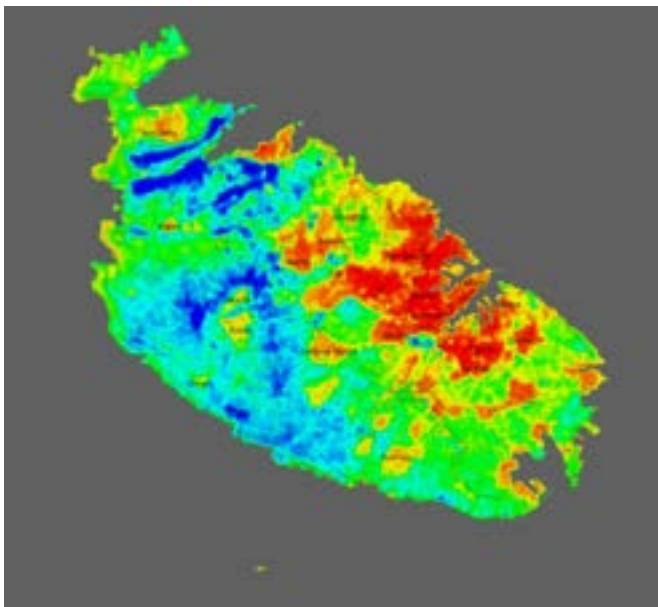
Michail Dementiev on Unsplash

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.

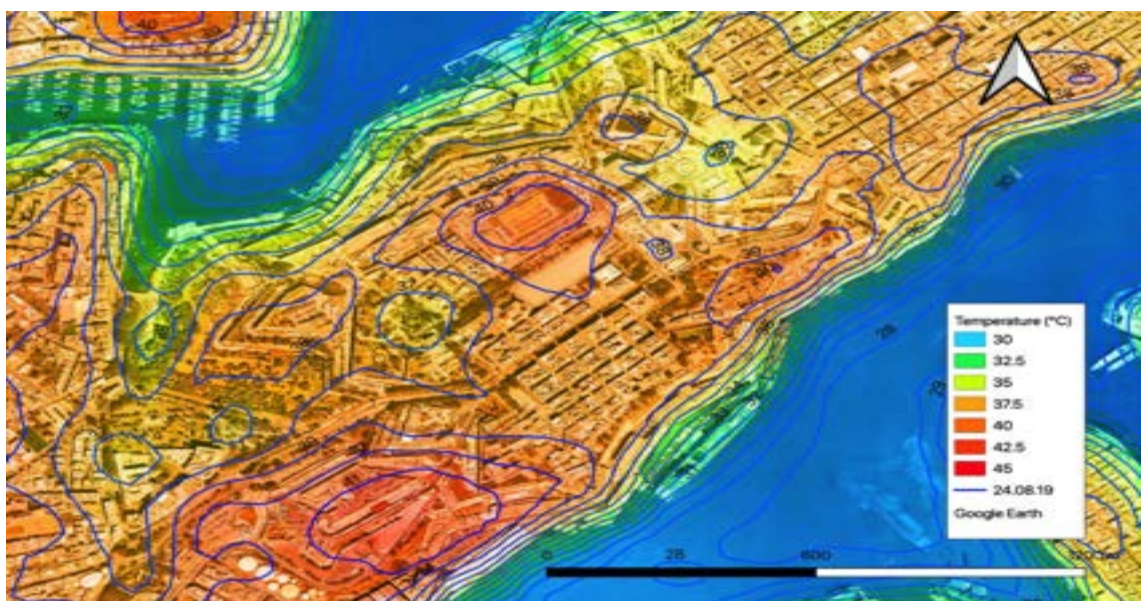
Climate-related concerns further highlight the urgency of creating parks and gardens that help to mitigate heat and support biodiversity. One such concern is the urban heat island (UHI) effect, a common consequence of densely populated regions, particularly in island environments. These green spaces 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

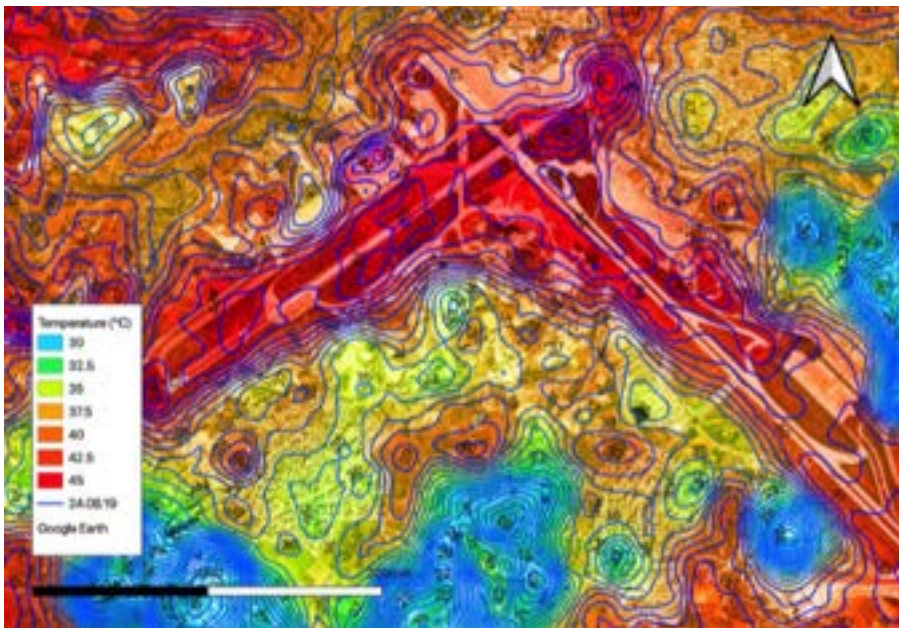
Malta's climatic conditions, particularly heat, combined with increased air pollution due to a growing population and tourism, underscore the urgent need for mitigation. Incorporating shade-providing trees in urban areas is necessary to cool urban spaces.



*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.

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.

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Photo by Vatroslav Bank on Unsplash

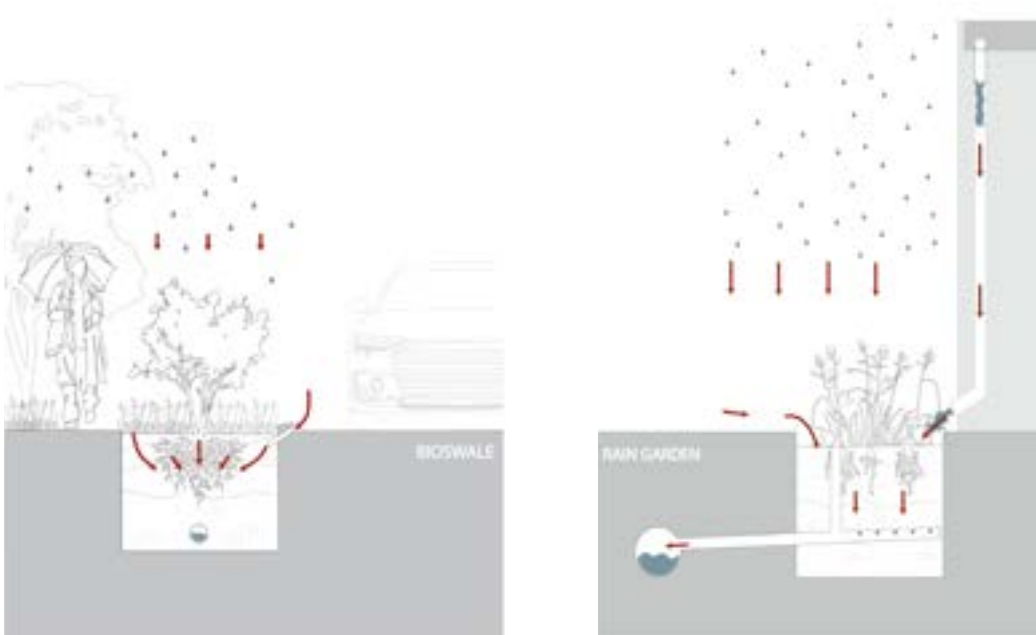
Permeable Surfaces, Bioswales and Rain Gardens and Tree Pits

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.

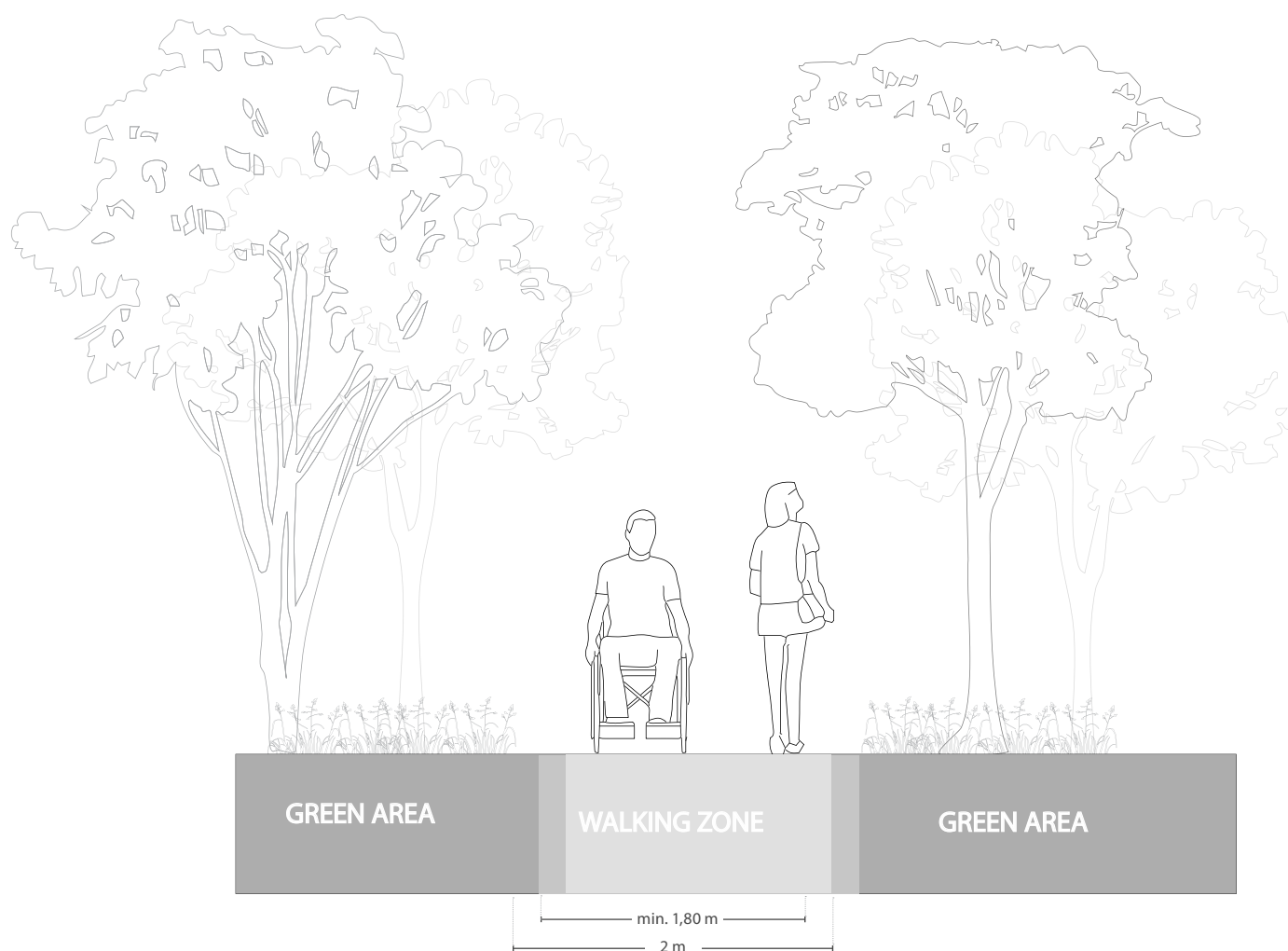
Universal accessibility

- 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.



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.

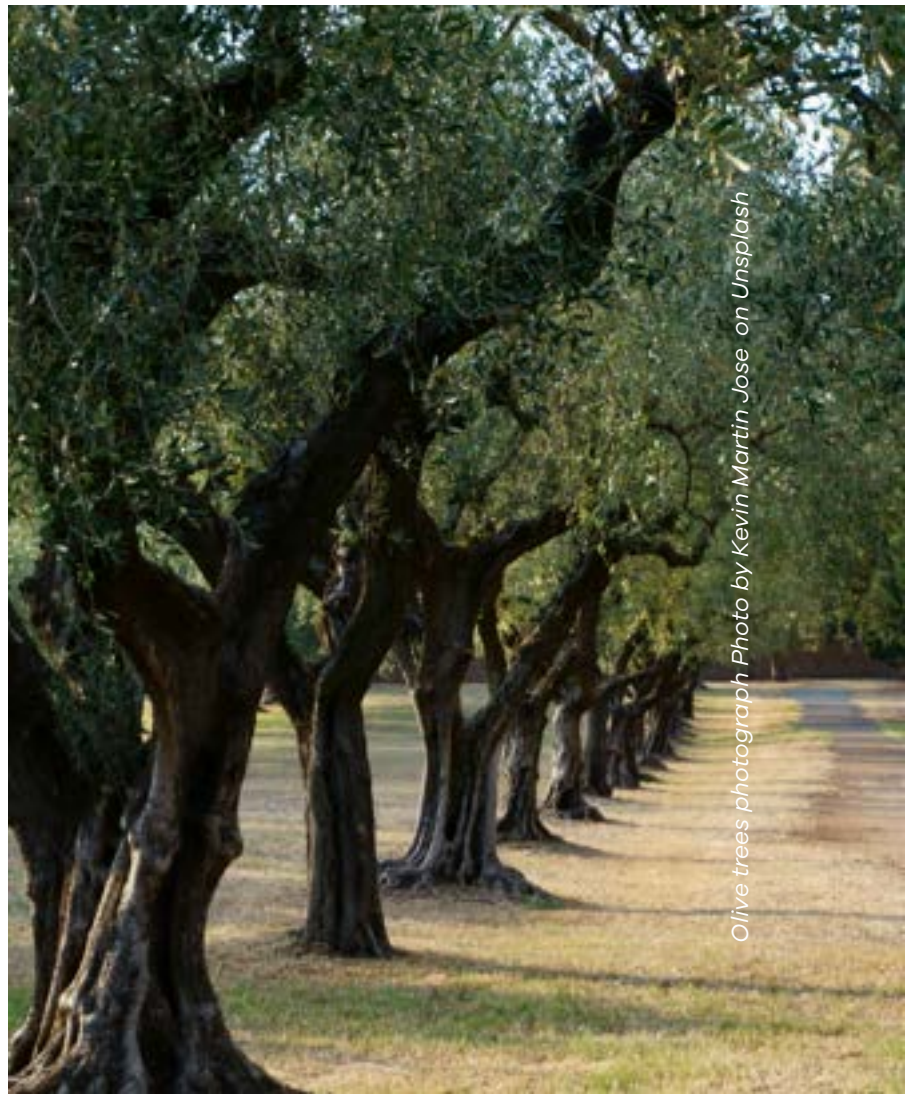
Sustainable park management further offers financial advantages by reducing long-term costs through the use of renewable energy sources and recycled water systems. By adopting environmentally friendly solutions, such as solar-powered infrastructure and water-harvesting techniques, maintenance expenses 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 CO₂ 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 CO₂ levels.

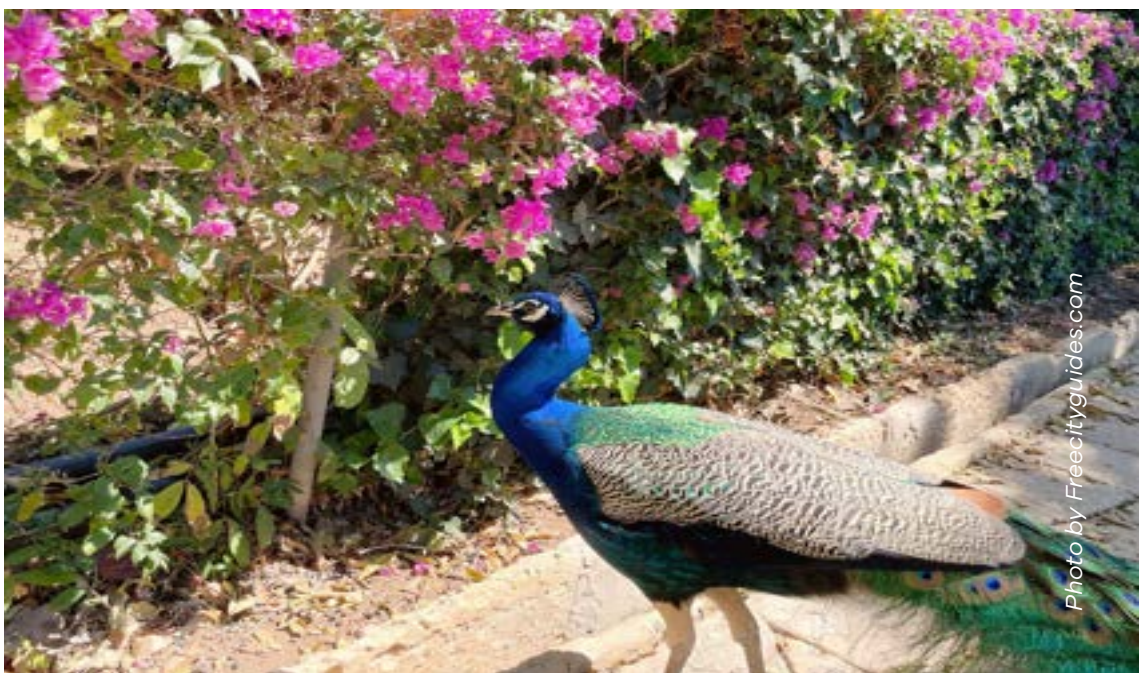
Multi-Functionality

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.



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





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:

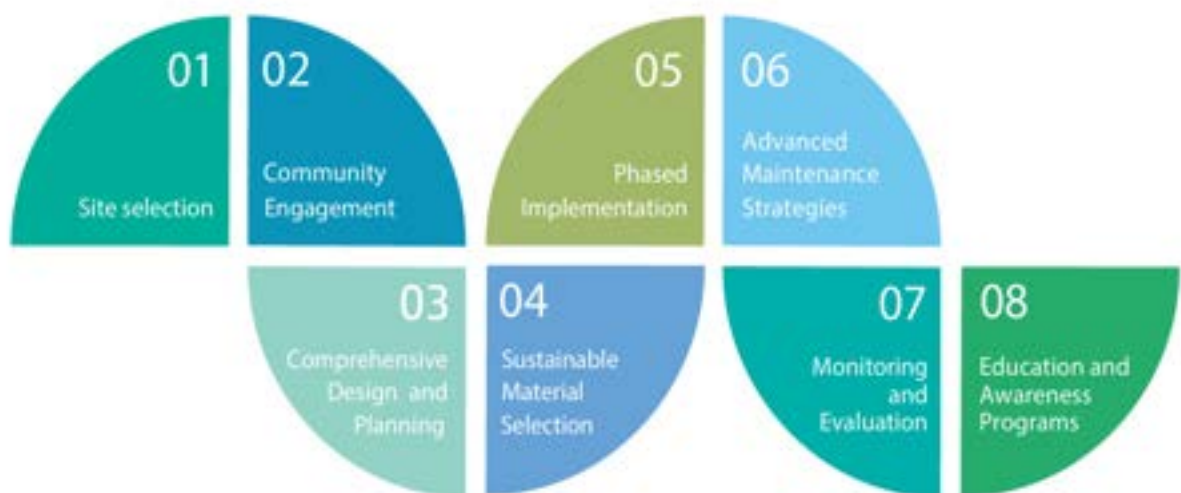
- Local sources and sustainable materials, such as Maltese limestone, to minimise transportation costs and environmental impact.
- Opt for materials with high durability and low-maintenance to reduce long-term maintenance costs. For coastal parks, anti-corrosion treatment ensures all metal fixtures are 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.



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

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



Beatriz Monteiro on Unsplash

- 
- 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.

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



Photo by CDC on Unsplash

- 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.



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



Photo by Yogendra Singh on Unsplash

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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GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES HISTORICAL HERITAGE, URBAN CORES (HUBS) AND PIAZZAS



Photograph by Sterling Lanier on Unsplash

This document has been authored by Dr. Antoine Zammit and Claudia Chanduvi for studjurban, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association Malta.

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Photograph by Reisehu on Unsplash.

1. Introduction

A defining element of most localities in Malta and Gozo is the historic urban core, comprising central *piazzas* and compact districts with traditional streets, often rich in architectural heritage. Not surprisingly, many are designated as Urban Conservation Areas within the Local Plans issued by the Planning Authority. In Valetta alone, around 320 monuments may be found, making it one of the most concentrated historic areas (in terms of built heritage) in the World. In the words of UNESCO, in order to improve the liveability of urban areas, urban heritage should be more than just a relic – it should be considered as a key resource present within the community's daily life that strengthens its identity.



Currently, Malta's historic centres face an imminent pressure of rapid modern development and a car-centric infrastructure, amply highlighted in the Local Councils' Association's documents on **Sustainable Mobility** previously published. Local Councils, policymakers, urban planners, NGOs and residents are slowly acknowledging the need to rethink such important sites for more sustainable community development. This document aims to guide stakeholders and policymakers to enhance these historical areas through responsible interventions that transform them into vibrant social hubs by primarily returning them to people rather than cars.

Ultimately, revitalising historic urban cores is about reaching a balance: honouring the past – the architecture, traditions and collective memory – while planning for the future – safer, greener and more inclusive public spaces. Heritage must be seen as a valuable asset. Central to this approach is the public space, which may catalyse improved liveability and social well-being within our localities. In this way, Local Councils may ensure their historic hubs remain the beating heart of the community for future generations.

*Photograph by Anja Lee Ming Becker
on Unsplash*

2. The Need to Enhance Historical Urban Cores

Many town centres in Malta surround a parish church and piazza, which naturally become a nucleus of everyday civic life activity. Their well-maintained status benefits the nation by preserving its cultural heritage, strengthening local identity and pride, providing spaces for businesses and social interaction, promoting sustainable tourism and boosting residents' quality of life.

These centres often suffer from traffic congestion, insufficient pedestrian safety, outdated and poorly maintained paving and furniture, as well as underutilised public spaces. Nevertheless, they still feature historical buildings, monuments, fountains and other elements that could greatly enhance the town's urban character. Thoughtful improvements, such as **restoring facades, pedestrianising streets and calming traffic, adding lighting and greenery and reversing past car-centric mistakes** (like converting squares into roundabouts or parking areas), can help regain their original spirit as places for gathering, trade, and celebration. Such an approach aligns with current EU priorities concerning sustainable urban development and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Moreover, investing in these interventions within historical cores strengthens community well-being and boosts local economies. UNESCO highlights how urban heritage conservation can balance growth with quality of life, while reimagined public spaces increase foot traffic, support local businesses and attract tourists seeking authenticity. The central government has recognised this potential, as evidenced by the recent regeneration of many main piazzas. Enhancing these hubs is not a luxury, but a necessity — vital for preserving both our built heritage and the social fabric that defines Maltese communities.

Mosta's and Birgu's recently completed main squares have reimagined urban space for people, introducing important place-making principles in the heart of these two important localities. Both examples were rethought initially as part of the broader Slow Streets strategy initiated by the LCA.

2.1 The Role of Piazzas as Social Spaces



The centre of every traditional Maltese town serves as the residents' living room for daily life and social interaction. As a result, it often features key institutions such as the Parish Church, band club (*kazin*), Local Council office and local shops that animate the urban area. Thanks to this concentration and mixture of elements, a distinctive scene emerges within the urban environment: elderly individuals chatting on benches, children playing, bustling markets and people walking or stopping, alongside village feasts (*festi*) celebrations, processions and cultural performances.

*Photograph by Jan Antonin Kolar
on Unsplash*



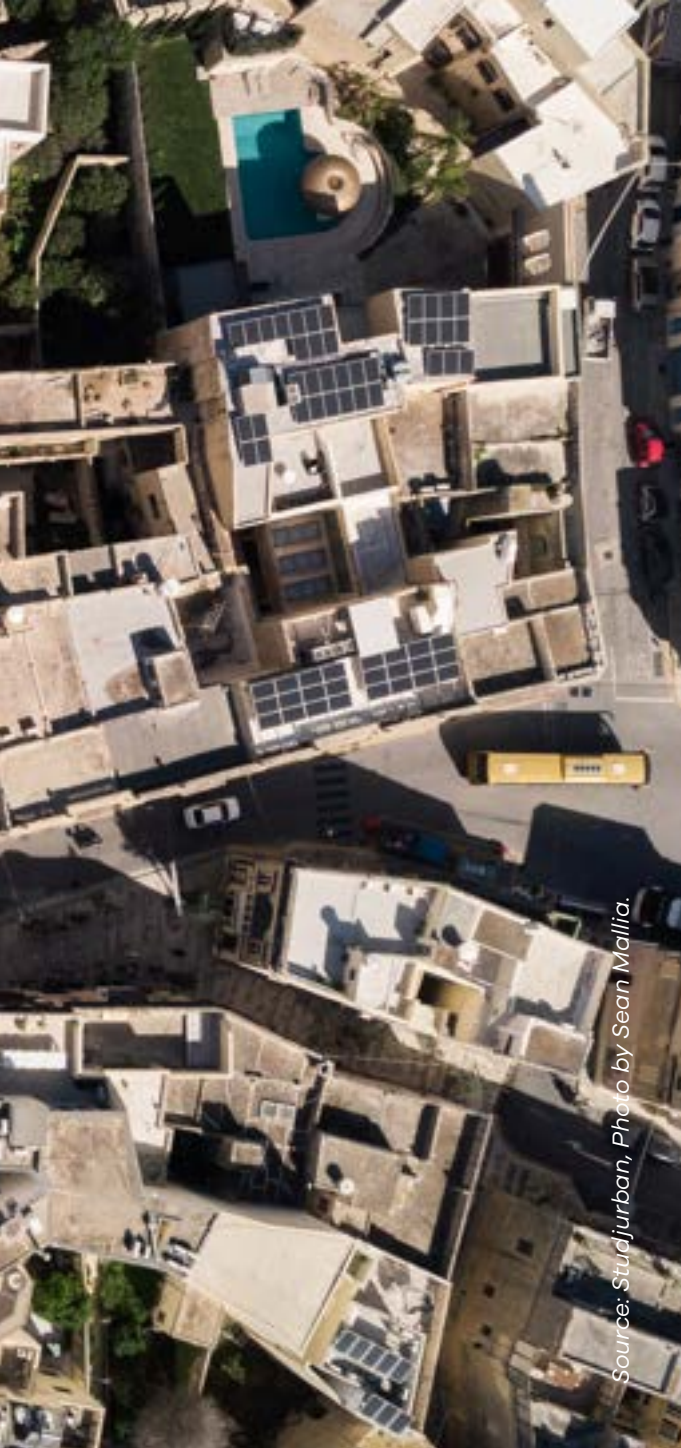
Photograph by Ingrid Martinussen on Unsplash

In today's fast-paced world, village squares hold vital social value as inclusive and neutral spaces where people of all ages can connect. Often seen by residents as extensions of their homes, these public areas offer fresh air, spontaneous encounters and a sense of belonging, which is especially important in high-density areas with limited private outdoor space. Ultimately, a way for a place to become emblematic is when it stays printed in the collective memory of local people. They are connected by one space in time where stories have taken place; this is another way to build a sense of community.

Beyond their social role, piazzas also support local economies and cultural life. Surrounding cafés and shops benefit from increased footfall, while tourists are drawn to their authentic atmosphere. Weekly markets, fairs, and festas animate these spaces, sustaining traditions and turning the square into a lively hub for local celebrations.



Photograph of the redesigned Mosta Square by Studjurban. Source: Studjurban (photo by Sean Mallia)



Source: Studjurban, Photo by Sean Mallia.



Illustration by Studjurban.
The redesigned Mosta Square

Mosta's new design features improved and wider pavements, landscaping, urban furniture, and rethought traffic paths, following an in-depth study of the locality's heritage value and urban character. Complementing the design are new traffic calming measures that have transformed a car-dominated space into a more pedestrian-priority area, albeit with vehicular traffic. As a result, this new safe space can now be enjoyed and utilised for various events by the community.

In recognition of a square's pivotal role to keep Malta's localities lively and connected, efforts to enhance urban cores often begin with rethinking the piazza – prioritising pedestrian traffic, adding greenery to the space, creating an aesthetically pleasing environment which is also robust enough to have different functions and hold various events, as discussed in the LCA's document **3.4 Open Space Re-use**. When a piazza is welcoming and well-utilised, it can promote a strong sense of community. Conversely, if a square is filled with vehicular traffic, residents' social life around this area weakens, resulting in an unused space.



Photograph by Artem Lobastov on Unsplash

2.2 The need to return urban spaces to people

Throughout the latter decades of the 20th century, as private vehicles started taking over, village centres became relegated to providing car access and parking, with vehicles dominating spaces that historically belonged to people. The consequences have been multifold – a loss of accessible public space for people, noise and air pollution in the heart of communities and safety issues for those venturing on foot.

As discussed within the LCA's **Sustainable Mobility** documents, Malta has one of the highest vehicle densities in Europe. Many piazzas have been turned into formal or informal car parks over the years and narrow streets and urban squares within the inner cores have been overwhelmed by through-traffic far beyond what they were designed to carry. Due to the presence of cars and parking areas, children are not allowed to play or run around the urban space, elderly people cannot commute safely, and the place's character becomes significantly compromised.

Encouragingly, Malta is demonstrating an increasing commitment to prioritising this cause. The **Slow Streets** initiative, led by the LCA in collaboration with Transport Malta and the Planning Authority, has recognised a national consensus to reduce vehicle dominance and enhance public accessibility in squares. More recently, and also building on this scheme's importance, Infrastructure Malta launched the **Vjal Kulhadd** programme to redesign 14 sites across Malta with pedestrian zones, cycle lanes and green spaces.



*Slow Streets. Source:
Local Councils' Association.*

Returning spaces to people does not necessarily mean banning cars everywhere, but reclaiming a balance. Strategies could include a degree of full or partial pedestrianisation, with a focus on the main piazza and adjacent streets (limiting vehicular traffic, if at all, to certain hours at night/early morning), re-routing through-traffic to peripheral roads (with a focus on the outer distributor roads rather than other local streets) and providing alternative transport options (amply discussed in the LCA's **Last Mile Transportation** document as part of the **Sustainable Mobility** series) to improve pedestrian and public transport accessibility to the centre. Where full pedestrianisation is not an immediate solution, traffic calming and "shared space" designs, as discussed within the **Slow Streets** schemes and other **Sustainable Mobility** documents, may also elevate the pedestrian experience and improve safety for all street users.

It is well-known that reducing car dominance in town and village cores may bring significant societal benefits, such as cleaner air, less noise, improved safety and more public space availability for greenery, seating and play areas. Ultimately, traffic and polluted, inaccessible spaces result from planning choices that can be reversed. The success of Valletta's pedestrian streets, Sliema's Bisazza Street pedestrianisation and, more recently, Birgu's Square, illustrate how pedestrianisation may succeed despite possible early resistance, boosting foot traffic and creating welcoming public realms.



*Birgu Square –
before and after visuals
of the piazza.
Source: Google Earth (top),
Studjurban (bottom)*

Traffic-calming measures in Għajnsielem, Gozo, further support this idea: closing key streets on summer weekends has reclaimed over 25,000 m² for the residents' use. However, the successful transformation of urban spaces depends on more than just restricting traffic. While valuing space as a physical entity is crucial, it should also be activated with amenities and planned events to provide purpose and meaning. Community involvement and thoughtful design are the basis of any successful urban space redesign. Schemes that are community-centred can restore dignity and life to historical squares, aligning with a national vision of prioritising people, supported by walking, cycling and other sustainable mobility options.

Sustainable tourism strategies, including interventions on historical spaces, may also provide significant economic benefits, supporting local businesses, encouraging extended visitor stays and further elevating our cultural heritage and Malta's profile as a high-quality destination.

Regenerating historical hubs within a sustainable tourism framework may position Malta as a historically rich destination of preference and a pioneer in responsible tourism. This approach protects cultural assets and paves the way for a more resilient economy, hand in hand with our heritage.



In summary, the Maltese experience can echo as a global urban trend: streets and squares for people, not just for vehicles. Embracing this in our historic cores is essential in order to restore their original purpose and unlock their full potential for the community.

3. Malta – Challenges and Opportunities

It would first be opportune to contextualise the discussion on transforming historical urban cores in Malta, by addressing distinct challenges and opportunities that need to be understood and navigated effectively.

3.1 Key Challenges

Claiming back Malta's historical public spaces faces various challenges, not least since urban space is at a premium and competition for land is intense, making changes like removing parking logistically harder and often a controversial issue within the local community. Coupled with this is the car-centric approach that characterises most local mindsets, wherein residents are used to driving into urban centres. This inevitably leads to resistance against pedestrianisation and fears of traffic displacement (and congestion) elsewhere. Local businesses will also worry about losing customers, despite evidence that the increased foot traffic in a safer and pedestrian-priority environment simultaneously increases their revenue over time. Maintenance and enforcement are further issues, especially if Local Councils lack the resources to keep such spaces clean, safe and well-regulated. This is particularly pertinent with regard to the appropriation of space by Outdoor Catering Areas (OCAs). Heritage protection adds another complex layer, with design restrictions due to heritage assets and the possibility of delays due to archaeological

discoveries. From an infrastructure point of view, Malta's hot climate and sudden storms call for thoughtful climate-resilient design, such as shaded areas and improved drainage, which is often hard to retrofit adequately into compact, historical environments. Finally, finding appropriate ways of ensuring residents' active involvement in the design and planning process is crucial. Even the best-designed public spaces can fail if the community does not embrace them. Residents need to be heard in the discussions even because they will have valuable information about the space they interact with on a daily basis. Residents need to be at the heart of the proposed changes, as ultimately, the improvements to urban spaces should aim to make a real difference in their daily lives. To ensure a good relationship with the local community, a project's benefits should be visible early on, such as safer pavements, more seating and better lighting at night. It is also important that these spaces are brought to life with regular activities and events – again, the local community should play a central role in this.

3.2 Key Opportunities

Despite the challenges, Malta has several advantages that strongly support the regeneration of its historical centres. First, Maltese communities have a deep cultural identity and emotional attachment to their towns and villages, with pride in their local traditions, the *festa* and landmarks that must not be ignored. Each successful urban space regeneration contributes to a growing momentum: national authorities, Local Councils and the Local Councils' Association increasingly prioritise people-centred planning, with programmes such as *Slow Streets* and *Vjal Kulhadd*

focused on supporting pedestrian-friendly spaces. Furthermore, Malta can access EU funds and initiatives aimed at cultural preservation, mobility and sustainable urban development, offering financial and technical backing. These realities have simultaneously raised a wave of civic engagement from NGOs, youth groups and residents calling for better public spaces. This reinforces the belief that communities are ready for change and eager to lead it when they can see tangible, positive results. These combined forces can represent a strong foundation for building meaningful regeneration efforts.



Illustration by Studjurban



Photograph by Ben Mathis Seibel on Unsplash

4. Key Design Pointers for Developing Public Spaces in Historical Contexts

When planning and designing improvements in historic urban cores and piazzas, certain design principles and best practices should be followed to ensure the outcome is both respectful of heritage and responsive to contemporary needs. Below are key design pointers tailored to Malta's historical contexts:

Respect the Historic Fabric and Identity

- Begin by deeply understanding the site's history and character.
- Preserve and highlight important heritage elements.
- Integrate archaeological features discovered during works.
- Integrate new additions (such as urban furniture) sensitively, seeking to respect and enrich the existing historical context.

Prioritise Pedestrians and Shared Use

- Design should centre around pedestrian comfort, expanding pavement area and creating pedestrian-only zones wherever possible.
- Implement traffic calming measures, such as curbless streets or textured paving, to slow down vehicles.
- If vehicle access is necessary, limit it to peripheral areas, keeping the central and most accessible space pedestrian-focused.

Reorganise Parking and Transport Links

- Reduce most parking spaces within the core and relocate them to the outskirts, supporting the parking strategy with parking management schemes and resident-priority parking, as amply discussed in the LCA's publication **Parking Projects** within the **Sustainable Mobility** series. Such remaining parking should be discreet, avoiding dominance in the central area.
- Ensure easy access to the core via alternative transport modes (e.g., bicycles, shuttle services and local bus connections).

Ensure Accessibility for All

- Ensure the space is inclusive, addressing mobility challenges with gentle ramps or smooth transitions.
- Use tactile paving for the visually impaired, provide seating for rest and install handrails at key points.
- Ensure that vehicular drop-offs are available for people with disabilities, preferably at the edge of the urban core.

Use High-Quality, Contextual Materials

- Choose materials that complement the historic context, such as local limestone or traditional paving patterns.
- Materials should be durable, easy to maintain, and safe (non-slip surfaces for high-traffic areas).



*Mosta Square landscaped areas.
Source: Studjurban,
(photo by Sean Mallia).*

Introduce Greening and Shade Thoughtfully

- Add green infrastructure that complements the historical setting without blocking important sightlines.
- Choose native or climate-appropriate plants that provide shade and enhance the microclimate.
- Plan for irrigation and maintenance of greenery, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Provide Adequate Street Furniture and Amenities

- *Install comfortable and well-positioned seating (benches, seating walls) in shaded areas.*
- *Include practical amenities such as waste bins, bicycle racks and innovative surfaces that lend themselves to various local activities.*
- *Ensure lighting is studied carefully, creating a safe and welcoming nighttime environment. Fixtures should not compete unnecessarily with the space but complement the surroundings.*

Balance Open Space with Flexible Use

- *Keep the central space open and flexible for various activities (holding markets, as discussed further in the LCA's publication **3.3 Open Markets**, events and performances).*
- *Design should allow easy reconfiguration for events, such as setting up temporary stages or tents.*
- *If possible, integrate zones for specific activities (e.g.café seating). Control instances of spatial appropriation and enforce against misuse, to ensure a balanced use of the entire urban space.*



Mosta's square used neutral-toned paving that blends seamlessly with the area's historical architecture. Source: Studjurban, (photo by Sean Mallia).



Sustainability and Infrastructure Upgrades

- Use the regeneration process to update underground infrastructure (water mains, electricity cables and sewers) and remove unsightly overhead cables and wires.
- Incorporate green infrastructure solutions such as stormwater management systems (e.g., rainwater harvesting, permeable paving and bioswales).
- Install energy-efficient lighting and consider renewable energy sources like solar power, but be mindful of the visual implications of PV cells within a historical setting.

Community Engagement in Design

- Actively involve residents and, more specifically, the neighbourhood in question, in the design process through participatory consultations, public exhibitions, design charrettes and feedback discussion sessions. Ensure the final design reflects the residents' needs and values, from accessibility to preserving local traditions.
- Engage local groups (residents, local businesses and NGOs) to build a sense of ownership and support for the project.

Key Design Pointer	Summary
Respect the Historic Fabric and Identity	- Understand the site's history - Preserve heritage elements - Integrate archaeological finds - Ensure new additions harmonise with historic style.
Prioritise Pedestrians and Shared Use	- Focus on pedestrian comfort - Expand sidewalks - Traffic calming by limiting vehicle access to periphery.
Reorganise Parking and Transport Links	- Move parking to outskirts - Keep any remaining parking discreet - Improve alternative transport links.
Ensure Accessibility for All	- Inclusive design with ramps, tactile paving, seating - Accessible drop-off points.
Use High-Quality, Contextual Materials	- Select materials (e.g., limestone, traditional paving) that suit the historic setting; - Ensure durability and safety.
Introduce Greening and Shade Thoughtfully	- Add trees and plants without obstructing views - Use native species - Plan for maintenance.
Provide Adequate Street Furniture and Amenities	Install seating, lighting, and practical amenities.
Balance Open Space with Flexible Use	Keep spaces open for events and flexible activities.
Sustainability and Infrastructure Upgrades	- Upgrade utilities - Integrate green infrastructure
Community Engagement in Design	Consult locals to shape and support the design.

*Illustration by Studjurban.
Key Design Pointers.*

The success of projects in historical urban cores may be gauged by their ability to successfully balance issues related to contextual respect, pedestrian priority, accessibility, appropriate materials, green infrastructure, integration of amenities, resilience, robustness and community inclusion throughout the design and implementation process.

They can renew the area's functionality and comfort for today's users while enhancing, rather than detracting from.

Good design in these sensitive contexts is ultimately about subtlety and responsiveness: making improvements with the grain of history, not against it, so that locals and visitors alike can appreciate the historical character that makes each town and village unique.

5. Steps to support the implementation of historical heritage, urban cores and piazzas

Turning plans into reality in historical urban cores requires good design and a clear implementation strategy. The following eight pragmatic steps provide a roadmap for Local Councils and other stakeholders to plan, execute and sustain improvements in public spaces.



*Illustration by Studjurban.
Design steps for historic hubs.*



Photograph by Nick Fewings on Unsplash.

Step 1

Define Vision and Assess Needs



Photograph by Rames Quinerie on Unsplash.

- Start by **evaluating the chosen urban space's current condition**. This includes collecting detailed data about pedestrian traffic patterns, nearby businesses, local services, and community needs. Conduct surveys among residents or hold focus groups to understand better the specific concerns and desires of those who live, work and visit the area. This analysis is essential to creating a functional and relevant plan for the community, laying a strong foundation for all subsequent design and planning efforts.
- **Engage local businesses, residents and other key stakeholders** early in the process. Host meetings, conduct interviews and collaborate with community leaders to help collect valuable input. This dialogue generates trust and ensures that the project aligns with the needs and desires of those who will be directly impacted by it.

Step 2

Engage Stakeholders and Build Consensus



Photograph by Dario Daniel Silva on Unsplash.

- After the stakeholders have been identified and consulted, a key factor would be **maintaining constant communication** to ensure the project meets their expectations. Engage community members throughout different design phases, ensuring their voices are heard when making decisions. This includes, among other things, planning safe and direct pedestrian flows, integrating heritage elements, and ensuring accessibility for all.
- Securing **permits and funding** is crucial before progressing to the next phase. Apply for relevant grants and seek government support to ensure financial support. Obtaining local authority and stakeholder approval is vital, as it will provide the needed legal and financial backing to move forward with confidence.



Step 3

Develop Integrated Plans



Photograph by Louis Sproul on Unsplash.

- 
- **Divide the work** strategically to make it more manageable, ensuring each stage is defined and achievable within a reasonable timeframe. **Prioritise infrastructure** improvements, followed by their integration with the surroundings.
 - It is essential to **build in flexible timeframes** for potential delays, especially in heritage areas where unexpected archaeological discoveries or structural challenges might arise. Create a contingency plan to address and foresee these situations, without losing much momentum or causing significant delays to the general schedule.

Secure Approvals and Mobilise Resources



- 
- **Extend the needed work** to reputable construction companies with expertise in similar projects, especially when dealing with historical areas. Ensure clear technical specifications for materials and methods.
 - Together with the Architect- and Engineer-in-Charge, it is highly recommended to hire a **project manager** for the day-to-day construction process. Such experts will ensure that quality standards are met, monitor compliance with safety regulations and address any issues that arise during construction. A dedicated project manager will provide easy flow communication, coordinate tasks and keep the project on track.

Step 5

Execute Construction



Photograph by Steffen Lemmerz on Unsplash.

- 
- At this stage, **transparency and communication** with the community become even more important. Updating the public regularly through various media or meetings keeps residents informed about project milestones and potential disruptions. Transparency always helps maintain the community's support and allows residents to plan accordingly for any inconveniences.
 - It is crucial to hire skilled **labour**, especially for sensitive heritage restoration work, to guarantee that materials and methods are handled appropriately. Regularly monitor the quality of work and address unforeseen challenges as they arise. Be proactive in solving problems to ensure that the project remains on schedule and within budget.

Step 6

Activate the Space



Photograph by Ross Sneddon on Unsplash.

- Once the construction phase is complete, draw attention to the revitalised space by encouraging community engagement in **organising events**. This allows residents to celebrate the transformation and feel a sense of pride in the new space that has been created. Scheduling regular, and diverse, events will draw a wide range of people, ensuring that the space remains vibrant and accessible to all.
- **Offer constant support to surrounding local businesses** to adapt to the new environment and contribute to the area's economic vitality. At the same time, ensure that the public space is not compromised for its main intended users, the residents.

Step 7

Manage and Maintain the Space



Photograph by Sterling Lanier on Unsplash.

- 
- Local councils should seek to designate a **person** or **committee** responsible for managing the maintenance of the space, including cleaning, repairs and enforcement of new regulations such as pedestrian-only zones, noise restrictions and designated OCA extents. This ensures that the space remains welcoming and functional for all users.
 - The space should remain an integral part of the community's everyday life by **providing a venue** for events to foster a sense of ownership and pride among local residents.

Step 8

Monitor, Evaluate, and Improve



Source: Studjurban, photograph by Sean Mallia.

- 
- Track key indicators such as foot traffic, event attendance and public satisfaction to assess the project's success and use the urban space as a test base for future urban spaces.
 - Use residents' feedback and monitoring data to make improvements and adapt programming.
 - If the project proves successful, consider replicating this approach in other local areas, expanding its positive impact across the town or village.

By following through the above eight steps, a Local Council may transform a historical urban core in a participatory, evidence-based and sustainable manner.

Case Studies



Mosta Square

Mosta Square is a point of high connectivity, located at the intersection of major urban routes. The new design features an uninterrupted central *piazza* that forms the heart of the space. Where the area around the Rotunda was once dominated by vehicles, there are now green pockets with strategically placed crossings accessible to everyone. The *piazza* retains its historical essence while helping slow down vehicular traffic and improve pedestrian flow through the design and strategic placing of elements, the paving layout and the selection of respectful, locally sourced materials. Today, the local community and visitors can enjoy the *piazza* on foot, particularly during weekends when the space opens up fully as a pedestrian space, further accommodating large events and gatherings. The new layout also enables partial closure to traffic, which may pass peripherally, permitting the co-existence of both activities if required.



*During works, archaeological finds in Birgu Square were integrated into the piazza's final design.
Source: Studjurban.*



Birgu Piazza

The regeneration of the Main Square of Birgu is a successful example of urban design that balances contemporary spatial needs with the site's layered heritage. Where it was once a car-dominated area and a parking lot, we find a historical piazza transformed into a pedestrian-oriented space that prioritises community use, accessibility and memory. A pedestrian-only zone is at the heart of the design. It has been repurposed for gathering, resting and interaction. Linear benches follow the movement paths, leading to the main feature: a red travertine composition of trims, kerbs and extrusions that traces the footprint of a historic clock tower lost during WWII. The archaeological remains of a domestic yard were found and integrated into the paving to preserve and reveal layers of history on site. This sensitive design approach invites an open dialogue between past and present through the material choices and minimalist interventions, enriching community life while reinforcing cultural identity.

6. Relevant EU Programmes and Funding Resources

Enhancing historical urban cores and piazzas often requires significant funding and expertise. Various European Union projects, initiatives and funding programmes support these goals. Below is an overview of relevant key EU resources and how they may be leveraged:

- **The ERDF and Cohesion Fund** are two of the primary EU funding sources supporting urban regeneration projects. These funds have enabled initiatives such as the restoration of heritage sites, the revitalisation of public squares and the enhancement of pedestrian infrastructure. Two priorities for the 2021–2027 programming period are particularly relevant: Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development. Local Councils interested in such projects — especially those involving regeneration of squares that combine heritage value with improved accessibility — should regularly consult the Planning and Priorities Coordination Division (PPCD) for open calls. ERDF funding typically covers most eligible costs, though a local co-financing contribution is required.
- The **Interreg V-A Italy-Malta** programme supports cross-border projects with Sicily to enhance access to cultural and natural heritage. It funds initiatives like historical centre revitalisation, cultural routes, and heritage tourism. The recent CHORAL project (2025) focuses on improving digital and green accessibility to heritage sites. Local Councils may collaborate with Sicilian towns to regenerate piazzas and create shared cultural itineraries — ideal for Interreg, which can cover up to 85% of costs.



Photograph by Sterling Lanier on Unsplash.

- **New European Bauhaus (NEB)** is an active EU initiative promoting sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion — values that align perfectly with revitalising historical squares. While not a funding programme, NEB connects projects to various EU funding streams like Horizon Europe. Malta has already engaged with NEB through initiatives like the Valletta Design Cluster (discussed in the LCA's document **3.1 Parks and Gardens**). Local Councils may tap into NEB for expertise, networking and strengthening funding proposals by adopting NEB principles such as cultural expression, community co-design and circular materials.
- **CulturEU Funding** is another European Commission initiative that supports the cultural and creative sectors, including heritage. Culture Strand often includes heritage-led regeneration. It is active and has a support team to connect potential partners with funding opportunities related to individual projects.
- **Horizon 2020 / Horizon Europe (until 2027)** funds research and innovation projects, often led by universities or companies, but cities can participate as pilot sites. Malta has participated in projects such as CIVITAS DESTINATIONS, which tested pedestrian-friendly tourism mobility. Local Councils may join either as partners or testbeds. They can still benefit from expertise, tech installations, or visibility. Under the Horizon Europe scheme, themes like climate adaptation and digital heritage tools could support projects in historical areas. With indirect funding, these projects may obtain smart features (like Augmented Reality apps or Wi-Fi points) that may boost a locality's profile in terms of urban innovation.

7. Concluding Thoughts



Photograph by Wilson Wu on Unsplash.

Malta is shaped by its historical urban cores and piazzas. Not only are they key to our cultural heritage, but they are also essential to the vitality of our past, present and future communities. Revitalising and adapting these spaces to today's realities can be a celebration of our rich history – an undertaking that is both challenging and exciting. The transformation of urban spaces requires a thoughtful balance of careful planning, genuine collaboration, respect for the past and a forward-thinking approach. The rewards may be profound, creating revitalised spaces that are both beautiful and functional, establishing a forum for stronger social bonds, improved public wellbeing and a renewed sense of pride and national identity.

As discussed throughout this document, as long as there exists a deep understanding of site value and a drive towards community improvement, the journey towards revitalising these spaces will be strong and steady, no matter the inconveniences and problems. While physical elements such as paving, preserved historical elements, green infrastructure components, local materials and street furniture are all key design assets, the true success of these projects lies in the day-to-day life of the locals living their lives in the squares. The ultimate goal is not to solely preserve these spaces as frozen relics of the past, nor to modernise them without sensitivity, but rather to facilitate their gradual evolution and adaptation through time. Through some case studies in this document, we have seen how infrastructure upgrades and heritage conservation can work together to create vibrant, functional and sustainable urban spaces.

Most importantly, however, any successful project lies in community ownership. The most effective transformations are those shaped with and for the people who will use them. When you can count on the collaboration of local residents, business owners, and community groups, you also ensure that these urban spaces truly meet their needs, fostering a sense of pride that will provide special care for the site in the long term. With the concerted effort of Local and Regional Councils, authorities, agencies and other institutions, Malta has the opportunity to be a leader in demonstrating how nations with rich cultural heritage can rethink and reimagine their urban spaces for future generations. A national programme could link these spaces through thematic trails or shared branding, inviting both locals and tourists to explore and enjoy the character of each locality. Such a vision could have a transformative impact on the quality of life for residents, while enhancing Malta's international reputation as a forward-thinking, heritage-conscious destination.

Local Councils thus have the opportunity to lead successful, meaningful transformations. These urban spaces are not just places on a map; they are living environments where people can come together, memories are created and identities are shaped. That is why they deserve nothing less than our best efforts. By acting now, we honour our past and provide the foundations for a richer, more inclusive future for generations to come.

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Source: Studjurban, photograph by Sean Mallia.





GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES OPEN MARKETS



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By Nathan Wang on Unsplash

1. Introduction

Open markets comprise vibrant public marketplaces where vendors and shoppers come together in the open or within designated lightweight structures for exchange (whether goods, food, or cultural). Far more than simple venues for commerce, open markets serve as social hubs, economic enablers, cultural assets and attractions for locals and visitors alike. Throughout history and especially in Mediterranean regions, marketplaces have been central to community life, often doubling as the heart of civic engagement and even poetically referred to as the 'soul' of a community.



In Malta, the tradition of open markets runs deep, from village squares bustling on weekly market days to the historic merchant stalls of Valletta. Today, there is a renewed interest in leveraging these markets as tools for sustainable local development in line with the Local Councils' Association's **ResidentFirst** vision. The value of open markets is multifaceted – they are, of course, platforms for economic opportunity, a reflection of the local culture and tourism magnets. Still, they are also important social spaces within a locality. Indeed, in essence, markets serve as social infrastructure, performing the role of open-air community centres where residents forge connections and local identity is strengthened.

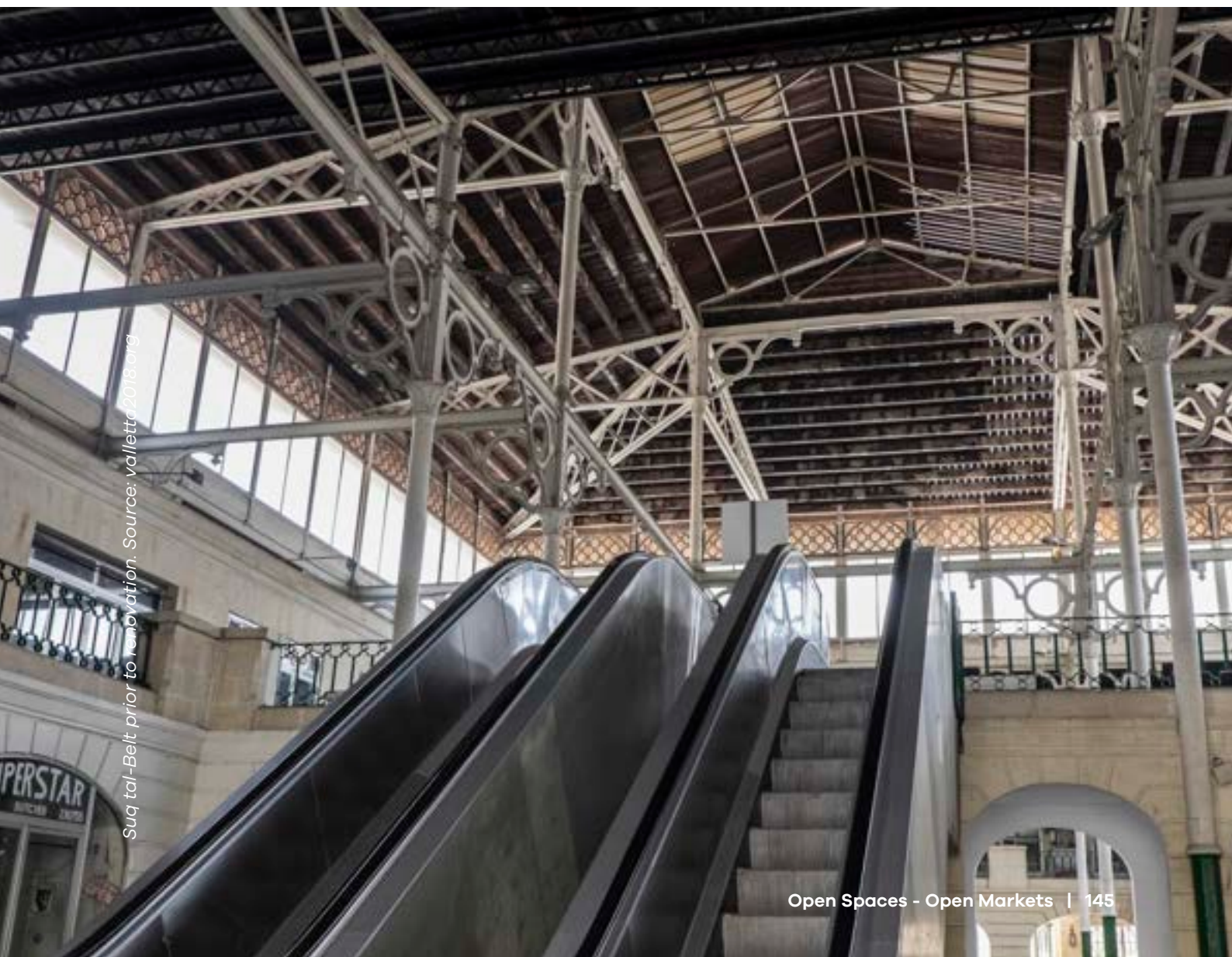
Building on open space re-use principles, further discussed in the LCA's document **3.4 Open Space Re-use**, this document outlines key design principles for creating or retrofitting spaces to host markets, ensuring they are flexible, accessible, well-integrated into our towns and that they do not significantly inconvenience nearby residents.

*Photo by Maria Kovalets
on Unsplash.*

2. Historical Overview of Open Markets in Malta

Open markets have been part of Maltese life for centuries, evolving from informal bartering gatherings into organised marketplaces that reflect broader historical changes. Malta's own market tradition can be traced to the time of the Knights of St. John. In Valletta's early days, an open marketplace existed in what was known as *Piazza del Malcantone*, where farmers from rural areas would bring their produce daily to sell. This

early market provided structure and shelter for vendors and shoppers, marking Malta's transition from ad-hoc village markets to a more formal urban marketplace. Under British colonial rule, Malta's markets saw significant development. The covered market hall in Valletta, known as *Is-Suq tal-Belt*, was expanded and rebuilt between 1859 and 1861 using a cast-iron structure, reminiscent of London's Crystal Palace and Paris' Les Halles' modern style.



Is-Suq tal-Belt prior to renovation. Source: valletta2018.org



Photo by Mael Balland on Unsplash

Unfortunately, the market hall suffered heavy damage in World War II. It was partially rebuilt in simplified form after the war and continued to operate, though the rise of new shopping habits gradually diminished its prominence by the late 20th century. Beyond Valletta, some Maltese towns and villages have maintained weekly open-air markets since the 19th century. Historical records and local memory point to regular market days in large villages where itinerant hawkers would sell wares from carts or stalls.

These local markets became part of the island's social activity. Every town had its *suq* day, providing residents access to fresh goods and household items in an era when travelling to Valletta was not easy for everyone. By the mid-20th century, Malta's open markets had to adapt to modern pressures. In 1982, the government relocated the primary food market out of Valletta to a new facility in Floriana, aiming to decongest the capital. The historic *Suq tal-Belt* building in Valletta was repurposed after extensive renovation works, retaining the Victorian iron structure and the market building reopened in 2018 as a food hall and market as one of the projects in connection with Valletta's European Capital of Culture designation.

Malta has also introduced new market concepts influenced by global trends. One notable development was the creation of official farmers' markets. Traditionally, Maltese farmers sold their produce wholesale through the central *Pitkalija* market (established in Ta' Qali in the mid-20th century) to grocers or mobile hawkers, who then retailed to consumers. Direct farm-to-consumer sales in an open market format were rare until the late 2000s. These markets symbiotically link urban and rural economies by connecting rural producers directly with urban consumers.

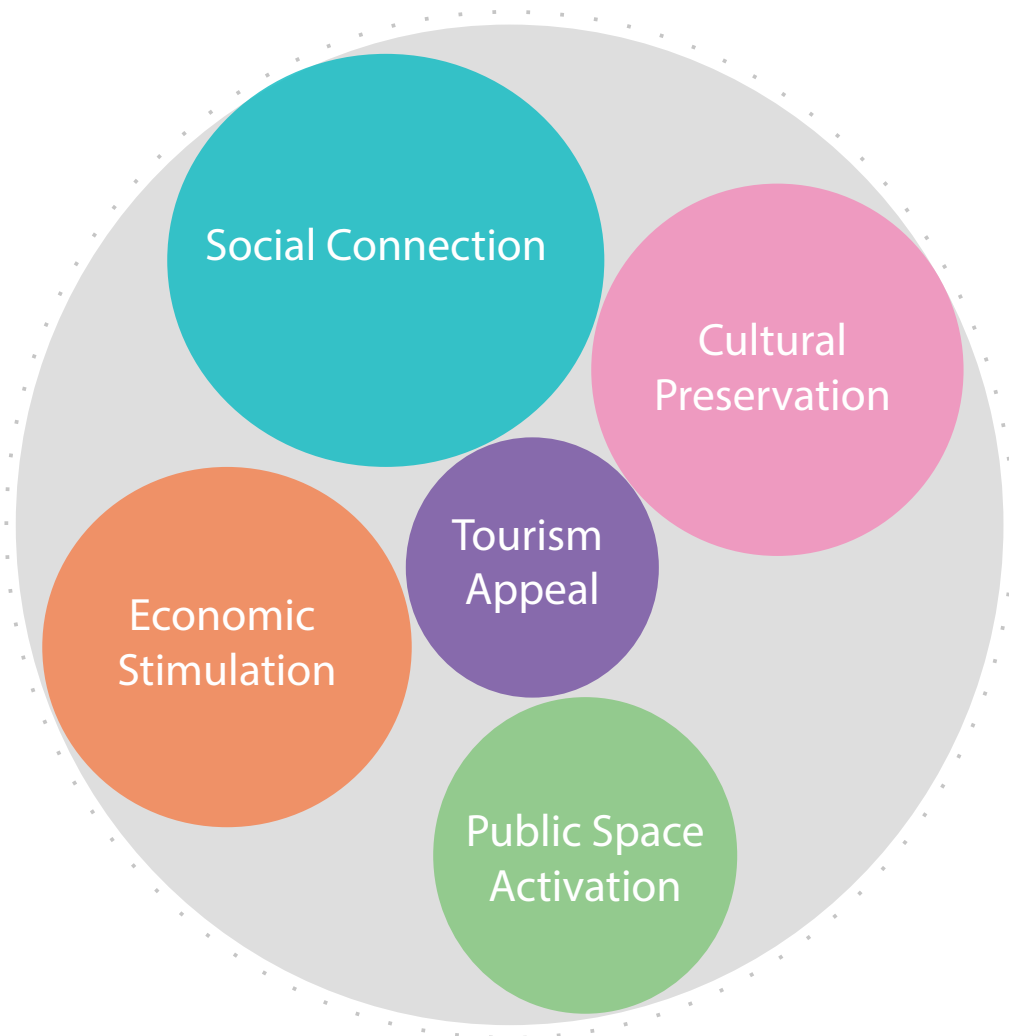
Malta's open markets have continually adapted within evolving urban settings. Markets such as the Sunday fish market in Marsaxlokk — rooted in the village's long-standing tradition of selling the morning catch — and Gozo's daily market at *It-Tokk* in Victoria, which has served generations, show how these spaces have grown into vibrant community hubs in their own right. Open markets have thus remained resilient and culturally significant. Their evolution and enduring legacy underscore their value in Maltese life and offer key insights for Local Councils considering investment in contemporary open markets.

3. The Value of Open Markets – Social, Economic, Cultural and Tourism Assets

In the Maltese context, where dense urban living can sometimes erode communal interaction, open markets present an opportunity to reinvigorate public life and put residents first.

Open markets draw diverse groups of people into a shared public area, fostering face-to-face interactions that are becoming increasingly rare in this digital age. As also discussed in the LCA's document *3.2 Historical Heritage, Urban Cores (Hubs) and Piazzas*, a busy market day turns a street or square into a lively public and inclusive gathering place where neighbours and visitors

engage with an important cultural element, conversations spark between strangers and a sense of community is reinforced, where everyone is welcome. One only needs to walk through the Ballarò market in Palermo, Italy to sense how a market can be a melting pot with customers from Sicilian, African and South Asian origin, all interacting in one space. The social fabric woven at markets can lead to greater trust and solidarity in the community. In multicultural localities, markets are often where intercultural exchange happens naturally.



*Illustration by Studjurban.
Open Markets.*



Open markets are engines of local economic activity and opportunity. They support small businesses, enable entrepreneurship and keep money circulating within the local economy. In fact, public markets are often called the 'ultimate small business incubator'. Vendors can find it relatively easy to get started – one can have a market stall with minimal investment compared to opening a big shop. This creates opportunities for individuals. Newcomers can also join the trade.

Meanwhile, Malta's beloved traditional markets continue to thrive and adapt. The famous *Valletta Monti* (the open-air flea market) has been a fixture in the City for over a century. Shopkeepers in towns like Victoria (Gozo) or Birgu often report higher sales on market mornings thanks to the influx of visitors who come for the market and then visit other establishments.



Photo by Jan Gemeirle on Unsplash. Photo of a fish market in Palermo.

Markets are living expressions of local culture and heritage. They are often the stage on which traditions play out daily – through food, crafts, language and rituals of commerce. In Malta, open markets encapsulate elements of our intangible cultural heritage – the call of the hawker, the display of local produce or the haggling over vintage local items. For instance, the Marsaxlokk fish market offers more than fresh fish; it offers a glimpse into Malta's fishing heritage. The stalls laden with *lampuki* and swordfish, manned by fishermen's families, and the background of colourful *luzzus* in the bay create a cultural landscape that educates younger generations and visitors about Maltese maritime traditions. Markets also inspire new cultural expressions as artisans and makers find a venue to showcase Maltese creativity.



Photo by William Jones on Unsplash.
The Monti set up in Valletta.



Photo by Kate Michalska on Unsplash



Photo by Martin Vonk on Unsplash.
Photograph of Barcelona's La Boqueria market

Tourists have always been drawn to markets for an authentic taste of local life. In the age of experiential travel, a bustling market is often a top attraction. Many European cities are inextricably identified with their famous markets: *La Boqueria* in Barcelona, for example, is billed as the most famous market worldwide and a must-see landmark on La Rambla. Thousands of visitors daily wander its food-laden aisles and tapas bars. While well-managed tourism at markets may bring economic injection that further helps sustain them, tourist popularity can also be a double-edged sword – locals consider Boqueria one of the contributors to overtourism in the city.

If tourist and resident needs are not well balanced, or if the sole focus of these markets becomes the visitor attraction, the value and authenticity of these important cultural assets may become compromised, at the expense of local character and community alienation. While expanding the scope for tourism can be beneficial, it must be carefully managed to ensure that community needs remain at the core.

4. Challenges and Opportunities in Malta's Open Markets



Further to the previous discussion, some of the key challenges facing open markets in Malta include:

- **Limited physical space and urban density** constitute a major challenge for open markets in Malta, making it difficult to find suitable areas for stalls, circulation and parking. Village cores are often constrained by narrow streets, heritage restrictions, existing café seating or resident parking, leaving limited space. As a result, Local Councils usually opt for temporary road closures or repurposing underused lots.
- Markets require **logistics** vis-à-vis traffic management, sanitation, utility provision, and protection against adverse weather conditions. They also need appropriate infrastructure because they generate waste and require water, electricity and public toilets. The intense summer heat demands shaded areas for visitors, while sudden

rain or wind can alter market activity. Local Councils must plan for contingencies, including temporary shelters or alternative venues.

- **Regulatory and administrative issues** can delay the establishment of open markets. Local Councils must manage complex processes involving permits, vendor licensing and strict food safety regulations, especially for fresh produce or fish. Moreover, any new market initiatives must comply with existing national legislation.
- **Competition from modern retail** presents a significant challenge. Supermarkets, shopping centres and online platforms offer consistent availability, convenience and a wide product range. In contrast, weekly markets often face issues such as inconsistent vendor attendance, limited product variety and variable quality. Restricted opening hours and a lack of modern amenities can deter people from visiting, as they may find it difficult to shop within the narrow window of market activity.



*Illustration by Studjurban.
Open markets – challenges and opportunities.*



Photo by Graphic Node on Unsplash.

Market activities can bring together a diverse range of stakeholders, whose interests may not always align. We have previously outlined the issue of over-tourism and the risk of losing a market's authenticity. Residents might also object to a market for other practical matters, such as noise, litter or congestion. Without effective consultation, such tensions could end a market project before it begins. Communication is vital to ease any initial tensions through collaborative and transparent efforts that remain consistent throughout the market's lifetime. Public meetings should be held in order to share updates, collect feedback and possibly identify joint solutions. In addition, a specific Market Liaison Officer could provide someone in charge to bridge between vendors, organisers and residents and solve complaints in real time.

On a more strategic scale, if feasible, a rotational schedule could be established to position markets in different locations, thereby avoiding a concentrated impact in one area. Indeed, markets need not be confined to the exact location or schedule each week. Local Councils could experiment with night markets in summer, seasonal holiday markets in winter, or artisan markets tied to local events. By aligning markets with the time-specific rhythms of urban life, Local Councils may maximise their success. Local Councils could also coordinate with the Malta Tourism Authority to align market days with specific occasions, such as cruise ship visits.

Markets offer a powerful tool for community revitalisation and placemaking. As further discussed in the LCA's document **3.4 Open Space Re-Use**, temporary interventions, such as pop-up stalls or street furniture, as part of a tactical urbanism strategy, may help test new uses within an urban space. Successful pilot projects could pave the way for more permanent improvements, including potentially more permanent market spaces. Outside such markets' operating hours, the market space may also be used for ulterior purposes.

Open markets align with wider policy objectives around sustainability, local food systems and urban liveability. The EU's Farm-to-Fork strategy and national initiatives from the Malta Food Agency promote direct selling and farmers' markets. Local Councils may access EU funding for infrastructure, training, or promotional campaigns. Market projects can be embedded within broader regeneration bids, making them more feasible financially and politically. In addition, since markets resonate deeply with Maltese cultural identity, Local Councils could capitalise on this by linking them to festivals or seasonal celebrations.

5. Key Design Principles for Market Spaces (Creation and Retrofitting)

Designing a space to host an open market or retrofitting an existing public space requires careful consideration of functionality, flexibility and context. A well-designed market can enhance the experience for vendors and visitors equally by ensuring safety and convenience. Some of the more important design principles include:

Location and Accessibility

In Malta, traditional markets may often be found in town centres, benefiting from high pedestrian traffic. Key accessibility considerations would be to:

- Locate markets near bus stops or within walking distance of residential areas.
- Ensure even surfaces and provide ramps where necessary to accommodate people with disabilities, parents with strollers and the elderly.
- Consider temporary road closures or re-routing during market hours to prioritise pedestrian access for shared streets.
- Allow for vendor unloading near stalls before market hours, with designated off-site parking thereafter.
- Install signage from nearby roads or transit hubs (bus stops, interchange points, Park and Ride areas, etc.) to guide visitors easily to the market.



Photo by Roman Suslov on Unsplash.

Robust, Multi-Use Design

Market areas should be designed for multiple uses. A robust design (in terms of the flexibility of the space) ensures the space is not underutilised outside of market hours. Design strategies would be to:

- Use collapsible or movable stalls instead of permanent ones; mark vendor pitches with unobtrusive paint or tiles.
- Choose movable street furniture or perimeter elements that do not obstruct market setup.
- Apply temporary adaptations such as installing removable bollards to restrict traffic, as part of a wider tactical urbanism approach.
- Allow space to expand or contract depending on vendor numbers.
- Provide infrastructure such as power outlets, hooks for lighting and water taps and, if required, connection points to the sewerage network.

Circulation and Layout

Efficient circulation makes markets safe, navigable, and enjoyable. Layouts should support smooth foot traffic and avoid overcrowding. Key elements would be to:

- Provide at least 3–4 metres for primary corridors to support two-way pedestrian traffic for the aisle width
- Provide multiple access and exit points to prevent bottlenecks.
- Use bollards or planters to block vehicle access during market hours and create pedestrian-only zones, while allowing emergency vehicle access.
- Avoid sharp turns or blind spots; aim for loop or U-shaped layouts that encourage browsing as well as vendors' visibility.
- Position stalls facing pedestrian flow; use back-to-back rows or perimeter arrangements.
- Allocate communal areas for food consumption or resting — ideally shaded and with seating to encourage the creation of social zones.
- Include maps and directional signs in various languages to orient visitors and reduce confusion.



Photo by Maria Kovalets on Unsplash. Ascoli Piceno, Italy

Amenities and Comfort

Well-equipped markets are more attractive to both sides, especially to visitors. Comfort elements should address Malta's climate and basic user needs. Important considerations are to:

- Use trees, tensile canopies, or uniform vendor umbrellas when in an open space to provide shade and protection. Local Councils may decide on standardised tents for cohesive aesthetics throughout the urban space.
- Provide benches or ledges to sit on that do not block aisles for visitors to rest.
- Ensure restroom access nearby as part of a more permanent infrastructure, with clear signage and accessibility features.
- Distribute bins for waste and recycling; designate a collection point for vendor waste.
- As discussed earlier, install water taps, power outlets and connection points to the sewerage network to support vendor operations.
- Use ambient string lights or lamp posts to enhance evening use and safety.
- Provide shared storage facilities nearby (such as repurposed garages) for market equipment and supplies.

Aesthetic Integration and Heritage Sensitivity

Markets in historic cores should enhance rather than detract from the existing character of the area. Design elements must be sensitive to local identity and heritage. Guidelines include the need to:

- Understand the urban context to provide a compatible design aesthetic that further reinforces local identity and accomplishes a visually harmonious relationship with the urban space.
- Avoid damaging historic paving or facades; use rubber pads under stall legs and secure permissions for any fixture attachments, if unavoidable.



*Photo by Lukas Klein
on Unsplash.
Inside La Boqueria market.*



Safety and Management Design

Design should proactively address operational safety and simplify ongoing management. Core features are to:

- Use underground wiring or secure cable channels for lighting and equipment to avoid safety hazards.
- Place food stalls using gas on the perimeter; provide extinguishers.
- Include a designated area or plan for emergencies with easy access for ambulances and other emergency vehicles.
- Position a central booth or tent for administration, lost-and-found, and visitor support.
- Post clear market rules, schedules, and organiser contact information that can be accessible for all.
- Use strong paving and good quality materials that resist wear from heavy footfall and vendor vehicles.
- Design surfaces with adequate drainage and support regular cleaning (e.g. slope to drains, nearby water taps).

Key Design Pointer	Summary
Location and Accessibility	• Locate near bus stops or residential areas. • Ensure flat surfaces and provide ramps for accessibility. • Temporary road closures or re-routing • Vendor unloading zones • Signage from nearby roads or transit hubs
Flexible, Multi-Use Design	• Collapsible or movable stalls • Implement temporary adaptations • Space for seasonal vendor expansions or contractions • Hidden infrastructure
Circulation and Layout	• 3–4 meters wide primary corridors • Provide multiple access/exit • Use bollards or planters to block vehicle access • Avoid sharp turns or blind spots • Position stalls to face pedestrian • Communal areas for food or resting • Signs and maps
Amenities and Comfort	• Shade and protection. • Provide sitting area • Restroom access or portable toilets with accessibility. • Bins for waste and recycling • Water taps and power outlets • Use ambient lighting • Shared storage facilities
Aesthetic Integration and Heritage Sensitivity	• Match local aesthetics • Avoid damaging historic pavings • Material selection to reinforce local identity. • Visual icons • Include traditional elements
Safety and Management Design	• Underground wiring or secure cable channels for safety. • Provide fire extinguishers. • Central booth for administration and visitor support. • Clear market rules, schedules, and organisers information. • Good quality paving and material that resists wear and facilitates cleaning. • Adequate drainage

Open Markets – Key Design Principles.
Source: Studjurban.

6. Typologies of Open Markets and Applicability in Malta

Locally, open (street) markets (*Monti*) are held in several localities, including Birgu, Birkirkara, Birzebuga, Mosta, Naxxar, Nadur, Qormi, Rabat, Valletta, and Żejtun. Some more specialised markets are held in Ta' Qali and Marsaxlokk, as detailed below. Open markets come in various forms, each with its own characteristics, target vendors, and audience. Understanding the different typologies of markets may help Local Councils decide what kind best suits their locality's needs and how to plan for each.

Farmers' Markets (Fresh Produce Markets)

These markets are a direct bridge between the farmers (food producers) and the consumers. The emphasis is on locally grown or made food and shortening the supply chain. One of Malta's most important markets is Ta' Qali Farmers' Market, which opens on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Farmers' markets provide an interesting prospect across Malta, given the national interest in fresh, local produce and the need to support our agricultural community. They can be established strategically to attract a considerable mass of shoppers regularly, such as urban neighbourhoods and village centres. A successful farmers' market abroad is London's Borough Market, which demonstrates that, even in urban settings, such markets thrive by focusing on quality and experience.

Some well-suited localities to host Farmers' Markets, apart from that held in Ta' Qali, include Żejtun, Victoria (Gozo) and Mġarr. Żejtun and Mġarr both have a long-standing agricultural tradition. Żejtun lies in proximity to various farming communities in the South and is relatively central to the southern region. Mġarr already has a strong identity with, and cultural ties to, farming and hosts events like the Festa Frawli (Strawberry Festival) that align well with a prospective market. As the commercial hub of Gozo and surrounded by active agricultural zones, Victoria would provide an ideal location for a Gozitan farmers' market, especially with the prospect of liberating the centre of vehicles and increasing its pedestrian nature.



Photo by Bruno Martins on Unsplash. Inside Borough Market, London.



Birgu Flea Market. Source: Mindtrip.com

Flea Markets and Second-Hand Markets

Flea Markets are focused on the sale of second-hand goods from antiques to collectables and they may be tied to community swap or upcycling initiatives. Portobello Road Market in London illustrates how flea markets can become cultural and tourist landmarks. These markets hold great appeal in Maltese culture, as seen from the success of car-boot sale markets organised by locals. A key success factor is having a critical mass of stalls to attract and retain foot traffic. Local Councils may support these markets with minimal infrastructure by offering public

spaces, basic organisation and low vendor fees. Smaller Local Councils might consider rotating regional markets across different town squares.

An example of the above is Birgu's Fortini Flea Market, held every Sunday morning and possibly Malta's largest and most eclectic car boot sale. The Fortini ground offers ample space for multiple stalls to be set up and organised. The market offers a vibrant mix of second-hand goods, antiques, books, vinyls, toys, tools, and more, drawing a diverse crowd of buyers and vendors.

Some interesting localities for Flea and Second-hand Markets could be Hamrun, Birkirkara, Bormla and Mosta. Both Hamrun and Birkirkara have a strong working-class identity and informal commercial culture. Their main streets already attract street vendors and temporary markets and they are well-connected by public transport. Mosta's weekly market could potentially segment or expand into a more specialised second-hand market in underused urban spaces.



Photo by Chan Tim
on Unsplash.

Night Markets (Evening or After- Dark Markets)

Night markets combine shopping, street food and entertainment in a relaxed and festive atmosphere. Typical features include food stalls, artisanal vendors, live music and decorative lighting, drawing crowds who enjoy socialising in the evening. In Malta, while we lack a strong tradition of recurring night markets, a successful analogy of night-time activity is Valletta's annual arts and culture festival, *Notte Bianca*. Some Local Councils have experimented with summer evening fairs or seaside night markets as part of tourism or community initiatives. These events

indicate there could be a demand and potential to formalise night markets, particularly between late spring and early autumn when evening temperatures are pleasant and locals and tourists alike enjoy being outdoors. In a hot Mediterranean climate like Malta's, evening markets are also far more comfortable than midday events. Night markets must be well-managed in terms of noise and crowd control, with closing times set so as not to disturb local residents. Post-event cleanup is essential to ensure they remain a positive presence in residential areas. Local Councils should coordinate with community officers or police to keep the environment safe and family-friendly.

Night markets in Sliema and St. Julian's could diversify the nightlife beyond bars and restaurants in these localities, particularly in areas that experience a good pedestrian footfall, such as Balluta. A night market in one of Valletta's pedestrianised urban pockets could complement its cultural calendar and seasonal events. Coastal promenades, such as those in St. Paul's Bay and Marsaskala could also offer ideal backdrops for night markets, which would enliven the waterfront beyond the outdoor catering areas.

Artisan Markets

The past decade has seen a rise in artisan markets in Malta, albeit on a small scale, reflecting a growing creative economy. An example is the *Patches Market*, launched in 2010, possibly Malta's first contemporary artisan market, held at locations like Upper Barrakka Gardens.

If well-curated, artisan markets tied to local crafts and heritage could be held in historical localities such as Mdina/Rabat and Birgu without compromising the preservation needs of their urban cores.

Other more specific markets could include dedicated Fish Markets, which coastal Local Councils should strongly support; informal (often community-driven) Swap Meets / Car Boot Sales held occasionally; and combined markets. Current examples include Marsaxlokk's Sunday fish and open market, demonstrating that combining the two markets may also be highly attractive. Another typology of combined market is the Farmers & Artisans Market (or Eco-Market), which combines organic produce, sustainable goods and crafts. Such markets may serve both to increase environmental awareness and provide a platform for local commerce. Local Councils with green priorities could establish monthly eco-markets featuring organic farmers, eco-product vendors and the participation of environmental NGOs.

A risk assessment must support any decision related to the location of any open market typology to ensure that safety and security hazards are addressed beforehand. Even more importantly, introducing any open market in a locality must be done with due care and consideration of its residents and infrastructure.



Photo by Richard Melick on Unsplash

7. Eight Pragmatic Steps for Implementing Successful Open Market Projects



Illustration by Studjurban.

Eight steps that Local Councils in Malta could follow to bring open markets to fruition successfully are identified, spanning from their initial concept to ongoing management. Although presented sequentially, some steps could overlap or be revisited as necessary.



Step 1

Conduct a Community Needs Assessment and Feasibility Study



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- **Distribute** surveys and hold public meetings to gauge resident and local community interest in such open markets and to understand their nature, market frequency, resident concerns and accessibility issues that may arise.
 - **Gauge** the willingness of potential vendors (farmers, craftsmen and small businesses) to participate.
 - **Research** nearby markets to avoid duplication and to complement, not compete with, existing events.
 - **Factor** in seasonality — a summer or holiday market might be an ideal test run before committing to a regular schedule.
 - **Identify** potential sites and assess any legal, land use, or logistical issues early, including permits, ownership and compatibility with market needs.
 - **Produce** a clear concept document outlining what kind of market is feasible, when it would run, where it would be held and who it would serve and obtain the Local Council members' unanimous support.

Step 2

Build a Stakeholder Coalition and Plan Governance



D. Tinieblas on Unsplash

- **Form** a core group of stakeholders — including vendors, local community members, Local Councillors and local business owners to co-lead planning and decision-making.
- **Establish** a market committee with diverse voices to foster shared ownership, avoid conflicts and reflect community interests. The committee should be used to draft market rules and policies, including, for instance, product quality standards and environmental goals.
- **Decide** on a governance model early — whether the market will be Local Council-led, committee-managed, or run by a vendor association – and assign clear roles to each stakeholder.
- **Involve** potential critics (like shop owners) early, ensuring the market complements existing businesses.

Step 3

Secure the Location and Necessary Permissions



Christian Mackie on Unsplash

- **Apply** for necessary permits, such as road closures or event licenses and coordinate with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, Transport Malta, Infrastructure Malta and the Malta Tourism Authority as needed.
- **Ensure** insurance is in place — Local Councils should have public liability cover and vendors may need individual coverage or waivers.
- **Assess** and prepare infrastructure, including ground levelling, electricity provision, water access, and sewerage network connection (if possible and if required).
- **Equipment** should either be acquired and rented out to vendors, or they are to bring their own, as long as this is based on uniform and coherent guidance.
- **Plan** logistics for vendor setup zones, customer access and parking facilities, with clear signage and marshals if needed.
- **Communicate** site-use changes early if the chosen location is a shared space (such as a car park that will require temporary closure) and enforce access rules during market hours.

Step 4

Vendor Recruitment and Curation



Oline Bohovyk on Unsplash

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- **Announce** vendor opportunities and criteria through different local channels.
 - **Aim** for a product mix that reflects the chosen market theme and review applications to avoid product overlap that could hurt vendor sales or that could compete with local businesses.
 - **Confirm** vendor participation early, share setup guidelines and assist with any certifications or permits that may be required.
 - **Organise** a vendor briefing or orientation before launching the open market, to walk through logistics, rules and any relevant expectations in person.
 - **Discuss** contingency plans for weather or low turnout, ensuring vendors know the committee's policies for cancellations or rescheduling.

Step 5

Promotion and Community Awareness



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- **Promote** presence on various channels and use the Local Council's communication strategy, further diffusing the market's information at key community locations.
 - **Clear** information should be shared to further ease logistics in the run-up to the open market and the market setup itself.

Step 6

Launch Day Execution (Pilot and Adjust)



Miltiadis Frackidis on Unsplash

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- **Treat** the market's launch as a trial. Collect feedback by walking around the market during opening to check layout, crowd flow and stall visibility, logging any issues for follow-up.
 - **Market managers** are to be on-site early and easily identifiable, ensuring all amenities function.
 - **Gather** informal feedback from visitors and vendors.
 - **Debrief** with the entire team after the market and adjust plans for the next edition.
 - **Commit** to a pilot period (e.g. 6-monthly editions) to test and refine.

Step 7

Ongoing Management and Improvement



Tommy Munoz on Unsplash

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- **Set** a regular market schedule, with prior vendor confirmation, but with the possibility of being flexible in terms of timings and layout. Promotion should be ongoing and targeted.
 - **Maintain** good neighbourliness, primarily vis-à-vis noise, litter and parking concerns.
 - **Collect** data in terms of visitor counts and vendor sales feedback.
 - **Monitor and manage** stall fees transparently, using the income to reinvest in amenities and address the feedback of residents and market users alike.

Step 8

Scale Up, Innovate and Integrate



Martijn Vonk on Unsplash

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- **Increase** the open market's frequency or expand frequency or expand it by introducing themed markets. Also, hold annual forums with different stakeholders to keep ideas flowing.
 - **Seek** ways of linking markets with tourism itineraries or by offering shuttle trips.
 - **Integrate** social initiatives and offer free stalls on rotation to support social inclusion, for instance, for minority groups or NGOs.
 - **Seek** EU and/or national funding as applicable (discussed further in the next section).
 - **Network** with other markets and look into the possibility of having a "market trail" across different localities.
 - **Use** the success of open markets to push broader goals, such as a square's urban regeneration, local business growth and the fostering of local community pride.

The above steps may enable Local Councils to grow their markets into a cornerstone of local life – fulfilling economic, social and cultural needs in line with the broader **ResidentFirst** ethos.

8. EU Projects and Funding Programmes (2020–2025) Supporting Open Markets and Public Space Activation

- The **ERDF and Cohesion Fund** are two of the main EU funding sources supporting urban regeneration in Malta. For the 2021–2027 programming period, two priorities stand out as particularly relevant: Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development. Local Councils interested in such projects — especially those involving piazza regeneration that combines heritage value with improved accessibility — should regularly consult the **Planning and Priorities Coordination Division (PPCD)** for open calls. ERDF funding typically covers most eligible costs, though a local co-financing contribution is required.
- The **European Union's Farm to Fork** Strategy, a core component of the European Green Deal launched in 2020, aims to create a fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system. A key objective of this strategy is to promote short supply chains and direct producer-to-consumer channels, enhancing the sustainability and resilience of food systems. In alignment with these principles, Malta established the Malta Food Agency in 2021 to strengthen market access for local farmers and fishermen.
- While Farm to Fork Strategy itself is a policy framework rather than a direct funding programme, it has influenced various funding opportunities under **Horizon Europe** and other EU initiatives. By participating, Local Councils could gain funding for market-related innovations (like an app for zero-waste operations).
- **Single Market Programme (SMP) 2021–2027** is an EU funding initiative designed to strengthen the functioning of the internal market and support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While the programme does not directly fund open-air markets, it supports related activities. Some of these supports are channelled through national agencies or specific EU calls targeting SME development or the social economy. The key is to position the market as a local initiative and as part of larger EU goals — promoting food security, small business growth and sustainable urban communities.
- **Interreg NEXT MED** (formerly Interreg MED) is an EU transnational cooperation programme supporting projects across Mediterranean countries. Although Malta has no land borders, it can participate through this framework. Local Councils can join partnerships with European municipalities to co-develop pilot projects. These could include revitalising historical squares into vibrant open markets, launching night markets, or hosting Mediterranean food festivals. The 2021–2027 programme is active, with calls periodically opening.



Denis A. on Unsplash

- **Creative Europe** supports cultural and creative sectors. Markets that highlight local heritage, craft traditions, or international culture (e.g., through festivals or artist exchanges) are eligible if positioned as contemporary cultural expressions. Local Councils could apply to host market-based festivals featuring local and international artisans, performances, or cultural workshops. Cross-border partnerships with other European towns are often encouraged, allowing shared programming between market towns. The programme is currently active and publishes annual calls for cooperation projects.
- **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)** funds town-twinning initiatives, civic engagement events, and cultural cooperation between EU communities. A Local Council could apply to host a Europe-themed open market event in partnership with twin towns, celebrating multiculturalism through stalls representing different countries and community-led activities. Markets framed as platforms for democratic participation or European identity are particularly eligible. The programme runs through 2027, with multiple open calls each year.
- **New European Bauhaus (NEB)** initiative promotes sustainable, inclusive and beautiful public spaces. Although not a dedicated funding stream, NEB principles are embedded in Horizon Europe and other EU programmes. A Local Council could propose transforming an underused urban space into a well-designed market plaza, incorporating solar lighting, artistic stalls, or eco-friendly landscaping. NEB demonstration projects or community-driven space activations could attract funding or mentorship.
- **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** provides training, employment and social inclusion funding. Open markets can become platforms for inclusive entrepreneurship by supporting women, migrants, or unemployed youth in developing small market businesses. In partnership with NGOs, Local Councils can potentially apply for funding to run training schemes. Projects that promote markets as inclusive, accessible business environments are especially aligned. ESF+ is managed partly through national and regional schemes, with rolling calls.

9. Concluding Thoughts

Open markets are dynamic spaces where economic activity, cultural identity, and community life intersect. For Malta's towns and villages, they represent a powerful tool to preserve tradition and address contemporary challenges. Open markets are not merely tourist spots for shopping; they foster social connections between locals and visitors, encourage inclusive entrepreneurship and contribute to revitalising public spaces. They are accessible platforms for small producers and artisans, which encourage healthier consumption patterns and strengthen community pride through shared experiences in familiar, local settings.

This document has shown that with thoughtful planning and community engagement, open markets can catalyse wider urban improvement. They align with key policy themes such as sustainability, social inclusion, heritage preservation and public space activation. Through restoring a historic *piazza*, hosting a multicultural food festival, or launching a weekly farmers' market, Local Councils can use markets to deliver tangible benefits that residents see and feel daily.

Crucially, successful markets require collaboration. Local Councils must engage residents, vendors, NGOs and potentially national or EU partners to co-create and sustain these spaces. The eight-step roadmap in this document offers a flexible approach — adaptable to small villages or large towns — that encourages Local Councils to begin from their current position, experiment with ideas and allow markets to develop organically until they potentially have a lasting impact.

Malta's current momentum towards community-oriented urbanism, ranging from pedestrian zones to local festivals, provides fertile ground for open markets to flourish. With access to support, funding opportunities and proven models across Europe, Local Councils are well-positioned to take action. Ultimately, open markets prioritise people, creating spaces that reflect local character, meet everyday needs and foster a stronger sense of place. By championing them, Local Councils can help build more vibrant, inclusive, and resilient communities — one market day at a time.

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GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES - OPEN SPACE RE-USE



This document has been authored by Dr Antoine Zammit, Ilona Lanneau and Kirsty Borg for studjurban, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association Malta.

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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.

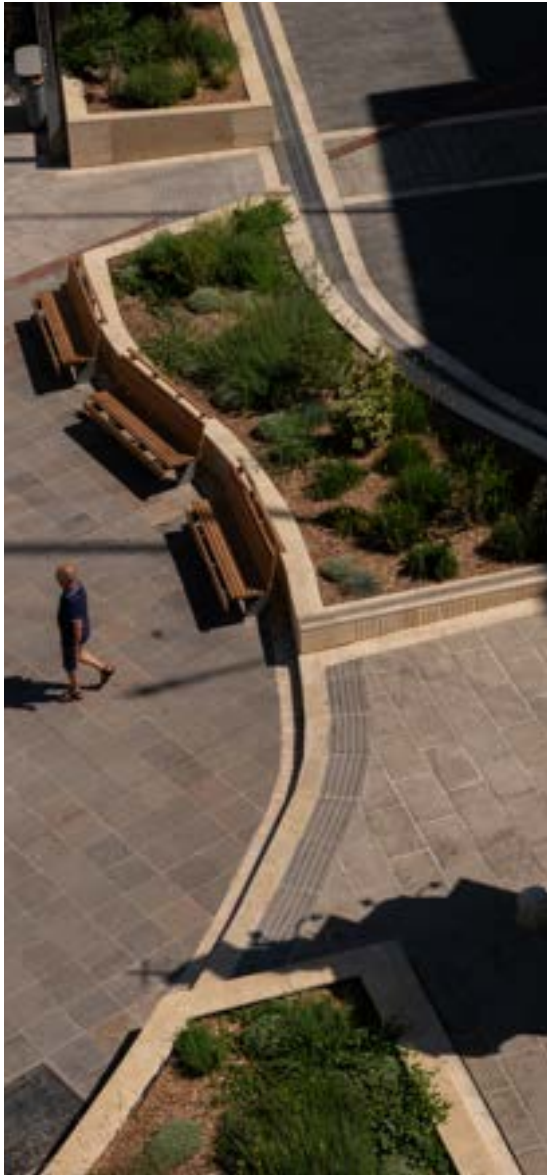


Illustration by Studjurban

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



Image by hellojoshwithers on Pexels

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.

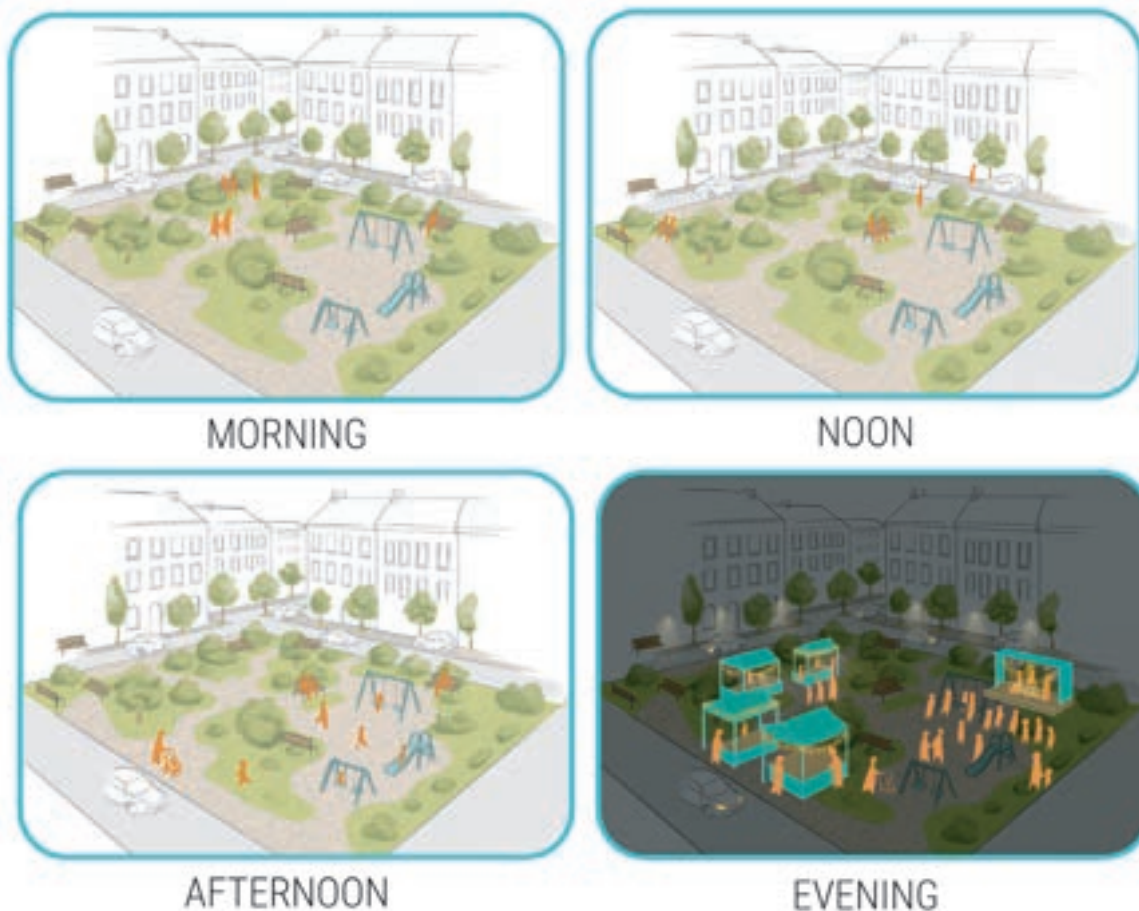
International Case Study: Place de la République, Paris, France

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 Frangisk, Rabat, Malta



"Time of the day" illustration by Studiurban

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.



Image from levrnocestovani.cz



Image by Efreim Efre on Pexels

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



Image by Polina Kovaleva on Pexels (both)



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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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.

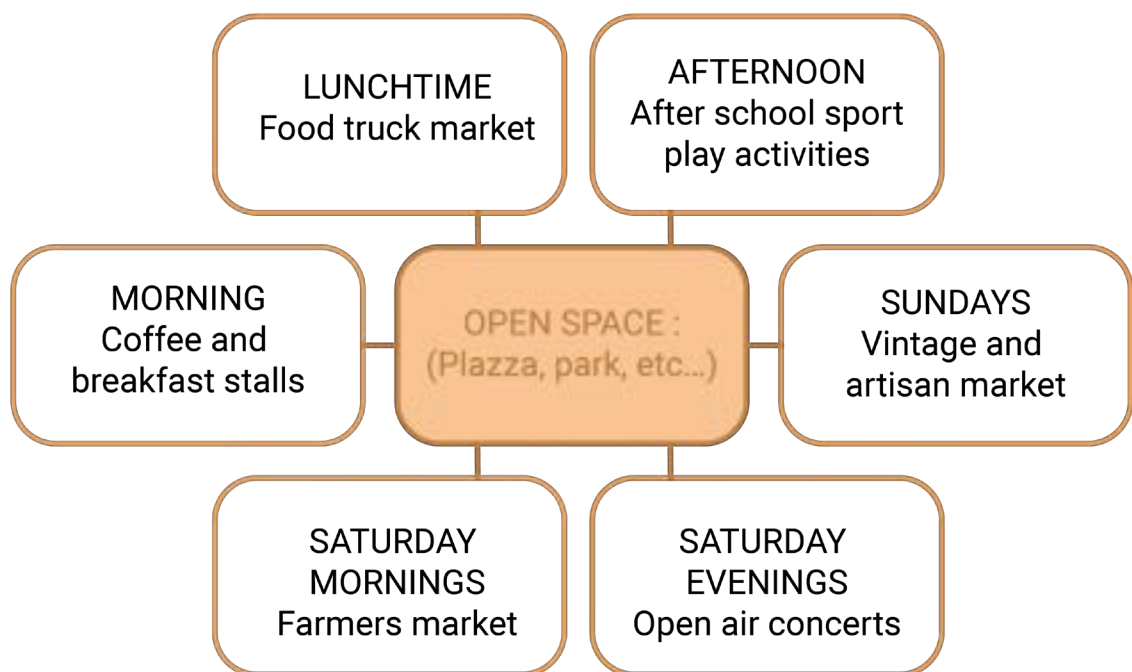




Urban theorists such as the French geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski advocate for embracing "temporary and temporal urbanism", planning cities that may adapt space according to time-based needs. This idea is embodied in a flexible open space, which always places people at the heart of design while serving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



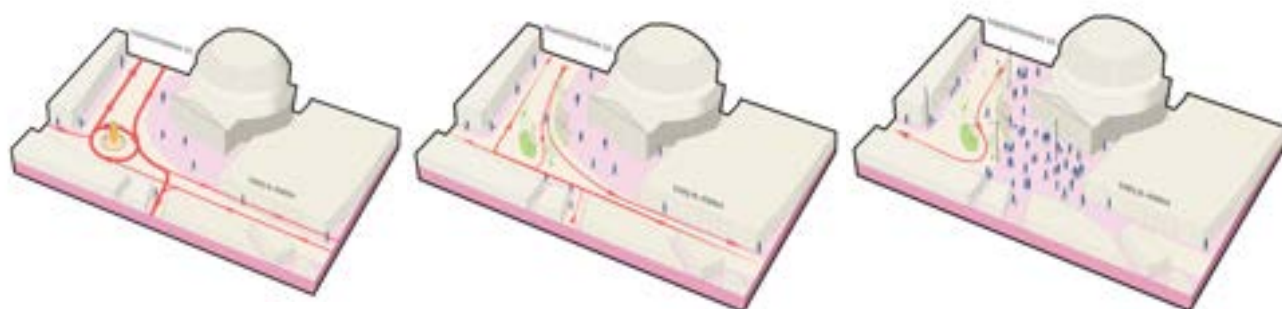
Mosta square re-use. Source: Studiurban (photos by Michaele Zammit)



Mosta square re-use. Source: Studjurban (photos by Michael Zammitt)

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



Image by gio-bartlett on Unsplash

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.



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



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.



*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.



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.



*Bernardgasse project /
Photos and images by Martin
Rolshausen.*

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
Rolshausen.*



Bernardgasse project / Photos and images by Martin Folshausen



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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 Kouji Tsuru on Unsplash





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



Image by Mayur on Unsplash

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.



Steps for Re-using Open Spaces.
Source: Studjurban

Step 1

Mapping and Assessment: Establishing the Baseline



Image by Victor Malyushev on Unsplash



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



Image by Mauro Mora on Unsplash



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

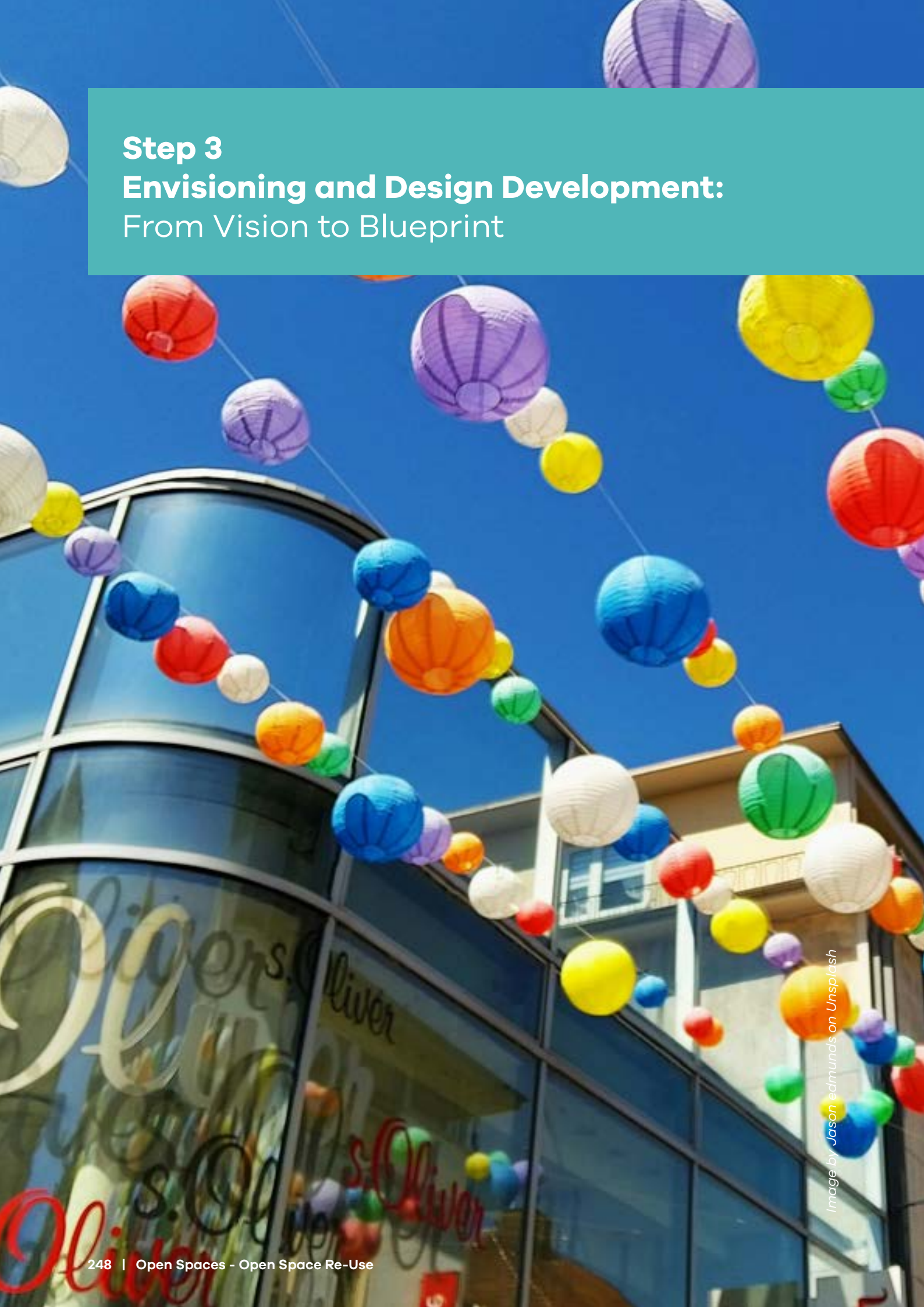


Image by Jason edmunds on Unsplash

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).

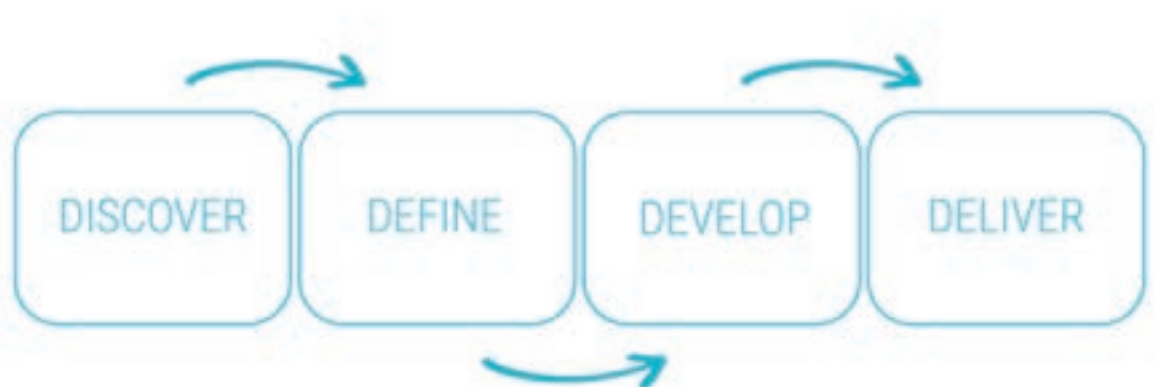


Illustration by Studjurban

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.



Illustration by Studjurban

Step 5

Decision and Refinement: From Pilot to Policy

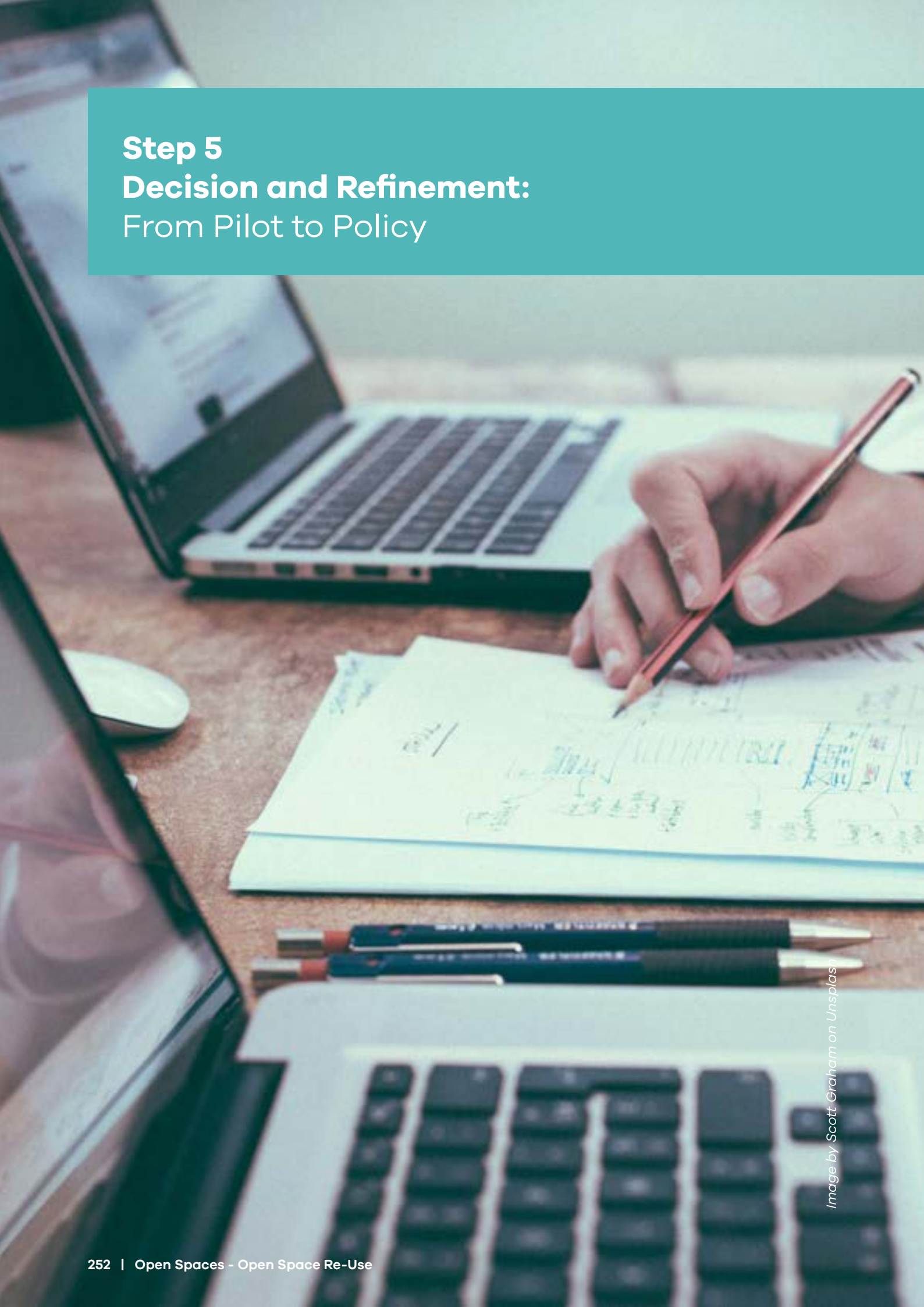


Image by Scott Graham on Unsplash

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.

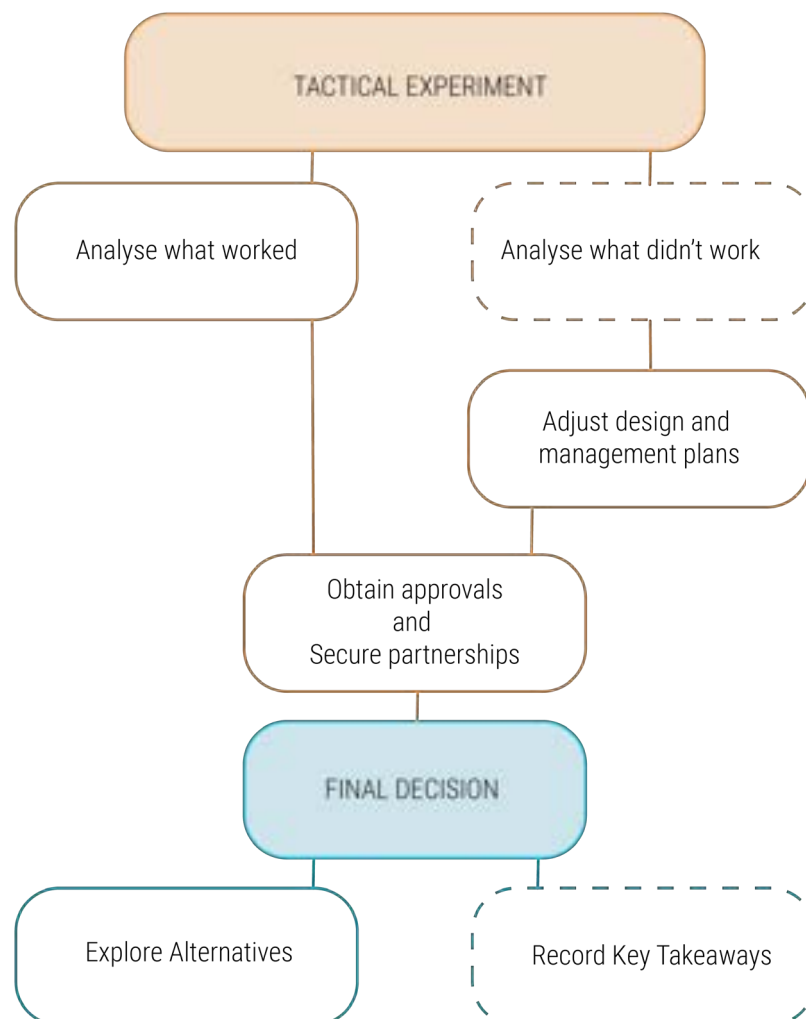


Illustration by Studjurban

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 as 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





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



Image by Alhasan Husni on Unsplash

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.

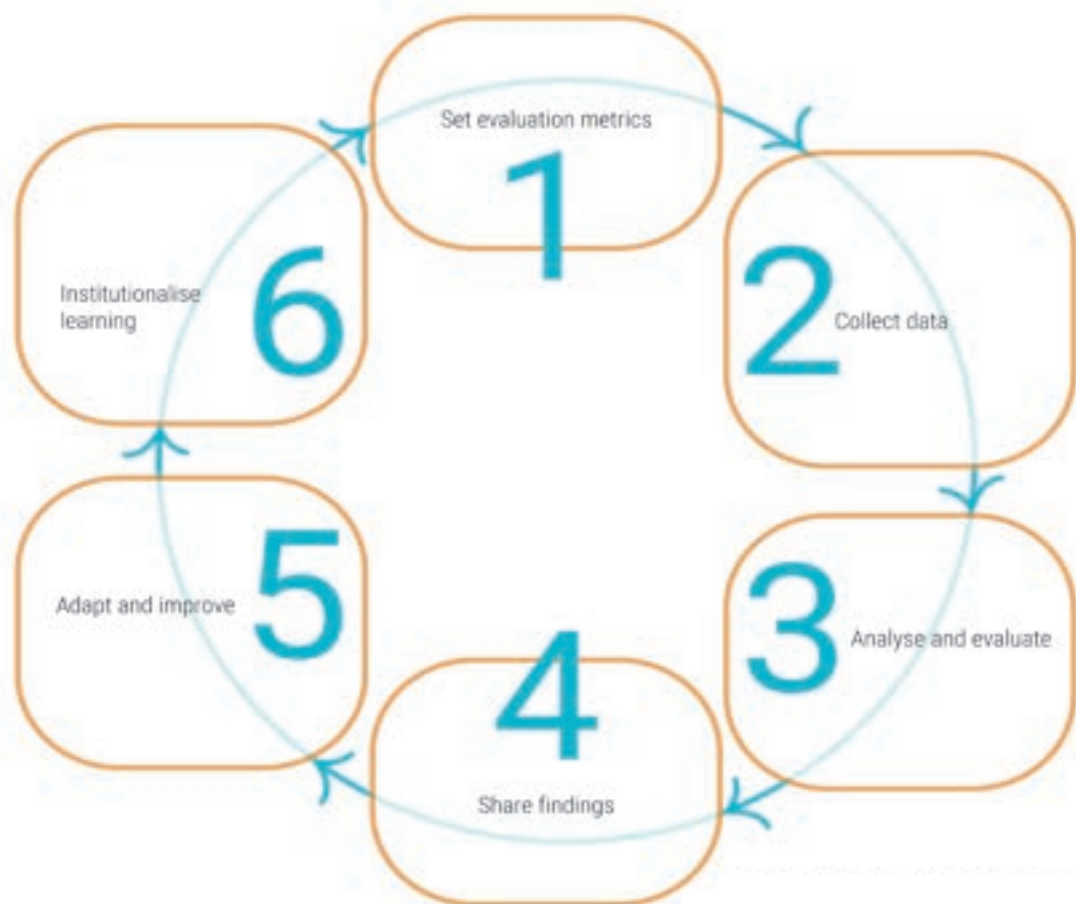


Illustration by Studjurban

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



- 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

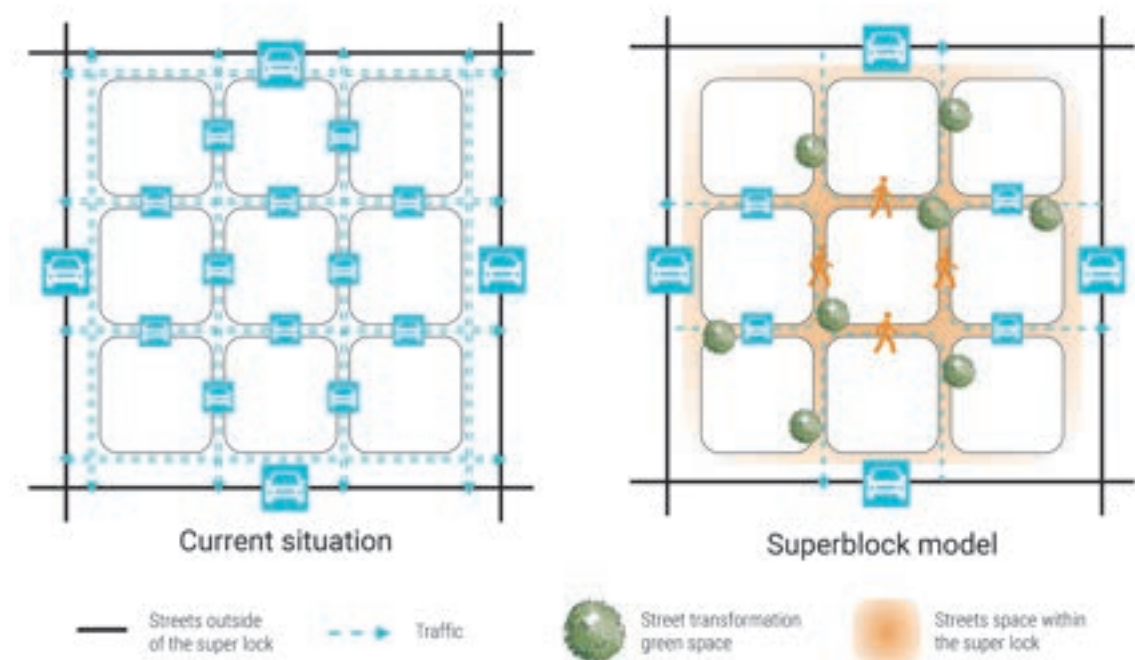


Illustration by Studjurban



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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GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES OUTDOOR SPORTS



This document has been authored by Dr Antoine Zammit, Luke Azzopardi and Kirsty Borg for studjurban, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association Malta.

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1. Introduction

Outdoor sports and recreation have long held a significant role in sustaining people's physical and mental well-being and are essential components of a truly vibrant community life. Outdoor sports facilities can also provide further assets that benefit society. Spaces with integrated outdoor sports facilities can become spots where users meet outside work hours or as an alternative to staying home, forging social bonds. Multi-use sports facilities may even boost foot traffic for nearby businesses, serving as economic catalysts.

Too often, physical activity is relegated to organised clubs or costly indoor gyms. This document urges a cultural shift – one where movement becomes part of daily life, supported by accessible, inclusive and well-designed outdoor environments.

Within the Maltese context, open spaces that are flexible for outdoor sports are especially valuable. However, as discussed in the other LCA **Open Spaces** documents, the limited availability of public green spaces in Malta presents a significant challenge. The Local Councils Association (LCA) has long emphasised the need for a holistic plan of open spaces, centred around the community, within its **ResidentFirst** initiative.

This document takes a similar approach to the other documents within the **Open Spaces** series. It first analyses different typologies of outdoor sports and the current status of outdoor sports integration across the Maltese Islands. It discusses Malta's unique challenges and opportunities, as well as salient pointers for successful and effective sports spaces, drawing lessons from earlier LCA documents and international best practice. This is followed by a more action-oriented section presenting eight pragmatic steps which Local Councils and stakeholders may use to implement outdoor sports areas. The document concludes with some key reflections, highlighting the importance of putting residents at the forefront of planning and embracing a more collaborative approach to adopt a culture of outdoor activity across the Maltese Islands.

2. Outdoor Sports Typologies and Benefits



Image by Pew- Nguyen on Unsplash

Outdoor recreation areas can be broadly divided into formal and informal typologies. Distinguishing between these categories is essential since each requires specific design considerations and provides different experiences. Both typologies are important, but successful open space planning usually blends the two.

2.1 Formal Outdoor Sports Facilities

These refer to spaces with integrated facilities such as football pitches, tennis and basketball courts, outdoor gyms, athletics tracks and/or other structures dedicated to sports. These cater for organised play such as matches, workout routines or local club training, and are usually defined by marking, goalposts, nets, exercise machines or other equipment. In Malta, one can find examples of such facilities, including football grounds (usually maintained by local clubs or schools) and public basketball courts. In recent years, the addition of outdoor gyms in public gardens has also been on the rise, defined by clusters of fitness equipment installed in urban areas. Similarly, skate parks such as the one in Msida are another formal facility slowly gaining traction, dedicated to skateboarding, BMX biking and scootering. Formal facilities are beneficial because they provide the necessary infrastructure for people to train in particular sports, and at the same time help attract those who seek a more structured form of exercise.

2.2 Informal Outdoor Sports Areas

These refer to open areas which are not dedicated to one specific sport, allowing for various physical activities and recreation. Within these spaces, one usually finds multi-purpose furniture which users temporarily appropriate for their activity's needs. In Malta, seaside promenades and outdoor walking trails can be considered as informal outdoor sports areas, used for jogging and cycling, with the addition of occasional fitness stations and benches which double up as exercise props for impromptu outdoor exercise sessions. Informal use of space within town squares and piazzas has also been a long-standing tradition for many years, with children using quieter side streets or space within the church parvis as a spontaneous play area. A recently growing trend is also the concept of 'play streets', temporarily turning residential streets into playing zones by restricting access to cars for certain hours: this was amply discussed in the **Slow Streets** schemes carried out for several localities throughout Malta and Gozo, where some streets were proposed to be partially closed to release urban space for safe informal play or other activities.



Image by J-balla on Unsplash

Understanding the difference between the two typologies is very important for Local Councils, vis-à-vis requirements. Formal facilities usually need dedicated space, funding and proper maintenance and management, whilst informal play areas tend to require a more holistic urban design approach, in order to make sure that they are accessible, safe and inviting for spontaneous recreation. The user typology also varies between each typology: a football pitch, for example, would most probably serve a community's competitive targeted sports' needs, whilst a network of walkable streets and spaces tends to attract more day-to-day physical activity from a wider population segment.

Formal Sports Facilities	Informal Outdoor Sports Areas
Primary Use Organised, structured sport	Primary Use Spontaneous, varied physical activity
Examples Football pitches, tennis courts, outdoor gyms	Examples Promenades, trails, town squares, play streets
Equipment / Markings Goalposts, nets, machines, markings	Equipment / Markings Benches, multi-purpose furniture, no formal markings
User Type Clubs, teams, serious exercisers	User Type General public, casual users, children
Infrastructure Requirements High needs investment, management	Infrastructure Requirements Low to moderate, needs design sensitivity
Flexibility of Use Low – sport-specific	Flexibility of Use High – multi-purpose
Trend Increasing (gyms, skateparks)	Trend Growing interest (play streets, slow streets)

Formal vs Informal Sports Facilities. Source: Studjurban

2.3 Value of Outdoor Sports Space

Research and practical experience show significant evidence of the benefits of well-designed sports areas within the public realm. Even small interventions could be beneficial, such as converting a small patch of underused land or a small street section into an activity-oriented place. Key benefits are outlined in the following pages.

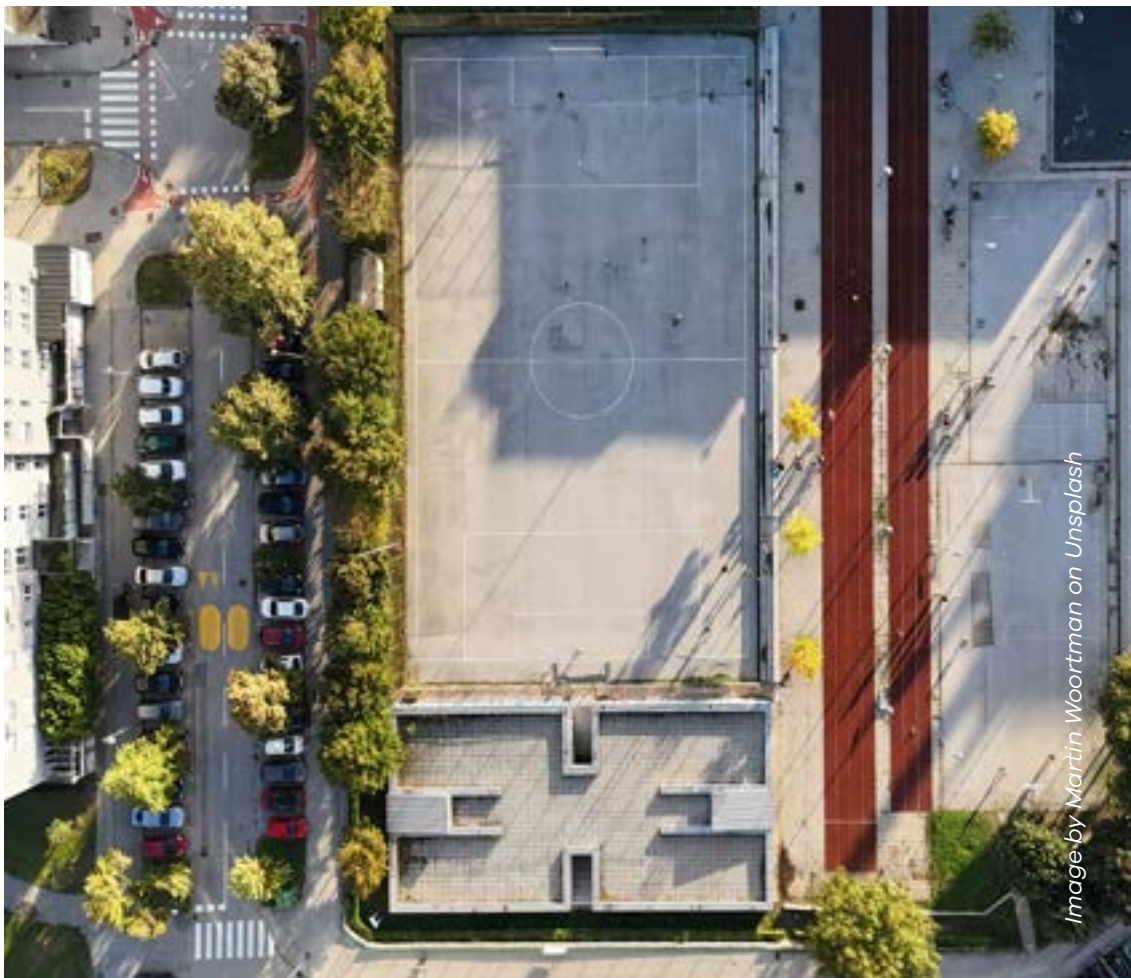


Image by Martin Woortman on Unsplash

2.3.1 Health Benefits

The most direct benefit of outdoor sports facilities would be on the user's physical and mental health. If an accessible and pleasant space is nearby, a resident is more likely to go for a short walk or play sports. Any outdoor activity that allows people to exercise would be critical for Malta, which currently faces very high obesity rates.

Besides fitness benefits, regular physical activity boosts mental health by relieving anxiety. Even being outdoors has its own

therapeutic effects. Outdoor recreation spaces can also become 'green gyms' to allow users to work out surrounded by nature for its calming effect. In a country like Malta, where urban life can become hectic, an open-air exercise spot can act as an oasis for mental wellbeing and, in the long term, helps prevent disease, reduces healthcare costs and enhances quality of life.



*Image by Martin Woortman
on Unsplash*



Image by Oleg Lukin on Unsplash



2.3.2 Social Benefits

Spaces for outdoor sports host a variety of social realms, connecting people of different ages, backgrounds and individual abilities. An inclusive sports space can host multiple uses throughout different times of the day, fostering interactions amongst different community members. This overlap of varying users helps create social cohesion as users become more familiar with each other.

Sports can unify people with different language or cultural barriers. Inclusive design features and their strategic placement allow other generations to use spaces side by side, increasing the chances of chance encounter and interaction. Diverse users also make the space feel safer, given that the presence of people may deter antisocial behaviour.



Image by Denago-eBikes on Unsplash

2.3.3 Economic Benefits

Well-placed sports and recreation areas can yield economic dividends for the vicinity. Generated activity tends to increase foot traffic and 'stay' time, benefitting nearby small businesses: a pedestrianised historical square, a football ground or a seaside promenade with a jogging path, for example, all attract a diversity of people that increases the chances of them going to a nearby shop, during or after their workout. In turn, areas that become known as gathering spots – such as squares or waterfronts – tend to become more popular with investors and vendors, increasing opportunities for local businesses. Research shows that prices of properties with access to recreational amenities can also rise, since investors are willing to pay more to live close to active spaces because of their lifestyle benefits. Furthermore, other macroeconomic benefits come into play since a healthier population leads to lower healthcare expenses. Investing in a multi-functional space that can host multiple sports and other recreational activities makes more efficient use of the space, which is money well spent and saves further money in the long run.

2.3.4 Environmental Benefits

Outdoor sports areas can become important urban assets, providing opportunities to integrate green infrastructure. When thoughtfully designed, the inclusion of trees, shrubs, or perimeter gardens helps cool the area's microclimate, provide much-needed shade in summer and filter air pollutants. Integrating greenery also helps contribute to sustaining biodiversity, offering a habitat for insects or birds in an otherwise hard-surface neighbourhood. Ground cover also serves as a water catchment area, an opportunity to store rainwater overflow.

Integrating sports facilities at a local level also encourages active mobility. Giving people a purpose to use alternative means of transport, such as cycling or walking, reduces car usage on the streets.

Ultimately, integrating these environmentally friendly elements helps foster an ethic of environmental awareness within our communities. As people spend more time outdoors, they automatically appreciate the integration of natural elements in their communities and are more likely to support further integration of such elements in the future.

3. Challenges and Opportunities for Outdoor Sports in Malta



Integrating outdoor sports spaces in the Maltese Islands comes with its own set of distinct challenges. These same challenges, on the other hand, also present innovative opportunities for a well-designed multi-functional design. Some key challenges of integrating outdoor sports and recreation areas in Malta are presented next, as well as how each can be seen as an opportunity for smarter and more creative solutions. By understanding these contextual constraints, solutions can be developed specifically for Local Councils' needs.

Given their scarcity, Local Councils often struggle to find and locate unused plots for new communal facilities. Within town and village cores, narrow squares and streets are difficult to convert into modern

sports facilities. Thinking of adaptive, re-usable urban spaces for recreation encourages Local Councils to use every space available innovatively, no matter its size, as explored further in the LCA's document 3.4 **Open Space Re-use**.

The issue is compounded by the fact that urban areas have been planned and designed around the car, resulting in traffic-congested streets and public spaces dedicated to parking. The lack of proper pavements or bike lanes – combined with the dangers of fast traffic along pedestrian movement – leaves little physical room for pedestrian usage, deems the user's experience unsafe and discourages active mobility, as amply discussed in the LCA's **Sustainable Mobility** series.

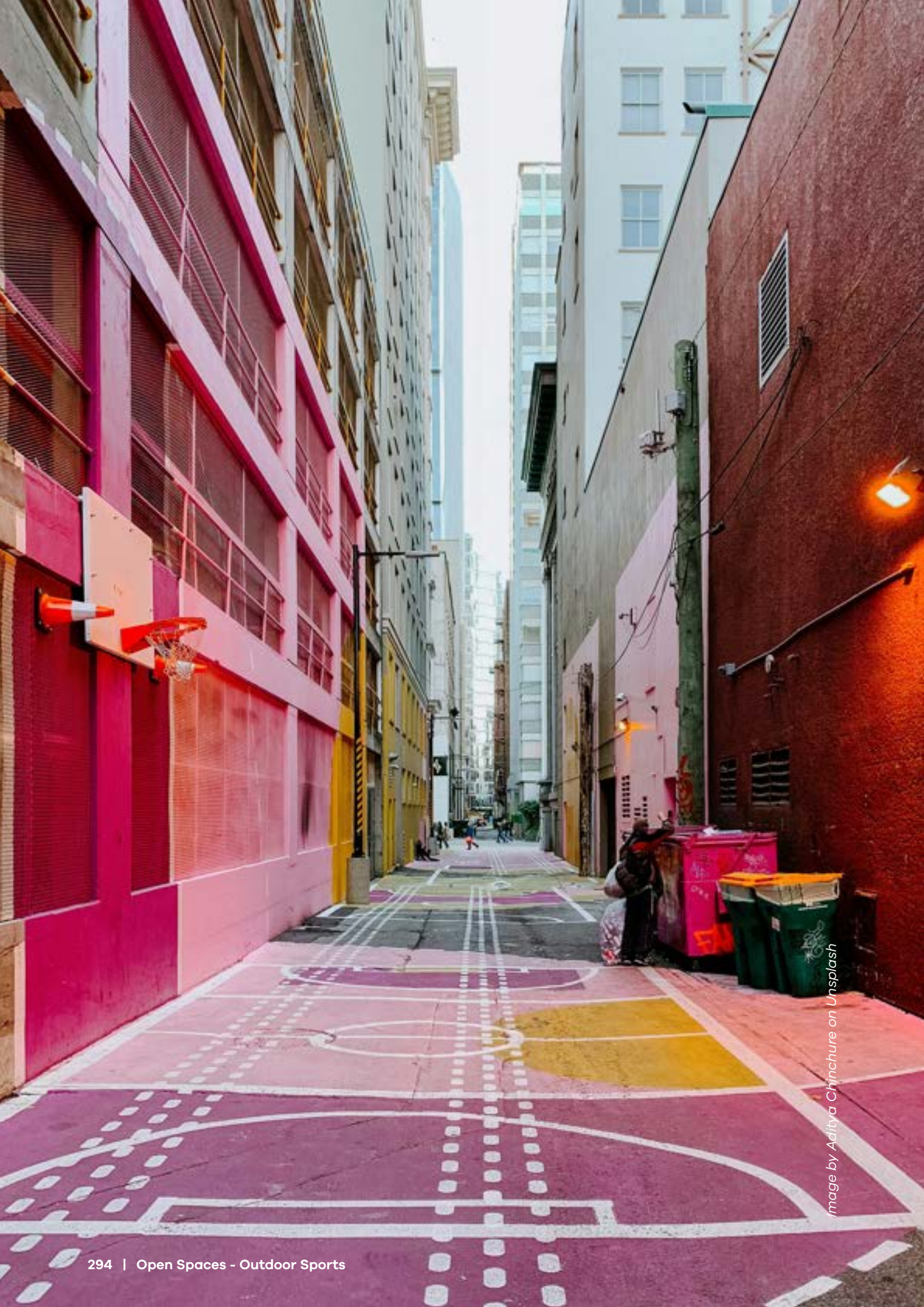


Image by Aditya Chinchure on Unsplash



The ever-rising awareness of the disadvantages of car-centric planning has slowly encouraged a positive momentum for more inclusivity of pedestrians and traffic-calming measures. It offers a timely opportunity to reclaim spaces for people. Projects such as the LCA's **Slow Streets** and IM's **Vjal Kulhadd** invite local communities to rethink urban spaces as shared spaces rather than just for vehicular access.

Building on this momentum, Local Councils can identify streets that are over-dimensioned or have less traffic and consider redesigning them to partially cater to recreation spaces. Examples of this would be integrating linear playgrounds by narrowing carriageway lanes, or freeing up sprawling parking lots by creating structured parking facilities such as a periphery multi-storey car park and reutilising the freed-up space better.



Another challenge is climatic, especially in summer when intense heat during the day can make outdoor sports very uncomfortable – even dangerous – without proper protection. In warmer seasons, hard surfaces can amplify the urban heat island effect and glare from the sun. In the colder seasons, open spaces need to be able to handle periodical heavy rain and windy days. Any urban furniture and equipment used must have proper materials to withstand such conditions. These climate constraints are also an opportunity to implement smarter, climate-responsive outdoor spaces. As discussed in the LCA document **3.1 Parks and Gardens**, tree cover is central to cooling down urban spaces. Designing permeable surfaces within outdoor sports areas and well-installed drainage systems underneath turns them into dual-purpose infrastructure. Such measures can also tap into the same climate for energy sources. For example, the installation of playful canopies, as part of a wider playscape design, may be partly or fully covered in PV panels to generate electricity. Designing outdoor spaces with seasonality in mind ensures that their usage is extended throughout the year. Activity in the evening is popular and should be further encouraged by good installation of artificial lighting and windbreakers where needed — some facilities, such as football pitches, already do this.

Sports and recreational facilities may also be exploited for tourism purposes. In recent years, tourists have sought out more active experiences in their visits (active tourism). They are willing to engage in outdoor sports activities such as renting bikes or participating in outdoor yoga. Local Councils may take advantage of this by providing attractions such as scenic bike routes or outdoor spaces for such activities. The prospect of tourism as an attractor also offers the opportunity to showcase local culture through sports, such as the game of bocci that is present in several localities.





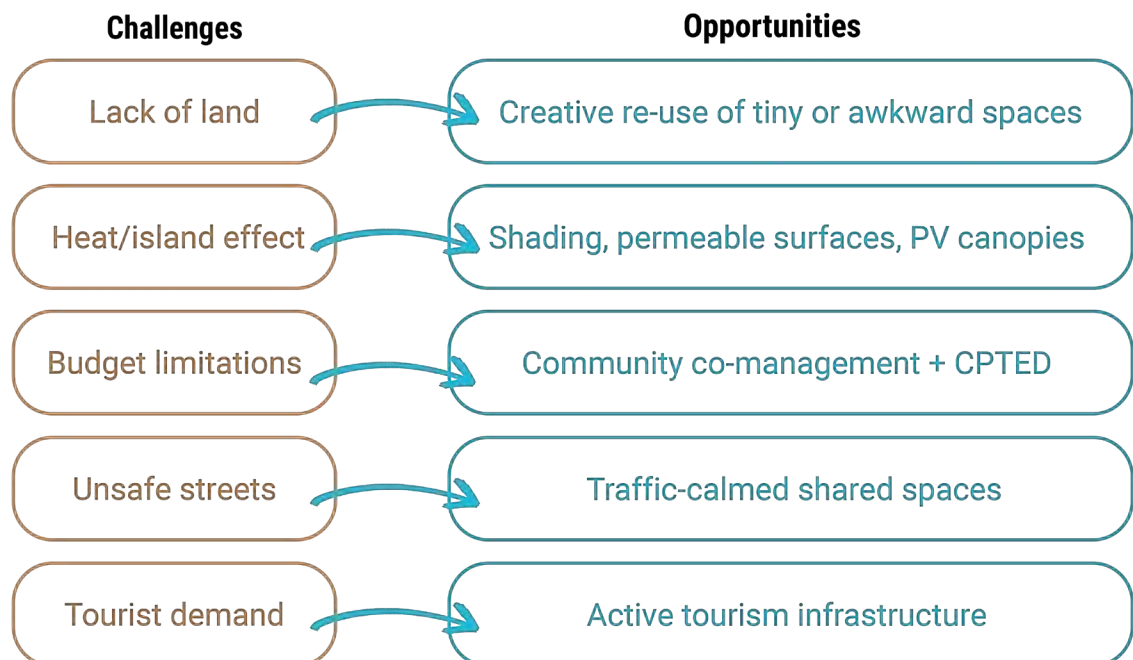
Image from Kalamba Kup



Image by Christian Lue on Unsplash

While creating and integrating attractive spaces for the community is ideal, maintenance is key to their longevity and ensuring that they remain usable for years to come. This is especially important for outdoor sports areas, where playgrounds or gyms need regular inspection to ensure constant high safety standards. This might be quite challenging for Local Councils given their limited budgets. One possible strategy for maintaining a space is to involve the community in its stewardship. When users of a space feel a sense of investment and ownership, they will automatically

help to take care of it. This can help alleviate some of the burden on the Local Council while also fostering civic pride. It also helps improve safety within the site – day-to-day recreational activities allow for informal surveillance, greatly diminishing the possibility of vandalism. Outdoor space design should adhere to CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles: ensuring clear sightlines and facilitating visual permeability, avoiding the creation of covered areas that could serve as hiding spots and installing adequate artificial lighting and signage.



Challenges and Opportunities.
Source: Studjurban

4. Key Design Pointers for sports and play spaces



Image Yura Batiushyn on Unsplash

Universal Accessibility

Well-designed recreation spaces should be accessible to users of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Provide level spaces or ramped access, using tactile paving to cater to the visually impaired. Consider distance proximities to cater to those with mobility issues, with amenities such as dedicated parking bays or well-located drop-off points. For more sports-dedicated spaces, ensure minimal obstacles to access and that the site is as close to street-level as possible. Wide entryways to the space are also important, facilitating crowd flow and avoiding any choke points during peak event times. Multiple pathways should be integrated within the space to connect different facilities, the surface of which should be smooth, safe and preferably step-free. An inclusive design approach also extends to the choice of play equipment to be installed within the space, such as sensory play equipment for autistic children or equipment suitable for the elderly.

Safety and Visibility

Safety measures are crucial when planning spaces for active use, and should be incorporated by design rather than as a reaction, preventing injury to their users. This can be achieved by using appropriate impact-absorbing flooring especially in places of high risk.

As discussed in the previous section, outdoor sports spaces should always have unblocked visibility from surroundings so that users are always in view from the rest of the public and well lit, avoiding hidden sports behind barriers, dark areas or secluded corners: this makes the space feel safe to use during all times of the day, including in the evening. This can be further enhanced in dense urban areas by adopting the concept of natural surveillance, locating spaces so that adjacent residents can observe from their homes, keeping an eye out for potential dangerous activity in the space and adding an extra layer of supervision.



Durable and Quality Surfaces

Investing in well-lasting, high-quality surface materials for outdoor sports spaces serves as the foundation for the spaces' usability and longevity, making sure that these can handle both the expected loads and the Maltese climate. In multi-functional urban spaces, robust materials should withstand pedestrian wear-and-tear and occasional vehicle loads if applicable. For example, a court that might double up as a parking area should be surfaced accordingly for these multiple uses. Any sports-related painted markings should use weather-resistant, non-slip paint to avoid fading under the harsh Maltese sun. expense of the pedestrian space being generated.





Image by Felix Ngo on Unsplash



Image by Elvise Kaiser on Unsplash



Environmental Considerations

Integration of green elements in outdoor sports areas is key to improving their environmental performance and aesthetics, making the space more inviting. Incorporating shrubs, trees or ground cover helps give the space a more human approach by softening its landscape. It also helps in improving the air quality of the surroundings. Trees or large shrubs become essential shading elements from the sun, potentially even from heavy rain or wind flow. Other functions using other typologies of landscaping can be achieved. For instance, planters around activity spaces can act as informal seating for users or spectators, whilst strips of shrubs

can demarcate a sports space and act as a containment barrier to balls going astray. These green elements tie such small spaces into broader environmental initiatives to reach climate action targets and urban greening efforts to reduce the urban heat island effect, previously discussed in other LCA documents, in our towns and villages.

Noise mitigation is another environmental consideration which should be planned for, depending on the context: if the space is close to homes, sound mitigation is imperative, through noise-dampening surfaces or even plant hedges to absorb sound.



Multi-Functionality and Amenities

Given the limited availability of space, sports areas should be designed to be as multi-functional as possible, such as flexible court spaces for different types of sports, using moveable urban furniture which can be moved and adapted according to the sport being hosted. Sports infrastructure itself can also be flexible, such as foldable ping-pong tables which can work as picnic tables – a hybrid design which promotes resilience, ensuring the space will rarely be unoccupied because there is always some purpose being served.

Amenities should be installed to make outdoor sports areas user-friendly and support longer stays. One such feature is seating. Users

can rest and observe the space where seating is provided, potentially engaging in conversation during sports events. For this reason, seating should be clustered near activity areas, such as benches facing sports courts. An active environment may also be enhanced by integrating amenities such as drinking water fountains or bottle refill stations, especially given the Maltese climate. Public toilets should be designed near outdoor sports activity areas, together with waste separation bins. Other design features may include bike racks, ideally located close to entrances; appropriate signage, way-finding markers and important emergency numbers.



Image by Laura-briola-Nh on Unsplash

5. Playscapes and Innovative Outdoor Activities

There has been a growing trend towards more innovative, creative approaches to outdoor recreation areas in recent years. The concept of a 'playscape' is increasingly being used: essentially, this is a type of playground where, instead of the usual off-the-shelf play structures, more organic and imaginative urban furniture is installed, allowing users to invent their own ways of playing. It stimulates and embraces creativity, offering an organic feel through integrated mounds or winding paths. Playscapes can enhance the appeal of outdoor sports areas by moving away from the typical open space model and allowing for playful, more vibrant landscapes. This approach reaches a broader audience thanks to its flexibility and reflects a more progressive attitude towards urban design. A well-designed playscape can also be more cost-effective to construct and more adaptable than installing multiple pieces of equipment.

Complementary to playscapes, the following are some other current trends and ideas that could be introduced or further developed in Malta.



Image by Eugene Chystiakov on Unsplash

Interactive Installations

Adding interactive elements invites interaction among different typologies of users. These may include musical installations such as outdoor xylophones or drums that people can use, or technology-driven play such as light installations that react to user movement or LED paving tiles in playing areas.

Pop-Up Activities

Programming pop-up events or temporary installations is vital for activating the space in new ways. Setting up temporary sports-related facilities, such as a pop-up roller skating rink or mobile climbing walls, can be organised as part of a local event or town festival. **Play Streets** events have been trialled in various cities around the world, where streets are closed to become linear gardens, cycling routes, or more. Building on the LCA's **Slow Streets** project, these are relatively low-cost and can gauge the community's interest in certain activities.

Playscape for All Ages

Whilst playscapes often focus on children, the concept can also apply to different generations, encouraging outdoor recreational use by other youths and adults. Ideas often incorporated in other cities, such as Berlin or Barcelona, include giant chess boards, table tennis tables, marbles or puzzle trails.

6. Eight Steps for Implementing Outdoor Sports Spaces

Successfully implementing well-designed outdoor recreation spaces requires multiple assessment and planning stages, incorporating feedback from residents and other members of the local community. This section presents eight steps to bring outdoor sports and play projects to fruition, offering Local Councils a robust yet adaptable process to plan, implement and maintain outdoor sports infrastructure that is inclusive, community-oriented and environmentally responsive. Principles of tactical urbanism inform these steps, and therefore, it is encouraged that ideas be tested and refined early on in the process, echoing the LCA's document **3.4 Open Space Re-use** and its action plans.



*8 Steps for Implementing Outdoor Sports Spaces.
Source: Studjurban*

Step 1

Audit, map and assess recreational needs (existing assets and gaps)



Image by Lftekhar R bir on Unsplash



A comprehensive baseline assessment is critical. Local Councils should initiate a locality-wide spatial audit that categorises all existing outdoor sports and recreation assets – including both formal (football pitches, tennis courts, outdoor gyms, bocci clubs, skateparks) and informal (promenades, school yards, side streets used by children) spaces. Map also potential sites that could host outdoor sports, such as underutilised, redundant or leftover spaces that could be converted or reclaimed (eg. empty plots or wide streets with ample space), discussed further in the next step.

Assess the context, physical condition, current use, safety, accessibility and lighting of each urban space and understand whether all residential areas are within a reasonable walking distance (say a 10-minute walk) from such spaces. Mapping could be done using GIS (Geographic Information System) to locate which zones lack access to recreation.

Alongside space mapping, the community's needs should be evaluated through public meetings and surveys to understand usage patterns and latent demand of residents, clubs, NGOs and schools. Examining community demographics also guides preferred uses: a neighbourhood with more young families, for instance, might favour more outdoor play spaces, while one with more teenagers might prefer outdoor sports courts. Demographic mismatches may be identified, such as youth-oriented neighbourhoods without accessible play areas.

The output of this process would be a shortlist of potential sites cross-referenced with a comprehensive list of community needs. This would provide the data and groundwork for possible projects, ensuring both the correct location and purpose. This groundwork would allow Local Councils to build a data-informed, location-sensitive strategy.

Step 2

Reclaim marginal and underutilised urban spaces, undertake tactical urbanism

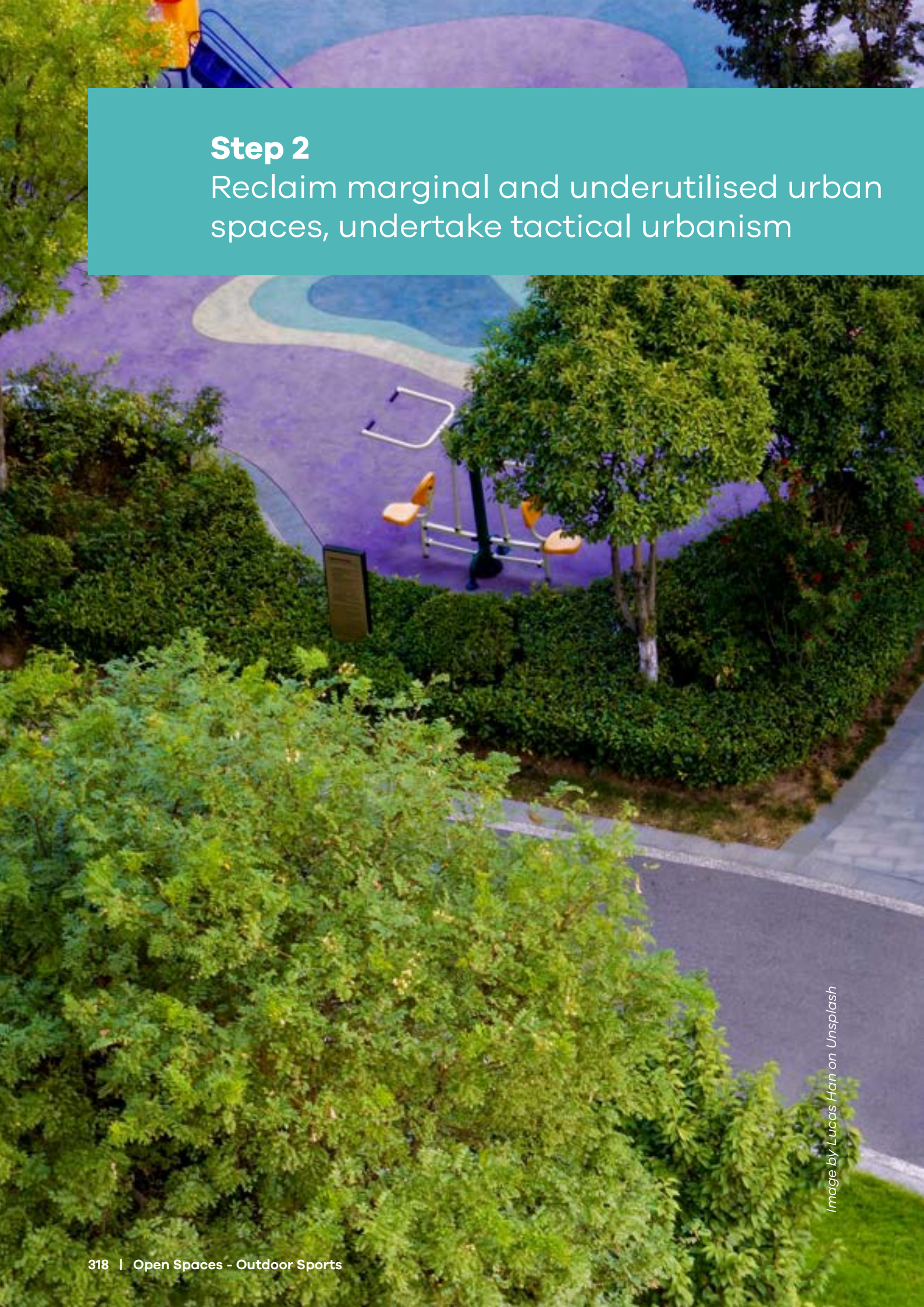


Image by Lucas Han on Unsplash



Given Malta's spatial constraints, new land is rarely available. Local Councils must adopt a mindset of urban reprogramming, transforming underused spaces into active places. Convert dead zones like oversized parking areas, over-dimensioned road space and intersections, or awkwardly shaped plots into micro-sport spaces (e.g. table tennis spots, marked circuits). As discussed within the LCA's **Slow Streets** project, evaluate wide roads or parking bays for temporary conversion into weekend pedestrian zones and play streets and seek to introduce tactical urbanism interventions, as discussed in Step 6.

Step 3

Integrate outdoor sports within everyday mobility networks



Image by Mahendra Putra on Unsplash



Outdoor activity does not only take place within sports grounds. Movement corridors, notably promenades, linear parks, cycling paths and walkable streets, are equally vital for daily physical activity and should be seen as part of a broader recreation network. Active mobility routes may be planned with fitness elements including distance signage, hydration points and exercise stations. Shaded areas and safe street crossings may be further provided to improve accessibility for all users. Schools, community centres and shops may be linked through these networks to embed movement into everyday errands. This network thinking ensures that all residents, not just formal sports players, have accessible and inviting options to remain active throughout the week.

Step 4

Design for multi- and inter-generational, inclusive and adaptive use



Image by Marek Lumi on Unsplash



Outdoor sports infrastructure must cater to diverse abilities, interests and age groups. Beyond the traditional football field, Local Councils must plan multi-use, layered and inclusive environments. Incorporate spaces for *bocci*, yoga, walking, rollerblading and general play, prioritising universal design principles. Inclusive use is more than providing spaces that are accessible for all. An inclusive design ensures longer daily use, wider appeal and community ownership. This is especially important in smaller or denser urban areas.

Co-locating different functions, such as a circuit for older residents adjacent to a kids' play area, or a seating area near a workout zone, allows the intergenerational use of space, bringing diverse members of the local community together and strengthening inclusivity. In this respect, too, mono-functional designs should be avoided. Sports courts, for example, may double as community event spaces when they are not in use.

Use the *Key Design Pointers for sports and play spaces* outlined in Section 4 of this document to guide the design of such urban spaces in an innovative and inclusive manner.

Step 5

Design climate-responsive and seasonally flexible infrastructure



Image by Kinanti Pratiwi on Unsplash



Malta's climate requires spaces that remain usable year-round. Outdoor sports areas must be planned with seasonality, shade, water management and energy efficiency in mind. Green infrastructure has a critical role to play here, especially with the potential of tree canopies to cool down key activity areas and provide rest spots from recreational activities. Permeable surfaces could lend themselves to some sports activities while simultaneously improving rainwater absorption. Sports equipment and fixtures could double up as passive energy generation opportunities (dual-use infrastructure), such as housing PV panels or integrated water collection systems. A good level of artificial lighting will enable evening use of these facilities, keeping in mind proximity to existing neighbourhoods so as not to create negative amenity issues.

Again, some of the *Key Design Pointers for sports and play spaces* outlined in Section 4 of this document may provide pointers for the added design value these elements may have.

Step 6

Undertake Tactical Urbanism



Image by Paul Walicz on Unsplash



Tactical urbanism is a temporary ‘test’ implementation of the idea in real life. Depending on its success, this could be tested throughout a one-day event or extended by a number of weeks. It may include colourful sports markings on existing asphalt or pop-up basketball hoops. Lightweight infrastructure may be used, including removable nets, mobile ramps or foldable goalposts to support flexible and temporary setups. This creative reuse maximises existing urban land, spreads recreational opportunities and pilots community uptake before long-term investment and the commitment to fully implement an idea.

The aim would be to simulate the use intended for the space to demonstrate its potential, attract interest from the community and gather useful feedback. For example, suppose the plan is to pedestrianise a street for outdoor sports. In that case, this should be tested, closing the street on a particular day and setting up temporary outdoor sports infrastructure. This would invite the local community to try the new idea out, builds excitement around it and at the same time serves as an opportunity to observe how people use the temporary space – which activities are being used more and by which demographic (usage rates), what issues arise and what other elements need to be addressed (for instance, with regard to noise or safety perceptions) in an eventual fully fledged implementation. Usually, such tests also serve as a way to win over sceptics of the project, serving as a good PR tool to attract support and potentially even sponsors. Throughout such tactical urbanism trials, documentation is essential through photos, brief surveys or user feedback that further refines the concept design.

Step 7

Establish maintenance plans and stewardship partnerships





Sports spaces degrade quickly without care. Establishing a long-term stewardship model is vital to ensure safety, cleanliness and function. Site management should include maintenance plans that focus on retaining a high-quality space and ensuring that quick, minor adjustments can be made, ensuring flexibility.

Local Councils could involve sports clubs, schools, NGOs and local fitness communities in co-maintaining facilities. An idea could be to set up local “sports ambassadors” or wardens within the locality, for regular reporting and feedback. Digital platforms may be used (through appropriately located QR codes on site, or via specific apps) to allow residents to report damage in real time or suggest improvements. A schedule for checking of equipment and quality of materials, cleaning of the space, and landscaping, among others, may be implemented.

Dedicated Local Council staff or contractors may be engaged where budgets allow for routine inspections and repairs. Shared responsibility improves longevity, safety and community connection to the space.

Step 8

Activate, monitor and embed into community life





A successful outdoor sports space is also properly programmed. This requires long-term activation beyond physical construction. Local Councils can sustain interest in the space by organising proactive programming events inviting people of all fitness levels, such as sports-related meet-ups, small walking groups, weekly exercise classes, play sessions for children, or family fitness festivals. These can be done in collaboration with schools, sports groups, elderly clubs, wellness NGOs, local volunteers or even businesses. Such events develop habits of using the new space, with the physical and social benefits it would bring.

The final step should also ensure monitoring of the usage of the outdoor sports space, analysing and evaluating its impact on the community, and taking action to improve the space over time. By measuring outcomes over a set period, Local Councils may determine whether people are engaging in physical activity, whether the space is well-maintained, and how safe it is for the public. On the other hand, if some features of the new space are not working as hoped, evaluation helps modify some aspects of the design.

The activation of the space also takes into consideration keeping community engagement alive: promoting feedback by the community on how the space is working and providing suggestions for improvement. Animating the space makes it slowly part of the community's daily life, not just a static installation. In this way, a sense of community "right to use" is also ensured, whereby residents feel the space is theirs, not just for a few athletes or organised sports.

7. EU Projects and Funding Opportunities



Implementing and investing in proper outdoor recreation projects requires tapping into external resources including design expertise, monetary funding or partnership networks. Together with national schemes and regional collaborations, in recent years, there have been several EU initiatives, funding programmes and other collaborative projects focusing on green infrastructure, urban wellbeing and promoting active lifestyles, all of which Local Councils may benefit from. The following is a list of key funding opportunities, resources and other initiatives that can be useful for planning and financing outdoor sports in open spaces:

- **EU Regional Development Funding (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund (2021–2027):**

These funds, partly managed by national authorities, have been useful in financing several projects in Malta. Local Councils may consider to include recreation components within broader ERDF-funded projects. In the period between 2021 and 2027, priorities include a greener, more carbon-free and more social Europe, further aligning with active mobility investments.

- **Erasmus+ Sport Programme (2021–2027), European Week of Sport:**

A Sport chapter is included within the ERASMUS+ scheme programme, funding collaborative partnerships and organised events which promote physical activity. While not funding the infrastructure itself, it can support engagement and support for a new space. Maltese NGOs have been able to access ERASMUS+ funds for projects such as SportMalta's BeActive campaign. The European Week of Sport is a specific initiative by the European Commission that encourages different countries to host physical activity events. SportMalta coordinates Malta's participation, acquiring support or small grants for local events (including the BeActive events).

- **URBACT and Other EU City Networks:**

URBACT is a European exchange programme in which various cities form common networks to tackle mutual urban challenges, especially those related to active cities and public spaces. Local Councils may benefit from such networks by either following or even joining them. These include networks such as URBACT "Health & Greenspace" or "Vital Cities," which also deal with green areas for recreation and sports, and CIVITAS, which often tackles active mobility.

- **European Sports Capitals (ACES Europe):**

ACES Europe is a non-profit organisation which awards different municipalities committed to sports titles such as European Capital of Sport, European City of Sport, and more. Whilst not directly funding projects, Local Councils may aspire to upgrade their sports facilities and apply for such designations, the recognition of which can drive further investment in facilities.

- **National Funding Programmes and Initiatives:**

Various schemes have been introduced locally, such as the Planning Authority's Development Planning Fund (DPF) which aims to contribute to community projects such as squares and gardens, or occasional community grants offered by SportMalta. Amongst others, the LEADER programme (EU Rural Funds, managed by Local Action Groups) could also be relevant to Local Councils, for projects such as creating recreation trails or smaller parks. Other health-related funds might also come into play, with support offered by the Health Ministry to integrate community health projects.

- **NGOs and Corporate CSR:**

Several local NGOs focus on community well-being and the environment, such as Nature Trust, Green House, and the B-cycle foundation, and can contribute to landscaping drives and initiatives related to greenery in active spaces. When it comes to corporate social responsibility, even local banks often invest in community initiatives. Furthermore, contacting local businesses to sponsor small components may add support.

The above list illustrates how several funding and support opportunities are available at Local Councils' disposal through national and EU channels. By aligning projects with EU priorities, Local Councils can muster resources well beyond their limited local budgets, with the best way often being a combination of funds. These initiatives and networks also help influence the vision of local stakeholders, keeping Maltese localities at the forefront of urban wellbeing innovation. The LCA and Regional Councils may assist in this process by disseminating these opportunities and possibly helping formulate joint applications (collaboration among localities may help compete for more substantial EU funds), focusing on programmes emphasising greener and more active and liveable communities.

8. Concluding Remarks

Outdoor sports infrastructure is not just about providing facilities — it is also a catalyst for healthier communities, stronger social bonds, and more sustainable environments. Designing open spaces for active recreation and outdoor sports is undoubtedly challenging, but it is more important in a country with limited open space opportunities.

Through the **Open Spaces** document series, we have seen that open spaces – whether historical piazzas, re-used urban spaces, linear parks or market streets – may be programmed for multiple layers of community benefit. Outdoor sports space adds yet another layer: it moves bodies, connects people and activates places. Local Councils, empowered by the LCA's **ResidentFirst** vision, are uniquely placed to lead this transformation. Significant benefits result from this, most notably related to health, especially addressing growing public health concerns such as Malta's high obesity rates. Other benefits relate to social cohesion, economic benefits (through the increase in footfall and potential strengthening of local businesses) and environmental benefits (designing outdoor recreational areas with green infrastructure in mind and stormwater resilience).

To unlock this potential, outdoor sports must be viewed as core community infrastructure. Just as walkability was emphasised as a policy priority in the LCA's earlier **Sustainable Mobility** work, recreational activity must rise to the forefront of spatial planning approaches and strategies.

Successful sports areas do not need to be large or expensive. Even the smallest pocket court or marked trail could become a valued node within the local ecosystem – if designed with people, climate and flexibility in mind.

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