



The artistic flair inspiring greener European cities

Arts and culture can bring imagination and momentum to projects for putting urban neighbourhoods more in tune with nature.

28 February 2024 - By JACK MCGOVAN

In the Dutch capital Amsterdam, a thoroughfare called the Stadhouderskade is being reclaimed by residents. They're turning the car-clogged artery into a two-kilometre-long haven for nature and people.

Students of art, engineering, mathematics, science and technology are helping to drive the transformation. Their role is to offer artistic, social and technical advice on remodelling the road section located along a main canal and near the Rijksmuseum, home to paintings by Dutch 17th century masters such as Rembrandt van Rijn and Johannes Vermeer.

Dutch designs

The “Green Mile” is an initiative by six Dutch organisations that include the Rijksmuseum, brewer Heineken – whose headquarters are on the Stadhouderskade – the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Dutch National Bank, architecture firm UNStudio and consultancy Blendingbricks.

‘Arts and culture can challenge people to get out of their usual way of thinking,’ said Annemie Wyckmans, a professor of sustainable architecture at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim.

Wyckmans leads a research project that received EU funding to examine how engaging with a broad range of groups including the artistic and cultural sectors can stimulate sustainable change. Called [CRAFT](#), the three-year project runs through April 2025 and features the Amsterdam initiative as a leading example.

The CRAFT team is drawing inspiration from an EU initiative to bring the European “Green Deal” to the places where people live. Called “New European Bauhaus”, or NEB, it wants people’s daily lives and living spaces to get inspiration from art and culture, be in harmony with nature and involve social interaction.

Like the Bauhaus movement in Germany a century ago, the NEB aims to fuse urban design, science, technology, art and community spirit. Art itself can be a driving force because it is widely on display in cities and has the power to galvanise people.

The EU is organising an [NEB festival](#) in the Belgian capital Brussels on 9-13 April.

Shining lights

With its Stadhouderskade initiative, Amsterdam is one of three leading cities among more than 70 coming together under CRAFT to share knowledge and experience. The other two main ones are Bologna in Italy and the Czech capital Prague.

In Bologna, an old railyard is being renovated to create sheds and open areas where arts, sports and other social activities can take place. In Prague, art installations are being placed in public spaces and the general public is being asked to provide feedback.

All three cities are bringing together a variety of local voices and testing new ways to spur and guide the transformation. In some cases, that means including community members in urban decision-making; in others it involves linking up municipal departments that otherwise often act in isolation.

‘We are emphasising the role of art and education in igniting this change,’ said Wyckmans. ‘We believe that art can connect people, offer new perspectives and enrich the dialogue between the different stakeholders.’

In Amsterdam, the transformation of the Stadhouderskade is well underway and a range of activities is due to continue for the rest of the decade.

In June 2023, an “insect hotel” was installed in a park named after 20th century Dutch painter Carel Willink. The wooden structure, which vaguely resembles a birdhouse complete with a sloping wooden roof, gives insects such as ladybirds, butterflies and solitary bees a place to spend the night, hibernate or just stay. It even faces south-west to increase warmth.

In September, a group of around 80 residents, workers and other interested people joined an initial clean-up activity along the Stadhouderskade. They collected plastic litter, cigarette butts and other waste for almost four hours, wrapping up with drinks at Heineken.

The ultimate goal is for the mile-long stretch, which is among the most congested, dirty and noisy parts of Amsterdam, to have fewer cars and more trees, bushes and parks for creatures of all kinds.

‘By 2030, we want to transform the Stadhouderskade into a green, sustainable, safe and vibrant thoroughfare for all life forms,’ said Rob Andeweg, programme manager at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. ‘And we want to do this by fostering a sense of ownership among local residents and users of the area and by allowing the unheard voices of nature and animals to be heard.’

Creative spark

Another EU-funded research project – [CreaTures](#) – took a playful approach to altering perceptions and possibilities regarding urban change.

It featured a group of strangers who gathered in Finsbury Park in the UK capital London in 2022 wearing masks depicting different animals, insects and plants.

Each mask represented a particular life form living in the park and the person wearing the disguise was the spokesperson of the species depicted.

The event was part of a role-play [game](#) to explore how this particular public space could be used in a way that answered the needs of all of its inhabitants, not just people.

‘Players act and think like a dog, bee or even grass and help change the way we all see and participate in our local urban green spaces and significantly alter community relations with local biodiversity,’ the local initiative said on its [website](#).

Just doing it

CreaTures – an acronym for Creative Practices for Transformational Futures – ran for three years through 2022 and explored ways for the arts to address climate change.

It catalogued current creative practices, experimented with others and offered an overall evaluation.

CreaTures included representatives from Finland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the UK. Besides London, it worked in several locations including Helsinki, Ljubljana and Seville, each with diverse experiments.

By testing ways for the creative arts to spur more people to engage actively with their environments, the project team wanted to build a common resource from which others could draw.

‘There are many academic articles saying what needs to be done but very few examples of how to actually do it,’ said Tuuli Mattelmäki, an associate professor in design at Aalto University in Finland and coordinator of CreaTures.

The project produced a collection of 20 [experimental productions](#). Each was proposed by an artist or group of artists and then drew on the ideas of all project participants.

Enterprising experiments

The Finsbury Park initiative, for example, was put forward by two cultural organisations – one based in London and the other in Berlin.

Like several other CreaTures experiments, this one is expected to have an impact beyond the life of the project. The borough responsible for Finsbury Park plans to invite local residents to sign a “treaty of cooperation” with park biodiversity and monitor the effect.

Another CreaTures experiment was an interactive [online social-care platform](#) inspired by “Social Solidarity Clinics” in Greece during the height of the financial and migration crises in the previous decade. A further experiment offers an [open-source board game](#) that encourages players to pool their resources rather than compete to accumulate goods.

The impact of human food production on climate change led to a [cookbook](#) with 11 “More-than-Human Food Futures” recipes meant to provoke reflection about diets that support environmental sustainability.

One recipe links a sustainable and healthy diet with the idea of glamorous food by combining seaweed, spirulina, rice, pomegranate and ice cream.

Another recipe challenges the notion of “pests” in nature, saying many invasive species have positive effects. It gives the example of lupin, which in Sweden is regarded as an unwanted garden invader but is a source of protein for cows.

Global impact

Since the project ended, people worldwide have been using its guidance on what artistic actions work best for particular initiatives, according to Mattelmäki.

It even gets a nod in a United Nations [report](#) published in December 2023. The UN document, entitled “The Most Creative Look to the Future”, argues that true innovation is impossible without the skills and behaviour fostered by imagination and creativity.

When it comes to combatting climate change, Mattelmäki said the power of the arts is too often underestimated and underused.

‘Through arts and culture, an openness of interpretation is created that can challenge the status quo,’ she said.

(This article was updated on 28 February 2024 to remove Barcelona from the cities cited in the 25th paragraph and to identify the associate professor role of Tuuli Mattelmäki in the 27th paragraph)

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New European Bauhaus

A century after it emerged in Germany, the Bauhaus school of art, architecture and design is getting a rebirth in Europe in a bid to improve urban life.

The [New European Bauhaus](#) (NEB) aims to help cities across the EU become less polluting and more attractive through artistic, cultural and technological projects reaching many millions of residents.

Initiated by the European Commission in 2020, the NEB has three prime goals: reduce environmental harm including climate change, tackle social inequalities such as exclusion and spruce up public areas.

Changing the design and use of urban spaces and structures is central to the whole undertaking, with sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics shaping the overall vision.

While serving policy goals set at EU level, the NEB relies on bottom-up initiatives undertaken by a range of people and organisations. These include city dwellers, artistic groups, architectural experts and local businesses, authorities and students.

Research is a main feature of the NEB, with almost €160 million for EU projects in 2021-2024.

More info

- [CRAFT](#)
- [CreaTures](#)
- [New European Bauhaus](#)
- [2024 NEB Festival in Brussels](#)
- [NextGenerationEU](#)