

Activating NbS through local collaboration. A transit zone becomes a 'garden for all' in Merano, Italy



Merano, a small Alpine town in northern Italy, is known for its extensive green spaces, many of which are ornamental or privately owned. Public green space, on the other hand, is relatively rare. An existing piece of public land, 900 m² in size, was identified as having potential to do more for local residents and for biodiversity: strategically located opposite a kindergarten and multigenerational apartment building, part of a historic pedestrian route and alongside a water channel. Despite this potential, access to the site was hindered by a busy adjacent street, and it had mainly served as a space for passing through.

In 2025, after a series of participatory workshops, the space underwent a complete physical transformation to become a shared space to rest, participate, learn, and connect with nature.



How was this achieved?

The pilot project was co-developed through three participatory workshops in 2023 involving residents, experts, and local stakeholders, who explored how best the site could offer cooling, relaxation, social interaction, and habitats for plants and animals. An initial expert-focused workshop identified key challenges such as biodiversity, heat mitigation, and traffic impacts. The second workshop was designed in the style of a public fair and specifically targeted local residents. More than 600 invitations were distributed to mailboxes throughout the surrounding neighborhood. Participants were able to vote on which elements should be included in the future "Garden for All," which plant species they preferred, and how water should be experienced within the space. In addition, information was provided on urban biodiversity and related topics. In the third and final workshop, a first design proposal-based on the outcomes of the previous meetings - was presented and discussed in depth. Structural elements such as deadwood installations were introduced, and participants voted on their preferences while contributing further suggestions for improvement. Overall, more than 100 people took part in the participatory process.

NBS INTERVENTION

Neighbourhood park integrating cooling, recreation, and biodiversity through native and climate-resilient trees and shrubs, wildflower meadows, drought-tolerant plantings, natural hedges, and deadwood structures to support microfauna.

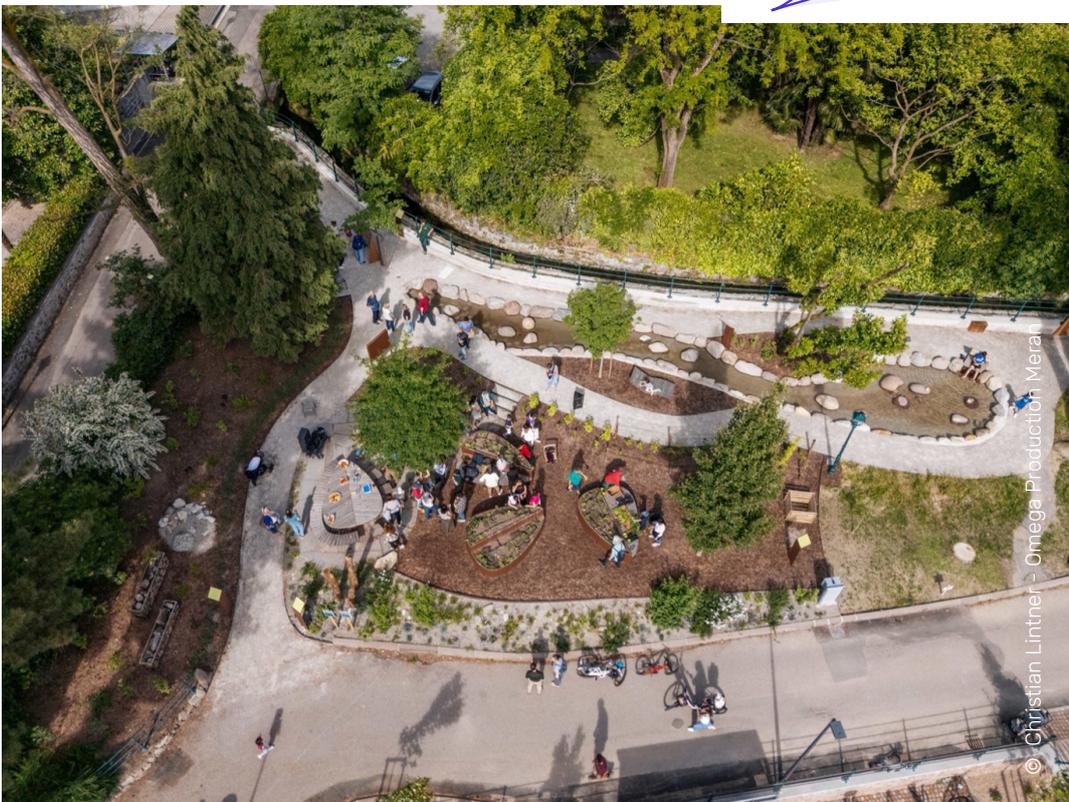


Results

The new garden is widely used, with many residents visiting to harvest vegetables. An unexpected but major outcome was the introduction of traffic calming measures on the road next to the garden, greatly improving pedestrian safety. This resulted from conversations that started in the first workshop. The participation process was also successful in making space for conflict.

A professional moderator hired by the administration was key to making sure that concerns could be voiced and addressed in a constructive and respectful manner. The site is now being maintained collaboratively by city gardeners and volunteer residents.

"I was quite surprised how important our first workshop was and how influential it was to put the right stakeholders together. I underestimated participation in this sense, and now I am a bit converted". Ruth Lochmann, project manager City of Meran.



KEY MESSAGES

- Co-creation can transform underused spaces: Participatory processes can turn transit areas into vibrant, multifunctional spaces that serve both people and biodiversity.
- Inclusive engagement improves outcomes: Diverse and well-designed participation formats help identify community needs, address conflicts, and shape more accepted and effective solutions.
- NbS can trigger wider urban improvements: Nature-based interventions can generate additional benefits, such as improved safety and long-term community stewardship.