



Unlimited Cities

**A tool
for urbanism**
An accelerator
for inclusive
territorial
transitions

Unlimited Cities (UC) in a nutshell

Unlimited Cities is a free, open-source tool that helps territories engage their civil society to accelerate inclusive transitions. Co-developed by the Open Urbanism Foundation and partner cities, and rooted in European research, it combines a structured process with a digital platform deployed directly in public space.

Designed to be facilitated by mediators and straightforward to use, the tool reaches audiences that conventional participation mechanisms typically fail to engage. Within a few weeks, the annotated collages produced by hundreds of participants make visible the preferences and ideas of citizens for improving their territory.

The effective use of these quantitative and qualitative data within transition projects, together with the transparent sharing of raw data and analyses, strengthens trust between residents, elected officials, and experts.

This accessibility and transparency have led the tool to be recognised by UN-Habitat and awarded several international prizes. To date, Unlimited Cities has been deployed operationally across more than 30 territories in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa.

Co-Authors of the Unlimited Cities tool

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Identified problems in urban planning participation

As analysed in academic literature and experienced by municipalities:

Lack of representativeness. Attracting a diverse cross-section of the population to participatory processes remains a persistent challenge.

Public disengagement. Urban transition issues are complex and often disconnected from people's immediate concerns; educational approaches struggle to reach their intended audiences.

Risk of distrust. Keywords such as participation, consultation, collaboration, and co-construction raise expectations that frequently exceed the room for manoeuvre available to cities.

Lack of perceived usefulness. Urban planning projects unfold over long timescales, and participants often cannot see whether their contributions have any real influence on decisions.

A Cognitive waste and a risk for democracy

Ineffective participation represents a major missed opportunity for society: oppositions that could have become constructive with better mutual listening; projects that could have better met real needs and gained in quality; blockages and forced decisions that could have been avoided; transition and climate adaptation projects that could have been realised far more rapidly.

When participation in urban planning fails, more than opportunities are lost. Regardless of the scale of the projects involved, ineffective participatory processes signal our inability to find solutions through dialogue. This failure of our collective capacity to think together insidiously undermines the very foundations of democracy.

"I place enormous hope in Unlimited Cities. It is a means of better conducting democratic debate, with the capacity to reach new layers of the population. »

Michael Delafosse,

*Deputy Mayor for Urban Planning,
City of Montpellier, September 2013 -
today Mayor of Montpellier*

Our response : Urban planning transformed by participation

Process and digital platform combined

The UC **process** unfolds over 3 to 6 months through a series of structured actions, culminating in a restitution event and the sharing of results. The **digital platform** is used by mediators to develop participants' capacity to act, ensure transparency, and document all contributions.

A pragmatic approach

Par Compared to conventional urban planning participation methods, the key differences are: Going to where people are, rather than attempting to bring them to meetings. Encouraging freedom of expression through a tool that enables the creation of annotated collages from public space. Providing real-time access to other participants' contributions. Sharing analysis methods as well as all collected data.

The annotated collage as the common thread

The annotated collage is the meeting point between participants, municipalities, and professionals. Contributory workshops, bringing together around twenty people, prepare the ground for digital mediation; this mediation then enables annotated collages to be created in public space with hundreds of people; restitution events subsequently draw on these collages as a basis for analysis and dialogue.

Concrete Outcomes

These differences concretely transform how participation is perceived by all stakeholders:

Going to where people are factually addresses the problem of representativeness

Encouraging creativity with a simple, universally accessible tool generates genuine interest and allows new ideas to surface - ideas inaccessible to conventional professional studies

Sharing annotated collages in real time builds trust, creates emulation, and encourages the emergence of community resource persons

Organising a restitution event with an exhibition of annotated collages - showing how the city has structured contributions to enrich upcoming projects - directly addresses the question of perceived usefulness

digital mediation

5:54 pm, southern France, a late afternoon in Montpellier's Pompignane neighbourhood. The day has been hot; this is the moment people come outside. The digital mediation session resumes until 8 pm.



Creating a collage on the site to be transformed is fundamentally different from working indoors. The height of the buildings, the smell of the pine trees, the sounds, the comings and goings of cars and pedestrians – all these sensations directly feed the annotated collage. Conversations strike up with curious passers-by; some join the group on the spot, others return later to create their own collages.

What makes Unlimited Cities powerful

A viral principle of great simplicity

A team of mediators approaches people in the street and invites them to imagine an improvement to their neighbourhood by creating a collage on a photograph of the site. The participant uses a tablet: **the interaction is easy and intuitive**, and mediators are on hand to assist. The annotated collage is instantly added to an open gallery accessible to all, giving the individual act a collective dimension. People sometimes spontaneously **volunteer as ambassadors**. Some join the mediation team; others open unexpected doors - municipal schools, retirement homes, asylum seeker centres, community centres, co-working spaces, businesses, and sometimes the city halls themselves.

A universal tool

What connects those who have used Unlimited Cities and live in a village in China and in Paris, in a Swiss city and in Ecuador's capital Quito, in Tijuana, Mexico, or in Laayoune, Morocco? **Across cultures, collage is a universal means of expression** - from prehistoric caves to Picasso, through to contemporary artists. **The annotated collage has a liberating effect**: each person moves beyond the fear of having less legitimacy than the experts, discovers themselves as a carrier of ideas, and dares to express themselves - taking the time to explain their thinking.

The universality of the tool extends equally to municipalities and designers, who find in the analysis of annotated collages elements previously inaccessible to them - elements that help anchor urban transition in **a mosaic of lived experiences and aspirations**.

Continuous improvement through open-source logic

Since the first experiments in 2012, additional modules have been developed with municipalities and through international research to improve the tool **in response to needs emerging from the field** - for example, the ability to export all data in a single file, to add labels to collage elements to facilitate qualitative and quantitative analysis, and to integrate a questionnaire.

Municipalities and organisations can today easily adapt the process and digital platform to their cultural and geographic contexts by choosing among existing modules. Those who develop new ideas are also encouraged to modify the tool and to contribute to the open-source logic by proposing new modules, **pooled freely for the benefit of all interested municipalities and organisations, wherever they are in the world**.

A Considered Use of AI

In the collage creation phase, AI would be counterproductive. Offering citizens ready-made AI-generated images in public space would run counter to the tool's primary intention: enabling non-professionals to become designers for the duration of a session - that is, to ask themselves questions, to hesitate, and to confront real-world contradictions. Where to place a tree, which species to choose, will it have enough soil? Where to park if pavements are widened to include play areas for children? How to manage nighttime noise from a public space with benches? Yes to new housing - but minimalist or traditional? These moments of discovery, doubt, and responsibility create a different relationship with professionals, and sometimes spark new vocations.

Conversely, AI is used for the analysis and structuring of the thousands of data points produced by annotated collages, in order to inform reflection and decision-making. The Foundation is currently investigating robust open-source models capable of running on its own servers, with explainable algorithms, in order to guarantee data integrity and avoid the black-box effect.

Unlimites Cities (UC)

Origins and timeline

Towards the Progressive Construction of a Digital Commons

2011

Unlimited Cities emerges as a prototype from the European FEDER UrbanD research programme, whose scientific director is Alain Renk (HOST). In agreement with the three CNRS laboratories involved, HOST (architecture practice and research laboratory) chooses copyleft and free software as the mode of dissemination. Selected by the Cap Digital call for innovative digital city projects, Unlimited Cities is tested by the general public at the Futur en Seine festival in Paris.

2012

Presented in Tokyo (digital art) and Rio de Janeiro (impacts of digital technology), UC undertakes its first operational deployment: the City of Rennes uses it in the context of the future TGV station project.

2013 - 2014

Deployments in Montpellier (urban renewal, Pompignane neighbourhood) and Évreux (conversion of the Saint-Louis hospital, more than 1,600 participants). Unlimited Cities receives the Open Cities Award from the European Commission in Barcelona in November 2013. New features integrated at cities' request, based on field feedback.

2015

New deployments, including Grenoble. Creation of the international user network (initially named Urbadiversity, later 7 Billion Urbanists) - the first formalisation of a community around the tool.

2016

UC is presented at the Habitat III Conference in Quito in partnership with the UCE (Universidad Central del Ecuador); the tool is selected by UN-Habitat as a good practice. The 7 Billion Urbanists network grows and becomes an associate partner of the UN-Habitat World Urban Campaign.

2017 - 2019

First UC projects in Switzerland. Deployments in China, Taiwan, Europe, and Africa. The idea of a Swiss-law foundation emerges to sustain the intention at the heart of the tool and the commitment to free software.

2020

Creation of the Open Urbanism Foundation in Vernier, Canton of Geneva. The Foundation joins the UN-Habitat World Urban Campaign as an associate partner. The Foundation integrates HOST's research and operational activities - including Unlimited Cities - into its laboratory and studio, alongside the 7 Billion Urbanists international network. The HOST practice closes.

2021 - 2026

The « Libellules Park » project (Vernier, Switzerland), developed with UC, receives the Coup de Cœur of the European Participation Prize 2024. Unlimited Cities is at the heart of the Multigination European research project (Driving Urban Transition Programme), of which the Foundation has been coordinator since January 2024.