Unlimited 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, (LAA, LIPN, LTPT) 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 Dragonfly 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.

gn & production by Claire Germain, atelier Maison Gong - printed on recycled paper

Unlimited Cities

Description

A tool for urban planning and inclusive transitions

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Unlimited Cities (UC)
in a nutshell

Unlimited Cities is the free, open-source tool built around the in-situ collage method 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, the tool 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. Depending on the process and time invested, annotated collages produced by up to 1,400 participants make visible the ideas and preferences of citizens for improving their territory.

The effective use of these quantitative and qualitative contributions within transition projects, together with the transparent sharing of raw data and structured analyses, strengthens trust between citizens, users, 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.

Identified problems in urban planning participation

As analysed in academic literature and experienced by municipalities:

Lack of representativeness. Attracting a divers 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

A tool combining a participatory process and a digital platform

The UC process unfolds through a series of structured actions, preparing the collage elements, creating the collages in public space, culminating in a restitution event and the sharing of results. **The digital platform**, introduced to participants by mediators, develops their capacity to act, ensures transparency, and documents all contributions.

Differences from conventional approaches

Compared to conventional urban planning participation methods, the key differences are: going to where people live, 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. In processes deployed with city planning departments, contributory workshops first prepare the elements to be used in collages; the annotated collages are then created during the digital mediation phase in public space with hundreds of people; restitution events finally 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 live 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 long-term engagement and the emergence of resource persons across all sectors.

Organising a restitution event that exhibits the annotated collages and shows how the city has turned them into concrete contributions to upcoming projects directly addresses the question of perceived usefulness.

Digital mediation with in-situ collage method

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 deceptively simple principle

Whether part of an organised workshop group or approached directly in the street, participants imagine an improvement to their neighbourhood by creating a collage on a photograph of the site. **The interaction is easy and intuitive**: each person uses a tablet, with the support of a mediator if needed. 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 and community centres, co-working spaces, businesses, and sometimes the city halls themselves.

A universal method

What connects those who have used Unlimited Cities and live in a village in China or in Switzerland, in a French city or 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. The annotated collage has a liberating effect: each person moves beyond the fear of not knowing how to draw, of not having the right words, of having less legitimacy than the experts. On the contrary, **they discover themselves as carriers of ideas**, and dare 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 easily adapt the process and digital platform to their cultural and geographic contexts by choosing among existing modules. Those whose needs are not met by the current version of the digital platform are encouraged to improve it and contribute to its open-source logic. Since the beginning, the Foundation has ensured that all enhancements are 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: it produces images too fast. What matters here is the time it takes — each participant facing their own choices and doubts. This is the tool's primary intention: **enabling non-professionals to think and act as designers for the duration of a session**. 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, and for whom? 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**.