

Virtual CityLab: Culture of Cooperation

Co-organised with the City of Bordeaux
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| Report



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INTRODUCTION

Since 2025, the *CityLabs* have been contributing to the development of the New Urban Process (NUP) of the Organisation of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) with a view to its adoption at the 18th OWHC World Congress in Marrakesh (26–29 October 2026). By exploring themes deemed essential by member cities, they ensure that priority issues are fully integrated into the NUP.

It is within this framework that the City of Bordeaux, in coordination with the General Secretariat, organised a virtual *CityLab* dedicated to the ‘Culture of Cooperation’. The aim of the *CityLab* was to collectively identify the conditions for the success of a culture of cooperation capable of facilitating the completion of complex projects in demanding heritage contexts. The discussion drew on two examples from Bordeaux: the gradual regeneration of the Garage Moderne in the Bassins à flot district and the transformation of the former Benaugue fire station.

The contributions gathered during this workshop form the basis of this report, prepared jointly by the OWHC General Secretariat and the coordinating city.

CITYLAB THEME

The *CityLab* is based on the idea that cooperation is a fundamental lever for the management, conservation and transformation of historic centres. The choice of this theme assumed that the quality of cooperative dynamics between stakeholders – institutions, professionals, associations and citizens – plays a decisive role in the development and implementation of urban projects capable of enhancing the *habitability* of historic centres.

Throughout history and across all locations, conservation and use of heritage has been a subject of debate, raising questions and potentially leading to conflicts of interest and differing visions. Several fundamental questions arise: what should be preserved? How can we transform without distorting? How can we adapt to better pass on our heritage? The answers to these questions vary depending on the stakeholders involved: heritage experts, elected representatives, urban planners, developers and residents do not approach the challenges of transformation and conservation with the same priorities or the same frames of reference. In the absence of dialogue and constructive exchange of views, no lasting consensus can emerge for the realisation of transformative projects.

Cooperation must emerge in complex contexts characterised in particular by:

- tensions between heritage preservation and urban development;
- severe economic constraints;
- multi-level governance systems;
- the need to ensure the social, cultural and economic viability of sites.

In this context, cooperation relies on the ability of stakeholders to define common or convergent objectives and to work collectively towards achieving them.

Two case studies from the Bordeaux context highlight the development of a culture of cooperation within the context of the regeneration of historic centres.



Case 1: *Le Garage Moderne in the Bassins à flots district*

This case study illustrates the gradual regeneration of a former wooden warehouse now occupied by an association (Association le Garage Moderne) working in the field of the social and solidarity economy. The project highlights the challenges associated with the heritage recognition of an industrial building, as well as the tensions that can arise between the ambition for transformation and regulatory constraints. Initially facing a negative opinion from heritage authorities, the project evolved through a process of dialogue and successive adjustments, illustrating a pragmatic and progressive approach to cooperation between community, architectural and institutional stakeholders. The site, now almost complete, demonstrates the ability to overcome initial obstacles through negotiation and collaborative development.

Case 2: *The former La Benaugue Fire Station*

The second case concerns the former La Benaugue fire station, an iconic example of modern architecture from the second half of the 20th century, whose heritage value was not immediately recognised. Located in an area undergoing transformation as part of the Bordeaux Euratlantique development project, this site illustrates the difficulties in reconciling heritage preservation, urban regeneration and economic viability. The process of recognition, followed by protection as a listed building, required the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and a shift in perceptions. The regeneration project, which emerged from an international consultation, has itself undergone adjustments to accommodate the constraints of the existing buildings. Pending its final implementation, the site is hosting temporary uses, revealing its potential as a living space and contributing to its social acceptability.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

The discussions identified a set of recurring issues hindering cooperation in projects to transform historic centres.

1. Divergent interests and visions among stakeholders involved in heritage projects

Tensions surrounding regeneration projects arise, in particular, from the contrast between strict conservation approaches and those favouring the adaptation of buildings. These differences emerge in debates over the limits of heritage protection or the possibility of modifying buildings whilst preserving their quality. For example, in the case of the former Benaugue barracks in Bordeaux, the building's conversion project sparked discussions both about its heritage qualities and, following its recognition, about the legitimacy of transforming this modern building, how to preserve its architectural value, and which plan should be prioritised.

2. Economic constraints

Economic considerations have a significant influence on project choices. Stakeholders are often forced to adopt pragmatic and modest solutions, tailored to the resources available. Economic constraints also necessitate the development of hybrid models, combining public funding, economic activities and social uses. In the case of the Garage Moderne, an ambitious project to transform the former hangar had to be scaled back due to limited resources, prioritising simple interventions spread over several phases aimed at consolidating the existing structure and improving the building's comfort rather than a complete restoration, which would have refurbished the building.

3. Institutional complexity and governance

Building conversion projects in a historic centre involve different levels of governance (local, national and international) as well as public and private stakeholders, which can slow down decision-making processes. In the case Rhodes, administrative fragmentation and bureaucracy have been identified as major obstacles to the implementation of projects affecting heritage.



4. Issues of social acceptability

Carrying out projects in historic centres can face challenges in terms of social acceptance, due to opposition from local residents. In Luxembourg, for example, certain regeneration projects have met with resistance from the local population, who wished to preserve the tranquillity of their neighbourhoods and rejected certain new uses.

5. Difficulty in finding suitable partners

The success of projects depends largely on the ability to identify compatible stakeholders who share a common or convergent vision and are capable of collaborating over the long term. This identification often relies on prior knowledge and relationships of trust built up over time. Some cities have highlighted the difficulty of finding suitable partners, particularly when economic or institutional conditions are unfavourable. In the case of the Garage Moderne, an agreement was possible between a small community organisation and the City because both parties benefit: the City wishes to retain the hangar and the activity, so it purchases the building and makes it available to the organisation; the organisation is willing to take on responsibilities to remain there and oversee the necessary works.

6. The need to resolve contradictions

Discussions have shown that tourism can be both an opportunity and a risk: whilst it provides economic support for projects, it can also create imbalances. In Rhodes, there are tensions between heritage enhancement and tourism pressure, which have been exacerbated by fragmented governance.

7. Obstacles due to differing attitudes towards heritage

Recognition of heritage characteristics influences the visions of various stakeholders in the implementation of building conversion projects. The case of the Benaue barracks highlights the difficulties in gaining recognition for the heritage value of 20th-century modern architecture, which is often less widely accepted than older heritage. Some stakeholders initially regarded this building as of little interest, or even negative, prior to the efforts of architects and associations contributed to its regeneration and conservation. This situation contrasts with contexts where more dated heritage benefits from more immediate and shared recognition.

SOLUTIONS

Discussions at *CityLab* highlighted a range of actions, measures and initiatives implemented by cities in the delivery of major projects. These approaches are based on the development and strengthening of a culture of cooperation.

1. Involving citizens and users from the earliest stages of projects.

The discussions showed that participation not only improves social acceptance but also enhances the quality of projects. For example, in several cases, public consultations, participatory workshops and user trials have enabled projects to be adapted to local needs. In Luxembourg, initiatives such as neighbourhood meetings or user trials in public spaces illustrate this commitment to embedding projects within an ongoing collaborative approach.

2. Dialogue and mediation

The diversity of stakeholders involved requires the establishment of formalised forums for exchange, enabling the comparison of viewpoints, the resolution of contradictions and the building of compromises. The examples from Bordeaux and Luxembourg illustrate the establishment of institutional tools for dialogue and consultation to make the projects possible.



3. Promoting contemporary uses

Discussions have highlighted that buildings are better preserved when they remain active and integrated into urban life. This is the case with the Garage Moderne in Bordeaux, a remnant of the neighbourhood's industrial past; the building now serves as a meeting place focused on the social and solidarity economy (bicycle repairs, cultural activities, food aid). Another example is the conversion of the Schleuchthaus Hollerich slaughterhouse in Luxembourg into a dynamic cultural hub housing venues dedicated to the performing arts, workshops, a sports hall and an urban art gallery. Both cases demonstrate that social, cultural and solidarity-based activities contribute to the recognition and protection of the building.

4. A pragmatic, flexible and evolving approach to projects

Rather than aiming for radical transformations, the examples shared by the cities show that stakeholders favour gradual interventions, tailored to economic constraints and local realities. This approach makes it possible to test solutions, adjust projects as they progress, and limit risks. It is part of a process of gradual transformation, where the project takes shape over time through successive adjustments. For example, the redevelopment of Visby's main square is planned on the basis of trials and pilot projects to evaluate ideas before a decision was made.

POINTS OF DIVERGENCE OR SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

Discussions highlighted specific characteristics unique to each city, closely linked to their respective institutional, social and economic contexts. The following four points summarise the main points of divergence and particularities related to the consolidation of a culture of cooperation.

1. Governance models

Each city's modes of governance directly influence the dynamics of cooperation. Some cities have relatively centralised systems that facilitate coordination, whilst others face significant institutional fragmentation. For example, Rhodes highlighted that many buildings are owned by the central government, limiting the municipal level's capacity for action and complicating the implementation of projects. The cases in Bordeaux show that collaboration between the municipality, associations and private actors has enabled projects to be structured more effectively, even if this has required patient work.

2. Economic and financing capacities

Some cities can mobilise public or private investment, whilst others must rely on limited resources and more hybrid arrangements. For example, the project to convert the Benauges barracks into a hotel illustrates the use of the private sector to ensure the economic viability of its conversion. In the case of the Garage Moderne, the continuation of community, cultural, social and solidarity-based activities is made possible because it allows access to other funding dedicated to these policies. In Luxembourg, the transformation and conversion of the former Schleuchthaus slaughterhouse is funded directly by the City.

3. Level and methods of public participation

Whilst some local authorities have developed advanced consultation and consultation mechanisms, others face difficulties in mobilising or involving local communities. In Luxembourg, despite the organisation of consultations and participatory workshops, some projects face active opposition from residents who reject certain uses or transformations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from the workshop, several strategic directions and courses of action emerge to foster a culture of cooperation in cities and support the implementation of sustainable projects in historic centres.

1. Institutionalising cooperation

The institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder cooperation frameworks strengthens, legitimises and raises the profile of permanent spaces for dialogue between public and private stakeholders, experts and society. Discussions have shown that cooperation requires structured mechanisms (monitoring committees, collaborative platforms, regular consultation formats, amongst others) to ensure the continuity of dialogue and the co-construction of projects over time.

2. Strengthening tools for citizen engagement

It is essential to strengthen mechanisms for public participation at the early stages of projects, to improve their acceptability and relevance. This involves diversifying the formats used (public consultations, participatory workshops, user trials, digital tools) and encouraging active and inclusive participation. The shift from a consultative approach to a co-production approach facilitates the integration of citizens' knowledge and enables the needs and habits of residents to be identified from the earliest stages of design.

3. Meeting contemporary needs and uses

Heritage conservation cannot be separated from contemporary use. Projects should systematically incorporate social, cultural or economic functions to anchor buildings in everyday life and to ensure their adoption and the recognition of their heritage value, as well as potentially to benefit from financial support specifically linked to these uses.

4. Designing ad hoc economic models

Given the specific challenges involved in preserving the *habitability* of historic centres, it is recommended that innovative and diversified economic models be developed. It is essential to explore flexible financing arrangements that can support projects at different scales, including modest interventions with a strong local impact. These models can combine public funding, private investment and initiatives from the social and solidarity economy.

5. Diversifying communication

In contexts marked by differing visions or local resistance, it is necessary to strengthen mediation and communication capacities around projects involving heritage. The development of educational tools (models, exhibitions, visualisations, workshops, open-site events) helps to facilitate understanding of the issues at stake, make projects more accessible and reduce conflicts between stakeholders.

6. Focusing on flexible and scalable approaches

Experimental and progressive approaches incorporate testing and adaptation phases, which improves ownership of projects. This demonstrates their ability to adapt to those for whom they are intended. Experimenting with temporary uses, phased transformation or continuous evaluation of actions allows interventions to be adjusted and better respond to economic and social constraints, thereby limiting risks.

7. Improving coordination

Coordination efforts between different levels of governance are necessary, particularly in contexts where institutional fragmentation acts as a barrier. This can involve clarifying roles and responsibilities, strengthening mechanisms for inter-institutional consultation, and establishing more integrated frameworks for cooperation between local and national levels and other relevant stakeholders.



CONCLUSION

This *CityLab* has highlighted that recognising differences — not as obstacles, but as starting points — presents a major opportunity to create spaces for mediation and move beyond the logic of institutional fragmentation. From this perspective, a culture of cooperation appears as a dynamic and ongoing process, based on dialogue, experimentation and adaptation over time. It is built through the establishment of consultation mechanisms, the active involvement of stakeholders, the development of sustainable partnerships and the adoption of adaptive approaches in project management.

The discussions also highlighted the specific characteristics of each city, which are closely linked to their institutional, social and economic contexts. These differences are essential factors to be considered when developing and strengthening a culture of cooperation tailored to local realities. They underscore the need to develop differentiated approaches, capable of adapting to the governance frameworks, social dynamics and economic capacities of each region, to foster effective cooperation processes.

In short, a culture of cooperation is a key prerequisite for ensuring the *habitability* of historic centres. It enables us to consider heritage preservation alongside contemporary social, economic and environmental challenges.

Strengthening this culture is thus one of the essential drivers of the cultural change required for the implementation and success of urban strategies centred on *habitability*. The lessons learned from this *CityLab* will be integrated into the *New Urban Process*, notably through the identification of the Governance Programme, designed to support cities in establishing or consolidating an institutional culture of cooperation, considered an essential prerequisite for the successful transformation of historic centres into genuine living spaces.



APPENDIX

List of participants

CITY	SURNAME	ROLE
Bordeaux	Anne-Laure Moniot Head of Department. Architecture and Urban Heritage Planning.	Coordinator
Bordeaux	Hervé Lapastoure Regional Director, Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Eiffage Immobilier Sud-Ouest; Project Owner, Caserne de la Benauges	Speaker
Bordeaux	Julien Goret Development Manager, Association Garage Moderne, Project Owner	Speaker
Bordeaux	Nicole Concordet Architect for the Garage Moderne project	Speaker
Bordeaux	Pierre Ferret Architect, Ancienne caserne La Benauges Project	Speaker
Hyderabad	Nitya Khendry Head of Heritage	Guest participant invited by the City of Bordeaux
Luxembourg	Martine Nicolay Architect. Urban Planning Department	Participant
Luxembourg	Shaaf Milani-Nia Architect – Director. UNESCO Site Manager	Participant
Mexico	Anabelí Contreras Julián Head of Promotion and Communications	Participant
Morelia	Maria Fernanda Núñez Head of the UNESCO World Heritage and Conventions Department	Participant
Rhodes	Polly Chatzimarkou Special Advisor to the Mayor on cultural and arts management	Participant
Visby	Louise Hoffman Borgö World Heritage Coordinator	Participant