

LEE KUAN YEW
WORLD CITY ○
PRIZE

Shaping the future of cities

Six city stories of rejuvenation, reinvention and resilience



LONDON

How robust governance shape systemic changes



ANTWERP

Ideas powerhouse making The Big Link



BUDAPEST

Reshaping mobility and public spaces even with prudent resources



GUANGZHOU

Redefining micro-rehabilitation in balancing old and new



TAIPEI

Power of people contributing to one of highest recycling rates



TIANJIN

Prioritising ecological and cultural heritage preservation

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The Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize is jointly organised by the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Centre for Liveable Cities.

Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)

URA is Singapore's land use planning and conservation agency. Our mission is 'to make Singapore a great city to live, work and play'. We strive to create an endearing home and a vibrant city through long-term planning and innovation, in partnership with the community.

URA's multi-faceted role includes being the main government land sales agent. We facilitate the development of sites that support planning, economic and social objectives.

We also partner the community to enliven our public spaces to create a car-lite, people-friendly and liveable city for all to enjoy. In shaping a distinctive city, URA also promotes architecture and urban design excellence.

www.ura.gov.sg

Centre for Liveable (CLC)

Set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the then-Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, CLC aims to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities.

The CLC's work spans four main areas: Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms, and Advisory. Through these activities, it hopes to provide urban leaders and practitioners with the knowledge and support needed to make our cities better.

www.clc.gov.sg



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About the Prize:
In search of urban excellence

“The Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize is an award that honours cities with outstanding achievements and contributions to the creation of liveable, vibrant, and sustainable urban communities. It also recognises city leaders and their organisations for their foresight, innovation, and effective governance to tackle their urban challenges over a sustained period of time.”

Dr Cheong Koon Hean
Chairperson
Prize Nominating Committee



8 cycles
16 years
32 cities

As cities continue to tackle increasingly complex urban challenges, the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, a biennial global award, seeks to shine the spotlight on those that have gone above and beyond to make remarkable and transformative changes to their environments in creating liveable and sustainable cities that elevate people’s quality of life. Since 2010, the Prize has not only recognised 32 cities but has also been inspiring continued conversations and partnerships for cities to keep learning from one another.



LEGEND
● Laureate
● Special Mention

Prize process
The Prize employs a rigorous process to identify cities' transformative efforts, with outreach for nominations, careful evaluation including extensive research, and thorough site visits.



Shortlist
Shortlisted cities are invited to submit additional information and detailed write-ups on long-term plans, planning strategies and transformative projects.



Prize Council endorsement
The Prize Council reviews the recommendations put forth by the Nominating Committee and endorses the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Laureate and Special Mention cities.

The Laureate and Special Mention cities are announced ahead of the World Cities Summit and invited to participate in the event with support from the Secretariat team.

01



Nominations
Nominations must be submitted by independent experts:

- Leading academics
- Leaders from International Organisations
- Urban industry experts

02

03



City review & recommendation
Site visits are conducted by the Nominating Committee and Secretariat office to shortlisted cities to enable deeper assessment of their urban transformation efforts, governance approaches and implementation outcomes.

04

The Nominating Committee undertakes several rounds of deliberation to formulate recommendations for consideration by the Prize Council.

05



Prize ceremony & network
The Laureate and Special Mention cities are invited to participate in the World Cities Summit, including presenting at the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Plenary Lecture and attending the Prize Banquet.

The Laureate receives the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize medallion and a cash award sponsored by Keppel Ltd.

Following the Award cycle, Laureate and Special Mention cities become part of the LKYWCP Network for continued exchange, collaboration and learning.

Evaluation criteria
The Prize recognises outstanding cities for their innovation, effective leadership, addressing urban challenges and fostering long-term benefits for communities worldwide.



Strong leadership and governance



Creative and innovative solutions



Robust processes to sustain efforts



Enhance quality of environment and people's lives



Good replicable practices and ideas

“The Prize’s uniqueness stems from its comprehensive nomination and evaluation process. Independent nominations create a level playing field, while extensive research and city visits enable in-depth assessment of cities’ visions and their ability to deliver sustainable urban transformation.”

Professor Ricky Burdett
Prize Nominating Committee member
Director, LSE Cities and Urban Age
London School of Economics
and Political Science, UK

Prize Network

The City Network for the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize (LKYWCP Network) is a platform for urban leaders and practitioners to connect and engage in creating and exchanging knowledge on building liveable and sustainable cities. Launched at the World Cities Summit 2024, the Network has grown to 21 member cities comprising of LKYWCP Laureates and Special Mentions.

It brings together various stakeholders from each city: Mayors, city halls, planning departments, and knowledge organisations as a community of practice that engages in dialogue, joint projects, and knowledge exchange. The LKYWCP Network offers three flagship fellowships – Mayoral Fellowship, Research Fellowship, and Urban Leaders Fellowship – to engage diverse stakeholders in member cities.

For more information: worldcityprize.sg/network



Member cities of the LKYWCP Network at the Mayors Forum 2025 and World Cities Summit 2024. Images: CLC



Urban Leaders Fellowship

The Urban Leaders Fellowship is a biennial immersive learning programme open to all Prize Network cities to gain firsthand insights in the host cities’ transformative strategies and initiatives and to learn from one another. Featuring site visits (images on left), workshops and discussions, the first edition was hosted by Bilbao, the first Prize Laureate, in April 2026, with city leaders (image above) joining from Antwerp, Cape Town, Hamburg, Singapore, Taipei, Toronto and Vienna.



2026 LAUREATE

LONDON

A global magnet for investment and talent, with rich historical and cultural heritage, London stands out for its ability to navigate complex urban challenges and deliver significant transformations over time. Its robust governance enables the city to envision bold visions and develop long-term oversight of key efforts across its polycentric system of 32 boroughs, the City of London Corporation, and multiple levels of government.

Anchored by world-class transport infrastructure and strong institutional and ground-up partnerships, London serves as a model for continuously anticipating and embracing changing contexts and needs to keep reinventing itself.

Image: London & Partners

Real change is possible

London Mayor Sir Sadiq Khan shares how real transformative change is possible with robust governance and strong collaborations while staying attuned to communities’ needs.

What makes London's governance effective in leading and effecting change?

Sir Sadiq: Home to over nine million people across 32 boroughs, London is one of the most diverse cities in the world. It is a place where hundreds of languages are spoken and people of all faiths live side by side. What makes London unique is the strength of the shared identity that brings us together and the singular sense of purpose that drives us forward.

As Mayor, Londoners have given me a clear mandate to make our city fairer, safer, greener, and more prosperous. From implementing the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ), the world's first and largest clean air zone, to delivering the Elizabeth line and providing free school meals in state Primary Schools, that is what my team have delivered.

The secret behind our success is a relentless focus on collaboration. We know that London's story will not be written by its elected leaders alone — real change is possible only when every part of our city is prepared to work together. From businesses and universities to the hospitals, schools, and police that keep our city running, we're working in partnership with all of London's leaders to build a better city in the decades to come.

How does the governance structure allow for continuity in managing change over time?

Sir Sadiq: Londoners have never been afraid to be vocal about their hopes for the city they love. The people I meet every day tell me they want secure and well-paid jobs, with green spaces to enjoy when they're not working and public transport that is clean, fast, and affordable. They want to be able to breathe clean air without worrying about what pollution will do to their children's lungs, and training which provides them with the skills they need to succeed in the age of AI.

In the last decade, our city has witnessed an unprecedented series of external shocks, from Brexit to the pandemic and the energy price shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite all the turmoil and turbulence, though, we've never once been blown off course. Finding strength in the resilience of ordinary Londoners, we've remained steadfastly focused on delivering the changes they want to see.

In areas like King's Cross and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, we've delivered decades-long developments that have completely rewired our city's economic geography. Once left out of London's success story, these places are now engines of growth and prosperity.

London's story shows that continuity need not mean complacency. Faced with unprecedented challenges, we can draw on our city's proud history of creativity to adapt and pioneer new solutions. Scientists said it would take almost 200 years to get nitrogen dioxide levels within legal limits without action. We did it in nine. That unique combination of flexibility and focus means we can defy expectations again and again.



Mayor Sir Sadiq Khan.
Image: GLA

What values and principles have guided London's transformation?

Sir Sadiq: The thread running through our city's story is what I call the London promise: the idea that if you work hard, you get a helping hand and can achieve anything here. We need our city to work for everyone, no matter the God they worship or the colour of their skin, the job they do or how much money they earn. That's why we put a commitment to fairness, inclusivity, and equality at the heart of everything we do.

We've frozen fares seven times and invested in transport to connect underserved communities. Our clean air policies have protected poorer and black and ethnic minority Londoners, who are more likely to be exposed to high pollution levels. Universal free school meals mean no child in London goes hungry or suffers the shame of standing in a separate line. Through our Violence Reduction Unit, we've provided vulnerable young people with 550,000 positive opportunities to keep them from being caught up in crime or exploitation.

What are key lessons in anticipating and managing change and complexity?

Sir Sadiq: To succeed, you need a clear, compelling vision of the future and you need to be able to communicate it to the citizens you serve. We faced no end of obstacles implementing the ULEZ, including a tidal wave of disinformation, but we succeeded because we showed Londoners how action on air pollution — linked to 4,000 excess deaths a year in our city — could improve and even save their lives.

A long-term vision is necessary but not sufficient. You also need a holistic, city-wide plan integrating housing, transport, and economic development into a single coherent strategy. The Elizabeth line, now the UK's busiest railway with 800,000 journeys every day, is testament to that. Between 2022 and 2023, 125,000 new jobs were registered within one km of an Elizabeth line station, and 70,500 homes have planning permission within the same area. But the embrace of change must always come hand in hand with respect for our city's identity, a balance embodied in our plans to



Sir Sadiq Khan with school children as part of the Universal Free Meal initiative. Image: GLA



London Anchor Institutions Network. Image: GLA

pedestrianise Oxford Street, which will prepare one of the world's most famous shopping destinations for the future while preserving the character and heritage which make it unique.

What advice would you give city leaders on building resilient structures and networks?

Sir Sadiq: Dynamic, diverse cities like London are always changing. To bring people together, you need strong, accountable leadership anchored around two principles: people and partnership.

Where we have succeeded, it's because we've worked with our communities to design and deliver policy rather than simply dictating it.

We've listened to their experiences of air pollution, their anxieties about the changing world of work, their struggles with the cost of transport and we've taken action. City leaders must also harness expertise beyond their own administrations.

Our London Anchor Institutions Network, created to tackle inequalities laid bare by the pandemic, brings together major organisations across policing, education, transport, business, and utilities, pooling resources in pursuit of a common goal.

Faced with the climate emergency and accelerating technological change, cities like ours will face no shortage

of challenges in the decades to come. But, by putting people first and working in partnership with those who have the power to effect change, we can keep building a city that works for everyone.

What are your future aspirations for London?

Sir Sadiq: I'm convinced London is already the greatest city in the world but I wouldn't be in my job if I didn't believe it could be even better. In the years ahead, we'll be building more affordable homes, driving forward the transformation of Oxford Street, and working towards our London Growth Plan goal of 150,000 good jobs by 2028. We'll be accelerating improvements to our transport network, aiming for 80 per cent of journeys to be made on foot, by cycle, or public transport. And we'll continue cleaning up our rivers and waterways so that Londoners from all walks of life can enjoy them.

To make cities like ours even greater, we must also confront the challenges which will define the decades to come. In London, we're launching an AI taskforce to prepare our city for the relentless rise of this transformative technology, and we're taking a stand against the growing threat of disinformation, too.

I may be biased, but after ten years as Mayor I believe London's future looks brighter than ever — and I can't wait to see what the next decade holds for our city.

Building the busiest rail line in UK

Andy Lord, Commissioner of Transport for London, charts the journey of building the Elizabeth line and its transformative impact on London's landscape and communities.

ABOUT THE ELIZABETH LINE

Since opening in May 2022, the Elizabeth line has become the UK's single busiest railway service, carrying up to 800,000 passengers on peak mid-weekdays and more than 840 million journeys to date. All 41 stations are step-free from street to platform and 4G-enabled, with high reliability and customer satisfaction. Beyond London, the supply chain for the Elizabeth line trains supports nearly 40 companies and over 1,000 jobs across the UK.

Can you share the origins and vision for the Elizabeth line?

Andy: The Elizabeth line — originally known as Crossrail — began taking shape in the early 2000s, led by Transport for London in partnership with the Department for Transport. The ambition was clear: a high-capacity, world-class railway that would support economic growth, reduce journey times, and boost central London rail capacity by around ten per cent. The 2005 business case outlined the expected transport, regeneration and economic benefits, centred on new connectivity between Heathrow, the West End, the City and Canary Wharf. Royal Assent followed in July 2008 through the Crossrail Act.

What were some of the biggest challenges and how were these overcome?

Andy: Crossrail was one of Europe's largest and most complex infrastructure projects, with technical integration challenges, station construction issues, and project management weaknesses contributing to a three-and-a-half-year delay and significant cost overruns. A leadership change in late 2018, with Mark Wild appointed as Chief Executive, proved the turning point, with a robust, realistic plan and set of cost estimates to complete the project put in place.

The most significant technical challenge was integrating new trains across three signalling systems: two legacy systems on the Great Western and Great Eastern Main Lines, and a new automatic train control system in the central section. The scale of software testing required was almost certainly underestimated in the original plan.

What are the important lessons learnt? Any surprising discoveries along the way?

Andy: A report for the Association for Project Management with contributions from Mark Wild, among others, concluded that delivering major infrastructure is ultimately about managing the whole system, not just building major assets, with the greatest challenge being the integration of complex technologies, operations, and organisations into a single reliable railway.

Key lessons include the danger of over-focusing on deadlines, with shifting from delivery dates to delivery ranges proving far more effective. Leadership and culture were equally critical, with progress improving through a shared vision, openness about risk, and collective responsibility.

The project also yielded remarkable archaeological discoveries, with excavations at Liverpool Street uncovering thousands of artefacts including Roman pottery, coins, and leather footwear, a reminder that modern infrastructure can unlock invaluable connections to the past.

How has the line enhanced neighbourhoods along the route?

Andy: Since opening, more than 125,000 new jobs have been created within one km of stations, and 71,000 new homes completed since 2015 with a further 70,500 in the pipeline.

Farringdon, Paddington and Tottenham Court Road have seen strong growth in jobs and productivity. Abbey Wood has seen significantly reduced travel times and a noticeable increase in trips that would not otherwise have occurred, helping to unlock regeneration opportunities including at Thamesmead.

Beyond the data, what has been the impact on people's lives?

Andy: Passenger surveys and stakeholder interviews revealed meaningful changes in everyday life. Local businesses reported increased footfall. In Ilford, a changing relationship with the car was noted, with more people cycling because they could take their bike on the line.

An accessibility group highlighted that the Elizabeth line has made a significant difference to people with accessibility challenges, with customers now confident that journeys on the line will be step-free from end to end.

What advice would you give to other city leaders embarking on similarly complex infrastructure projects?

Andy: The evaluation report was clear — focus as much on leadership and culture as on engineering. Build a broad base of support early, drawing in political, commercial and community allies. Invest in strong governance and independent assurance from the outset and be realistic about complexity. Projects of this scale will face setbacks.

Avoid becoming overly fixated on a single opening date; a delivery window supported by transparent reporting leads to better decisions. Above all, create an environment where issues can be raised without fear. The most successful projects are led through sustained commitment and trust, not personalities or ego.



Image: GLA



Image: GLA



- Interchange
- Interchange
- Above-ground station
- Station in tunnel

118 km
Length of the network



SCALE AND IMPACT OF ELIZABETH LINE

London's Elizabeth line opened in 2022, almost 50 years in the making (it was first mooted in 1974, known as Crossrail) and was considered the largest transport infrastructure project in Europe.

>840 million
passengers since it opened

£ 42 billion
(US\$56.36 billion)
Estimated to generate at least this amount for the UK economy

Station highlights



Paddington Station

Open at each end to street level, the station design encourages natural light, ventilation and noise absorption.



Liverpool Street

It is the deepest of the Elizabeth line stations. During its construction, archaeologists uncovered and carefully excavated around 4,000 human skeletons below the street level, which were reburied.

Impact

71,000

New homes built were within one km of an Elizabeth line station between 2015 and 2024.

125,000

New jobs were registered within one km of an Elizabeth line station between 2022 to 2023.



Woolwich Station

Inspired by the Royal Arsenal site, the station makes reference to the military history of the surrounding area. The new station is a key part of a master plan for the area that includes 3,750 new homes and new cultural, heritage, commercial and leisure facilities.

16%

Estimated proportion of all trips using public transport that begin in Abbey Wood that would not have occurred without the Elizabeth line.

71,000

Extra trips per day are estimated to be made across London's transport network.

How to create memorable destinations?

Learning from regeneration projects like King's Cross, Bob Allies, Founding Partner, Allies and Morrison and Peter Bishop, Professor of Urban Design, The Bartlett School of Architecture, share what it takes to create engaging and thriving destinations.



King's Cross site before rejuvenation.

For places like King's Cross, what makes such places thrive?

Bob: What's remarkable about King's Cross is the range of public spaces, each with its own distinct character. People often assume these projects are about commissioning interesting buildings. They're not. Creating a great place is about the spaces in between.

A great place also needs diverse uses. It's hard to achieve, but an imaginative client willing to bring in varied institutions and activities enriches the whole place. And it must connect to its surroundings. King's Cross was deeply disconnected — from central London and from deprived residential areas on either side. Reconnecting the site to those communities was one of our most important objectives. A project like this shouldn't just work well within its boundaries; it should spread the benefits of investment to a much wider area.

What are the unique challenges of regenerating a historic area like King's Cross?

Bob: The historic elements aren't a challenge, they're an asset. At King's Cross, having extraordinary artefacts already

on site like the Granary, Coal Drops, German Gymnasium, and gas holders was a huge advantage, providing an authentic sense of place you can't manufacture from scratch.

These elements didn't just get incorporated, they shaped the plan. In a similar way, we let the pattern of the original railways generate the configuration of the new urban spaces we were creating. There's only one right angle at King's Cross; everything else follows the site's historic geometry, creating unique spaces that could only have happened here.

The development of King's Cross involved extensive stakeholder engagement. Why was this important?

Bob: King's Cross had a long and difficult history, with significant community opposition to earlier proposals. The developers and the council made a commitment from the outset to engage seriously, sharing information openly. Over a five-year period, Argent and the local planners spoke to around 30,000 people.

ABOUT KING'S CROSS

King's Cross is one of London's largest redevelopments, transforming a derelict 27-ha former rail site into a vibrant mixed-use district over 20 years, with offices, shops, restaurants, 20 new streets, and 10 public spaces. It is now London's biggest inner-city interchange, connecting six metro lines.

The 1996 decision to relocate the Channel Tunnel Rail Link to King's Cross prompted landowners to form King's Cross Central

Limited Partnership in 2000 with lead developer Argent, with institutional funding enabling a long-term focus on master planning and placemaking.

Argent conducted five years of engagement involving 30,000 people, guided by their 2001 publication "Principles for a Human City". The masterplan was developed by Allies and Morrison, Porphyrios Associates and Townshend Landscape Architects, with flexibility to adapt to changing market demands whilst ensuring a diverse mix of uses.



Granary Square. Image: Related Argent

Peter: What the engagement process gave us was phenomenal market research. The consultation helped us to better understand the subtleties, the trade-offs, the relative weight people placed on different concerns. Without the extensive engagement, we wouldn't have secured the critical support we needed, and the development would not have gone ahead.

Tell us a bit more about the masterplan and planning process for King's Cross.

Bob: The planning process involves developing the plan up to the point of making a planning application. The plan doesn't fix everything — it sets parameters such as the maximum area of any one use and the minimum area of others but retains flexibility. Individual building and landscape designs come forward subsequently and are each considered by the local authority.

Peter: Importantly, from the outset the developer, ourselves, and the council recognised this was a 20-year programme with at least two development cycles anticipated. In the end we experienced at least three. The masterplan therefore had to be flexible enough to function as a framework rather than a blueprint, providing sufficient certainty for the community and decision-makers to feel confident about what would be built, whilst giving the developer the flexibility to adapt to changing market conditions and emerging opportunities. That balance, I think, is the real secret of King's Cross.

What are lessons from regenerating places like King's Cross?

Bob: Two lessons stand out. First, anchoring King's Cross around Central Saint Martins transformed the site. 5,000 art students daily completely changed its atmosphere and energy. Today, major London schemes seek to include a university, because everyone recognises what such institutions bring. Second, scale matters in unexpected ways. The narrow lanes and tightly packed buildings at the southern end create intimacy and atmosphere. In the past, in the UK, planning orthodoxy always assumed bigger spaces are better, but you need both.

Peter: In 2001, most assumed King's Cross would be built around financial services. Basing it around an arts university seemed like madness, but it was a genius move — it marked the shift into the knowledge economy and signalled to companies like Google that this was somewhere to be.

The other lesson is about process. A year in, I thought we'd cracked it. Three years later, we were still drawing and amending. The takeaway: time invested upfront is never wasted. King's Cross will be here for 100, maybe



Image: John Sturrock

200 years, so spending an extra year getting the details right, understanding how moving a building a metre affects sunlight and how a space feels, is always worthwhile.

How has working on King's Cross shaped your broader approach to urban design?

Bob: We now try much harder to retain as much as possible of what already exists on a site — not just the significant or celebrated elements, but more ordinary ones too. We've come to recognise the value of continuity, of a place carrying traces of what it was before.

The other shift is in how we think about masterplans themselves. We prefer to describe a masterplan as a process, not a project, nor a blueprint but a process that you set in motion. You establish an initial set of rules but leave room for it to evolve.

Every decision you take triggers slight adjustments to what surrounds it. You're not trying to realise a fixed image. You're creating the conditions for something to unfold in ways that are often more interesting than anything you could have anticipated.



Bagley Walk. Image: John Sturrock

King's Cross masterplan principles



Heritage

King's Cross's 19th-century industrial heritage buildings have been retained and embedded within the masterplan's urban fabric.



Adaptability

The framework of streets, squares and parks forms the public realm, with long-lasting megablocks containing shorter-lived buildings that allow for adaptability.



Permeability

The masterplan maximises connectivity with its surroundings. Its permeability integrates King's Cross with London, enhancing its economic and social value.



Connectivity

A north-south route connecting Station Square to Regent's Canal and the area beyond is critical to King's Cross's success.



Diversity

A mix of commercial, retail, leisure, housing, arts and community uses animates the public realm and gives character to the city.



Sense of place

The masterplan encourages civility and a sense of place, featuring a series of places, each with distinct character. For example, Pancras Square and Granary Square.

Key public spaces in King's Cross



1

Pancras Square

Gateway to King's Cross, serving as a town square. It is a popular spot to pause and relax.

4

Bagley Walk and Gasholder No. 8

An elevated park on a railway viaduct, it curves along the canal towards Gasholder No. 8, the largest cast-iron gasholder at King's Cross.



Legend

- Principal public spaces
- Smaller public spaces



2

Granary Square

Home to Central Saint Martins School, this is where barges unloaded goods during the Victorian times.

3

Lewis Cubitt Square

Designed by architect Laurie Olin, who designed New York's Bryant Park, it features water jets popular with children.



Images: John Sturrock and Allies and Morrison



Aerial view of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park taken in 2024
Image: Jason Hawkes

Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park

Another significant regeneration project is the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games catalysed the major regeneration of east London's Stratford district previously made up of underutilised industrial sites and contaminated land. A decade later, the area has evolved into Queen Elizabeth Park, representing one of Europe's most ambitious urban regeneration projects led by the London Legacy Development Corporation. Today, the park is at the heart of the metropolitan centre for east London and is home to 38,400 people, attracting over 20 million visitors per year.

The Olympic and Legacy masterplans turned the post-industrial area into a valuable ecological asset — the largest park created in London in 150 years. Work began in 2003 with the masterplan developed by the EDAW Consortium (EDAW, Allies and Morrison, and Buro Happold) alongside LDA Design and Hargreaves Associates. A key aspect was creating a complex network of connections across the valley, including new bridges, which provided the framework for the post-Games legacy development. The River Lea offered London's first continuous footpath and cycle path linking the city with its rural hinterland.

The park's success has depended on constructing numerous bridges to accommodate large crowds during the Games that have permanently integrated the site into the city's fabric.

Power of partnerships

Lizzie Smith, Co-Chair, London Anchor Institutions’ Network (LAIN), believes strong, cross-sector partnerships are no longer a luxury but a necessity to make systemic changes for communities to thrive.

ABOUT LAIN

A collaborative formed in 2021 in London bringing together around 30 of the city’s largest organisations (public, health, education, and private sectors) to tackle social, economic, and environmental inequalities to create a fairer, greener, and more prosperous city.

What LAIN does

- Advocates for inclusive employment
- Drives inclusive growth for local businesses

- Tackles climate change through training
- Creates more opportunities for youths

Impact so far

- More than £3.4 billion (US\$4.56 billion) in contracts for small, diverse businesses
- Pay uplifts for over 11,000
- Trained over 15,600 on climate literacy
- Over £25 million (US\$33.56 million) invested in training opportunities

How did LAIN come about?

Lizzie: Born out of the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid bare London’s deep inequalities, this initiative brought together some of the city’s largest institutions under the Mayor of London, Sir Sadiq Khan. Recognising that existing approaches were insufficient, these anchor institutions pledged to use their procurement, workforce, and estate management capacity to support London’s recovery and build a fairer, greener, healthier, and more prosperous city, pioneering a new collaborative model that balances London’s global ambitions with its responsibilities to local communities.

What makes LAIN effective in leading change?

Lizzie: LAIN represents organisations across the public, private, faith-based, education and cultural sectors. Collectively, members employ tens of thousands of people, spend billions of pounds a year and manage millions of square metres of real estate. Leveraging this collective power, the network helps build a better London for all, creating the social, economic and environmental conditions that organisations themselves need to flourish, from a greater talent pool to more resilient supply chains and thriving local economies.

Five years in, the results speak for themselves. Members have awarded more than £3.4 billion (US\$4.56 billion) in contracts to small and diverse businesses; transferred over £25 million (US\$33.56 million) of unspent apprenticeship levy to increase training opportunities; delivered pay uplifts to over 11,000 Londoners through the London Living Wage; trained over 15,600 employees in sustainability and climate literacy; and saved over 311,000 tonnes of CO2e — equivalent to removing 70,000 cars from the road each year.

How do you foster true collaboration amongst diverse organisations?

Lizzie: Through dedicated working groups, members share knowledge and take action to support inclusive employment, drive inclusive economic growth, tackle the climate emergency and improve life chances for young Londoners. This involves setting targets, sharing best practice, collaborating on joint projects and tracking impact.

Collaborative initiatives have included a supply chain mentoring programme for small businesses, joint market engagement events for diverse-led businesses, Curious about Climate — an online training course improving climate literacy across thousands of staff — and joint guidance on workforce disability data to help members close their disability pay gaps.

What are the biggest challenges ahead?

Lizzie: The rise of AI holds transformative potential but will fundamentally change the nature of work, displacing many entry-level roles. Climate resilience is increasingly urgent, with wildfires, heatwaves and flooding already stretching resources. Misinformation and divisive narratives demand that anchors actively champion equality, diversity and inclusion.

And growing financial pressures across health, policing, education and other sectors make partnership not a luxury but a necessity. Working together is the only way to effect system-wide change at the scale required.

How do you see the network evolving?

Lizzie: London is one of the greatest cities on earth, brimming with talent, creativity and opportunity. But like any global city, it faces complex challenges, from health and economic inequalities to a rapidly changing climate. Tackling these requires everyone pulling in the same direction, deliberately focusing resources on shared goals. That is why LAIN has adopted a missions-based approach, building deep and wide partnerships as the new business-as-usual.

As the network looks to its next chapter, it remains committed to leading with conviction that anchor ways of working are the future, heartened by new organisations joining, new initiatives coming forward, and impact that continues to grow.



Metropolitan Police Officer volunteer mentor sharing career insights with young Londoners. Image: Metropolitan Police Service



London’s zero emissions bus network is the largest in electric fleet in western Europe. Image: Transport for London



LAIN members have committed to spending up to 30 per cent of their annual procurement budgets with small and diverse led businesses. Image: LAIN

Reinventing world’s leading financial district

The Square Mile never stands still. Chris Hayward, Chair of Policy and Resources at the City of London Corporation, shares how the world’s leading financial district is reinventing itself for the way people live, work and play today and tomorrow.

The City of London or the Square Mile is London’s historic financial heart. It is the ancient core from which the rest of London developed. What makes it truly unique is its scale and intensity. In just 2.9 sqkm, 8,600 residents and 678,000 workers share a district that draws millions. The City of London Corporation has managed the Square Mile for over 1,000 years, serving as the world’s oldest continuous municipal government.

What makes the Square Mile unique and how is it evolving to embrace shifts in live-work-play lifestyles?

Chris: What really sets the Square Mile apart is that you can feel its history and future at the same time. Founded by the Romans, this is London’s oldest neighbourhood, a place of invention and reinvention for more than 1,000 years. It’s also unique in how it’s governed, with a voting system that allows workers and residents to shape how the Square Mile is run, giving the City a very distinctive character.

Our growth strategy, Destination City, builds on this rich history, making the Square Mile a globally competitive destination that attracts the next generation of talent and creates a place where people genuinely want to spend time in.

What is the significance of the City Plan 2040 in shaping the Square Mile?

Chris: The City Plan 2040 is the blueprint for how the Square Mile grows over the next 15 years, guiding every major planning decision. The City is expanding at a record pace, with a deep pipeline of world-class, sustainable office space alongside some of the UK’s most famous heritage landmarks. Vacancy rates are incredibly low, so the plan’s ambition to deliver at least 1.2 million sqm of new Grade A floorspace is essential for UK’s economic prosperity.

In 2025, the City hit a 10-year high for planning applications received and decided — a clear signal of global demand for premium space. And while the City is a business district, the plan is clear that growth shouldn’t come at the expense of character.

How are you making the City attractive for diverse groups seven days a week?

Chris: Footfall data shows visits to the Square Mile are up around nine per cent year-on-year, reflecting the City’s growing appeal beyond the traditional working day. Inclusion is a big part of that. The City Belonging Project strengthens links between different communities and diversity networks, while the Destination City Partnership Fund supports a wide range of initiatives with grants of up to £20,000 (US\$26,840).

Culture also plays a major role. The City is one of the UK’s biggest funders of cultural activity, home to globally recognised institutions including the Barbican Centre and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Add nearly 1,000 licensed premises, over 200 venues with outdoor seating, and around 180 gardens and open spaces, and you can see how the City is genuinely becoming a seven-day destination.

How has hybrid working influenced office demand and infrastructure for the future?

Chris: Many thought hybrid working would hollow out the City, but employment has grown 25 per cent since the COVID-19 pandemic. Offices aren’t going away. Demand has simply shifted decisively towards quality over quantity. Occupiers are consolidating into smaller spaces, but they want best-in-class buildings with flexible layouts, strong sustainability credentials and great amenities.

Our response has focused on what businesses and workers value most: wellbeing, continuous learning

and a sense of purpose. The City offers unparalleled access to world-class institutions such as Bayes Business School, London School of Economics and Political Science and University College London, and nearly all offices are within a five-minute walk of major transport links. The fundamentals remain intact; what’s different is that success to 2040 depends on treating the City as a destination as well as a workplace.

Why is investment in public realm important, and how are developers contributing?

Chris: Public spaces are central to the City’s vibrancy. The Corporation manages around 180 parks, gardens and churchyards — green sanctuaries in the heart of a dense city, many created from sites damaged by the 1666 Great Fire or the 1940-1941 Blitz.

At Greyfriars Square, a £19 million (US\$ 25.5 million) project is transforming St Paul’s gyratory, converting almost 1,500 sqm of road into new pavements and creating a 3,000 sqm pedestrianised public square. Developers are playing a growing role too. Through planning, we’re securing world-class publicly accessible spaces such as Horizon 22 (London’s highest free viewing platform), and The Garden at 120 (free publicly accessible rooftop garden), which together have attracted nearly 50 million visits since opening.

What makes the Square Mile successful and what can others learn?

Chris: One of the City’s greatest strengths is the agglomeration of world-defining organisations within a very small area, from the Bank of England to the Inns of Court, the Old Bailey, Guildhall, St Paul’s and the Barbican.



That closeness creates daily interaction between decision-makers, regulators, courts, markets and culture in a way very few places can replicate.

People are another huge part of the story. The City has one of the youngest, most international and highly skilled workforces in the UK. That depth of skills allows firms to innovate, adapt quickly and compete globally. The Square Mile also has the highest public transport accessibility rating in London. Combined with the UK’s time zone and English as the global business language, it’s clear why the Square Mile has retained its status as the world’s financial capital.

Which other city centres can the Square Mile learn from?

Chris: Internationally, we look to New York’s Hudson Yards and Japan’s close public-private collaboration for inspiration, while closer to home, King’s Cross and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park show how anchor institutions, quality public realm and strong connectivity can create thriving mixed-use districts.

The lesson is one the Square Mile knows well: long-term thinking and purposeful urban transformation are what make great cities endure.



Before (left: 2016) and after (above: 2026) showing the City of London. Images: City of London/GMJ

London's other major initiatives at a glance

World's largest clean air zone

With air pollution being a silent killer for many cities, London's Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) is reflecting a fundamental shift in prioritising public health and creating cleaner environments. It is the world's largest clean air zone, covering Greater London's 1,580 sqkm and nine million residents. Operating 24/7 except Christmas Day, it enforces strict emissions standards with 97 per cent

of cars now compliant, up from 39 per cent pre-ULEZ.

Introduced in 2019 and expanded in 2021 and 2023, the initiative has reduced nitrogen dioxide levels by over 50 per cent in some areas. Complementing the ULEZ, London has also expanded its cycling infrastructure and bus network whilst introducing electric buses and taxis.

Images and data: GLA



- 2019: Ultra Low Emission Zone introduced to inner London
- 2021: Expand to 23 boroughs
- 2023: Expand to outer London
- Area outside the ULEZ boundary (Greater London)
- Borough/County boundary



1,580
sqkm

Largest geographic coverage
32 boroughs, City of London



365
days a year
(Except Christmas Day)



97%
vehicle compliance



3,700
cameras
monitor pollution
in 150 locations



54%
lower NO₂ levels
in central London



Free meals for Primary school children

Launched in 2023 in response to rising living costs, the Universal Free Meal initiative supported 1,790 London state primary schools for a year, drawing on £130 million (US\$174 million) in emergency funding and saving eligible families up to £500 per child annually. Early impacts have been significant: 84 per cent of parents surveyed reported improved household finances, 55 per cent said their child was trying new foods, and over 33 per cent felt the initiative contributed to a calmer, more productive school environment.



Pedestrianising Oxford Street

London is pedestrianising a core stretch of Oxford Street, its busiest shopping street, as announced in 2026. Led by the Oxford Street Development Corporation and backed by strong public and business support, with 6,600 responses to the 2024 consultation, key improvements include trees, greenery, and seating. The area will also feature public art, street performances, and cultural and commercial events, reflecting London's diversity and making it a destination for all.

As a pocket-sized metropolis with big city ideas that punches above its weight, Antwerp navigates the complexities of balancing Europe's second-largest port with urban liveability for more than 560,000 residents.

Its governance framework is grounded in long-term planning and sustained coordination, effectively converting infrastructure barriers into community connectors through

visionary planning and collaborative governance. The ongoing progress of The Big Link project, alongside comprehensive climate adaptation initiatives, reflects Antwerp's ability to implement major projects across political cycles while maintaining strong citizen buy-in and achieving visible improvements to both environmental performance and quality of life.

2026 SPECIAL MENTION

ANTWERP

Image: SKYVISION

Focus on the long game

Antwerp Mayor Els Van Doesburg believes thinking long-term, investing in building trust and working across boundaries is key to building resilient communities and making transformative changes.

How has Antwerp's governance model enabled the city to make impactful changes?

Els: Antwerp's governance model is characterised by long-term vision, political continuity and strong cross-sector collaboration. Over decades, the city has consistently invested in strategic planning, allowing successive administrations to build on shared objectives rather than short-term gains.

This continuity has enabled Antwerp to undertake transformative projects such as The Big Link, which reconnects neighbourhoods, improves mobility and strengthens climate resilience. This strong governance is reinforced by close cooperation between the city, the port, regional authorities, academia and civil society, ensuring that ambition is matched with delivery.

How are citizens contributing to shaping the city's solutions?

Els: Citizen engagement is central to Antwerp's approach. Major urban projects are shaped through early, transparent and continuous dialogue with residents, neighbourhood



Scheldt Quay. Image: Sigrid Spinnox

organisations and stakeholders. Participation is not treated as a formality, but as a way to improve plans and build shared ownership.

Through smart and innovative urban development, we are meeting climate, mobility and liveability challenges head on while reconnecting neighbourhoods and strengthening community ties within one of the world's most diverse populations. The Big Link will lay the foundation for a resilient, future-proof city that will echo its rich heritage for generations to come.

By involving citizens in co-creation processes, we ensure that large-scale transformations reflect local needs and aspirations, turning ambitious plans into widely supported collective projects.



One of Antwerp's engagements with its citizens. Image: Frederik Beyens

Mayor Els Van Doesburg. Image: City of Antwerp



Antwerp's green quarter. Image: Matexi

Antwerp is an innovation powerhouse — how does the city encourage creativity?

Els: We have a long history dating back to Roman times. Along with its port, the city historically grew into the economic powerhouse of the nation — and even Europe. The profound transformative process that is currently taking place in Antwerp, will catalyse further progress and prosperity for the wider region and reinforce the city's position as a crucial hub within Europe.

We actively foster innovation by creating space for experimentation, supporting start-ups, and connecting creative talent with public challenges. The city leverages its strong ecosystem of universities, research institutions, cultural organisations and entrepreneurs to pilot new solutions in areas such as mobility, climate adaptation, health and digitalisation.

Flagship projects and living labs allow ideas to be tested in real urban settings, while partnerships with the port and private sector help scale successful innovations. This open, collaborative innovation culture ensures that creativity is translated into tangible impact for residents and businesses alike.

How do you manage diverse communities while ensuring inclusive growth across neighbourhoods?

Els: Diversity is one of our greatest strengths. The city's policies focus on inclusive growth, ensuring that every neighbourhood benefits from urban transformation. Investments in public space, education, health, housing and mobility are deliberately spread across the city, with extra attention to vulnerable areas.

By combining social policies with spatial planning, we work to reduce inequality while strengthening social cohesion. Community organisations and local actors play a key role in tailoring solutions to neighbourhood realities, ensuring that diversity translates into resilience rather than division.

What advice would you give to other city leaders on building resilient communities?

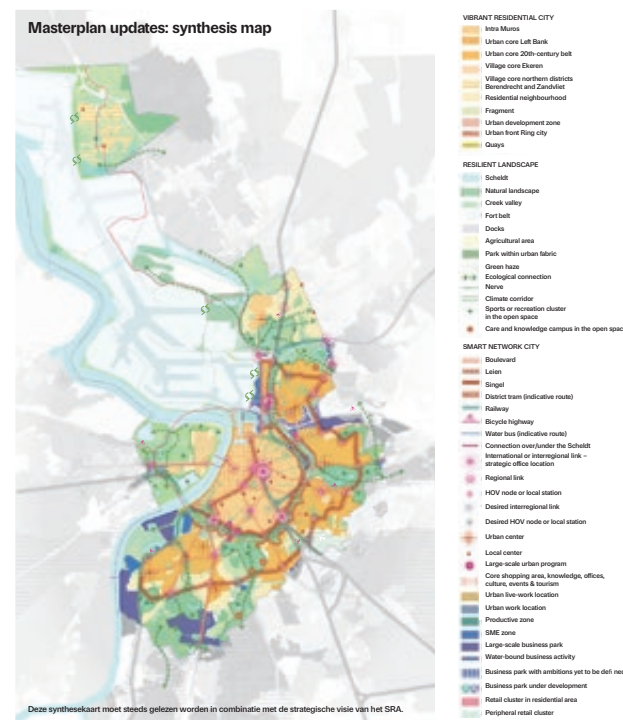
Els: Our experience shows the importance of thinking long-term, investing in trust, and working across boundaries. City leaders should dare to set ambitious goals but also take the time to build partnerships with citizens, neighbouring governments, academia and the private sector.

Resilience is not achieved through infrastructure alone, but through strong communities that feel involved and empowered. Transparency, inclusiveness and consistency are essential ingredients for turning bold visions into lasting progress.

What is your key focus for Antwerp in the next 5 to 10 years?

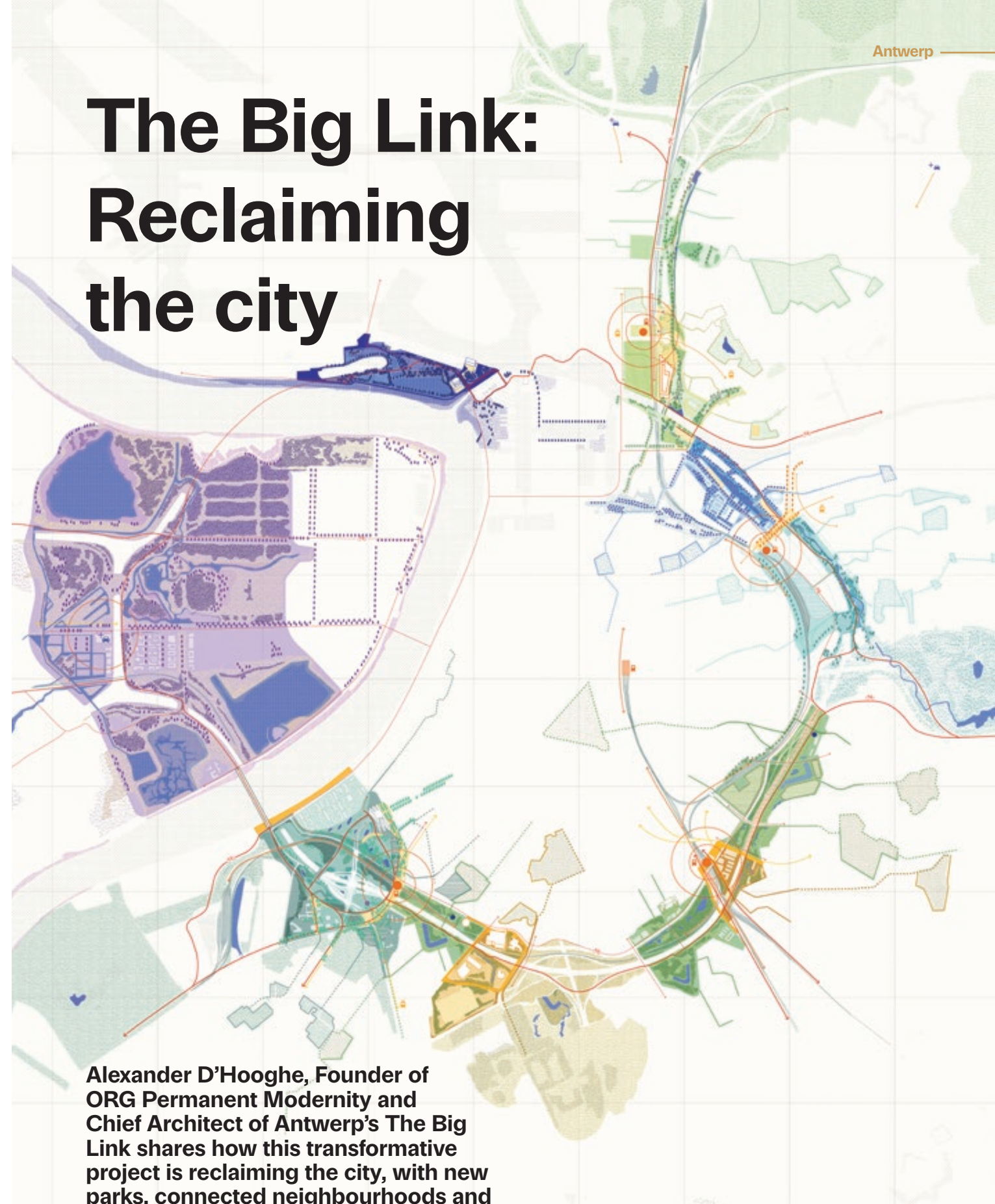
Els: Looking ahead, Antwerp's ambition is to further strengthen its role as a climate-resilient, inclusive and innovative European city. The coming years will focus on completing major transformative projects such as The Big Link, accelerating the transition to climate neutrality, and ensuring high quality of life across all neighbourhoods.

Building on our historic role as an economic and logistical hub, we aim to remain open, connected and forward-looking — honouring our heritage while shaping a sustainable future for generations to come.



Antwerp's spatial plan 2040. Image: City of Antwerp

The Big Link: Reclaiming the city



Alexander D'Hooghe, Founder of ORG Permanent Modernity and Chief Architect of Antwerp's The Big Link shares how this transformative project is reclaiming the city, with new parks, connected neighbourhoods and cleaner ways to move.

Map showing The Big Link. Image: ORG

The Big Link is Europe’s most complex urban infrastructure transformation. It is a 10.4-km highway overhaul spanning four underground and four above-ground levels within dense urban fabric. It combines massive highway reconstruction with new parkland, targeting 30 to 40 per cent air pollution reduction and a 10-decibel noise reduction by 2030, fundamentally rewiring the city for more sustainable mobility.

What was the key vision behind the The Big Link?

Alexander: Antwerp’s Ring Road, the busiest in heavily populated region Flanders, was an incomplete loop unable to keep pace with the city’s growth and port traffic, generating daily congestion that choked commuters and freight alike. Surrounding neighbourhoods, blighted by noise and pollution, had turned inward, leaving valuable urban land neglected and inaccessible.

Simply removing the highway was never realistic given the port’s economic significance. Instead, we conceived a solution that accepts the infrastructure’s necessity while radically changing its relationship with the city, burying much of the Ring underground and covering it with parks, public spaces, ecological corridors and new tramways to stitch the city back together.

Spanning 12 lanes and 17 km, this is a city-wide system change. But the vision was always about more than traffic. A central ambition was to right historical wrongs done to Antwerp’s northeastern quadrant, whose residents were made to absorb the infrastructure nobody else wanted. Construction is now underway to give that area the city’s largest parks, with a clear focus on urban health, reducing noise and pollution and improving daily life.

The Big Link adopted an innovative participatory approach. Tell us more.

Alexander: Our superintendent’s team developed an intensive co-creation process bringing together government entities, civic action committees, designers, engineers and businesses, using tools including charrettes, workbench

sessions, Ring days and sounding boards. The result is rare: polls consistently show around 80 per cent public support for a massive construction project.

This is largely explained by the project’s history — a 20-year stalemate between the Flemish government and Antwerp’s citizens over an earlier version. Rebuilding that trust required a genuinely transparent, co-creative process, and that investment has made all the difference.

What two challenges did you encounter and how did you overcome these?

Alexander: The first is the knowledge problem. A project like this brings together experts from many disciplines, and even a single shared word can mean entirely different things across fields.

Investing early in a common language is essential and becomes even more so when an engaged citizenry is part of the conversation. Getting this right turns potential confusion into genuine strength: integrated thinking across disciplines.

The second is the game-theory problem. Many actors hold enough influence to block progress, yet none can guarantee a project’s realisation alone. We came to see this as an invitation to build broader coalitions and deeper legitimacy. A project genuinely negotiated across a fragmented power landscape tends to be far more durable than one imposed from above.

What were the core design principles guiding The Big Link?

Alexander: They are enshrined in our Covenant for the Future of the Antwerp Region, now almost ten years old. Five commitments sit at its heart:

- Completing the Ring so traffic flows around rather than through the city
- Creating a northern bypass for heavy freight
- Achieving a 50/50 modal shift so half of all regional journeys are made by means other than private car
- Maximising the capping of the Ring to reclaim surface land
- Committing to an inclusive, co-creative process, ensuring those most affected are genuine partners in shaping the outcome

What were the key innovative approaches developed for The Big Link?

Alexander: The foundational insight was that a large urban infrastructure project is above all a social contract.

Everything followed from that. The most significant innovation was the superintendent. It is a role created to oversee the project in its entirety, above the usual technocratic governance structures, ensuring that design, planning, stakeholder engagement and political negotiation all pull in the same direction.

Another replicable approach are investment catalogues we developed: rapidly developing dozens of options for public comparison, rather than exhaustive work on a handful of solutions. The public interest is better served by breadth and transparency than by depth on a few pre-selected choices. This approach led us to develop computational tools and ultimately spin out Solv, an AI-backed platform for stakeholder management on complex projects.



The Big Link showing mobility (above) and flora and fauna (below) layers. Images: ORG



How will The Big Link impact on Antwerp residents’ lives?

Alexander: Antwerp will become healthier, more connected, and more liveable. The Big Link is not only about moving traffic more efficiently — it is fundamentally about allowing people to move, meet, and live differently across the city.

Neighbourhoods severed by highway infrastructure will be reunited with the rest of the city, gaining access to green space, cleaner air, and a renewed sense of belonging. The northeastern quadrant in particular — long burdened with unwanted infrastructure — will be transformed, with new parks, ecological corridors and public spaces replacing what was once a grey and hostile barrier.

New tramway and cycling connections will give residents genuine alternatives to the private car, making movement quieter, cleaner and more pleasant for everyone, including children, older residents, and those with limited mobility.

What advice would you give to other city leaders on garnering support for transformative infrastructure projects?

Alexander: Treat stakeholder alignment as a core part of the design process, not a communication exercise that follows decisions already made. Bring people in early and make their involvement genuine. Trust is only built when citizens can see that their input shapes outcomes.

Invest in tools that let you generate and compare multiple options quickly, so deliberation is meaningful rather than performative. Appoint a superintendent-type figure to hold the long-term vision above day-to-day technical and political pressures, and bridge design and policy deliberately. The best decisions emerge when spatial designers and policymakers work in the same room.

Finally, treat the governance process as infrastructure. How decisions are made, how conflicts are resolved, how progress is communicated — all this matters as much as the physical design. Sustained support is earned incrementally, by showing at every stage that each step is building toward a future people recognise as their own.

Some highlights of The Big Link

61

As of 2022, the number of hours motorists spend on average stuck in traffic in Antwerp's Ring Road annually.

2017

The year the "Covenant for the Future" was signed by the Flemish Government, City of Antwerp and various civil groups to move ahead with the The Big Link.

9 km

Length of new bike and pedestrian paths that will be developed.

2,100 m

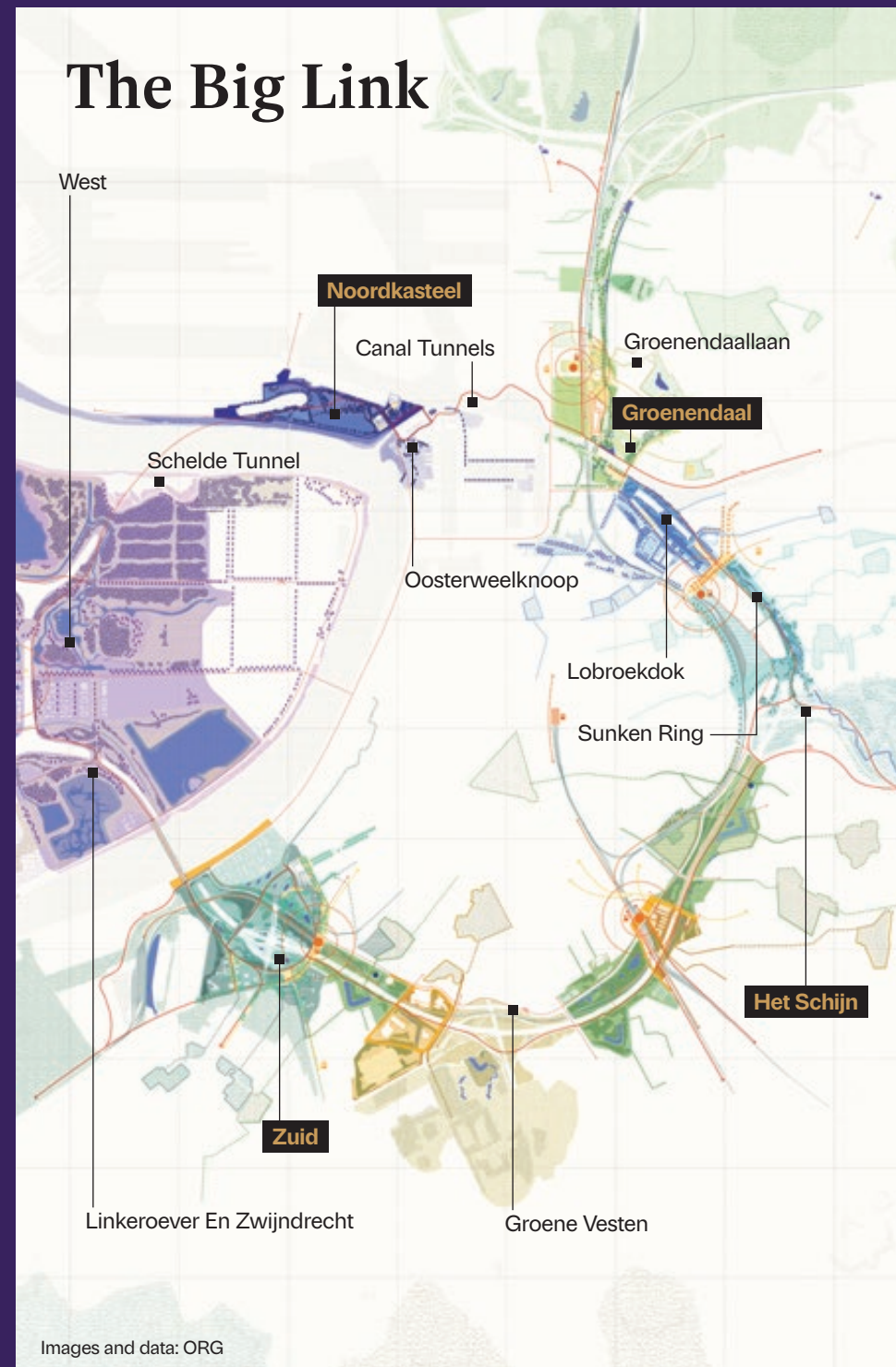
of the Ring Road that will be completely sunken underground.

1.2 million

Population in the city-region that will benefit from The Big Link.

From highway to green spine

The Big Link transforms Antwerp's Ring Road into a green spine reconnecting city, suburbs and nature. Capped highway sections give way to green corridors, public spaces and multimodal hubs where bikes, buses, trains and foot traffic converge. Densely programmed "green nerves" cluster amenities, culture, and greenery at key locations along the route.



Noordkasteel

Ringpark Noordkasteel builds on a layered polder and fortification landscape where wet and dry systems, port, city, nature, and heritage converge, shaped by the Oosterweel Tunnel. The park forms a strategic transition between the Scheldt, the port, and the city, weaving quays, park roads, water, and river into one coherent ecological and urban whole.



Groenendaal

Ringpark Groenendaal is an urban park above and alongside the ring infrastructure that connects Luchtbal and Merksem and forms an open transition to the Albert Canal. With the Metropolitan Green as a counterbalance to the urban greenhouse, complemented by natural gardens and active urban edges, the park creates a coherent structure for city life, neighbourhood use, and ecology.



Zuid

The transformation of Knoop Zuid compacts the motorway and creates large, legible zones between the city and infrastructure, enabling new urban uses. At the same time, an extensive cycling network acts as an active "alternative motorway," providing both physical separation and connectivity while structuring and shaping the experience of the area.



Het Schijn

Ringpark Het Schijn is a water park defined by the River Schijn, reshaped into a valley with widened banks, relocated meanders, side streams, and islands. Functional paths, active entrance squares, and neighbourhood facilities complement a strengthened cross-connection between Deurne and Borgerhout via the Hof ter Lo cover.

Building water resilience

Lien Engels (Project Manager Water) of the City of Antwerp and Samuel Van de Vijver (Advisor Deltalab) share how the city is embracing its aquatic heritage to create a cooler, greener and more resilient city.

What is the vision behind Antwerp's Water Plan?

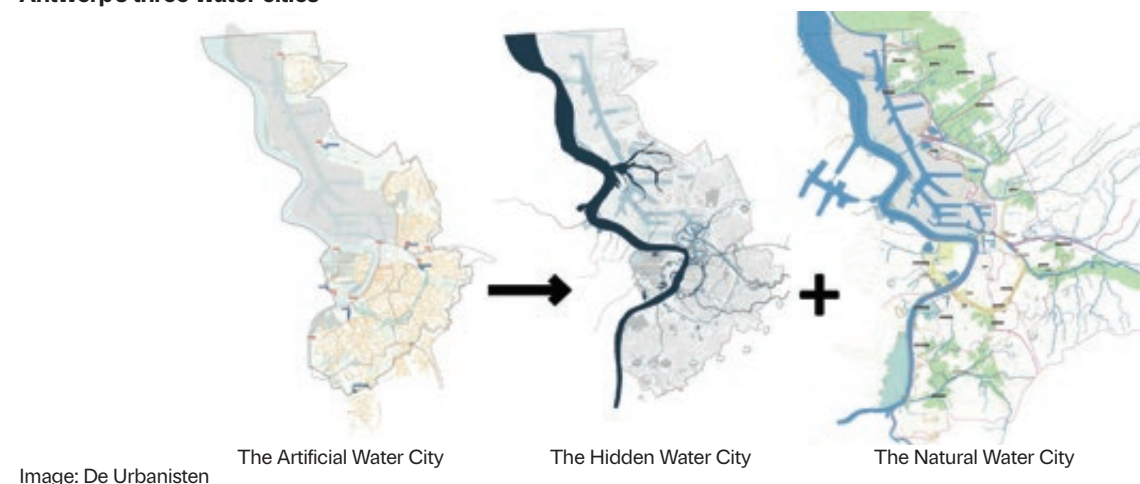
Lien and Samuel: Antwerp is historically a water city. The River Scheldt and smaller waterways shaped the city for centuries, but over the 20th century water gradually disappeared from the urban landscape. Ponds dried up, streams were culverted, and in some places, street names remain the only traces of our rich aquatic heritage.

Climate pressures are now mounting. Extreme rainfall causes flooding, prolonged droughts threaten groundwater, and heat stress makes the city uncomfortable during warm summers. The existing sewer network can no longer cope.

The Water Plan seeks is to transform Antwerp into a water-sensitive city — receptive to heavy rainfall, resilient in drought, cooling in summer, and sustainable in its freshwater management. It has three "water cities": the Hidden Water City of vanished historical infrastructure, the Artificial Water City of existing sewers and pumping systems, and the Natural Water City of blue-green networks and stream valleys.

The plan strikes a new balance between these three, in which the latter reclaims a more prominent role, supported by a city-wide vision map, a toolbox of 60 water-sensitive measures, and a concrete action plan built on shared responsibility between government, citizens, and private stakeholders.

Antwerp's three water cities



What is the scale of the Water Plan and key groups involved?

Lien and Samuel: Commissioned in early 2018 and completed by summer 2019, the plan was developed at pace through an intensive parallel process of analysis, design, and participation.

A consortium of three firms led the work: design office De Urbanisten, hydrologists Witteveen+Bos, and participation agency Common Ground, whose involvement from the outset was a requirement, not an afterthought.

Municipal departments, sewer operator Water-Link, wastewater company Aquafin, the Province of Antwerp, and the Flemish Environment Agency played a role. At least 150 individuals contributed through workshops, advisory groups, and political consultations.

What were the most significant technical challenges?

Lien and Samuel: The greatest technical challenge was integrating spatial design with hydrological modelling, two disciplines that traditionally operate in parallel. A concrete example arose in Deurne and Borgerhout, where project boundaries did not align with the underlying hydrological catchment. This had direct implications for how measures were designed and financed, since water challenges that cross municipal boundaries require financing that can do the same.



Antwerp's density also left little physical space for water. Solutions common in suburban contexts — large swales, broad water features, flood zones — simply do not apply here. This drove inventiveness: blue roofs, underground buffers, permeable paving, and collective rainwater storage integrated into street furniture. The toolbox of 60 measures is the direct result of this design-driven search for solutions within tight urban constraints.

What obstacles arose in coordinating across districts and stakeholders?

Lien and Samuel: Institutional fragmentation was the greatest obstacle. Water management touches dozens of authorities and organisations, each with its own agenda, budget cycle, and legal framework.

One telling example involved the historic Ruien, the underground network of medieval waterways beneath the city centre. From a hydrological perspective, this system holds enormous potential as a water buffer. For heritage experts, the idea of a culturally significant monument serving a functional infrastructure role was difficult to accept. By bringing both groups together to gather and understand the facts rather than to debate, a shared vision ultimately emerged.

How does the Water Plan improve daily life beyond flood protection?

Lien and Samuel: Water is deployed as a lever for improving the city across multiple dimensions. The Garden Streets are the most visible expression of this. In the Lange Ridderstraat, basement flooding is a thing of the past, sewer pressure has been significantly reduced, and residents describe the street as simply a nicer place to live, one that is greener, cooler, quieter.

Water squares such as the De Wapper, a pedestrian square, combine temporary water buffering with social meeting places and play fountains. In neighbourhoods where public space is scarce, this carries tangible health benefits, both physical and mental. Residents involved in designing their street report stronger ownership over public spaces, and neighbours who met through workshops describe climate adaptation as a catalyst for social cohesion.

What lessons does Antwerp offer?

Lien and Samuel: Start by understanding your own water system, where water comes from, where it wants to go, and what historical structures remain beneath the surface. Make the problem visible, but also the potential: abstract models rarely persuade, while accessible maps and compelling narratives mobilise political will.

Integrate design and hydrology from the very beginning rather than bringing designers in after engineers have fixed their solutions.

Involve stakeholders early, but at the right moment — too late entrenches positions, too early creates confusion. And think in cascades and systems: a rainwater cascade from rooftop to garden to street to neighbourhood buffer to stream valley is more resilient than any single large pipe.



Engineering and design go hand in hand to create added value: the same water challenge can be addressed in different ways, each responding to specific needs such as greening the neighbourhood or providing play space. Image: De Urbanisten

Antwerp's other initiatives at a glance

Scheldt Quays

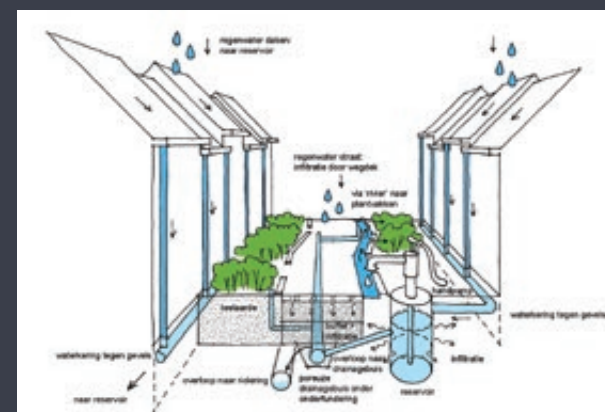
The revitalisation of Scheldt Quays reconnected the city with the river and created valuable public spaces within the densely populated inner areas, promoting community well-being and social cohesion. Specific projects like Droogdokkenpark and improved active modes enhance connectivity and offer scenic views of the Scheldt, while the project also catalyses sustainable urban development in the form of Nieuw Zuid, featuring energy-efficient buildings, a heat network, car-free streets, innovative water management, and community engagement for a sustainable living environment.



Image: Sigrid Spinno



Lange Ridderstraat Garden Street. Image: Jeroren Broeckx



Water management system for Garden Streets.
Image: Stad Antwerpen

Garden Streets

Initiated in 2017, Antwerp's Garden Street initiative seeks to redesign streets to reduce asphalt and increase permeability, incorporating planting beds, trees, and rain-water retention systems to maximise infiltration of water on site. The transformation process involves close collaboration with residents. Residents are responsible for maintaining 80 per cent of the greenery, fostering a strong sense of community ownership. The design integrates walking, cycling, limited car traffic, and gardening into one space.

2026 SPECIAL MENTION

BUDAPEST

Budapest shows that meaningful urban transformation can be achieved even with limited resources. As a historic European capital of over 1.7 million residents, Budapest has optimised strategic innovation, tactical urbanism, and community-centred planning to achieve urban transformation, despite limited financial means and decision-making authority.

The city's achievements in integrating transport systems both physically and digitally, alongside its success in creating vibrant public spaces and adopting the Healthy Streets programme, reflect strong creativity and a commitment to improving liveability for all citizens.

Image: Municipality of Budapest

Living better

Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony on building a city where people don't just live longer, but live better.



The Chain Bridge. Image: Municipality of Budapest

Having done considerable infrastructure improvements, what are some of Budapest's impactful projects?

Gergely: Major infrastructure developments are rarely tied to a single electoral cycle. They are the result of long-term planning spanning multiple administrations. Projects completed before my term, such as Metro Line 4 and the Central Wastewater Treatment Plant, already set a strong foundation by improving the city's environmental performance and mobility.

During my previous term, the renovation of the Chain Bridge was among the most emblematic projects, not simply a technical upgrade, but an opportunity to rethink how this central artery functions, prioritising pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport over private cars. A similar philosophy guided the opening of the Rakpart to pedestrians and cyclists since 2021, and the renewal of squares such as Széll Kálmán and Blaha Lujza into modern, accessible hubs.

The common thread is a shift from cars to people, from grey infrastructure to liveable spaces, and from short-term fixes to long-term sustainability.

Mayor Gergely Karácsony. Image: Municipality of Budapest

What are key public transportation improvements?

Gergely: Budapest has one of the strongest public transport cultures among European capitals, and maintaining this standard requires continuous development.

We have focused on renewing our fleet with modern electric buses and fully accessible trams. These are investments that are not only about comfort, but about dignity and equal access for elderly passengers, people with disabilities, and families with children.

Metro Line 4 connected South Buda with Pest and catalysed urban regeneration along its route. The full renovation of Metro Line 3, including the installation of inclined lifts, has made Hungary's most heavily used rail line fully accessible.

Building on the success of the Buda Interconnected Tram Network, we are preparing further developments on the Pest side and in other parts of Budapest, complemented by the BudapestGO app and the third generation of the MOL Bubi bike-sharing system.

These improvements are about creating a city where moving around is predictable, affordable, and environmentally responsible and where public transport is not just an option, but the natural choice.





Danube opened for swimming in 2025. Image: Municipality of Budapest

What are important priorities Budapest is focusing on in creating a more sustainable and resilient environment?

Gergely: Sustainable transition is no longer an abstract goal. It is a daily reality. We are introducing rain gardens and climate-adaptive landscaping to retain water, support biodiversity, and reduce the urban heat island effect, visible in projects such as Pünkösdfürdő Park and the ecological restoration of the Mocsáros Nature Reserve. Our Healthy Streets Programme goes further, redesigning streets with more greenery and permeable surfaces that make a real difference during extreme heat.

One key milestone is improving water quality of the Danube. After decades of effort, the river has reached a level of cleanliness that allows safe bathing again. We opened our first designated free-swimming areas in 2025. This is not just an environmental achievement, but a powerful reminder that cities can repair their relationship with nature.

Budapest has a co-creative governance model for citizens to shape the city.

Gergely: When I became Mayor in 2019, one of my clear commitments was to govern in partnership with residents. Our participatory budgeting programme allocates around one billion HUF (US\$3 million) annually for projects proposed and selected directly by residents, building trust

and giving people a tangible sense that they can shape their own city.

Citizens' assemblies bring together diverse groups to deliberate on complex challenges, creating space for thoughtful dialogue in an era of polarised public discourse. Thematic working groups at City Hall regularly consult non-government groups and professional communities, ensuring decisions are grounded in real expertise and lived experience.

What are your priorities for Budapest's continued transformation?

Gergely: My most important commitment is to increase the life expectancy of Budapest's residents by five years. It may sound unusual to frame urban policy in these terms, but everything we do — from transport to housing, from green spaces to social services — ultimately shapes how long and how well people live.

This means investing in green and accessible public spaces, strengthening public transport, tackling housing challenges, and reducing social inequalities. But it also means something less tangible: building a city where people feel they belong, where they trust each other and their institutions, and where public spaces are truly public.



Reimagining urban mobility

As one of the few cities operating metro, tram and trolleybus systems, Ádám Bodor, Mobility Development Director, Centre for Budapest Transport, shares how Budapest is creating more seamless mobility for people.

Image: Municipality of Budapest

What are Budapest’s biggest challenges in ensuring seamless connection between trams, buses, cycling and pedestrian networks?

Ádám: Budapest ranks among the world’s leading cities in public transport density and ridership, and is one of few cities globally operating metro, tram, and trolleybus systems in parallel. Walking and cycling have traditionally been important parts of the mobility mix, though their appeal has declined with the growth of car use.

Maintaining a liveable city requires safeguarding public transport performance while growing the share of walking and cycling. Where urban space is limited, this means reallocating street space from car lanes and parking to expand tram networks, establish bus lanes, improve cycling infrastructure, and create wider, greener pavements, a careful but continuous balancing act, particularly in historic areas.

The most pressing challenge is the rapid growth of suburban areas, where longer travel distances and limited rail access push residents towards private cars, generating growing congestion pressures.

What are the most important strategies and factors that have shaped your mobility integration efforts so far?

Ádám: Budapest’s approach is guided by the Budapest Mobility Plan, prioritising public transport, walking, cycling, climate neutrality, and social inclusion.

Key factors include:

- **Better physical connections**, including tram-based corridor developments as the backbone of urban mobility, human-centred public spaces for walking, and cycle highways supporting longer urban trips.
- **Vehicle renewal and electrification**, including new tram fleets and the ongoing introduction of electric buses and trolleybuses.
- **Improved services through digitalisation and Mobility-as-a-Service**, such as the BudapestGO application and a new electronic ticketing system.
- **More effective institutional frameworks**, including stronger oversight of contracted transport services, closer coordination between transport planning and urban development, and improved parking policies.

What has been the major impact of the BudapestGO integrated app on people’s lives?

Ádám: BudapestGO has become the city’s central digital mobility platform, used by more than one million people each month. It simplifies everyday travel by integrating real-time route planning, service information and digital ticketing into a single interface.

The app reduces uncertainty, improves coordination between transfers across different modes and lowers access barriers, supporting more seamless and stress-free mobility for both regular and occasional users.

Tell us more about the micromobility hubs created to integrate e-scooters, shared cars and bikes with public transport. Why are they important?

Ádám: Micromobility hubs, known in Budapest as Mobi-points, provide clearly designated locations for shared bikes and e-scooters close to public transport stops, supporting efficient first- and last-mile connections. We are working on upgrading the system with electric chargers and car-sharing parking.

These hubs improve urban order and safety, reduce street clutter caused by randomly parked devices, and make multimodal travel more intuitive. By aligning shared micromobility services with public transport, Mobi-points strengthen a coherent, people-centred urban mobility system.

What are the key lessons learnt in creating seamless mobility integration?

Ádám: One central lesson is that successful integration must address infrastructure, operations and digital services together. Reliable, high-capacity public transport, supported by digital tools such as BudapestGO, is essential for effective multimodality.

Another key lesson is the importance of incremental implementation and participatory planning. Pilot projects, continuous public consultation and stakeholder involvement help ensure that solutions are widely accepted and well adapted to local conditions.

What’s next for Budapest’s mobility enhancements?

Ádám: Key future priorities include:

- **Fleet renewal and expansion**, including over 50 new trams, about 250 electric buses, and 160 trolleybuses.
- **Major corridor projects**, such as the renewal of the Grand Boulevard and Danube embankments, with electric vehicle facilities and cycle highways.
- **Road and structure reconstruction**, including the Petőfi Bridge, with a focus on safer, more attractive conditions for walking and cycling.
- **Tram network expansion** along Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Street, Budafoki Street, and Pacsirtamező Street.
- **BUBI 3.0**, the next generation of Budapest’s public bike-sharing system.
- **Stronger oversight** of road management and public space use around major developments.
- **Next-generation electronic ticketing** building on the BudapestGO platform.
- **Further embedding of participatory planning** into mobility projects.

Together, these efforts aim to create a seamless, low-emission, and internationally competitive urban mobility system for Budapest.



One of Budapest's main transport arteries, Széll Kálmán Square before (above) and after (below) the interconnection of Buda’s tram network, creating a more accessible and vibrant public space and a seamless flow for commuters. Images: Municipality of Budapest





Examples of enhanced public spaces in district 8. Images: Municipality of Budapest

Streets are the new squares

Dániel Rádai, Vice Mayor, Budapest's District 8, shows that even with challenging conditions, citizens can be engaged to reclaim streets for people through smaller, tactical progressive efforts over time.

What makes District 8 special?

Dániel: Budapest's 8th District, Józsefváros, covers seven sq km in the heart of the city and is defined by remarkable social and spatial diversity. Its neighbourhoods range from the elegant, Vienna-style Palace Quarter to large socialist-era housing blocks, as well as areas facing significant socio-economic challenges.

Nearly 15 per cent of residents are of foreign origin, and the district is home to the city's largest Roma community. For the Municipality, this diversity means that strategies must be tailored to very different local contexts, requiring nuanced and differentiated approaches across the district.

What were the challenges that led to the decision to reclaim streets for people?

Dániel: Public spaces, especially the streets, were marked by neglect and congestion. Sidewalks were narrow, parking lanes were routinely painted onto them, accessibility was poor, and the overall condition of the public realm had deteriorated.

Residential streets carried far more traffic than they were designed for, while even the citywide 50 km/h speed limit was widely ignored.

Why are quality public spaces important?

Dániel: The leadership of Józsefváros introduced a new vision best captured as "the streets are the new squares." At its core is the belief that everyone deserves to live in a greener, more liveable environment.

This begins with the streets, which are the starting point for most residents in their daily public lives. Streets should offer far more than space for storing cars. In a district where many apartments are small, public spaces often function as an extended living room.



Share with us the pilot efforts that convinced people on the value of public spaces?

Dániel: We began under challenging conditions: limited professional capacity and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to preserve financial reserves and slowed institutional transition.

In this context, we introduced tactical urbanism to the city, starting with measures to improve pedestrian comfort at key junctions and launching an "open street" initiative, offering residents safer opportunities for outdoor social life.

With logistic support from the Municipality of Budapest, we expanded the bike-sharing network and established a district-wide micromobility system. As visible, evidence-based improvements took shape alongside participatory design processes, residents increasingly recognised the potential of change rather than focusing solely on disruption. Doubters gradually became supporters.

How were citizens involved in reclaiming the streets?

Dániel: Ensuring residents feel genuinely heard is essential to the municipality's approach. We rely on a wide range of participatory tools, from participatory budgeting and public consultations to co-design processes.

During tactical urbanism interventions, consultation accompanies the testing phase so residents can meaningfully shape the solutions built later. For many hyperlocal initiatives, the municipality actively reaches out to residents in their own neighbourhoods through door-to-door conversations, online surveys and printed consultation forms.

What have been the impacts of creating more pedestrian-friendly streets?

Dániel: The number of cars circulating through the neighbourhoods has been lowered by thousands in the recent years, leading to noticeably improved air quality and reduced noise pollution.

Streets have become greener and more shaded, new shops have opened, and the municipality benefits from increased rental and tax revenues. Public spaces have grown more active, enhancing the sense of safety, and residents have begun to feel a stronger sense of belonging in these renewed environments.

How has District 8's efforts inspired other initiatives?

Dániel: Many other districts have begun approaching public space transformation with greater confidence, removing parking lanes from sidewalks, adopting stronger residential parking regulations and implementing similar rules for parking terraces.

The conversation about Budapest's public realm has clearly shifted. The Municipality of Budapest frequently highlights Józsefváros in its communications about the Healthy Streets Fund, using our projects as key examples of successful, green and people-centred urban transformation.



Experiments and engagements on public spaces in district 8. Images: Municipality of Budapest



What is your vision for District 8's future public spaces?

Dániel: Our vision remains unchanged: an inclusive, green, service-oriented and resilient district. We want public spaces where everyone feels at home — where walking and cycling are natural choices, wheelchair users and visually impaired residents can move with confidence, and children can cross intersections without fear.

We are currently rewriting our public space and road operation regulations, preparing three major Healthy Streets renovations worth nearly €7 million (US\$9.4 million), and continuing programmes on street renewal, school streets, greening and road safety.

What are important lessons you have learnt?

Dániel: Residents understand the everyday realities of their environment better than anyone. Overlooking their insight is a serious mistake.

Creating space for open debate builds coalitions, strengthens trust and enhances the legitimacy of any project.

The more demand-driven and participatory the design process, the more successful the outcome. Functionality and aesthetics at eye level determine whether a project succeeds, and good design cannot compensate for poor durability or difficult maintenance.

Budapest's Healthy Streets initiative is based on the key framework and principles (reflected in image) developed by UK's public health specialist and transport planner Lucy Saunders.

Budapest's other initiatives at a glance

Central Wastewater Treatment Plant

The Central Wastewater Treatment Plant in Budapest, located on Csepel Island, significantly improves the Danube River by biologically treating more than half of over 600,000 cubic m of daily wastewater, reducing untreated discharge. Part of the "Living Danube" initiative, the plant ensures that 95 per cent of Budapest's wastewater undergoes biological treatment before being returned to the Danube.

Pünkösdfürdő Park

Pünkösdfürdő Park is part of Budapest's efforts to green the city. Transformed from barren grassland into a vibrant recreational space, it is regularly monitored by researchers from the Hungarian Centre for Ecological Research, who adjust plant species as needed. The park manages flooding by retaining rainwater and reducing pressure on sewer systems, and features rain gardens, wildflower meadows, and varied vegetation to enhance biodiversity along the Danube.



Images: Municipality of Budapest



Margaret Island

Located in the heart of Budapest, the 2.5-km-long Margaret Island reflects the city's careful rehabilitation efforts of the island over decades. It was declared a public park in 1908, and car access was restricted in the 1980s. The car-free pedestrian paradise with well-kept gardens and restored medieval sites is a haven and oasis, attracting both tourists and locals. The island also stands slightly elevated to protect against Danube's floods.



As a fast-growing metropolis of 19 million people, Guangzhou continues to refine its approach to balancing rapid urbanisation with long-term liveability, demonstrating how growth can align with local identity, community participation, and ecological care.

This commitment is reflected in community-driven revitalisation initiatives that place residents at the centre of

neighbourhood improvement. The Public Urban Designer Programme improved living conditions, enhanced safety, and created job opportunities for the elderly and low-income residents. Projects such as the restoration of Yongqingfang historical and cultural district and Liwan district have repurposed historical landmarks for current use, fostering sustainable growth and job creation while preserving cultural integrity.

Image: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality

Amplifying Guangzhou's cultural heritage

Guangzhou Mayor Sun Zhiyang shares how the city is not only strengthening its 2,200-year-old Cantonese culture heritage, but also amplifying it globally.

How are you ensuring the city's unique Cantonese culture remains vibrant and accessible to residents and visitors?

Zhiyang: Guangzhou, with over 2,200 years of urban history, treats Cantonese culture as the root and soul of the city.

We pursue planning-led, law-based protection to systematically preserve the city's thousand-year-old urban fabric. A six-level city-wide conservation framework protects everything from natural landscapes to intangible cultural heritage, with 26 designated heritage blocks, over 3,800 cultural relic sites, and 841 historical buildings. The "Memory of Guangzhou" digital initiative makes this heritage searchable and shareable.

Our "embroidered" approach prioritises meticulous micro-renovation over mass demolition, integrating historical preservation into everyday living. The Yongqingfang district preserved historic arcade buildings while introducing creative studios and ICH (intangible cultural heritage) experience shops, attracting over one million visitors during the holidays.



Overview of Guangzhou City.
Image: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality

Living heritage programmes bring Cantonese opera, Lingnan medicine, jade carving, and traditional music into schools, communities, and commercial spaces, ensuring culture is actively lived.

We also foster Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area synergy and global outreach, projecting Cantonese culture onto the national and world stage. Leveraging Guangzhou's legacy as a cradle of the Maritime Silk Road, we have deepened cross-border cooperation and harnessed global new media platforms to amplify our cultural appeal.

What role do traditional markets, teahouses, and cultural practices play in your vision for the city?

Zhiyang: These cultural elements revitalise the old urban fabric. Guangzhou's urban renewal goes beyond simple renovation. It is about preserving the city's roots and passing on its cultural genes.

In Yongqingfang's ICH block, ivory carving, enameled porcelain, embroidery, and lion dance coexist with creative businesses, enabling the neighbourhood to retain its Lingnan character while radiating contemporary energy — a model of cultural-tourism integration that captures "old-town charm with a fresh twist."



Mayor Sun Zhiyang.
Image: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality

These cultural assets are powerful bridges integrating culture, commerce, and tourism. Traditional teahouses are more than culinary destinations. The popular saying “Let’s have tea when you’re free” perfectly captures Guangzhou’s warmth. Through initiatives like “ICH Shopping Month” and “ICH in Scenic Spots,” we have fostered new formats such as “ICH + Tourism” and “ICH + Technology,” burnishing the brand of “Eating in Guangzhou” and transforming traditional culture into a new engine for consumption.

These cultural assets serve as emotional landmarks that foster a deep sense of cultural identity. Folk events such as the Flower Market Tour, the Bolo Festival, the Youth Lion Dance Competition, and the Cantonese Opera Carnival carry the nostalgic memories of residents while drawing enthusiastic participation from visitors. These celebrations breathe new life into Cantonese culture across generations, strengthening citizens’ cultural confidence and sense of belonging.

How is Guangzhou positioning itself, particularly in emerging industries like artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology?

Zhiyang: Guangzhou’s strategy is anchored in the State Council-approved Territorial Spatial Master Plan (2021–2035) and its “6+4” framework of urban functions and core roles. In biotechnology, we coordinate biomedicine and bio-manufacturing across a full chain from basic research to international expansion. The city hosts over 6,500 biomedicine enterprises, 50 Class III Grade A hospitals, and 194 million annual outpatient visits. A RMB 20 billion (US\$2.94 billion) biomedicine mother fund supports early-stage and hard-tech investment, with six priority tracks including cell and gene therapy and brain-computer interfaces.

In AI, we are implementing a special initiative to empower thousands of industries with AI, striving to build a globally influential capital of vertical AI models. Our three-stage roadmap targets over 70 per cent AI application penetration by 2027, establishing Guangzhou as a national benchmark for AI development; a trillion-yuan AI ecosystem by 2030; and by 2035, a fully intelligent economy where AI is ubiquitous across all industries and daily life, turning Guangzhou into a “super city showroom” for AI innovation.

How do you envision Guangzhou in 20 years?

Zhiyang: Guangzhou will remain a millennium commercial capital and open gateway to the world, where global capital, technology, talent, and information converge. Its role as the core engine of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area will grow more prominent, driving high-quality



development and supporting China’s broader opening-up strategy.

It will serve an ecological and cultural model where tradition and modernity blend. Historic architecture will coexist harmoniously with modern life, while “green views through windows and parks at the doorstep” become part of daily living.

It will be a highland for technology and innovation. AI, biotechnology, and future networks will be fully embedded in production and daily life. A thriving innovation ecosystem will make Guangzhou a fertile ground for entrepreneurship where young people can realise their ambitions.

Guangzhou remains committed to a future where street-level traditions and urban sophistication coexist. By nurturing our “Eating in Guangzhou” heritage, we keep the city’s unique flavour and vitality alive, a place where everyone, regardless of background, finds happiness and a sense of belonging.

A new model for micro-rehabilitation

Jiang Weihui of Guangzhou’s Liwan District Bureau of Housing & Urban-Rural Development shares lessons from rehabilitating the Yongqingfang (永庆坊) district, balancing heritage, commerce and community.

What is special about the Yongqingfang district?

Weihui: Yongqingfang has largely preserved the original urban fabric and spatial layout of Guangzhou’s historic old town, featuring picturesque arcade streets, winding historical waterways, and numerous former residences of distinguished figures. The area is home to seven cultural relic sites, seven historic buildings, and 32 traditional-style structures.

It is the place of China’s first Cantonese-language feature film, and more than 30 renowned Cantonese Opera

performers once lived here. Key institutions such as the Bahe Guildhall are located within the district, cementing its status as the birthplace of Cantonese Opera. Other heritage practices, including lion dance, copper forging, jade carving, and martial arts, are actively practised throughout the neighborhood.

What is particularly remarkable is that one third of the original residents continue to live here, sustaining an unbroken community life. This enduring principle is reflected in our core philosophy: “See the people, see the heritage, see the life.”



An overview of the Yongqingfang district, before and after restoration. Image: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality

What factors contributed to choosing a different approach for the district?

Weihui: All our renovation efforts are consistently centred on people. These residential areas, built primarily around the 1930s, can no longer meet the demands of modern life due to ageing infrastructure, insufficient public facilities, structural safety concerns, and fire hazards. Residents have also expressed a growing need for a higher-quality living environment that the original state of the neighborhood can hardly fulfil.

Our approach goes beyond static preservation. It involves optimising the neighborhood in response to contemporary living and working needs, introducing appropriate industries and job opportunities, and carrying out adaptive renovations to building functions, public spaces, and public facilities. Meeting these evolving needs must inevitably be achieved through thoughtful modernisation.

How were some of the challenges overcome?

Weihui: The greatest challenge has been balancing the diverse interests of all parties, reconciling residents' property rights with the preservation of the historic character of the area. To meet this challenge, we established Guangzhou's first "Co-Creation Committee", a platform for public participation composed of resident representatives, property owners, developers, merchants, government authorities, media representatives, and members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Through this platform, we facilitated thorough deliberation, built consensus, and implemented solutions gradually, continuously adjusting our plans throughout the entire construction process.

What principles guided the rehabilitation efforts?

Weihui: First, the preservation and transmission of historical and cultural heritage remain our fundamental premise. Second, the renovation is carried out in a people-centred manner.

Our implementation framework is open and adaptive, allowing for continuous adjustments based on real-site conditions and stakeholder coordination, ensuring both the protection of the historic fabric and the compliance of adaptive renovations that meet residents' modern needs.

How do you balance commercial and public interests?

Weihui: Before renovation, Yongqingfang was a declining residential area with ageing facilities and an ageing



population. There was an urgent need to introduce new industries to inject vitality and provide momentum for self-renewal. The government therefore brought in property developer Vanke through a BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer) model to participate in renovations needed in the district.

With a view to preserving the area's historical character, safeguarding residents' interests and balancing commercial viability with public welfare, two pre-renovation regulatory documents were developed:

- Guidelines for Micro-Renovation
- Guidelines for Community Business Format Control

These guidelines serve to regulate Vanke's construction activities and daily operations. In addition, through the Co-Creation Committee, public opinions were collected and submitted to the Construction Command to inform decision-making.



During the renovation process, the local sub-district office and relevant government departments adopted grid-based management and inter-departmental coordination mechanisms to not only ensure strict oversight of construction and commercial activities within the entire block but also provide robust support and safeguards for its development and operation. This facilitates the introduction and continuous iterative upgrading of business formats rooted in local cultural elements.

How have residents been engaged for improvements made in the area?

Weihui: Resident engagement was central to the improvements made, through door-to-door surveys, pop-up consultations, and community workshops held throughout the process to ensure residents' needs shaped outcomes on the ground.

This was evident in how practical concerns were addressed. When residents of Zhibao West 1st Alley faced persistent flooding, repeated consultations led to the construction of a covered porch that resolved the issue while creating vending space and regulating street vending. Residents' requests for natural gas pipelines were similarly met through on-site surveys and coordination with property owners.

Engagement also encouraged private owners to take the initiative. Neglected Xiguan Mansions on Yongqing 2nd Alley were independently renovated and are now leased for cultural and creative retail, while private owners along Enning Road led their own renovations, converting the entire stretch from residential to commercial use, generating tangible economic benefits.

What lessons from this district can be applied to other similar areas?

Weihui: There are five lessons we learnt from this:

- Integrate heritage preservation with revitalisation while retaining original residents
- Adopt an open and adjustable planning framework
- Pursue a people-centred approach through co-creation and community engagement
- Explore government-led, market-driven multi-stakeholder collaboration
- Adapt technical standards to the specific conditions of each historic district

Images: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality

Restoring Yongqingfang

The micro-rehabilitation approach for Yongqingfang, a historic Cantonese cultural district in Guangzhou dating to 1931, serves as a model for heritage preservation and urban renewal with its government-led, community-involved strategy, sensitively revitalising the district with micro-renovations. Its intangible cultural heritage and businesses have been refreshed, making the area more relevant and sustainable for the long run.



Before and after showing how the area has been sensitively restored. Images and data: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality



Highlights of efforts and impact

700 m

Length of arcade street at Enning Road revitalised.

55,000 m²

Amount of building space upgraded.

9,000 m²

Amount of public space created.

1,263

Number of original residents benefitted.

RMB 5 billion

(US\$735 million) Amount generated from the area.

> 80 million

Number of tourists who have visited the area since 2021.

Designing with citizens

A new breed of designers is bridging the gap between planners and residents, turning neglected spaces into community assets. Jiang Li, Deputy Director, Guangzhou Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, shares the impact and lessons learnt.

Since 2016, Guangzhou's Public Urban Designer Programme fosters public participation in community renewal, shifting from government-led management to collaborative governance. To date, 1,500 designers have worked with citizens on 355 improvement projects covering 177 towns and subdistricts across Guangzhou.

Public urban designers are employed to work on revitalisation efforts with citizens. What is their role?

Li: Guangzhou's Public Urban Designers play a multifaceted role in urban renewal. They provide full-process services for community projects, from initiation and design review to construction guidance and long-term maintenance.

Acting as intermediaries, they translate complex planning terminology into everyday language for residents, while converting residents' concerns into design solutions. They also convene multi-stakeholder platforms to co-create improvements, guided by the principles of "small spaces delivering great public benefit" and "small incisions catalysing significant uplift."

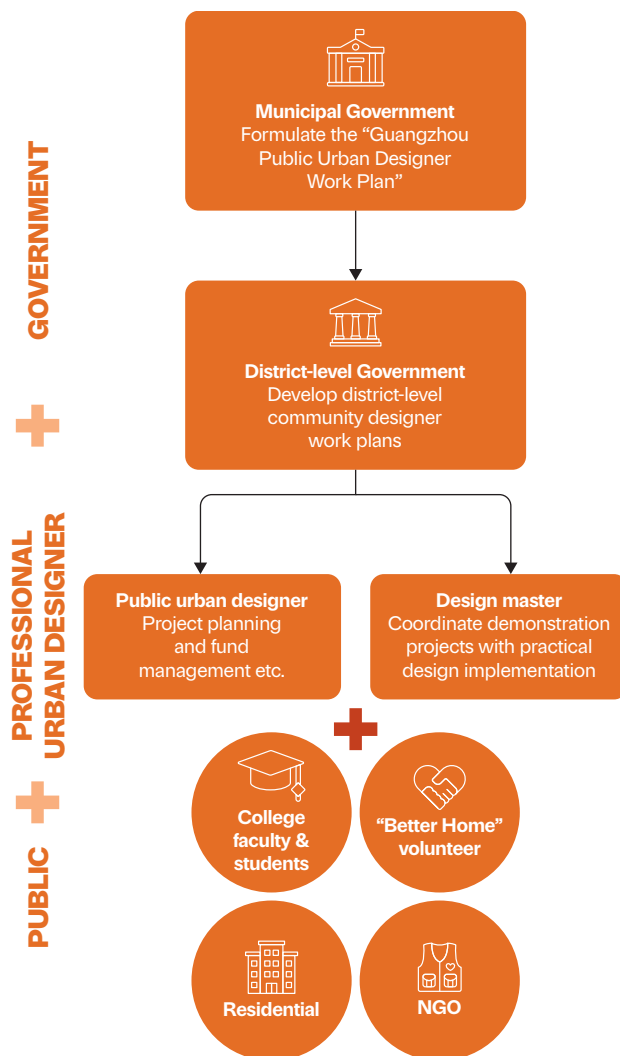
Can you share one example of an improvement because of collaborations between citizens and designers?

Li: One example is the Lieqiao Substation construction, where people initially did not want this developed in their immediate neighbourhood. Through an open design competition, public consultations, and citizen deliberation, the facility was reimagined as an urban public artwork under the concept of the "Moonlight Treasure Box," seamlessly integrating function, aesthetics, and community services. A source of local resistance became a cherished neighbourhood asset.

How have citizens championed public spaces?

Li: The following are examples:

Xingyuan and Zilong Communities: Following the "One-Square-Metre Garden" renovation, Xingyuan residents designed the "Xingfu Baby" community IP and launched



Structure for the Urban Designer Programme.
Image: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality



weekend charity bazaars to establish a micro-fund, making garden maintenance entirely self-sufficient.

Inspired by this, parents in the neighbouring Zilong community transformed a neglected patch beside a kindergarten into a "Children's Herbal Garden," turning an unsightly dead space into an outdoor nature classroom.

Yunhe Community: A disorderly parking lot was reimagined as an all-age-friendly, pet-friendly plaza through a collaborative funding model of resident contributions, business discounts, and government subsidies. Residents' enthusiasm radiated outward, spurring façade refurbishments, lighting improvements, and fire safety renewals, attracting a younger demographic and injecting fresh vitality into the community.

What were key obstacles in implementing the programme, and how did you overcome them?

Li: Two key challenges shaped our approach. The first was bridging professional design discourse with the authentic texture of everyday community life. Traditional top-down planning often struggles to generate genuine participation, so Guangzhou progressively scaled up public engagement methods across neighbourhoods, with Public Urban Designers serving as vital connectors to inspire residents' participation.

The second was balancing construction with long-term stewardship. This calls for a demand-driven approach that prioritises spaces which are aesthetically pleasing, user-friendly, and easy to maintain. By introducing diverse stakeholders into the co-construction process, these spaces are endowed with a self-sustaining capacity to thrive beyond the initial project phase.

What were favourable factors that made this programme effective?

Li: Guangzhou's humid subtropical climate and dense historic urban fabric have made public spaces a natural

extension of residents' living rooms. This deeply ingrained communal culture provides a fertile social foundation for the programme's micro-scale spatial transformations.

The programme mobilises built-environment professionals, residents, and university faculty and students to jointly contribute to the city's betterment, beautifying community spaces, participating in design voting, and contributing fresh design proposals.

As the design capital of the Greater Bay Area, Guangzhou is home to premier institutions such as South China University of Technology and the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, ensuring high-calibre design thinking can be channelled into even the most modest neighbourhood spaces.

Guangzhou's culture of bold experimentation is reflected in its "One District, One Policy" framework, empowering each district to devise bespoke innovations, from Yuexiu's "Dual-Designer Linkage" model to Huangpu's "Full-Process Ledger" system, ensuring governance solutions are as diverse as the communities they serve.

What advice would you give to city leaders considering a more collaborative model with citizens?

Li: First, establish a legal and regulatory framework embedding key processes, such as soliciting citizen feedback, publicising design proposals, and overseeing implementation into local regulations.

Second, build a multi-stakeholder collaboration platform encouraging communities, professional institutions, and market entities to jointly participate, ensuring community development genuinely reflects the principles of "seeking needs and wisdom from the people."

Third, enhance capacity building and digital enablement through targeted training and online engagement platforms to improve the quality and efficiency of public participation.

Guangzhou's other initiatives at a glance



Images: The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality

Haizhu National Wetland Park (海珠国家湿地公园)

Spanning 1,100 ha at the heart of Guangzhou, Haizhu National Wetland Park stands as a testament to prioritising the environment. Originally a vast orchard, the site faced severe degradation from rapid urbanisation in the 1990s, with biodiversity loss and habitat fragmentation. In 2012, it was made a national park, with two thirds designated as protected areas, transforming the area through nature-based solutions. A three-tier tidal river network was established to restore its natural hydrological rhythms, while gradient habitat systems were created for birds, fish, and insects.



CSGKC Knowledge City

The China-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City (CSGKC) is a national-level bilateral cooperation project jointly developed by the Chinese and Singaporean governments, located in Huangpu District, Guangzhou, spanning 232 sqkm. Guided by Guangzhou's Territorial Spatial Master Plan, CSGKC aims to establish a national knowledge hub with global influence, striving to become a new hub for knowledge creation, a free port for international talent, and an innovation source for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Between 2020 and 2024, aggregate industrial output surged from RMB 11.59 billion (US\$1.7 billion) to RMB 71.01 billion (US\$10.44 billion), while CSGKC developed 51 km of new greenways, with 100 per cent green building coverage, increasing its green buildings to 1.85 million sqm so far, making it a model for sustainable urban development.

2026 SPECIAL MENTION

TAIPEI

What stands out about Taipei is its governance culture that embraces civic participation as a core planning tool to deliver positive and responsive change through integrated transport systems, neighbourhood-scale initiatives and community-led environmental actions. The city's civic consciousness manifests in everyday practices and major policy initiatives.

Its community-driven waste management systems achieve remarkable environmental outcomes through social norms

and collective responsibility, rather than infrastructural interventions alone. The city's participatory budgeting system enables residents to propose and vote on neighbourhood improvements, while the Long-Term Development Guidelines 2050 engage citizens as partners in shaping coordinated planning rooted in liveability, sustainability and inclusivity.

Image: Taipei City Government

Warm governance, happy city

Taipei Mayor Chiang Wan-an shares what does it mean to truly create a people-centred governance

What has contributed to Taipei's strong civic culture?

Wan-an: At the institutional level, Taipei has established diverse participation mechanisms, from Mayor-Village Chief meetings to participatory budgeting, public hearings, and cross-departmental platforms, ensuring different stakeholders can meaningfully influence city decisions. Major projects are required to begin public consultation early, so citizens can genuinely shape policy direction.

Civic education has been equally important. Taipei treats participation as part of everyday life rather than a one-off effort. The waste sorting transformation, for instance, was driven not by top-down mandates alone, but through school education and neighbourhood norms, turning policy compliance into social habit.

The role of government has also evolved. Rather than a one-way administrator, the city now acts as a platform and facilitator. The 1999 Citizen Hotline handles around 500,000 cases annually, generating real feedback and results. Similarly, a pedestrian improvement project in Daan District began as a community-raised demand and, through residents' workshops and collaborative consensus-building, transformed a vehicle-oriented space into a people-oriented one, inspiring similar efforts across other districts.



Workshop in Daxue Village. Image: Taipei City Government

What are important considerations in ensuring meaningful engagement?

Wan-an: Participation must be designed so that people of different ages, occupations, and backgrounds have a genuine opportunity to take part. Many public issues are inherently technical, and if government cannot translate them into accessible language, participation becomes superficial. Taipei addresses this through briefings, workshops, and hearings that turn complex issues into tangible choices.

If procedures are too lengthy or responses too slow, participation erodes trust rather than builds it. Citizen complaints must receive a response within six days, with complex cases requiring an update on progress within that window.

What are Taipei's pressing priorities?

Wan-an: Two priorities are particularly close to my heart. The first is easing the burden on parents. We have introduced measures such as a one-hour reduction in daily working hours for parents of young children, free nutritious school lunches, expanded childcare, and more flexible working arrangements.

Mayor Chiang Wan-an. Image: Taipei City Government



Mayor Chiang Wan-an with children benefiting from the Fresh Milk Weekly initiative. Image: Taipei City Government

The government must look beyond formally categorised vulnerable groups and recognise families who appear stable on the surface but are under real pressure. These invisible burdens are among the key reasons younger people hesitate to have children. Our role is to translate those unspoken needs into institutional design.

The second is creating opportunities for the city to keep growing. We are advancing major projects such as the Beitou Shilin Technology Park and working to attract internationally leading enterprises in high-tech and AI. Our efforts to bring the tech company NVIDIA to Taipei illustrate what this involves — coordinating resources across departments and presenting competitive development proposals.

This is not simply one investment; it is a contest over a city's conditions and future positioning. When global enterprises see that Taipei has the foundation for long-term innovation, talent will stay and growth can enter a positive cycle.

What advice would you give other city leaders?

Wan-an: Many cities focus on overall indicators: economic growth, infrastructure, international rankings.

These matter. But what truly determines the quality of a city are often the small details and the groups most easily overlooked. A city becomes great not only through large-scale development, but through real improvements in everyday life at the micro level.

I have always believed that the height of governance can make a city stronger, but only the warmth of governance can make it truly great. Urban governance cannot remain at the level of blueprints and plans; it must enter everyday life and become a force that supports people.

A happy city is not one without risks or challenges. It is one with the capacity to face uncertainty. Every policy should return to one central question: does it make people feel more secure? Happiness does not lie in maximising material abundance, but in having the capacity and confidence to face problems and solve them. The goal of governance is not only to create prosperity, but to strengthen the resilience of both the city and its people, so that every citizen, in good times or bad, has something to rely on, has choices, and has confidence.

That is the kind of city that is truly people-centred, and truly happy.

How Taipei made rubbish everybody's business



Yin Wei, Chairperson of Taipei's Research, Development and Evaluation Commission, suggests that the key to cities' waste management challenges lies not in building larger facilities, but in changing people's habits.

What have been the biggest challenges in Taipei’s waste management efforts and how have you overcome these?

Yin: In a highly urbanised city, the challenge is not how to process waste, but how to change the daily habits of millions. We once considered building larger facilities but realised that adding treatment capacity without changing behaviour only postpones the crisis. That is why Taipei made a crucial decision: we turned the waste problem into a project of behavioural change.

During the early pilot phase, introducing the “Leave No Trash On Ground” policy in only a few districts led to waste being dumped across boundaries. It was not a moral failure; it was a natural response to inconsistent rules. Partial implementation displaces problems rather than solving them. That was why we expanded city-wide, so that everyone operated under the same rules.

How were citizens persuaded and motivated to do their part?

Yin: From the beginning, our focus was on designing a system where doing the right thing becomes the most natural choice.

The first step was making behaviour tangible. After the “Leave No Trash On Ground” policy in 1997, citizens had to bring waste to garbage trucks at fixed times and locations. On 1 July 2000, Taipei introduced the per-bag trash collection fee. The more you throw away, the more you pay. Within a year, waste volume fell by more than 30 per cent and recycling doubled.

The second step was to start with schools. Waste sorting education was established in schools, children learned first

and then taught their parents. Neighbourhood residents reinforced this further through mutual reminders and informal supervision, and sorting gradually became second nature.

The third step was letting society operate on its own. Once most people sorted correctly, those who did not began to feel out of place. Behaviour shifted from something the government required to something society expected.

The fourth step was building trust. Early on, even data showing reduced waste was questioned. So, we kept making results visible. When waste volume fell from around 2,970 metric tons in 1999 to 1,045 metric tons in 2024 — a reduction of 65 per cent — those figures were not merely performance indicators. They were proof of citizen participation.

What we learnt is people do not change because they are told to. Change takes hold only when the system makes the right behaviour feel natural and easy.

Trash has reduced and recycling rates have increased. How have citizens’ habits and lifestyles changed?

Yin: Recycling has become part of the DNA of Taipei citizens.

Where overflowing public bins were once commonplace, the streets are now clean and orderly. Every day, residents wait for the garbage truck at a fixed hour, gathering at street corners with bags in hand, listening to the familiar melody of Für Elise. What began as waste management gradually became a rhythm of city life. People chat at that moment. Children learn sorting from their parents. Some elderly residents regard it as part of their daily outing.

For citizens, waste is no longer something that simply disappears once thrown away. When you must sort it yourself and hand it directly to the sanitation team, you begin to ask different questions: do I need to buy this much? Can I use it one more time? Citizens have come to understand that environmental quality is not something the government provides alone. It is something everyone creates together.

How does waste management in Taipei contribute to a more circular system?

Yin: Taipei’s circular economy is a complete mechanism that starts with behavioural change and extends all the way through recycling, reuse, and regeneration.

Getting the source right is the foundation. Through the “Leave No Trash on Ground” policy, mandatory sorting, and the per-bag fee, citizens became direct participants in the system. From there, a clear division of labour sustains the chain: citizens sort, sanitation teams collect, recycling businesses process downstream, and government designs the rules and incentives.

Every type of waste also has a clear regeneration pathway. Food waste becomes organic fertiliser. Discarded furniture is refurbished and reused. Incinerator ash and construction waste are remade into engineering materials. The goal is not simply disposal but returning as much as possible back to the land, the industrial chain, or the city’s own operations. Combined with recycling funds, public-private collaboration, and circular economy regulation, the system has grown beyond environmental policy into a broader model of urban governance.

The results speak for themselves. Waste volume has fallen 65 per cent, recycling has increased fourteen-fold, and in 2024 alone, the food waste composting programme produced 206 metric tons of organic fertiliser, while the “Renewing with Love” programme has restored cumulative 165,762 pieces of furniture.



Because of the significant reduction in waste, the Fudekeng Landfill has been restored and transformed into a park where visitors can enjoy grass sledding. Image: Taipei City Government

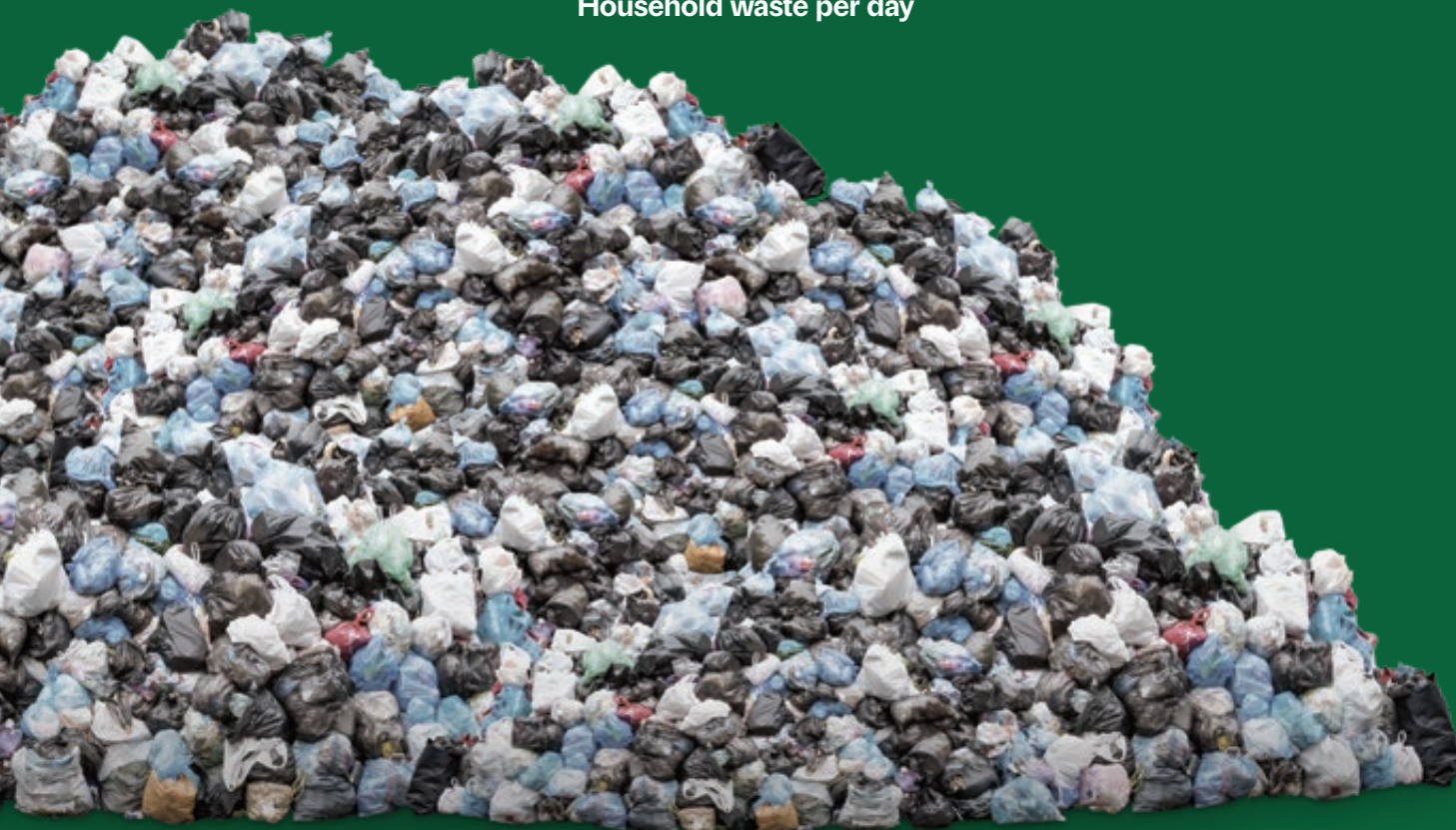
Educational materials on sorting waste (above) and residents bringing their garbage to the trucks. Images: Taipei City Government

1999

Less than 5% recycling rate

2,970
metric tons

Household waste per day



2024

67% recycling rate

1,045
metric tons

Household waste per day



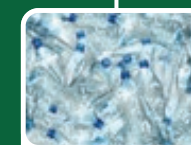
Taipei's recycling examples



Kitchen
waste



Renewing
with love
programme



1.5 million
PET bottles



Clothing



206
metric tons of
organic fertiliser



165,762
furniture restored



9-storey
EcoARK Pavilion,
world's first using
Polli-Brick made
from plastic bottles



3,161
metric tons
of used clothing
recycled

FROM TRASH TO GOLD

In 1994, Taipei generated approximately 3,945 metric tons of household waste per day, underscoring the need for a new approach. With the introduction of the “No Trash on Ground” policy and pay-per-bag collection in 1997 and 2000 respectively, residents and businesses took ownership of their waste, drastically reducing it and boosting recycling rates. Taipei now has one of the highest recycling rates in the world.

Urban regeneration does not mean demolition

Huang Ching-shinn, President of Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation, shows how Taipei is regenerating its city without demolition and is in fact creating new, integrated city rooms through its XinZhongshan Linear Park (心中山线形公园).



Image: Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation



Image: Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation

ABOUT XINZHONGSHAN LINEAR PARK

Led by Taipei Metro, it is an urban green corridor linking Zhongshan and Shuanglian train stations along an 800-m stretch. It is designed as a “city living room,” featuring landscape platforms, green walkways, public art and includes the Zhongshan Underground Book Street. The space reflects a people-centred urbanism with public-private-people collaboration.

Why was the decision made to create such a park?

Ching-shinn: The area between Zhongshan and Shuanglian — one of the city’s most important central districts — had begun to show signs of strain: cramped pedestrian space, confusing routes, ageing facilities, and a fragmented urban landscape. After the old Tamsui Line was placed underground in 1997, the surface became a park and the underground a shopping street. Nearly three decades later, both had lost vitality.

Rather than carry out a large-scale demolition, we adopted a micro-regeneration approach, using smaller, more precise interventions to stitch together spaces long fragmented by transport infrastructure, creating a living urban axis connecting metro, walking, commerce, culture, and community life.

The transformation has unfolded in phases, from the first section completed in 2019 to a planned connection to Taipei Main Station by 2029. This means the project is not a once-off site intervention, but part of a continuously expanding green corridor across the city.

How were people engaged in the process?

Ching-shinn: The success of XinZhongshan came from involving academics, experts, and the community from the very start. The hardest part of urban renewal in older districts is not construction but building consensus. As early as February 2016, Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation collaborated with university professors and students to shape the concept itself — integrating urban design, landscaping, and everyday life scenarios from the outset.

A vision forum in August 2016 brought together residents, businesses, and experts to discuss the district’s future. Residents raised concerns about safety and walkability, businesses asked about foot traffic, and younger users wanted flexibility — all of which were reflected in the final design. The park has since evolved into a venue for markets, performances, street dance, and community activities.

What were the key design considerations?

Ching-shinn: Three considerations shaped the park. The first was restoring continuity — reopening the axis between Zhongshan and Shuanglian so people could move naturally from station to street and from commuting routes into spaces of commerce and culture.

The second was creating an undefined city living room. XinZhongshan was designed around a simple question: would people want to stay here? Spaces were left without fixed definitions or predetermined functions — a stepped element could serve as a stage, a gathering spot, or a performance space. This openness allows citizens to interpret the space in their own way, naturally accommodating a diverse range of activities.

The third was designing for long-term maintenance from the outset. Materials, construction details, and colour planning were chosen with maintainability in mind, reflecting a governance mindset that public works are not finished when construction ends — they must continue to be cared for to maintain their quality over time.

What are the major impacts of the park?

Ching-shinn: For commuters, this had long been a high-traffic corridor where most people simply passed through without stopping. After the transformation, the walking environment became more open and pleasant, and connections between station exits and surrounding streets much smoother.

After the first section was completed in 2019, passenger volume at Zhongshan Station increased by eight per cent that same year. The Zhongshan commercial district has gained momentum, foot traffic has returned, vacancy rates have fallen, and areas such as Chifeng Street have attracted new start-ups and creative businesses.

An underground book street was also created.

Ching-shinn: Originally developed in 1997 as a shopping street, the underground space had lost foot traffic as commercial patterns shifted. In 2017, it was repositioned as a book street-style mixed-use mall anchored by Eslite Bookstore, transforming a pass-through retail environment into one that encourages lingering through reading, exhibitions, and cultural programming.

The goal was never simply to sell books, but to use cultural content to make the space meaningful. Improving only the surface while leaving the underground outdated would have disrupted the overall urban experience. Together, the



Image: Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation

two environments generated ripple effects — restoring foot traffic, attracting younger crowds, and building a strong cultural character for the district.

What lessons does this park offer for Taipei and other cities?

Ching-shinn: Five lessons stand out:

- Replacing large-scale demolition with micro-regeneration
- Turning transport infrastructure into urban living spaces
- Shifting from creating pass-through spaces to ones for people to stay longer
- Designing for flexibility so that the public can shape and redefine spaces over time
- Ensuring that long-term maintenance is considered and included in the design from the start

This approach has continued to spread within Taipei. The corridor has expanded from Zhongshan to Yuanshan Station, and the methodology has been applied elsewhere, including the Liugong Green Corridor in the East District, where fragmented lanes and back alleys have been reconnected into a walkable urban corridor.

XinZhongshan shows that regeneration does not always require wiping the slate clean and starting over. Cities can begin with existing space, and by integrating transportation, public space, and cultural activity, they can create maximum public value under very limited conditions.

Taipei's other major initiatives at a glance

FRESH MILK WEEKLY 2.0

Children aged 2 to 12 can get one free bottle of fresh milk or soy milk every week using their student ID card at major convenience stores all year round. Launched in April 2025 and supporting 208,000 children, the initiative by the Taipei City Department of Education seeks to ensure children have better access to essential nutrients. The implementation involved close partnerships between schools, families and local businesses.



SONGSHAN CULTURAL AND CREATIVE PARK (松山文创园区)

Once a bustling 1937 Japanese colonial-era tobacco factory, this historic site has been transformed into a thriving cultural and creative hub in 2011 by the Taipei City Government through public-private partnerships. By pairing heritage preservation with contemporary programming, the park has become a tourist magnet with a strong neighbourhood identity for creative industries and community-led activities.

ONE SPORTS CENTRE PER DISTRICT

Initiated to make sporting activities more accessible and to foster healthier lifestyles, 12 comprehensive public sports centres (one in each administrative district) have been developed (2003-2012) to provide accessible, affordable, and high-quality fitness facilities to citizens. The centres have become community hubs and have had a positive impact on their neighbourhoods.



JINRUI FLOOD MANAGEMENT PARK (金瑞治水园区)

Completed in 2015 by the Taipei City Hydraulic Engineering Office, the Jinrui Flood Management Park is part of Taipei's long-term plan to improve its flood mitigation capacity. It serves as a 27,000 sqm detention basin for flood mitigation and is Taipei's first dragonfly-themed ecological park, hosting over one-third of all dragonfly species found across Taiwan.

Images: Taipei City Government and Tsao Cheng Pang

Tianjin is an emerging model for sustainable urban development while balancing growth with ecological and cultural heritage preservation. The city's evolving approach prioritises liveability, integrating eco-friendly initiatives and historical revitalisation to create a resilient urban environment for a population of 13.64 million while managing the pressures of urbanisation and high-quality development.

The city's leadership demonstrates a clear intention to align modernisation with long-term environmental and cultural goals, positioning Tianjin as a competitive and attractive metropolis.

2026 SPECIAL MENTION

TIANJIN

Image: Tianjin Jinyun New Media Group Co., Ltd. (Tianjin Haihe Media Centre)

Balancing growth and identity

Tianjin Mayor Zhang Gong shares how the city is balancing growth while retaining its identity, protecting and promoting its rich heritage.

How does Tianjin balance urban development with the preservation of its architectural heritage?

Gong: As a nationally recognised city of historical and cultural significance, Tianjin stands as an epitome of the recent hundred years of the country. In the process of urban construction, we have adhered to the principles of pursuing development in the course of preservation and carrying out preservation in the process of development.

Using the Haihe River as an axis, Tianjin has organically linked the Ancient Culture Street, foreign-style villas, and modern bridges and docks, creating an urban showcase corridor where “scenery changes with every step, and the past converses with the present”. During the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) Tianjin Summit, the Haihe River light show attracted over 100,000 visitors, demonstrating how waterfront spaces can integrate cultural and tourism landmarks and boost the nighttime economy.

On heritage preservation, Tianjin's urban renewal regulations took effect in 2026, marking a new stage of legal and systematic governance. The Italian-styled area, a tourist district, blends art, theatre, and design to preserve its buildings while enabling them to be functional and sustainable over time. Meanwhile, the former First Machine Tool Factory has been transformed into the JINYI PARK, integrating industrial science education, leisure tourism, and commercial activities, a model for industrial heritage revitalisation.



JINYI PARK.
Image: Tianjin Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd

How does Tianjin address housing affordability?

Gong: Upholding the principle that houses are for living in, not for speculation, we have focused on establishing a housing supply system that combines public housing support with market mechanisms.

We remain committed to optimising policies for steady real estate development. In October 2024, we fully lifted all restrictive measures — including purchase restrictions, price caps, and resale restrictions — to support housing demand. We have also lowered downpayment ratios for first- and second-home mortgages to 15 per cent and 25 per cent respectively and extended the maximum loan term to 30 years.

As of end-2025, per capita housing floor area in urban areas exceeded 40 sqm, with an average of approximately 1.2 homes per household.

We support professional, large-scale rental enterprises, strictly regulate their conduct under the regulations on housing rental, and publish annual reports on rent levels across all districts to guide the market.

We remain committed to strengthening the housing support system through a combination of public rental housing, government-subsidised rental housing, and allotment-based indemnificatory housing, ensuring that all eligible low-income households receive the necessary support.

Mayor Zhang Gong. Image: Tianjin Municipal People's Government



What are your major environmental challenges and how are you addressing them?

Gong: Tianjin faces significant ecological pressures. Its atmospheric dispersion conditions are relatively poor, and as the lowest reach of the Haihe River Basin, it is vulnerable to upstream precipitation impacts on water quality.

On air quality, we have advanced a green transition by phasing out outdated production facilities, optimising the energy structure, and transforming the transportation sector. Total coal consumption has been reduced by 36 per cent compared to 2013. By 2025, the city's average PM2.5 concentration dropped to 36.2 micrograms per cubic m, a cumulative decrease of 62.3 per cent and the proportion of days with good or excellent air quality reached 72.3 per cent.

On water governance, we have adopted a “one river, one strategy” approach, integrating water resource management, environmental governance, and ecosystem restoration. By 2025, all water bodies previously classified as below Class V (lowest grade in the country's surface water standards) had been eliminated, marking historic progress in water quality improvement.

How does Tianjin protect and promote its rich heritage?

Gong: Tianjin has strengthened heritage preservation through legislation, systematic planning, restoration, innovative revitalisation, and digital empowerment. The regulations of Tianjin on the preservation of historical buildings, promulgated in 2005, was the first of its kind nationwide. Since then, a comprehensive suite of regulations and preservation plans has been introduced, covering intangible cultural heritage, revolutionary heritage, and the Grand Canal.



Former residence of Liang Qichao. Image: Tianjin Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd

Adhering to the principle of “restoring to its original appearance”, we have restored over 100 cultural relics, including the Dagu Fort and the former residence of Liang Qichao. Many historic buildings have been repurposed into financial exhibition centres, digital art museums, and public cultural spaces. Ten themed cultural routes have been planned to immerse residents and visitors in Tianjin's heritage.

Tianjin also has 49 national intangible cultural heritage items and 72 Chinese time-honoured brands. Traditional crafts such as Yangliuqing and Clay Figurine Zhang continue to radiate new vitality in the modern era.

What are Tianjin's priorities in improving quality of life?

Gong: We consistently uphold a people-centred development philosophy. Over the past five years, we have created over 1.75 million new urban jobs and maintained urban unemployment rate within 5.5 per cent.

In healthcare, we have established a “15-minute health service circle” with over 2,500 family doctor service teams serving 5.12 million enrolled residents. In elderly care, we are building a “15-minute home-based elderly care service circle” supported by nursing homes, senior dining halls, and smart elderly care complexes.

In urban infrastructure, seven new rail transit lines have been constructed, bringing the total operational length to over 400 km. Over 6,500 km of old pipe networks have been built and renovated, enhancing urban resilience. In 2025 alone, over 1,100 sports parks and fitness facilities were built or renovated, ensuring that the fruits of modernisation are shared equitably with all residents.



Haihe River. Image: Tianjin Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd

Building an eco-city from the ground up



Li Long, Director-General, Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Administrative Committee reflects on two decades of creating the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City (中新天津生态城) showing how to build a liveable, low-carbon city from the ground up, that continues to offer lessons and adopted practices across the country and globally.

Images: Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Administrative Committee

What has been the achievements and impacts of Tianjin Eco-City?

Long: Since its establishment in 2008, the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City has pursued the “Three Harmonies and Three Abilities” as its development goals, to serve as a model for sustainable urban development. It has transformed from an ecological restricted zone into a green new town ideal for living, working, tourism, and recreation and is now evolving from a construction model into a standard exporter and global demonstrator.

As a green eco-city, it formulated the world’s first eco-city indicator system, launched the first standard system for zero-carbon demonstration units, and achieved a green building coverage rate that makes it the highest concentration of green buildings in the country. As a smart, innovative city, it was designated one of the first national smart city pilots and the core area of the new-generation artificial intelligence innovation and development pilot zone.

As an open and collaborative city, it has created a fulcrum for the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei-ASEAN economic and trade corridor and actively participates in the formulation of ISO international standards. As a vibrant, liveable city, it has built a three-tier residential and services model, introduced high-quality educational institutions, and established an all-for-one tourism demonstration zone with 13 themed scenic areas.

Its broader impact is reflected in three ways:

- its demonstrative effect in setting benchmarks for green transformation and industry-city integration
- its international character as a model for cross-border eco-city cooperation and a prime example of implementing the United Nations 2030 Agenda; and
- its sustainability in drafting ISO and national standards that offer the “Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Solution” for global urban development

How has its practices influenced other cities in the country?

Long: At the national policy level, it has become a standard-setter for top-level design. Its quantitative indicator system pioneered the use of indicators to guide planning and construction and has since served as a blueprint for state-level new areas including Xiong’an New Area and the Beijing Sub-Centre.

Its pilot schemes for sponge cities, zero-waste cities, and smart cities have served as reference templates for similar programmes nationwide. In terms of technological innovation, it has become a pathfinder for

ecological practice. Its technical standards for remediating contaminated sites and improving saline-alkali land have been adopted in locations including Baiyangdian in Xiong’an and Yishui in Shandong.

Its renewable energy models and green building lifecycle standards serve as references for Beijing and Shanghai, while its urban operations management platform has helped multiple cities refine their governance.

In terms of industrial development, it serves as an enabler for green and smart industries, demonstrating a viable model that strictly controls polluting projects while cultivating green sectors such as energy conservation, environmental protection, and the circular economy. Its model is not meant for simple replication but provides an adaptable methodology that permeates all aspects of urban development.

How were major challenges addressed?

Long: The biggest challenge was transforming a saline-alkali wasteland into an eco-city. The original site comprised one-third saline-alkali wasteland, one-third abandoned salt pans, and one-third polluted water surfaces, conditions that significantly raised the difficulty of environmental transformation and made the replicability of its remediation experience more valuable.

The wastewater reservoir on site spanned approximately 2.56 sqkm and had received industrial and domestic sewage for nearly 40 years, leaving it classified as inferior Grade V with no historical precedent for remediation. The Eco-City designated this its “No. 1 project”, formulated new remediation standards that filled a gap in domestic regulation, and divided the reservoir into lightly, moderately, and severely polluted zones for targeted treatment.

After more than three years of effort, 2.15 million cubic m of wastewater and 385 cubic m of sediment were treated, transforming the former sewage reservoir into Jinghu Lake. These solutions have since been replicated in pollution control projects across six provinces.

We also had to improve the saline-alkali land. With highly salinised soil, high groundwater tables, and saltwater beneath, traditional landscaping methods were unsustainable. The Eco-City pioneered a comprehensive soil improvement technology integrating physical, chemical, and ecological methods, now a Chinese national invention patent, prioritising salt-tolerant native plants and halophytes to create a distinctive vegetation landscape while preventing re-salinisation.



Images: Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Administrative Committee

How does the city balance liveability with green space expansion?

Long: Liveability and green spaces are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities, guided by the principle of “planning first, ecology as the foundation, and systematic governance.”

The Eco-City begins with a “baseline before blueprint” approach, demarcating prohibited, restricted, suitable, and built-up areas before planning construction land. It uses original water systems to build an ecological framework of “one island, three waters, and six corridors”, treating natural ecosystems as the foundation of urban development rather than an embellishment.

A multi-level park system anchored by city-level theme parks, community parks, and pocket parks ensures residents can access green spaces on foot or by bicycle at any time. A dual-grid layout of road networks and greenways physically separates pedestrian and cycling routes from motor traffic, creating a human-scale environment of small blocks and a dense road network.

Since inception, the Eco-City has mandated 100 per cent green building standards across the full lifecycle. As of end-2025, green building area had reached 27 million sqm, with high-star projects accounting for 93 per cent of certified buildings. Improved environmental quality has in turn driven land and real estate value upward, creating a virtuous cycle of ecological optimisation, environmental improvement, asset appreciation, and resident benefit.

What are lessons we can learn from the city’s success?

Long: The first is innovative planning, integrating regional coordination, an evidence-based indicator system, and flexible zoning to ensure ecological priorities are embedded from the outset.

The second is an ecology-first development model that expands blue-green spaces, builds tiered residential and service systems, and ensures housing access for all. The third is a diversified green and low-carbon technology system spanning full-process green building standards, renewable energy, sponge city construction, and zero-carbon demonstration districts.

Together, these demonstrate that the key to sustainable urban development lies in treating ecological principles as a prerequisite rather than an afterthought and in building systems robust enough to sustain that commitment over time.

PLANNING FOR LIVEABLE ENVIRONMENT

The Eco-City is planned for intensive, efficient land use within a liveable and business-friendly environment, incorporating transit-oriented development principles to integrate land use and transport. Its residential planning follows a three-tiered structure. The basic unit is the Eco-Cell, roughly 400 m by 400 m — a comfortable walking distance. Four eco-cells form an eco-community, each with a community centre adapted from Singapore's neighbourhood centre concept. Several eco-communities make up an eco-district, of which there are five in the eco-city, each with its own amenities and workplaces.

22 sqkm

Total size of Tianjin Eco-City as of 2024

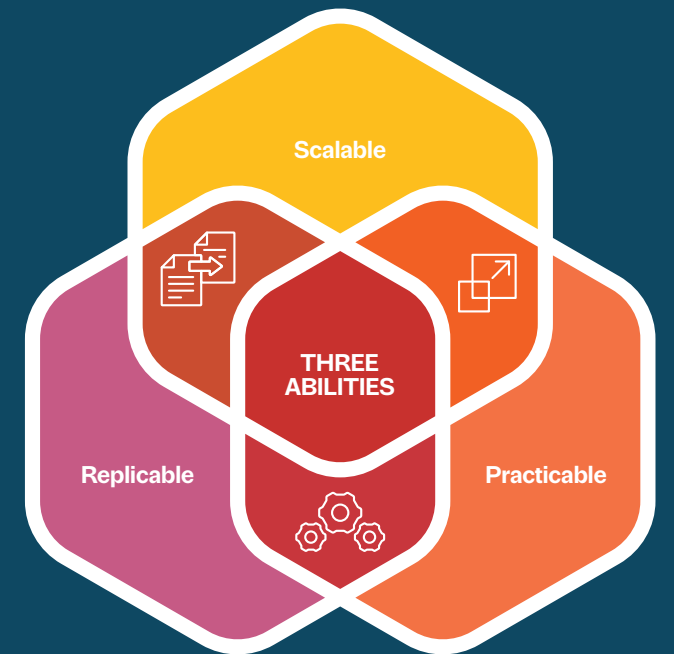
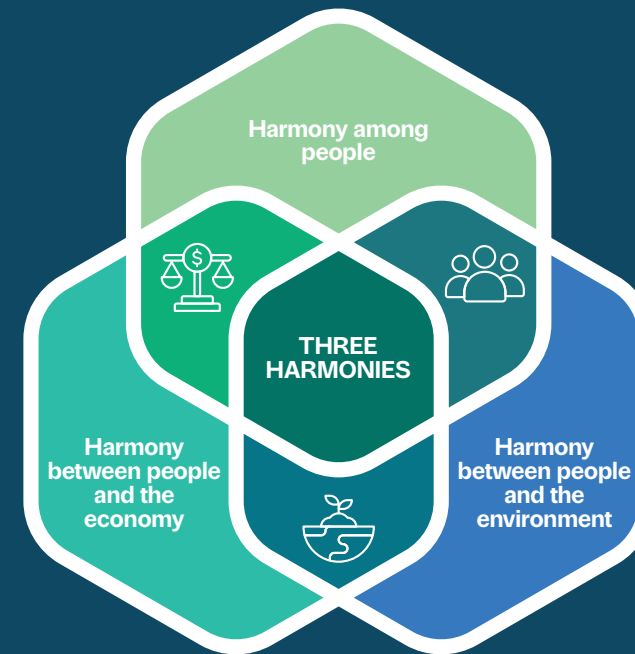
> 210,000

Number of residents living in Tianjin Eco-City

> 40

Number of urban parks in Tianjin Eco-City

Key principles guiding Tianjin Eco-city



Location of Tianjin Eco-City

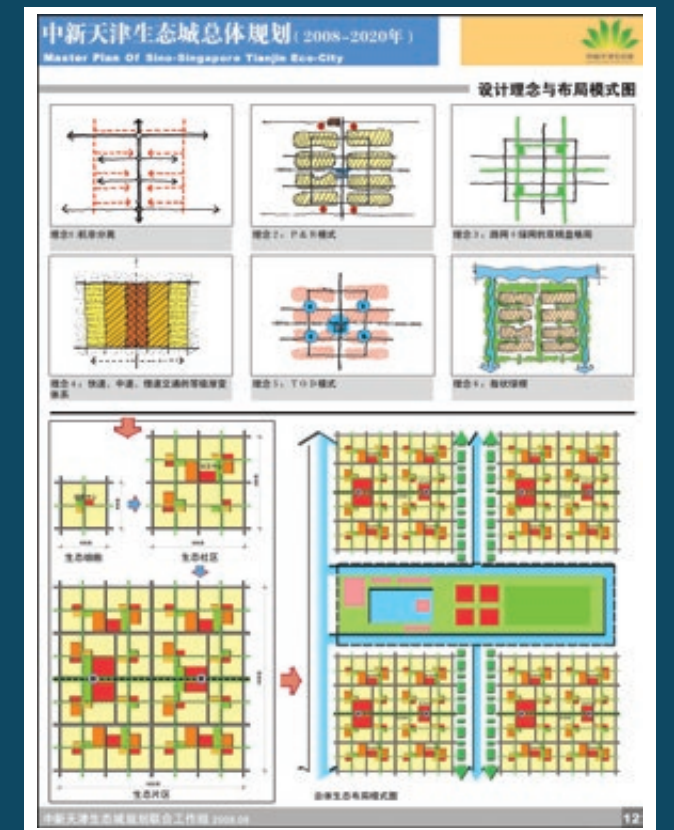
Images: Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Administrative Committee



Planning map



Master plan



Three-tier neighbourhood system

Restoring Qilihai Wetland

It took eight years with systemic governance and meticulous efforts — Tian Xiuqing, Director-General, Management Committee of Tianjin Qilihai Wetland Nature Reserve (七里海国家湿地自然保护区), share how the rehabilitation of Qilihai Wetland has benefitted not just its flora and fauna but has enriched the city and people’s lives too.

What makes the Qilihai Wetland special?

Xiuqing: It is one of the world’s three major ancient coastal wetlands and the only national nature reserve where an ancient coastline and a wetland coexist. Located at a core node of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, it supports 500,000 to 600,000 migratory birds annually across 258 recorded species. During migration season, it hosts 4,000 to 5,000 Oriental white storks — nearly half their global population — and has seen the return of rare species like the reed parrotbill and Chinese penduline tit after more than a decade’s absence.

The wetland also serves as a biological gene bank, home to 162 wild plant species, 47 wild fish species including icefish unseen for over 50 years, and a steadily reproducing milu deer population. Beyond wildlife, it performs critical ecological functions such as water conservation, flood regulation, carbon sequestration, and climate regulation, making it a vital ecological security barrier for the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.



Images: Information Office of Ninghe District People's Government, Tianjin

What strategies have driven its transformation?

Xiuqing: The restoration of the wetland was officially launched in 2017 and spans eight years. Its Ecological Protection and Restoration Plan has been implemented through four strategies.

The first is minimising human interference by transferring over 8,266 ha of core water surface and buffer zone land into centralised protection and management. The second is restoring the natural baseline through the “Ten Major Projects” — connecting 120 km of waterways, restoring 1,333 ha of vegetation, and creating 1,000 ha of shoals — expanding the water area by 50 per cent and vegetation coverage to 85 per cent.

The third is strengthening governance through a joint committee spanning multiple agencies, backed by an environmental tribunal and ecological procuratorial station, to ensure long-term law enforcement and sustainability.



The fourth is technological empowerment via a “space-air-ground” monitoring system using over 90 IoT devices, drone patrols, and bird voiceprint recognition, enabling round-the-clock precision management.

What has been the most significant impact of the transformation so far?

Xiuqing: Biodiversity has been systematically restored. Bird species have grown from 182 to 258, with annual migratory bird numbers nearly doubling to 500,000. The Oriental white stork population has reached 4,000 to 5,000 — nearly half the global population — while Eurasian spoonbills have grown from 1,500 to over 3,000. In 2025, spoonbills were observed nesting here for the first time, marking Qilihai’s transition from a transit station to a breeding ground.

Ecological quality has also fundamentally improved. Vegetation coverage has reached 86 per cent, water area has been restored to its historical peak, and negative oxygen ion concentrations have reached 10,000 per cubic cm.

The restoration has also established a model of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. Ninghe District has been designated a National Ecological Civilisation Demonstration Zone and recognised by the United Nations through its “Biodiversity Charming Cities” and “CitiesWithNature” initiatives. The value of wetland eco-products has surpassed RMB 15 billion (US\$2.2 billion), driving eco-agriculture and cultural tourism, with the Qilihai river crab brand alone exceeding RMB 500 million (US\$73.5 million) in brand value.

What key technologies and innovative practices were adopted?

Xiuqing: Natural recovery was prioritised, supplemented by targeted interventions including dredging 80 km of waterways, rejuvenating reed beds, restoring wetland

vegetation, and rewilding milu deer to activate the wetland’s self-healing capacity.

A modular ecological floating bird island spanning nearly 400 sqm was constructed from eco-friendly materials, providing roosting, foraging, and breeding zones.

In 2025, it attracted over 2,000 roosting terns and now hosts year-round residents including wild ducks and black-winged stilts.

A “wetland + low-altitude” drone monitoring model was also developed, integrating drones with biodiversity platforms for all-weather, automated patrols, the first such system for a national wetland nature reserve, unveiled at the 2024 World Intelligence Expo.

Finally, a distinctive wetland brand was built around bird-watching festivals, rotational reed harvesting, and science education, with high-value-added reed products developed in collaboration with enterprises to create a virtuous cycle of conservation and value creation.

What lessons can be drawn from the restoration efforts?

Xiuqing: Protection must come first. Firmly rejecting short-term development at the environment’s expense creates the foundational conditions for ecological recovery.

A holistic approach is essential. Simultaneous, system-wide interventions connecting waterways, restoring vegetation, creating shoals and recovering the biological chain drive qualitative transformation rather than piecemeal improvement.

Construction and management must receive equal emphasis. Long-term outcomes depend on sustained governance: joint prevention mechanisms, grid-based patrols, and round-the-clock monitoring prevent relapse and consolidate gains.

Technology enhances precision and efficiency. The integrated space-air-ground monitoring system has reduced labour costs by 60 per cent while enabling real-time monitoring and rapid response across the wetland’s vast expanse.

Finally, ecological value must be realised sustainably. Converting RMB 15 billion (US\$2.2 billion) in ecological value into development momentum through nature education, carbon sink accounting, and eco-product development establishes a virtuous cycle of protection, value addition, and reinvestment that supports long-term conservation.

Tianjin's other initiatives at a glance



Wudadao (五大道)

The heritage district of Wudadao has undergone a successful revitalisation by retaining its architectural identity while introducing modern amenities. This area, once at risk of losing its historical charm due to urbanisation, is now a vibrant cultural and commercial hub through conscious frameworks to preserve the urban texture, spatial scale and fabric.

Minyuan Stadium (民园体育场)

The stadium has been thoughtfully revitalised to maintain its architectural structure while adapting it for modern uses. Once a symbol of the city's sporting history, it has been transformed into a dynamic venue for cultural events, sports activities, and public gatherings, contributing to the city's lively public space network. This transformation has successfully turned the stadium into a key destination for the community, reinforcing Tianjin's identity as a city that creates dynamic public spaces that blend history with modernity.



Images: Tianjin Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd

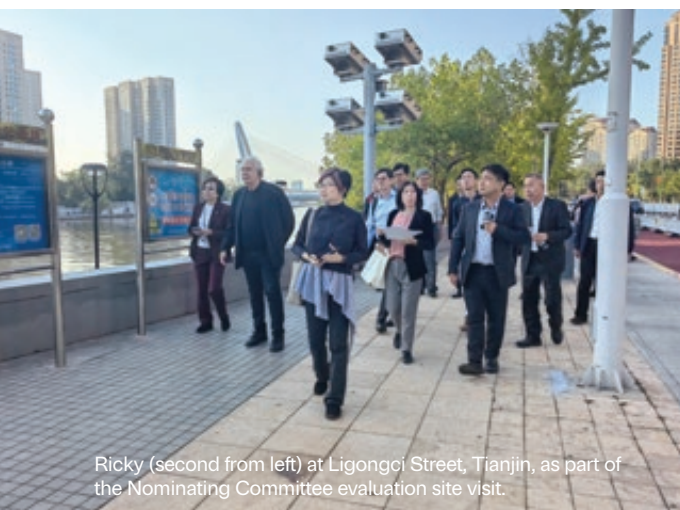
REFLECTION FROM NOMINATING COMMITTEE MEMBER:

Prof Ricky Burdett on bold leadership and inclusive cities

What makes the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize significant?

Ricky: The Prize's uniqueness stems from its comprehensive nomination and evaluation process.

Independent nominations create a level playing field, whilst extensive research and city visits enable in-depth assessment of cities' visions and their ability to deliver sustainable urban transformation.



Ricky (second from left) at Ligongci Street, Tianjin, as part of the Nominating Committee evaluation site visit.

Looking at past winners like Bilbao, New York, Suzhou, Mexico City and now London, what common threads do you observe in their approaches to urban transformation?

Ricky: In the cases of Bilbao, New York, Mexico City and London, the role of inspirational city leadership through a single or sequence of elected mayors has been transformational in setting bold and inspirational visions and delivering them on the ground.

In different ways, they have succeeded in addressing deep structural changes facing urban society in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, addressing de-industrialisation, social exclusion, democratic engagement and the challenges of climate change — key issues facing city governments globally.

What can we learn from London's unique governance structure and how do you see this further evolving?

Ricky: The fact that London, only 25 years ago, created an entirely new form of governance with the election of a directly elected mayor and the formation of the Greater London Assembly has ensured that the 9-million-person city has remained open and competitive despite major national and international crises. It has invested successfully in sustainable transport (the Elizabeth Line, congestion charge and Ultra Low Emission Zone) and land-use planning models (densification in well-connected areas) which address some of its deep-seated social, economic and environmental challenges.

Many of the 2026 cycle cities are not just expanding their public spaces, they are co-creating these with citizens. What does it mean to be a more inclusive city?

Ricky: At best, cities have always been places that accommodate people of difference and promote a sense of tolerance. But they can brutalise as well as humanise urban existence for their residents.

The continuity and accessibility of the public realm is an essential ingredient of 'good urban design' that supports democratic engagement, brings people together and can foster a sense of community.

Together with affordable housing, access to services and sustainable transport, these are the core elements of an inclusive city.

What are the biggest challenges and priorities that cities should focus on for the next 10 to 20 years?

Ricky: The biggest challenge over the next decades is to reverse the global negative trend of cities becoming more spatially fragmented, socially divided and environmentally destructive, where cities can learn from positive examples awarded the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize.



King's Cross in London. Image: John Sturrock

REFLECTION FROM NOMINATING COMMITTEE MEMBER:

Wong Mun Summ on building cities for people, with people

In this age of increasing urban complexities and challenges, what is the role and value of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize?

Mun Summ: What makes this Prize different is that it takes a holistic view of a city, not just in its built form, but socio-economically too. Has life genuinely improved for its people? Has the city become more equitable, more resilient? That's a much harder question than celebrating a single building or project, and a far more impactful one.

The Prize is named after Singapore's former Prime Minister, whose legacy showed that real transformation means tackling housing, education, economic opportunity, and social security together. You can't separate them. I also value its understanding that every city is different. There's no universal template. How a city identifies its own challenges and finds its own path is what makes the Prize a real learning platform for city leaders everywhere.

Looking at past Laureates, what common threads do you observe in their approaches to urban transformation?

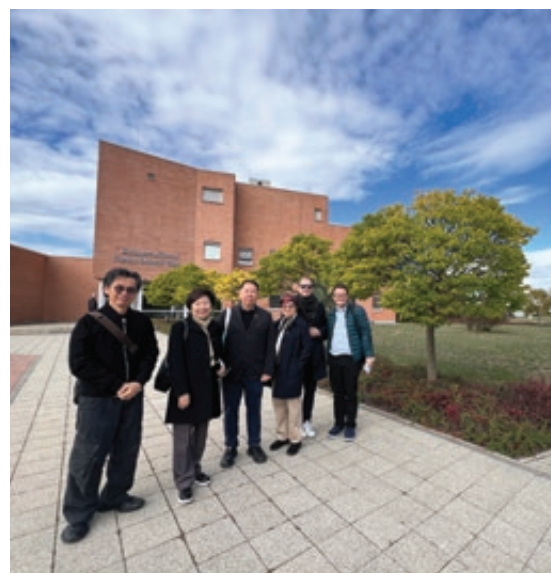
Mun Summ: The thread I keep coming back to is people-centred infrastructure. The cities we've recognised all understood that infrastructure exists to serve people, and that conviction shapes everything, from metro networks to how streets are designed for walking and community life.

London is a good illustration. The Elizabeth line didn't just add capacity; it connected major nodes and spurred regeneration in places like the Olympic Park and Canary Wharf. The Ultra Low Emission Zone has transformed air quality, while investment in cycling, walking, and the upcoming pedestrianisation of Oxford Street reflects a sustained commitment to reclaiming the city for people. King's Cross shows heritage-led regeneration at its best — public space and culture anchoring private investment.

Having visited Budapest as part of the evaluation process, what are lessons we can learn on making impactful changes with prudent resources?

Mun Summ: Budapest shows that constraint can sharpen thinking rather than limit it. With limited resources and limited political autonomy, the city has achieved remarkable transformation through ingenuity and systems thinking — unifying a fragmented tram network, upgrading multi-modal hubs, delivering the M4 metro line.

But equally impressive is the car-free Danube Embankment and converting streets into people-centred environments. None of this required large budgets. It required political will, community trust, and a clear sense of what the city should feel like.



Wong Mun Summ (far left) at Budapest's Central Waste Treatment Plant as part of the Nominating Committee evaluation site visit.

What are key lessons from the 2026 cycle cities?

Mun Summ: The most striking common thread is how seriously these cities have embraced participatory approaches. They're not imposing change top-down; they're building it with their communities. Antwerp's The Big Link project, once contested, now has former opponents actively participating. In Guangzhou, community-driven micro-regeneration improves historic neighbourhoods incrementally without displacement. The lesson is that the process is as important as the outcome.



A perspective showing the Ringparks as part of Antwerp's The Big Link. Image: Lantis

What are the biggest challenges and priorities for cities over the next 10 to 15 years?

Mun Summ: The widening gap in social and economic equity is the defining challenge, with housing affordability its most visible symptom. The second is reconciling density with liveability. These are not in opposition. Well-designed density can give more back to people and the environment than urban sprawl ever could. Underlying both is governance.

The hardest part isn't knowledge or technology; it's making decisions whose benefits are only felt in the long term. The capacity for committed governance with foresight is what will determine whether cities truly thrive in the decades ahead.

Keppel: Integrated solutions for cities of tomorrow

Loh Chin Hua, CEO and Executive Director of Keppel Ltd., shares how Keppel can help cities embrace integrated ecosystems and smart solutions for a more sustainable future.



Loh Chin Hua
CEO and Executive Director of Keppel Ltd.

“As a global asset manager and operator, Keppel provides many solutions that contribute to liveable, sustainable and connected cities. We are honoured to sponsor the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, which aims to inspire cities around the world and provide a platform for governments, companies and thought leaders to collaborate and share best practices.”

Given Keppel’s strong track record in the built environment, what can companies do to contribute to smarter and more sustainable cities?

Chin Hua: Cities today are shaped not just by the real estate and infrastructure they have, but by how well their systems work together. Energy, digital infrastructure and the built environment are becoming more interdependent. What matters going forward is not just having smarter assets, but more connected ones.

As a global asset manager and operator, with deep capabilities across infrastructure, real estate and connectivity, Keppel brings an integrated perspective to delivering these essential solutions, partnering cities not just in developing assets, but also in operating and optimising them as part of a resilient and sustainable urban ecosystem.

With cities responsible for around 70 per cent of global emissions, what are the practical ways to decarbonise the built environment?

Chin Hua: One of the key challenges to decarbonising the built environment is addressing the world’s ageing building stock. Demolition and redevelopment can be carbon-intensive and disruptive.

Keppel’s Sustainable Urban Renewal approach focuses on upgrading existing buildings through energy-efficient features, smart systems and operational improvements. This extends asset life while reducing emissions and disruption to tenants. By retaining and enhancing what is already built, it also supports a more circular approach to urban development, while driving value through improved asset quality, occupancy and long-term returns.

How can cities deliver and manage energy more effectively as demand continues to grow?

Chin Hua: As energy demand increases, cities need to improve how energy is delivered and managed while reducing emissions.

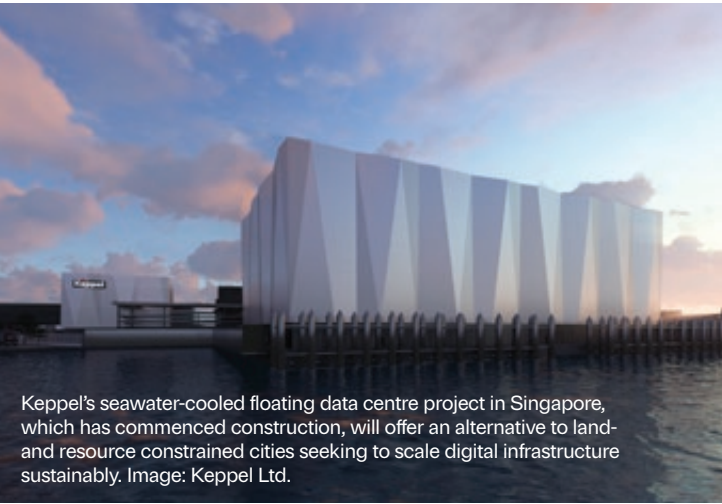
Keppel’s Energy-as-a-Service model addresses this by delivering cooling, smart energy management, distributed solar photovoltaic, and thermal and battery energy solutions on a subscription basis. This lowers upfront capital requirements, reduces barriers to adoption, and ensures systems continue to perform over time. These solutions can be deployed at both district and asset levels, allowing energy and cooling demand to be managed more effectively across the urban environment.

At the district level, aggregating cooling demand across multiple assets can improve efficiency by up to 40 per cent compared to conventional in-building chilled water systems.

We are seeing growing traction across cities in Asia, from district cooling for urban precincts to asset-level solutions for commercial developments. With centrally managed operations, these solutions can be optimised more consistently, providing a practical, reliable and scalable pathway to decarbonisation.



Set to achieve generation readiness in 1H 2026, the 600 MW Keppel Sakra Cogen Plant will be the first hydrogen-compatible power plant in Singapore, positioning Keppel ahead of the energy transition. Image: Keppel Ltd.



Keppel’s seawater-cooled floating data centre project in Singapore, which has commenced construction, will offer an alternative to land- and resource constrained cities seeking to scale digital infrastructure sustainably. Image: Keppel Ltd.

AI is transforming sectors and how cities operate. How is Keppel approaching this shift?

Chin Hua: We see our role in two dimensions — enabling AI and embedding AI.

As an integrated ecosystem player, we enable AI by providing cleaner energy, data centres and subsea connectivity solutions. These are capital-intensive assets that require the ability to mobilise long-term capital, such as through Keppel’s investment solutions spanning private funds and listed real estate or infrastructure trusts.

At the same time, we are embedding AI across our platforms, applying it in how assets are designed, managed and operated, drawing on data and domain expertise to generate better insights, improve performance and support more efficient decision-making.

Taken together, this positions Keppel as an AI-enabled asset manager while ensuring outcomes remain aligned with our investment and sustainability objectives.

How can sustainable urban development be scaled in a way that creates enduring value for cities, communities and investors?

Chin Hua: Scaling sustainable urban development depends on aligning long-term capital with projects that deliver both strong outcomes and sustained performance. Much of the value is created after assets are built through how they are operated and optimised over their lifecycle.

As a global asset manager and operator, Keppel focuses on improving performance across our portfolio, enabling capital to be deployed into essential solutions that meet the needs of cities and communities, while delivering strong risk-adjusted returns to our Limited Partners and investors.

Bilbao (2010 Laureate)

How did Bilbao continue to transform itself over the years despite changes in its leadership? The answer lies in its institutionalised process through a private non-profit entity known as Bilbao Ria 2000. It has effectively aligned government, business and community towards a shared vision, showing the power of public-private partnership, long-term planning and a well-integrated approach in driving urban transformation.

How
long-term
visions
and robust
governance
can drive



transformation



Before and after images of Abandoibarra in Bilbao, transformed from an obsolete industrial port area into a vibrant, cultural and economic hub. Images: City Council of Bilbao

How long term visions and robust governance can drive transformation

Seoul (2018 Laureate)

Moving from a bureaucratic city to an inclusive and innovative hub, Seoul has pivoted its focus with its visionary Seoul Plan 2030. A collaboration between citizens' groups, city council members, experts, city government officials and other stakeholders, the plan charted the city's future, categorised by key issues, and containing spatial structure and land use plans, regional plans and action plans. The process saw the formation of the Seoul Plan Citizens' Group, 100 citizens who were tasked with identifying the vision and key tasks for the city.



(Left) Mapo Culture Depot in Seoul, transformed from disused oil tanks into a cultural venue. Image: Seoul Metropolitan Government

(Below) Aerial view of Vancouver. Image: City of Vancouver



From ageing highway to memorable public space, the Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul has become a haven for locals and tourists. Image: Seoul Metropolitan Government



Vancouver (2012 Special Mention)

The city has demonstrated strong visioning, community values and long-term planning, contributing to a more liveable and vibrant city. Benefitting from an active citizenry bonded by a strong set of values, a succession of capable planning staff and progressive leadership, the city has been able to institutionalise key processes and continue the sustained implementation of their plans across the terms of several Mayors.

How long term visions and robust governance can drive transformation

Melbourne (2024 Special Mention)

Constantly ranked as one of the most liveable cities globally, Melbourne has sustained and enhanced its liveability through strong and robust governance. A key initiative is its Design Excellence Programme (2019-2030), an integrated effort with the industry and community featuring design competitions, awards, advisory panels that provide design advice and outreach that elevates architectural excellence to create quality environments for all.

Auckland (2016 Special Mention)

Auckland has overcome its planning challenges through a highly integrated and innovative governance model. It has strategically orchestrated the vision of 'One Mayor, One Council, One Plan' to amalgamate all the local territorial authorities into a unified 'Super City'. Its Auckland plan sets out a compelling and achievable vision for the city's regional spatial development for liveability and sustainability in the next 30 years.

Sydney (2016 Special Mention)

The city has demonstrated strong leadership, relentless commitment, and an excellent model for partnership with its citizens and stakeholders in the tackling of their urban challenges. Despite having limited regional power under State authority, the Lord Mayor Clover Moore and the City Council strategically and successfully aligned the city's work and institutionalised key strategic planning principles into their governance.

Mural at Upper West Side arts precinct as part of Melbourne's Flash Forward laneway initiative, converting neglected alleyways into vibrant spaces. Image: City of Melbourne



How creating and extending public spaces are bringing communities together



An example of 'Grätzloase', an activated public space in Vienna.
Image: Christian Fürthner

Vienna (2020 Laureate)

Successfully reinventing itself without losing its distinctive identity as the capital of culture, music and history, Vienna stands out for its extensive citizen participation and engagement in shaping many facets of the city. A key initiative is its 'Grätzloase' (Neighbourhood Oasis) that creates temporary public spaces throughout the city co-created with citizens. Since 2015, over 140 'Grätzloase' projects have created local havens throughout Vienna, with more than 700 activities staged including parties, workshops, sports events, communal dining and more.

Medellín (2016 Laureate)

From uncontrolled urban expansion to a model city for urban innovation, Medellín emphasises good governance, transparency, social security and a participative society, with a strong common focus on improving quality of life, especially in its poorest areas. A key initiative is its Circumvent Garden, where informal settlements were legalised and residents became active participants in contributing to the area. Public spaces were increased and the area was opened with more jobs and opportunities.

How seamless mobility is elevating people's quality of life

Mexico City (2024 Laureate)

Mexico City has made significant progress in improving the quality of life for its citizens. The city has addressed various challenges through creative solutions and visionary leadership. Its mobility transformation integrates transportation systems, introducing innovative solutions like the world's longest cable car line, modernised metro, and bike-share programmes, enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and sustainability for citizens and visitors.

Tokyo (2018 Special Mention)

Tokyo is a well-managed megacity that has transformed into a highly efficient, liveable and vibrant city through its urban blueprint and long-term investment in public transportation. Its exceptional public-private partnership model has produced successful urban development projects, such as the Otemachi-Marunouchi-Yurakucho District transformation.



The Cablebús Line 2 has revolutionised transportation in Mexico City's Iztapalapa district, reducing commute times from over two hours to just 25 minutes. Image: Mexico City Government

How inclusive cities are opening new opportunities

Suzhou (2014 Laureate)

Besides meeting multiple challenges of balancing economic growth with protection of cultural and built heritage, Suzhou has introduced innovative social policies to ensure fair and equal treatment for all for a sustained future. Migrant workers receive equal access to health and education benefits, promoting community integration and social stability.



A community gathering in Suzhou, where it takes care of its citizens.
Image: The People's Government of Suzhou Municipality



Through training programmes and platforms for home-based enterprises, Surabaya has created a self-help and sustainable local economy. Image: City of Surabaya

Yokohama (2014 Special Mention)

Yokohama's collaboration with stakeholders and citizens is an admirable model, achieving significant transformation despite privately held land. The city negotiated with stakeholders to develop the waterfront business district, Minato Mirai 21. The city negotiated with stakeholders to free up land for downtown development and concluded agreements with the community to implement good urban design and coordinate development actions in the entire district.

Kazan (2018 Special Mention)

Kazan leveraged on international sporting events and broad-based infrastructural upgrades with a focus on health, nutrition, and greenery to quickly improve the health of its people, elevate its quality of life and become the country's sports capital. In 2016, Kazan adopted the 'Kazan 2030 Strategy' for social and economic development. The strategy emphasises on healthy lifestyles, while increasing the share of population engaged in physical activities and sports up to 50 per cent and life expectancy to 76 years by 2030.

Surabaya (2018 Special Mention)

Surabaya has successfully preserved and developed its kampung neighbourhoods while experiencing rapid economic growth. The city's Kampung Improvement Programme has transformed these areas into clean and productive environments. Through training programmes and creating platforms for existing home-based enterprises to showcase their products, Surabaya helped to create a self-help and sustainable local economy and improved household incomes.

Toronto (2016 Special Mention)

As a diverse city with a population of nearly 50 per cent non-native Canadians, Toronto has successfully implemented social integration strategies, embracing diversity through initiatives such as the Toronto Public Library's newcomer settlement programmes. The library is more than just a regular library; it takes on an important community-building role through its extensive 100 branches across the city, providing easy access points to a full range of facilities that cater to different groups of the society.



As part of Rio de Janeiro's Porto Maravilha's revitalisation, its elevated highway was removed, making way for a pedestrianised boulevard reconnecting the city to its waterfront, anchored by the Museum of Tomorrow.

How cities are reinventing themselves with sensitive rejuvenation

Rio de Janeiro (2024 Special Mention)

The city has made bold moves to redefine its central area and waterfront, moving away from decades of a mono-functional downtown and suburban sprawl — a legacy from its historical development since the 1980s. Through strategic implementation of innovative land transfer policies, financing mechanisms and an evidence-based programming approach, the city is poised to shift public mindsets and set in a motion a transformation towards a more attractive, liveable, and vibrant downtown.



Brisbane

(2012 Special Mention)

For over two decades, the city's sustained initiatives have successfully revived local economies and inner-city living by regenerating derelict industrial sites and revitalising the city's neglected riverfront. The focus of has been on the inner city, an area within a five-km ring around and including the Central Business District (CBD). Former industrial and warehouse areas in the CBD fringe and along the Brisbane River are now highly attractive, lively neighbourhoods of mixed-use that embrace and enhance the area's industrial built heritage.

(Left) View of Brisbane River. Image: Brisbane City Council

(Below) Overview of Hamburg. Image: City of Hamburg

Hamburg (2018 Special Mention)

Hamburg continues to reinvent itself with successful rejuvenation efforts, catering for increased demand for housing and urban mobility. A key example is its HafenCity. A former industrial brownfield site, it was transformed from a former underused harbour to a dynamic mixed-use district. It is realised through an innovative governance structure and a unique land sales programme.



How cities are reinventing themselves with sensitive rejuvenation

New York City (2012 Laureate)

Embracing its complexity, density and diversity, the city witnessed a marked increase in the quality of life in a short span of time. Recognising the importance of improving existing urban systems and creating new public infrastructure at the city-wide level to secure its future, the city takes the lead in strategic capital investment to generate catalytic benefits for the city. Examples include the High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park, repurposed from an industrial waterfront into a dynamic and sustainable park.



(Above) Brooklyn Bridge Park on Brooklyn's East River shoreline is a revitalisation of the area's post-industrial waterfront. Image: NYC Department of Parks & Recreation

(Right) A vibrant sidewalk in Praça do Duque de Saldanha, Lisbon, as part of the efforts to create more attractive public spaces. Image: Pedro Serranito

Lisbon (2020 Special Mention)

The city's strategic urban interventions and mobility measures have resulted in significant physical transformation and improved public realm experiences. There are many catalytic projects implemented along the riverfront, such as the new Cruise Terminal, pedestrianisation of a major arterial road along the waterfront, and removal of a surface carpark at the waterfront into the extremely popular Comercio Square. These projects helped to stitch the city core back to the river and created an attractive recreational corridor that continues to catalyse improvement and rejuvenation works along the waterfront.





Wellington's Zealand Ecosanctuary has been have restored to its pre-human state over the past 30 years. Image: Zealandia

How cities equip themselves to create more sustainable futures

Wellington (2024 Special Mention)

The city stands out for its steadfast dedication to conserving and restoring natural habitat in both urban and natural areas through innovative programmes. Wellington's success stems from extensive citizen engagement and involvement in rewilding efforts, promoting environmental conservation, social cohesion, and community spirit — an exemplary model for harmonious urban-nature coexistence.



Over the span of a few decades, Copenhagen transformed their once-polluted industrial harbour into a popular spot where locals and visitors enjoy swimming in clean water. Image: City of Copenhagen

Boston (2020 Special Mention)

The city has carried out holistic and cumulative efforts on climate resilience, improving housing affordability and mobility options, and fostering civic participation, as exemplified through the completion of multiple projects with significant transformative effects. Boston's future readiness is most significantly highlighted in its innovative and tailored solutions to overcome its vulnerability to flooding as a dense city with 75 km of coastline.

Copenhagen and Malmö (2012 Special Mentions)

Both cities have close collaboration at government and business levels, and a shared vision of a holistic set of economic, environmental and socially sustainable goals. Widely recognised as two of the most sustainable cities in the world, both cities continue to push for even more sustainable developments through active dialogues and with a clear vision and a strong commitment to integrated and comprehensive strategic long-term planning.

How cities equip themselves to create more sustainable futures

Cape Town (2024 Special Mention)

The city has adeptly managed climate change repercussions and other disasters, addressing their implications for daily life and future sustainability. Overcoming the challenges of a severe water crisis from 2017 to 2018, and the COVID-19 pandemic, Cape Town successfully adopted an agile governance approach to swiftly build and deliver rapid, effective systemic responses to extreme events.



Cape Town's "Day Zero" campaign rallied people together to overcome the city's most severe water shortage in 2017 and 2018.
Image: City of Cape Town

Ahmedabad (2012 Special Mention)

The city is recognised has developed a comprehensive City Development Plan to transform India's seventh largest city into a more liveable, equitable and sustainable metropolis. A key effort is the redevelopment of its Kankaria Lake. This former dilapidated and polluted royal bathing ground is now a vibrant cultural and recreation centre after implementation of practical solutions to improve the environment, organise traffic movement and rehabilitate the food vendors.

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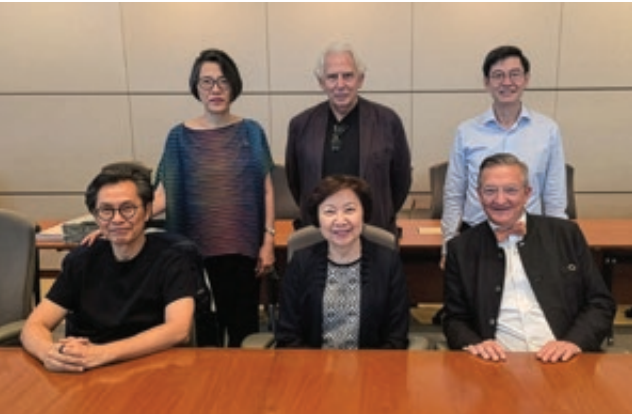
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