

Urban Doers Community

FRAGMENT AS

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Abstract

Fragment, a Norwegian architecture and consultancy firm specialising in community-focused and nature-based citizenship, architecture, landscape design and urban planning, has developed the “Endlessly Rebuildable” concept. “Endlessly Rebuildable” focuses on creating adaptive and sustainable urban spaces. This initiative empowers communities to actively participate in designing and continually redesigning public spaces, such as parklets and pocket parks. The goal is to foster community engagement, adaptability, and resilience by putting citizen co-creation in the centre and treating these areas as dynamic urban “living rooms” and cherished public spaces that can evolve with changing needs and preferences.

The “Endlessly Rebuildable” concept involves a participatory process where residents collaborate with architects to co-create and regularly update their local environments. This process not only allows for practical improvements, such as adjusting layouts to better serve community functions but also builds skills in design and construction, as well as in co-creation processes, among participants. It aims to create a strong sense of ownership and empowerment within the community, encouraging broader participation in local governance and sustainable development practices.

A key pilot project of this concept is in the process of seeking funding in order to be launched at Hersleb High School in Oslo, in an area characterised by its multicultural population and economic challenges. Over a two-year period, Fragment aims to work closely with students, teachers, and community members to transform the street outside the school into a flexible community space by implementing the designs and the participatory process insights that were developed during the “Urban Doers” project.

This pilot will include a series of workshops and co-creation sessions, where participants will explore design possibilities, construct initial installations, and periodically evaluate and adjust the space based on feedback and observed usage. The pilot will also share its learnings from community co-creation, high school student engagement and designing-for-redesigning into practical guidelines to ensure a wider uptake of our ideas.

Key lessons:

1. The cycle for co-creation and redesign shouldn't necessarily be annual, to avoid "participation burnout" and a feeling of chaos, as well as keeping costs of participatory meetings and rebuilds low enough to be realistic. A high school setting is a bit particular, with its high turnover of students, and can support a more intense cycle of design and redesign.
2. The long-term governance of these co-created installations will seem too costly, if it is simply measured against conventional public procurement and one-off cost of purchasing of street furniture. Being able to document and tell a wider story of community impact on topics such as public health is key. More work is needed to develop practical metrics to support this.
3. Cross-domain learning facilitates speedy innovation; in our case it has been useful that we have worked with wood-based architecture and floor plans that are changeable over time.
4. Everyone agrees that co-creation and community participation is important but few are able to, feel comfortable, and have training and experience in being truly inclusive, especially when it comes to involving "unusual" or "difficult" community members. There are many toolkits for participatory activities, but often the workshop facilitators themselves are not sufficiently trained in how to accommodate and involve complex user groups, so tools or trainings for this would be useful to develop.
5. Being part of the DUT community has been very inspiring as it has been a showcasing of a spectacular range of initiatives across Europe, and we hope that there will be many more opportunities to collaborate with these initiatives in the future.

HOW "ENDLESSLY REBUILDABLE" PUBLIC SPACES CAN CREATE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Imagine living in a vibrant neighbourhood where every park, bench, flowerbed or tree tells a story of neighbours coming together, and where neighbours co-create, co-explore and co-build their greener, regenerative and circular future. This is the inspiration behind Fragment's "Endlessly Rebuildable" concept.

Fragment is a Norwegian architecture and consultancy firm based in Oslo, widely acknowledged as a strong and progressive voice for nature-based and community-centred citizenship, architecture, landscape and urban planning. Over the last few years, we have been pushing the agenda of "endlessly rebuildable" concepts in many of these spheres.

As participants of the Urban Doers' programme, we have focused on exploring, discussing and refining these concepts by focusing on urban landscape solutions in the form of parklets, pocket parks and other related initiatives.

In 2022, Fragment played a key role in the development and involvement around turning Grønland Street into a green space that gained international recognition.



Figure 1: The parklets in Grønland Street, Oslo have focused on combining nature based materials and design, ample seating, native plants and extensive dialogue with local businesses. Source: Jan Khur

This work, in collaboration with SLA Architects, involved extensive outreach to businesses in the street to incorporate their wishes and needs into plans and designs approved by the Planning and Building Agency (PBE) of the Municipality of Oslo. This is one of the reasons the project is considered very successful and has been continued by the new city council.

From other projects the Fragment team has participated in, we have found that young people show great interest in participating in concrete projects that provide hands-on experience and give youth the opportunity to be positive role models in their neighbourhood. We know that when we open the door to engagement and participation, many find this motivating, and feedback from young people who have participated in such processes is that they look back on this as something that shaped them as adults, even years later.



Figure 2: Students at Hersleb High School in Oslo are urban doers creating community spaces while learning practical life skills and gaining work experience. Source: Julie Hrnčirova

The work we have done with the Urban Doers programme therefore fits very well our goal to always be bold, brave and ahead of the pack, which also directly addresses the DUT partnership's ambitions to promote participatory governance models that involve citizens in the decision-making processes by ensuring that urban transitions are inclusive and reflect the needs and aspirations of citizens coming from all walks of life.

A vision for community-building when the community builds

The initial idea of our “endlessly rebuildable” concept, was that through participatory processes, neighbours would have the opportunity to continually rethink, improve and change their local parklet, it being a reclaimed community space that can be likened to a blank canvas for innovation. One year the space might be used for a vegetable garden, the next the community might want to reconfigure part of it to host a picnic table. The year after, the community might have learned that the table isn't long enough and would receive more afternoon sun if it would be moved to another spot.

In this process, the neighbours would also gain important skills in collaborating, co-creating, working together with local municipal stakeholders, get practical skills in building, maintaining and redesigning a wood installation. The most important impact that we foresaw, would be a more resilient neighbourhood, with a strong sense of empowerment of being able to impact their surroundings, and that also over time has developed a strong agency to be positive change makers in their community. We also believe that this has a potential to lead to increased participation in other walks of life, - from possibly joining other community organisations to higher participation in local and regional elections. This process would particularly be important for vulnerable and marginalised communities that are not used to their voice being heard.

From our experience, we have seen that any community group that can be considered vulnerable or marginalised, can become a resource for the community if we adapt our approaches and see every person as equal, useful and knowledgeable, - all worthy of our time. For instance, we have worked with mobilising immigrants with limited communication skills or shared language with the locals. We have a history of mobilising high school dropouts and turning them into community assets by providing an arena for them to contribute meaningfully - them also learning useful life skills in the process.

We have even engaged local drug dealers into becoming a sort of custodians of community spaces; - by entering in dialogue with them and ensuring that we had no intention of forcing anyone to leave (as that would be far outside of our scope, role or responsibility), and that we could broker a kind of unofficial agreement that they would vacate the space in question during the afternoon hours when local kids would be most likely to be in the area.

The “Endlessly rebuildable” idea came about to find ways that the community can be involved, long-term, in how public spaces are shaped. We imagine a street that is being redesigned by the municipality to facilitate traffic reduction, and a parklet system is planned. Traditionally there would be little consultation with the public in how the solution is designed, and that consultation would be a once-off process that leads to a permanent solution that may last 5, 10 or 50 years and where later citizens have no say in the design.

Fragment wants to challenge this by seeing these public spaces as shared living rooms that we should have the opportunity to refurnish if and when our needs change.

A YEAR OF EXPERIMENTING, LEARNING AND EVOLVING

The Urban Doers project year has allowed us to explore a range of knowledge-enhancing activities that contribute to us building a stronger case for the rapid uptake and implementation of such nature-based and community-centred rebuildable solutions.

Fragment has executed expert interviews, explored practical design solutions, piloted participatory tools and methodologies for community co-creation and co-governance, we have set our experiment into a greater context including architecture and urban planning to explore systemic impact, and are in the process of acquiring funding for a two-year pilot.

Learning from experts

Fragment conducted a series of interviews with Oslo-based experts on public space to explore the relationship between community engagement and urban interventions such as parklets and pocket parks. The interview process had as a starting point the framework for public space that Jan Gehl has developed, and which is the key metric for evaluating public spaces that the Municipality of Oslo uses.

Gehl originally uses 7 aspects (urban economy, arts & culture, mobility, people, architecture and innovation). To better address current and emerging perspectives, Fragment has added 5 new aspects (public health & wellbeing, democracy & citizenship, housing & community, knowledge & skills, and circular economy & material use, giving a total of 12 urban factors that we believe a municipality should consider when developing their strategies.

Experts were then selected to reflect these urban factors. The experts came from different fields, some were researchers or academic specialists, while others represented local businesses, NGOs and other civil society initiatives.

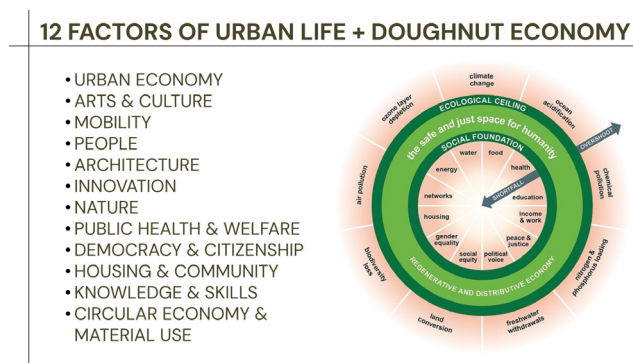


Figure 4: Innovation in public space can address many perspectives of urban life and sustainability. Source: FRAGMENT

The interviews were executed on-site of municipal parklet pilot projects in Oslo that Fragment has been involved in, and we used the “doughnut economy” framework to guide the conversations, to ensure that we would uncover and explore the impacts of these kinds of projects both in the social and natural realms.

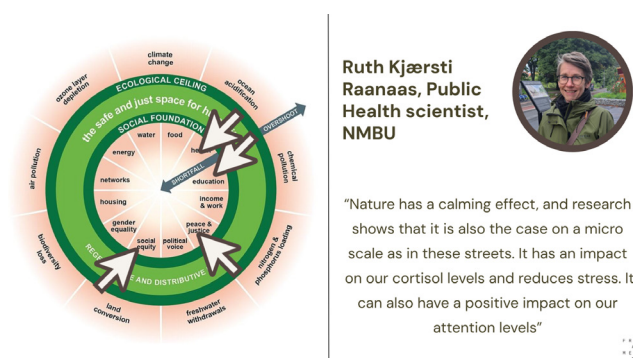


Figure 5: Public health research shows us the major impact of minor changes to our surroundings. Source: FRAGMENT

Bringing in viewpoints on topics such as gentrification, mental health, social entrepreneurship, climate adaptation and circular economy has been very useful in developing a storyline of the importance of and impact of community involvement in these seemingly small initiatives. The municipality of Oslo was presented with a copy of the report on interviews, and found it to address many of their key challenges, especially in terms of learning to better communicate complex positive impacts of nature-based urban interventions.

A visual summing-up of the interviews, and the “doughnut economy” impacts that the experts identified in the pilots we visited, demonstrates the massive systemic impact of such initiatives, and a need to better share these stories, also to address the backlashes against such initiatives that many cities have experienced.

SUMMING UP THE “DOUGHNUT CONVERSATIONS”

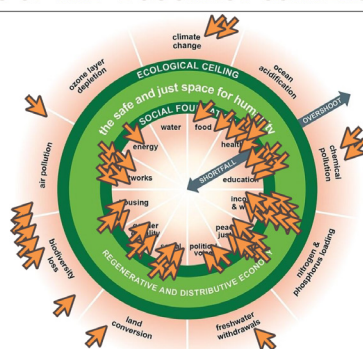


Figure 6: summing up visually the manifold impacts of small urban interventions, reflecting impacts on social and natural dimensions. Source: FRAGMENT

The learnings from these interviews have been shared in various presentations and workshops over the last year, inspiring audiences beyond the original target group of the project.

Design experiments

Fragment has a long track record of wood-based design, and how to design for adaptability. In-house discussions and collaborations lead us to explore different types of “lego-ish” designs; ways that we can work with wood to make the designs able to be reconfigured over time. This was done by developing a set of interlocking designs, that are sturdy and safe on a day-to-day basis but where simple plugs can unlock the design and make it possible to take it apart and rebuild it.

We also took care to design the interlocking elements so that the elements are of a size and weight dimension that they can be lifted and moved around with relative ease and without being a hazard for people. Finally, we also took great care to ensure that formal regulatory requirements (health and safety, etc) have been followed.

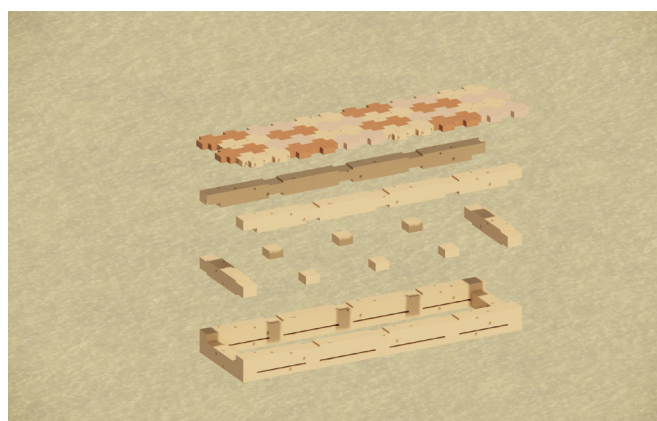


Figure 7: A peek into the creative design process, exploring ways a solid wood structure could be dismantled, reconfigured and rebuilt over time. Source: FRAGMENT

Using wood as our main building material is sustainable and durable. If planned carefully, we can “plan for circularity” in terms of not just the materials used but also designs adapted to standard lengths that are easy to find 2nd hand and that can also be re-used by others afterwards, if needed.

Exploring participatory methodologies

During the “Urban Doers” year, Fragment has executed a wide range of community workshops, and has lectured on topics of participation, participation and co-building in Norway and abroad. We have developed guidelines for participatory processes for community gardens that builds on many of the same principles as those we describe here. This continuous work, along with experimenting with and refining tools and methodologies also feeds nicely into the processes of developing our concepts’ core idea and implementation.

Participating in the various DUT platforms, meetings and events, online and offline, has also provided excellent opportunities to learn from the tools and practices that other “urban doers” use in their work.

“ENDLESSLY REBUILDABLE”; FROM IDEA TO PILOT

Fragment is currently collaborating with a local high school to start a two-year long pilot to be executed in collaboration with teachers and students. Through practical co-creation workshops, both students and architects from Fragment will learn about each other and the neighbourhood’s needs in order to find solutions that are “beautiful, sustainable and together” to use the “New European Bauhaus” guiding terms. The project collaboration is pending getting funding that will cover the process.

The school in question is Hersleb high school, a school located in the downtown residential district of Grønland in Oslo, only a couple of hundred meters from Fragment’s offices. This area is known for its multicultural vibe, - but is also the area in all of Norway with the highest poverty rates and one of the highest high school dropout rates. The school has students from all across Oslo but about 1/3 of the students reside in the school’s vicinity. Across all of Oslo, Hersleb is the school with the second lowest grade point average upon admission.

The high school has top notch facilities and a very motivated staff, but still struggles to provide a good learning experience for students that often have already fallen far behind, in academic terms, many years prior to entering this high school. This is partly due to the local demographics, this being an area that houses a lot of recent immigrants and low-income families, but also from an admissions system that funnels students with better grades into more prestigious schools.

In spite of all the challenges that this school sees, the principal and her staff are very actively looking for innovative partnership with the community and for alternative ways to facilitate academic learning and life skill training for their students. They see these partnerships as effective ways to gain visibility as a hub for innovation, showcasing that resources can be found in all segments of society, and for general positive promotion of the school, - which repeatedly has received a lot of negative press coverage.

Over the years, Fragment has participated, directly and indirectly, in various collaborations with Hersleb. The school was a pilot for a student-led process where youth took concrete steps to improve the school yard, so as to make it a more welcoming space for students during the day but also facilitating its active use in afternoon and evening by neighbours of all ages. This process early uncovered that the youth wanted more seats, more greenery and more colours. As a result of this process, youth built sturdy and colorful seating on wheels that also could be moved around the school yard depending on where people would want seating. The building process was overseen by skilled mentors from the social enterprise Makers’ Hub. These early pilot projects were run by Nabolagshager which has since then become incorporated in Fragment.



Figure 8: Students at Hersleb High School in Oslo are urban doers creating community spaces while learning practical life skills and gaining work experience. Source: Julie Hrnčirova

The youth projects have also experimented with various placemaking activities to explore how both the schoolyard and the road outside of the school can better serve the community. The experiments have included sports such as ping-pong competitions, art installations, community barbeques and family oriented games - all coordinated by students from Hersleb.

Part of these processes has been to train youth in participatory mappings and methods to facilitate their peers' engagement and involvement in the processes. These experiments have allowed students that may otherwise be considered "marginalised", to become community champions that are recognised by peers, neighbours and others as important and positive resources for the community as a whole.

In collaborating with the municipality in the execution of some of these pilot activities, the youth have also demonstrated that the street in question is very apt for being developed as a community space, opening the door to further experimenting.

From the school year of 2023/2024 the school has been allocated a prestigious specialisation track in "art, design and architecture" (ADA) over all three years. It is the third of its kind in Oslo, the two other schools that offer it have among the highest GPA scores in Oslo. The newly hired teachers of this programme are excited to work with innovative partners and have been very enthusiastic about the opportunity to collaborate with Fragment to pilot our "Endlessly rebuildable" concept. In addition to the ADA teachers we have also connected to "regular" teachers, especially the Human Geography teacher has expressed strong interest in using a collaboration with us to explore participatory exercises, community mappings etc with his students. This sets the stage for a very rewarding and innovative collaboration for Fragment, students, teachers, school officials and the community.

Through practical co-creation workshops, both students and architects learn about each other and the neighbourhood's needs and find good solutions. The project also puts Hersleb on the map in Oslo as a role model for inclusion and co-creation, serving as inspiration for other schools.

2-year pilot implementation plan

Below is our proposed two-year structure for co-designing, co-building, evaluating, co-governing, and co-improving a youth-focused process. If funding is not secured in time for the proposed starting date, the plan B is to postpone the project until next year;

Organisation of Work

The work will be led by Fragment, who will be responsible for project implementation, workgroup follow-up, as well as financial management and reporting to relevant authorities and funding agencies.

A project workgroup will be established, including a project manager from Fragment (Arild Eriksen/Helene Gallis or another employee from Fragment), a representative from the administration at Hersleb (Marianne Bauger Morck), and minimum 1 representative from the ADA/ Human Geography teachers.

Progress Plan

- Start: August 2024
- End: August 2026

Key Milestones:

- September 2024: Co-creation process with the first group of students begins
- April 2025: Construction of version 1.0
- June 2025: Evaluation of experiences from the first project year
- September 2025: Co-creation process with the second group of students begins
- April 2026: Redesign to version 2.0
- June 2026: Evaluation of experiences from the second project year

Detailed Progress Plan (August 2024 - August 2026)

FR = Fragment

HV = Hersleb High School

AUGUST 2024

- FR: Ongoing project coordination and financial management
- FR+HV: Detailed project planning and coordination between Fragment and Hersleb VGS
- FR: Finalise agreed project plan and detailed progress plan for the school year 2024/2025

SEPTEMBER 2024

- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 1 (Design), full day
- Explore why such physical meeting places can be important in a neighbourhood. What functions can they include, and what do different users need? How do needs change throughout the day/week/year?
- Design materials in a sustainability context.
- Explore practical limitations around a future redesign process of the elements.
- Agree on purpose, location, format, size, facilities (planting? Hammocks? Tables?)

- Discuss and refine draft design for the pilot
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 1

OCTOBER 2024

- FR: Planning and permits
- FR: Adjust pilot design based on user feedback and municipal requirements, and stay within the material budget.
- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 2 (Design), full day
- Explore materials, surfaces, discuss sustainable choices in everyday life and the project
- Choose colours and finishes
- Explore ways each student year can leave their “signature” on the project.
- Agree on the final design
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 2

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2024

- FR: Detailed planning of the construction phase, coordination with the municipality, permits from PBE, etc.
- FR: Develop student manuals for construction/assembly

JANUARY 2025

- FR+HV: Test the manual with students, make any adjustments.
- FR: Finalise construction/assembly manuals

APRIL 2025

- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 3 (Construction/Assembly) of version 1.0
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 3

JUNE 2025

- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 4 (Evaluation)
- FR: Evaluation and collection of experiences so far to ensure even better processes in year 2.
- What worked/didn't work regarding co-creation workshops
- How was the collaboration with teachers/integration into the curriculum and school activities?
- How was student mobilisation for participation?
- How is the installation received - is it used?
- Ideas for improvements and adjustments.
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 4

AUGUST 2025

- FR+HV: Detailed project planning and coordination between Fragment and Hersleb VGS
- FR: Finalise agreed project plan and detailed progress plan for the school year 2025/2026

SEPTEMBER 2025

- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 5 (Design/Redesign) of version 2.0, full day
- Explore why such physical meeting places can be important in a neighbourhood. What functions can they include, and what do different users need? How do needs change throughout the day/week/year?
- Explore the room for action and practical limitations, based on the design developed the previous year.
- Agree on adjusted purpose, location, format, size, facilities (planting? Hammocks? Ping pong table?)
- Discuss and refine version 1.0
- FR: Make major and minor adjustments to design 1.0, based on input and experiences.
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 5

OCTOBER 2025

- FR: Follow up with PBE/possible adjustments to permits from the municipality
- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 6 (Design/Redesign), half-day
- Explore materials, surfaces, discuss sustainable choices in everyday life and the project
- Explore ways each student year can leave their "signature" on the project.
- Agree on guidelines for final design 2.0
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 6

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2025

- FR: Detailed planning of reconstruction/maintenance
- FR: Update manuals for construction - reconstruction/maintenance

APRIL 2026

- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 7 (Reconstruction/Maintenance) of version 2.0, full/half-day
- FR: Summarise Co-Creation Workshop 7

JUNE 2026

- FR+HV: Co-Creation Workshop 8 (Evaluation)
- FR: Evaluation and collection of experiences so far.

- What worked/didn't work regarding co-creation workshops.
- How was the collaboration with teachers/integration into the curriculum and school activities?
- How was student mobilisation for participation?
- How is the installation received - is it used?
- Ideas for improvements and adjustments.
- Evaluate maintenance needs moving forward and what the municipality should take responsibility for vs. what the school may want to continue.
- Decide if the project can and should continue, and if so, in what form and project organisation under which unit.
- FR: Summarize Co-Creation Workshop 8

AUGUST 2026

- FR: Project evaluation, compile experiences.
- Create a concise project guide

CONCLUSIONS

The "Urban Doers" year has been important in that it has allowed Fragment to work on developing the "Enlessly Rebuildable" idea from a vague concept into a detailed project plan ready for implementation.

It has been a good case to bring different skills and knowledge sets, both from our in-house colleagues but also to all the external stakeholders that have been involved to some degree in this process. This is especially true of the various experts that we interviewed to explore the potential that parklets hold to address social and natural challenges and objective as described in the Doughnut methodology. The doughnut graph summing up these conversations stand as a solid testament to the manifold impacts that these public spaces have a potential to fulfil, if we would raise our ambition level, dare to involve people, and tell a wider story of impact.

Meeting the other Urban Doers and hear about their projects, processes, ideas and insights has inspired us to challenge the concept as we first saw it, into a more concrete and doable concept ready for implementation.