Urban Maestro

New governance strategies for Urban Design

Grenoble Public Space Programme

experimental processes for improving public spaces (FR)

Tommaso Gabrieli
Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

UN-HABITAT
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INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses an initiative of tactical and experimental urbanism based on temporary interventions in the town of Vif, in the Grenoble-Alpes Metropole, in the 2017-2020 period. It is based on public information from the metropolitan guide for public spaces and roads, alongside primary research information obtained via semi-structured interviews with the project manager, in order to unpack the institutional complexities and the professionals' experiences. This research describes and analyses the operations of the initiative and then assesses the key-drivers behind its operations. Furthermore, it has been identified that a combination of explorational and financial tools supporting citizen-led, temporary and incremental urbanism is a key-factor to the success of the initiative. This research also illustrates that the use of temporary interventions and the professional skills provided by motivated agents are also key to the efficient use of limited resources and for the implementation of urban transformations even with limited budgets.

1. CONTEXT AND ADMINISTRATION

1.1. Grenoble Metropolitan Region

Grenoble is a French region with 1.5 million inhabitants and 49 municipalities. It is a dense region situated within the Alps, rich in minerals and sensitive to climate change with cold winters and very hot summers. It is also known for a local spirit of pioneering innovative ideas and a population which is generally strongly aware of ecology and environmentalism. As a result of this pioneering spirit, it was voted the capital of innovation in 2018 by Forbes as the region possesses a virtuous mix of excellence in education, research, industry. Furthermore, there is an important legacy of smart city initiatives and various energy projects and partnerships.¹

In 2015, a national law transferred the management of public spaces from the municipalities to the Metropole’s administrative body, and therefore presented the challenge of transitioning from 49 cities with 49 different approaches to the creation

¹ For example, the EU ZENN project https://zenn-fp7.eu/news/news/nearlyzeroenergyneighborhoods za.html and the City-Zen project http://www.cityzen-smartcity.eu
Grenoble has also been selected EU green capital for 2022. See https://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/grenoble/
of one single coherent, efficient, innovative vision for public spaces and urban planning.

1.2. Governance model: one vision, five principles

In order to tackle this challenge, through a process of co-creation among the 49 local administrations, the Grenoble-Alpes Métropole has defined five principles to be respected by any actor developing public spaces and roads in the metropolitan area since 2015. These principles, presented in in the metropolitan guide of public spaces and roads and other additional documents, aim to serve the dynamism, the territorial attractiveness, and the energy and ecological transition of the Grenoble metropolis.

The five principles of the Metropolis presented in the metropolitan guide of public spaces and roads (henceforth the guide) are:

- Sharing public space in favour of active mobility and public transport
- Strengthening the poles of life
- Guaranteeing the place of nature and take care of the environment
- Cultivating the diversity of territories
- Doing better, with less

1.3. The experimental approach through the evaluation grid

The approach of the guide is based on an experimental and design-led community participatory process for improving public spaces. Specifically, an evaluation system via a participatory and incremental process that gradually scales up temporary interventions was developed within the guide. This follows several steps: 1. the specific need/demand is identified by citizens and brought to the administration; 2. the public administration has a small budget (3 months/€3,000) and 3 months to deliver a temporary intervention; 3. a period of evaluation of the results of this first intervention follows that may lead to a second project with a higher budget (e.g. €20,000) and a longer testing period (1-3 years); 4. If successful, a permanent intervention may be put in place, drawing from a much larger budget (e.g. €200,000).

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2 https://www.grenoblealpesmetropole.fr/483-guide-de-l-espace-public-et-de-la-voie.html
This initiative is managed by the Grenoble-Alpes Metropole and covers the 49 municipalities.

### GRILLE D’ANALYSE ET D’ÉVALUATION DU PROJET D’AMÉNAGEMENT DE ...

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ORIENTATIONS DU GUIDE</th>
<th>LA PRIORITÉ</th>
<th>ENJEUX MÉTROPOLITAINS</th>
<th>PROBLÈMES À RÉSoudRE ET BONNES IDÉES À RETENIR</th>
<th>ÉTAT DES LIEUX</th>
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**Figure 1:** An example of a completed rating grid
The central tool for the rating, evaluation and strategic development of urban projects is a multi-criteria and holistic tool aiming towards a common policy on public spaces within the Metropole. This tool is commonly referred to as the grid. Given that the administration is using an “incremental model” for projects involving public spaces, allowing for experimentation and testing through temporary projects, this grid works as a roadmap enabling project managers to follow a set of predefined steps over time, ensuring that the objectives of the initiative are fulfilled at each incremental stage. Therefore the grid is the fundamental decision making tool for the development of each public space.

Turning to the stakeholders, the grid is a unique available rubric, which provides analysis and monitoring for the projects. Completed throughout the life of the project, it allows the priority of the project to be kept in mind, while broadening the outlook on all the themes identified by the metropolitan-elected officials, in order to capitalize on the stages and maintain the capacity to improve the project. Through this grid, the project manager assists the project owners and stakeholders with defining the priority of the development and its major challenges. The project manager assesses the state’s site locations and their capacity for improvement through objectives, actions to be taken, and resources that can be mobilized. Thereafter, and all throughout the creation and later the realization phases, the grid makes it possible to analyse and assess whether the planned performance has been achieved while also verifying the adequacy between the problems observed and the solutions deployed in the field. The grid also serves as an evaluation tool supporting the quality and diversity of uses of the reinvested site as it makes it possible to concretely apply the recommendations of the guide in order to achieve the metropolitan area’s objectives such as 50% of the public space being dedicated to social intensity and local life and 50% being accessible by car, by 2030. The grid also allows harmonizing and improving the technical analysis of projects by validation bodies and offers support for decisions and arbitrations.

More specifically, the grid allows for:

- knowledge sharing by all stakeholders and actors involved in the project at all stages, in order to keep in mind the primary objectives, particularly when technical and financial constraints impact the project;

- revealing and putting a problem into perspective (like reapplying asphalt to pavement for example), which allows for a more complete and more relevant reformulation.

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3 Specific objects and criteria can be found in the supporting documentation:

- taking into account the challenges and ambitions of the project, the means mobilized, and the dialogue between them;

- optimization of project capacity, not only in terms of functionality and safety, but also in terms of public space practices, mixed users, active mobility, health, nature, the environment, economic attractiveness, heritage, sustainability, and recycling;

- an arbitration of constraints, sometimes justifying favouring one program at the expense of another;

- good management in terms of public investment and anticipated operations, and through this achieving moderation on well-targeted projects;

- an evaluation, once the experience or project has been completed, by verifying user ownership in number and diversity.

The grid is structured into four main sections with a number of sub-columns, and the evaluation process is structured in six steps. When presented to the assessor, steps one through three would have already been completed in line with the guide for public spaces in order to provide fundamental information about any priorities and issues. The six steps to be taken are as follows:

1. The project stakeholders/leaders and the priorities of the project are defined. In figure 1, we can see that the priorities are defined in the second column, given the guide objects in column 1.

2. The major challenges for the project stakeholders/leaders and the planning issues are determined. In figure 1, in the third column, we see all of the categories of issues that are specified in the guide, with the ones relevant to the project colour-coded in yellow in column 3. The issues can be further described in the empty columns to the right, as in figure 1 we see a descriptive column in purple.

3. The existing conditions and inventory of the project site are evaluated by the assessor using specific criteria from the guide that are explained in the documentation of the evaluation grid. The marks range from 0 to 3 points: representing non-existent, to insufficient, satisfactory, and exemplary, respectively. In figure 1, this is in the first numerical column.

4. The programmed objectives are evaluated with the same numerical scale. The guide explains that the existing conditions and objectives should be evaluated independently; meaning that even if the pre-existing conditions
are insufficient, ambitious objects would receive a higher score. According to the guide, when the inventory depicts a low level of satisfaction, intervention into the public space is fully justified. When, on the contrary, the inventory depicts a level of high satisfaction, one must consider the needs of the project and, in all cases, aim for moderation. In figure 1, this is in the second numerical column.

5. Evaluation of the different stages of the temporary project. The same numerical scale is used to determine if a proposed temporary project's objectives have been achieved, then again during the monitoring phase, and finally following completion of the project. According to the guide, these ratings' function is to ascertain if the ambitions of the program are maintained and in the case of arbitration. In figure 1, these are in the last three numerical columns, respectively.

6. Final assessment. Given the highly specific criteria in the guide for each object in column 1, the assessor verifies if the objectives of the project have been achieved (quality of use of the site, satisfaction of the users, etc.) and a colour code is used to fill in the evaluation. For this colour code, green represents: objective achieved, yellow: objective to improve, and red: objective not achieved. Given the numerical evaluation in the previous columns, the capacity of the project to improve is calculated as a sum in every numerical column. Moreover, for each step from 4 to 6, a description of the improvements to be made and the ideas to be retained for future projects are written in the purple boxes in the central columns.

2. THE OPERATIONS OF THE INITIATIVE

2.1. Urban acupuncture in the town of Vif

The urban initiative that we are analysing is focused on the town of Vif and was led by the public space office in the Grenoble planning division. The general principle on which this initiative has been funded is one of experimental urbanism. In the spirit of the guide, citizen-led proposals, incremental implementation, and the related financial model enabled practical experimentation in public space projects, with the potential for scaling up opportunities and modifying them to better respond to users' needs.
The project manager (henceforth PM) leading the initiative was inspired by literature and cases of urban acupuncture/tactical urbanism, and is a follower of initiatives such as Stipo, Placemaking Europe, and the Creative Bureaucracy Festival.

“Urban acupuncture” is a socio-environmental theory combining contemporary urban design with the concept of traditional Chinese acupuncture, using small-scale interventions to transform the larger urban context. This term was originally coined by Barcelonan architect and urbanist Manuel de Sola Morales,4 and has recently been further developed by Finnish architect Marco Casagrande. This concept reflects a departure from large-scale urban renewal projects towards a more localised, cheaper, community-based approach. Tactical urbanism, also known as DIY Urbanism, Planning-by-Doing, Urban Prototyping, or Urban Acupuncture itself, is a related and similar idea albeit one that focuses more on temporary changes to the built environment, with the intention to improve local neighbourhoods and urban spaces. Often this approach refers to a city, organizational, and/or citizen-led approach to neighbourhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions to catalyse long-term change. This movement was inspired by urban experiments including Barcelona Cicloviá and Paris-Plages, and is rapidly growing among the newer generations of urban designers and planners.5

Vif is a commune in the Isère department in South-eastern France, with circa 8,200 inhabitants. Vif was selected for this initiative because there was already a Metropole plan to limit car traffic in its small city centre, while improving walkability and cyclability. The area of intervention is the city centre, a small area with a perimeter of two kilometres, with very small roads, houses, shops, and restaurants. The PM explains that normally the plan for this urban transformation would be drafted between the implementation office and the public space office with a unique budget. Instead, in this specific initiative the public space office pushed for an experimental approach and used a specifically small budget, while keeping the other planning divisions informed with the view of using the experimental phase to inform the final permanent transformation. This initiative was organized over three different phases, with an envisaged time scale of three years.

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5 See for example Houghton et al. (2015) and Lecroart (2020).
2.2. Phase 1: ambitious transformations

Phase 1 took place between November 2017 and February 2018. It was led by Sonia Lavadinho⁶ (henceforth SL), who is a well-known urbanist that has worked on a number of projects in the Grenoble Metropole. Also involved were 15-20 key stakeholders: commercial businesses in the city centre, civil servants, elected officials, and children from local schools, in order to ensure maximum representation. This initial phase set the foundation for the entire project and was based on three concepts: inclusive citizen-led initiatives, mixed mobility, and urban acupuncture. SL had led a similar experimental approach focused on transport modes in Echirolles, another small town in the Grenoble Metropole.⁷

This phase was based on a number of workshops (3 X 2 day workshops, every two months) with walking observations, modelling workshops and discussions. SL pushed the participants to be ambitious with the suggested aspirations and suggestions for transformations. Although the evaluation grid was used as a tool, imagination was an important input through pictures depicting any hypothetical changes, and modelling workshops among the stakeholders, which enabled them to analyse its impact on various people and categories.

*The PM explains “The conceptual idea was the same as that underpinning acupuncture: identify areas for transformation that can trigger further change. Sonia pushed for creativity and imagination, what would you like to see?”*

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School Children were consulted about their urban experiences and aspirations. One child wrote: “I designed tree houses, with fireplaces if it is cold, a slide to go down trees and ladders to go up. There are also slides and swings for playing.”

The output of this phase was the selection of 10 areas of intervention and conceptual proposals for their transformation, based on the simple models created. The proposals were also visionary and described the aspired radical change that would result from the envisaged process of urban acupuncture. Visual images and pictures were also used to describe those visionary aspirations and the final outcomes.
2.3. Phase 2: The 48 hour challenge

Phase 2 took place over two days in May 2018 and was nicknamed the “48 hour challenge.” The PM, alongside the involved civil servants of Vif and SL, met with an urban designer/planner, selected through an open call, on a Tuesday afternoon in order to explain the concepts from Phase 1. The planner had no further involvement in the project, was paid a standard fee for two days of work, and was asked to produce some sketches for temporary interventions from the conceptual outputs of phase 1. The planner completed those sketches on the following day (Wednesday) and presented them to the aforementioned persons on Thursday morning, when they were collectively discussed, revised and completed. The final outputs of this phase were 10 sketches for each temporary intervention. This phase was not initially planned, but once phase 1 had been completed it became clear to Vif’s civil servants that it was necessary to have a more precise idea of the type of temporary intervention that could be implemented. Therefore, even if it was completed very quickly, this phase was crucial to the development of communications and negotiations between the PM and civil servants regarding how citizens’ urban aspirations can become implementable urban projects.

Figure 5. The area of intervention is small, with a perimeter of 2km. A concept for each area of intervention.
Figure 6. Phase 2 sketch: a bus stop becomes a “beach”

Figure 7. Phase 2 sketch: a road for motorists becomes a “stage”

Figure 8. Phase 2 sketches: A non-utilized green space becomes a “reading paradise”
2.4. Phase 3: transforming ideas into reality

Phase 3 was led by the urban practice Alt.Urbaine (henceforth AU), which was selected via an open call. AU was tasked with transforming the sketches into a real, temporary project, including the production or commissioning of all necessary infrastructure. This phase started in December 2018, with the completion of all temporary interventions planned for April 2020, and a subsequent monitoring phase of 6 months. This phase cost €215,000 in total (including costs associated with labour and infrastructure), was focused on tactical urbanism and, naturally following the previous phases, it was based on citizen-led proposals, discussions, walking observations, and evaluations. In particular, it involved 183 hours of discussion with citizens and stakeholders, including local businesses and schools, and was structured into various types of workshops involving collaborative design, guided observations, and technical discussions with the administration and civil servants.

The output of this phase consisted of a detailed proposal and the implementation of 10 temporary urban transformations with a focus on the sensory experiences of walking, cycling and meeting in public spaces. The monitoring phase will follow for 6 months and will be based on the guide, and then a final decision on whether or not to maintain the temporary interventions will be taken.

Figure 9. Phase 3 develops the phase 2 sketches into implementable temporary interventions.

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8 Based on experimental/tactical urbanism, the philosophy of the practice Alt.Urbaine is discussed in this online blog entry https://medium.com/@alturbaine/lespace-public-de-l-exp%C3%A9rimentation-%C3%A0-l-%C3%A9mancipation-citoyenne-773367639213

9 Because of the impact of Covid-19, the temporary interventions could not be completed in April 2020 and were instead scheduled for July 2020.

10 Alt.Urbain videos on walking observations/evaluations: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCB0dDyAJRM&t=2s and on the consultation workshops https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7oaarFRli0

11 See Degen and Rose (2012) for a theoretical foundation of the approach.
Figure 10. Le Mots Passants (transl. the passing words) (intervention 2 in Figure 11) offers a different experience of mobility and stationing/resting that takes advantage of a large area of pavement and is centred around a public bookshelf with books provided by the nearby public library.

Figure 11. Le Halte Urbaine (transl. the urban stopover) (intervention 3 in Figure 11) offers a different experience of mobility and stationing/resting that takes advantage of a larger pavement area and is centred around a shady public urban lounge.

Figure 12. Le Perchoir (transl. the perch) (intervention 5 in Figure 11) offers a different experience of mobility and stationing/resting by a crossroad nearby a college, with a new sensory experience centred around a stair overlooking tall trees.
Figure 13. Le Pyramides (transl. the pyramids) (intervention 6 in Figure 12) offers a different experience without car-based mobility on the small road leading to the college, centred around cycling ramps that take advantage of the existing wider road space with car parks.

Figure 14. Le Grande Tablee (transl. the great table) (intervention 8 in Figure 12) offers a different experience of public space, stationing and walking centred around public tables on a central pedestrian road with cafes and restaurants.

Figure 15. Breakdown of the infrastructural costs:

The PM explains that given the budget constraint of €150,000 for the infrastructure in phase 3, some projects could not be implemented and that, as such, priorities had to be identified.
3. THE TOOLS BEHIND THE INITIATIVE: SOFT POWERS AND ASSOCIATED FINANCIAL MECHANISMS

The PM explained that a cooperative interaction between the Metropole office for public spaces, who was managing the initiative, and Vif’s civil servants, who had to facilitate and implement some of the transformations, was a fundamental ingredient to the successful development of the initiative. The PM clarifies that such cooperative interaction is neither obvious nor natural a-priori, due to various institutional and political reasons. First, it may be the case that the party ruling the Metropole may differ from the one governing the town where the initiative is to be implemented, and therefore the two administrations may have different agendas for urban projects. Secondly, a situation may arise wherein the local administrators do not want to implement certain urban transformations that might make them unpopular with certain voting demographics. In this respect, one anecdote from the PM is exemplary: the Metropole had the power to close some roads to car traffic, but the mayor would not pass the order to the local police on the weekend of the local elections, and the measure was instead implemented the following week. While the virtuous cooperation between project managers and the local administration is not obvious, the inclusion of different types of stakeholders—such as different categories of citizens, businesses and local civil servants—in every phase of the initiative was key to fostering cooperation and enabled the initiative to not be blocked by partisan discontent. In this respect, we notice that the carefully structured inclusive and consultative approach that the initiative used in every phase enabled the project leaders to successfully use soft powers of negotiation and persuasion with the local administrators.

It is also important to recognize that the initiative would not be possible without tools such as the guide for public spaces, the evaluation grid and the existence of a budget for experimental incremental interventions, as described in section 1 of this paper, as well as the agreement that some civil servants would spend 30% of their working time monitoring the project. Although in this initiative they were used in discretionary decision-making, we interpret those to be formal tools, as their use is prescribed by law. However, as already pointed out, these formal tools would not be able to solve the possible tensions that may arise between the project managers and the local administrations, given their potentially differing institutional and political agendas. From the research carried out through a semi-structured interview with the PM, it appears that the consultative approach that the initiative used in every phase was key to cultivating the necessary consensus for the initiative not to be blocked, as
well as to enable the project leaders to successfully use soft powers of negotiation and persuasion with the local administrators.

The primary research demonstrates that the financial model of the initiative also uses a virtuous combination of formal and informal tools. First, we notice that the experimental approach enables saving resources and/or implementing urban transformations despite limited resources. The total expenditure for the initiative was €280,000, where €147,000 is the total cost of the infrastructure and the rest is the fee for the external personnel, without accounting for the time of the various civil servants involved. The PM explains that the typical cost for a permanent major transformation of that area would be in the region of €2 million.

Second, we see that thanks to the framework in the guide for public spaces, the existence of a formal mechanism to allocate a budget to the experimental initiatives enabled this initiative to take place. The PM explains that this budget was separate from the budget for the implementation of permanent infrastructures and therefore was relatively easy to use for this type of experimental initiative. The PM adds that, in the region of Grenoble, a typical experimental initiative would cost around 10% of the cost of a permanent project.

More generally, we learn that the existence of an institutional approach where formal and informal approaches to urban planning co-exist is key to developing an institutional culture where initiatives like this one can flourish, be accepted and thrive. In this respect, apart from the guide for public spaces, another tool that was certainly critically important to this initiative being accepted and understood was the existence of a participatory budget. A participatory budget has existed since 2015 at the Grenoble city level, which has allowed residents over 16, collectives and associations to propose projects that enable the transformation of the city and improve everyday life. The PM explains that although this initiative was not funded by the participatory budget, similar experimental initiatives have been launched in the City of Grenoble in recent years thanks to the participatory budget, meaning therefore that this initiative was welcomed. We also learn that the experimental framework of the guide and the culture of a participatory budget are tools that enable intrinsically motivated agents to work on urban projects by devoting their passion, competence, and creativity, practically for free, and therefore act as tools that imply an efficient allocation of talents and resources for projects with a public interest. Moreover, the consensual approach in which those tools are based enables soft powers of negotiation and persuasion to be exercised. In this respect, the PM explained that the tools created the conditions for creative bureaucracy to thrive.

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12 This is the list of all public space projects implemented with the participatory budget [https://www.grenoble.fr/1135-etat-d-avancement-des-projets.htm](https://www.grenoble.fr/1135-etat-d-avancement-des-projets.htm)

13 See Bénabou Tirole (2003) for a theory of incentives with this concept.

14 See Landry and Caust (2017) for this concept.
4. KEY LESSONS AND TRANSFERABILITY

In conclusion, the research that has unpacked how this initiative developed across the three phases demonstrates that this initiative was facilitated by a virtuous combination of formal tools supporting an informal experimental approach, which in turn led to an institutional acceptance and the effective use of the informal experimental approach. For those reasons, and turning to questions of implementation and transferability, the experience of Vif indicates that a formal framework that institutionalizes temporary, incremental urbanism and participatory citizen-led initiatives can create favourable conditions for the use of a similar experimental approach.

KEY RESOURCES


URBAN MAESTRO

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Principal authors: Tommaso Gabrieli, Associate Professor in Real Estate at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

Design and layout: Kidnap Your Designer, Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA)