

Atelier Meunier: iterative co-governance of urban nature through a street experiment in Leuven, Belgium



Facing the growing impacts of climate change, the municipality of Leuven, a historical city in the Flemish region of Belgium, sought to expand urban nature within an inner-ring residential neighbourhood to enhance biodiversity, air quality, thermal comfort, access to green and rainwater infiltration. However, this ambition required reducing parking spaces, car traffic, and impermeable paving, which initially raised concerns among residents and other actors.

To learn how a greener, more sustainable urban design could work in practice, the municipality developed a test installation with the local community, other municipal departments, and institutions. The intervention took place on Constantin Meunierstraat, a street already scheduled for roadway and sewage renovations, offering an opportunity to create a 'climate street'. The installation was conceived as a temporary measure to demonstrate and trial different NbS scenarios with local actors. This temporary project served as a collective learning process to develop a model for the comprehensive redevelopment of the street in future and to create guidelines to inform similar transformations in other municipal areas.

How was this achieved?

For every project stage, there was a phase of informing and awareness-raising, co-creation, and feedback-gathering and dialogue tailored to each stakeholder group. For instance, to col-

laborate with municipal experts, the municipality established a multi-departmental working team with periodic and bilateral meetings to discuss the intervention, understand challenges, brainstorm solutions, and review results once pilots were ready, supported by concrete measurements and feedback from other stakeholders. To work alongside end-users, there were leaflets, info panels, website information to disseminate the project and its proposal, then public open co-creation workshops (given the name "Atelier Meunier") to develop the intervention itself, followed by paper surveys, feedback workshops, and door-to-door conversations to gather opinions also from any local residents that were not able to participate in the workshops. Decision-makers were informed of every step taken, with feedback received from both experts and end-users. Their perspectives were gathered to ensure the test installation could truly inform the final redesign of the street, and the results were directly linked to existing policies and agendas.

This iterative and collaborative approach was applied throughout the test installation, which was implemented in stages. It began with a pilot in a smaller section of the street and was subsequently expanded based on insights gained from earlier stages, supporting continuous improvement. After the test installation was completed, the entire process and results were presented to the diverse actors to gather a final round of feedback and facilitate dissemination prior to developing the permanent design.

NBS INTERVENTION

Temporary green intervention on Constantin Meunierstraat to test different street greening approaches and inform the final redesign of the street and city guidelines.



Who was involved?

During this process, the municipality of Leuven engaged:

Experts: Partners from the JUSTNature team, contributing expertise in nature-based solutions (NbS) and co-governance; Architects and engineers from local firms, providing design and planning expertise; Academics and students from KU Leuven, offering scientific support; Municipal staff from other departments, contributing insights on relevant and competing infrastructure, legal procedures, and policy agendas; Advisory groups on mobility, accessibility, biodiversity, and cultural heritage, representing specialised and minority interests.

End Users: Residents and students living in the neighbourhood; People using the street for commuting; Both hard-to-reach and more easily engaged groups, to anticipate potential challenges and develop appropriate mitigation strategies.

Decision-makers: Heads of department and city councillors, responsible for final decision-making authority.

Results

In concrete terms, the municipality succeeded in changing traffic from two-way to one-way, lowering parking spaces from 65 to 40, and creating room for water-sensitive design, green areas, trees, and social meeting spots. Although many public actors were skeptical at the beginning of the project, residents and institutions received the final results and the permanent redevelopment plan of the street with strong appreciation. The community of a neighbouring street has since asked for the intervention to be expanded to their area.

"This co-governance approach can take some time, but at the end, you will have saved time by having included already during the process all the information and knowledge you need to become the best result. And never forget the people who actually use a space: their expertise is never too be underestimated". Nele Janssen, City of Leuven.



KEY MESSAGES

- Use diverse and inclusive formats: Reach underrepresented groups and include overlooked perspectives.
- Design accessible participation: Adapt formats, timing, and communication to different needs.
- Set clear expectations: Be transparent about goals and constraints to avoid false hopes.
- Involve decision-makers: Ensure they receive a complete and balanced view of the process.