

# Urban Doers Community

Groupe One - Recyclerie

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## Imprint

### **Driving Urban Transitions Partnership**

Website: <https://dutpartnership.eu/>

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### **Design and Layout**

Front page: HAUS

Text: Tina Cihal

### **Photo credit**

Front page: In order of appearance: Johannes Riegler, purchased image from iStock, Mariborska kolesarska mreža, Barkarby Science AB, Jan Khur, Julie Hrnčirova, Supergrätzl Lichtental

November 2024

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## Abstract

Groupe One's "Circular Economy Hall" project aims to transform waste and resource reuse in Brussels, addressing urban challenges such as waste management, reducing the carbon footprint, providing local economic support, education and awareness, and enhance urban resilience. The project proposes an innovative solution for urban development that highlight sustainability and circular economy practices.

The Circular Economy Hall can be considered as a shopping centre dedicated to circularity, bringing together actors in the circular and social economy sectors under one roof. This facility will offer citizens a single point for processing, repairing, and buying reused goods, simplifying waste management and encouraging the adoption of circular economy practices. By centralising these services, the Hall aims to create a more efficient and user-friendly system for managing and reusing resources, thereby reducing the overall environmental impact.

The project's vision extends beyond waste management. It aims to create a collaborative ecosystem that unites local actors, public authorities, and the Region of Brussels. This collaboration is intended to foster the creation of sustainable jobs, promote innovation, and raise public awareness on environmental issues. By doing so, the Hall also addresses social inequalities by providing accessible and affordable goods to all citizens (even the more precarious).

However, the implementation of the Circular Economy Hall faces challenges. Securing funding is one of the primary obstacles, as the project requires substantial investment to cover HR costs, infrastructure development, and ongoing operational expenses. Finding a suitable site is another major challenge. The urban context of Brussels makes it hard to find appropriate spaces available, and those that are available often require costly renovations. Additionally, developing a sustainable business model that balances social, environmental, and economic objectives is complex.

Despite these obstacles, Groupe One remains determined to bring this ambitious project to achievement. Collaboration with stakeholders is essential to overcome the challenges and ensure the project's success. This includes engaging with local authorities, businesses, and the community to support and secure resources. Workshops and co-construction sessions with actors is important in shaping the project and ensuring it meets the needs and expectations of all parties involved.

In summary, the Circular Economy Hall is an innovative and ambitious project that seeks to address some of Brussels' urban challenges. While significant obstacles remain, Groupe One's commitment to collaboration and sustainability positions the project as a potential catalyst for transformative change in the city. By fostering a circular economy, the Hall represents a unique opportunity to create a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive city of Brussels for all its residents.

#### Key Lessons:

1. When dealing with a local urban transformation project, collaboration and co-creation are key words. Even more so when trying to create a project which is in line with the needs of citizens, circular economy actors, municipalities and political strategies. Without any collaboration with all the parties above, to understand their needs, their challenges, their vision, there are some risks for the project to not take off, that people might not get attached to it, or invest in it. Which is catastrophic for a community project. You need to co-build the project, so that each party finds themselves in it. These collaborations and partnerships will also get you to achieve the expected environmental and social impacts.
2. The ambition of the project brings with it a complicated business model. It is true that, most of the time, having a project that deals with social and environmental concerns, brings a business model that is often not cost-efficient. The conventional system, as it currently stands, is not social-oriented nor is it egalitarian for this kind of socially and environmentally resilient project. This poses problems in terms of profitability and means that it is heavily dependent on funding for its continued existence. In order to succeed, it is important to have strong partnership (with economic actors and with municipalities or region) that supports the project.
3. Sometimes, it is not needed to create something new. The present project was born from what was observed, from the existing. We have seen that there is still too many materials / products in town that were being thrown out, and we saw a network of committed actors, trying their best to make ends meet by generating positive impact. Thus, it is important to start from the existing, and to create something with it.
4. Each area has its own specificity. It is important, before any urban development project, to analyse the area, by analysing the socio-economic context, the existing networks, the needs of the inhabitants, the existing flows.
5. An ambitious project takes time to be implemented. Even more when it deals with several stakeholders, multiple partnerships, municipalities or regions discussions... Perseverance is important in order to implement the project.

## The birth of the project: Groupe One's approach to transforming waste management in Brussels

The issue of waste management is an important challenge for most of urban cities, especially metropolises. Brussels has long struggled with the division of waste management competencies between the Region and the municipalities,



which has, somehow, slowed down the process of efficient collection and reuse of the citizen's wastes and resources. This inefficiency, coupled with a specific socio-economic context in some municipalities, has led to a lot of insalubrities in the streets across the Capital, and imposed a huge cost on municipalities to address that problem.

In this context, the non-profit organisation Groupe One has been working for several years with local authorities in different areas of Brussels to reuse their waste-resources (by waste-resource, we mean wastes that are considered as resources that can be utilised in ways beyond just recycling or incineration). Thanks to this, we have gradually built-up experience and expertise in waste-resource recovery, adapted to the characteristics and needs of each urban area.

Working on this topic led to the creation of the first Recyclerie project in Brussels by Groupe One, the "Social Recyclerie of Saint-Gilles". Since then, the Recyclerie has gradually become autonomous, and the project has taken off. Indeed, one of Groupe One's objectives is to create local development projects and make them self-sufficient.

A "Recyclerie" is a company (usually on a non-profit base) that offers services of collecting, sorting, revalorising (reusing, repairing, upcycling, recycling) and selling, of recovered goods, that citizens no longer wanted. A "Social Recyclerie" adds to its activities the socio-professional integration of marginalised people and the possi-



**Figure 1:** Picture of the Social Recyclerie of Saint Gilles, shop part. Source: Groupe One



**Figure 2:** Picture of the Social Recyclerie of Saint Gilles, shop part. Source: Groupe One

## From a Recyclerie to a Hall: the evolution of the project

This "Social Recyclerie of Saint-Gilles" project has been highly successful, which has greatly inspired various Brussels municipalities, some of which have sought to replicate the project on their territory. Groupe One has continued to work with municipalities on the theme of revalorising their waste-resources. However, we have observed certain limitations in Recyclerie-type projects.

(1) Firstly, we have seen a growing presence of local actors working on the theme of the circular economy. The creation of yet another actor thus seems increasingly less relevant. Instead, encouraging collaboration and synergy among existing actors could enhance the overall impact and efficiency of circular economy initiatives. By leveraging the unique strengths and resources of each actor, we can develop more comprehensive and effective solutions that address the diverse needs of the community. This approach also minimises redundancy and competition, ensuring that efforts are complementary rather than duplicative. Additionally, it allows for the sharing of best practices and innovations, which can accelerate the adoption of successful strategies across different areas and sectors.

(2) Secondly, despite a rise in ecological awareness, the concept of second-hand is often less appealing to citizens, who remain more attracted to conventional shopping. New objects are often perceived as cleaner and more hygienic than second-hand ones. There is thus a certain reticence to buy second-hand items due to concerns about cleanliness and previous wear. Fast fashion stores are often easily accessible and offer a wide range of choices in terms of styles, sizes, and colours. This makes the shopping experience more convenient and pleasant compared to hunting for bargains in second-hand stores, which may require more time and effort to find satisfying items. Moreover, a Recyclerie can attract different audiences, which is one of its strengths. One of the target audiences is the underprivileged, who struggle to make ends meet every month. However, depending on the type of resources, the needs for a sense of belonging and status can vary. Clothing, for example, is not only functional but also symbols of status and social belonging. Second-hand stores can be associated with social stigma, suggesting a lack of financial means. Underprivileged people may prefer to avoid this stigma by buying new, fast fashion items.

(3) Lastly, we questioned the limits of having a Recyclerie in every municipality in a region as small as Brussels - this did not seem like a coherent goal for us. Although the idea is worthy and potentially beneficial for the environment and social aspects, creating such a project involves financial, logistical, human, and regulatory challenges. It would notably saturate the market and limit access to resources. Would it not be more relevant to act at a higher level? Such as at a regional level, at a minimum? To be strategic about where you locate in the region? To pool efforts, spaces, and tools? To create links between municipalities, each with its specificities, and between existing actors?

We then began to look into what is happening around us to draw inspiration from other projects carried out in Europe. The idea that first came to mind is to have a centralised vision with decentralised actions that are accessible to everyone.

This led to the idea of creating a Circular Economy Hall within the Brussels-Capital Region. The main idea is based on the fact that together, we can create more synergies. By centralising the collection of materials, we can provide a single point where everyone can find what they need. For the customer, this creates an experience similar to the one of a shopping mall, where everything is accessible in one place. The benefits of a shopping mall are thus adapted to a second-hand model, allowing for better organisation and increased accessibility. However, this model faces challenges posed by fast fashion and conventional shopping malls, which dominate the market because of their powerful marketing and visibility.

In contrast, the second-hand market is often fragmented and scattered throughout the city, with fewer resources for promotion and communication. This requires more effort from consumers, both to find the best items and to know where to drop off the goods they want to dispose of. Additionally, there is the challenge of avoiding the rebound effect of second-hand goods, where resources are lost because people do not know where to go.

## Adapting to urban needs: a hub for sustainability

The creation of a Circular Economy Hall within the Brussels-Capital Region represents an innovative and ambitious opportunity to meet the needs of citizens, local actors, and the region. This project aims to promote “zero waste”, material recovery, reuse, and the valorisation of goods within the community. It seeks to create a dynamic circular and solidarity-based economy in the neighbourhood where it is located, and more broadly within the region, aiming to transform our consumption and reuse behaviour while bringing social, economic, and environmental benefits. This Circular Economy Hall is intended to be entirely dedicated to existing circular and social-based economy actors, and help them to up-scale. In addition to clarifying the circular economy offer in the area for citizens, it also allows for the management of far more resources than a simple Recyclerie by working on different resources sectors and mutualise infrastructures and resources between actors and citizens. It would raise awareness on environmental topics, by organising various type of activities, and provide training, as well as creating sustainable jobs in a high-impact sector.

The Circular Economy Hall can take various forms and adapt to different needs. The form the project can take is thus defined by the site that will be found (its accessibility, visibility, size...).

For example, in connection with what was said above, the project could take the form of a “shopping centre” dedicated to circular initiatives and sustainable waste management. It could operate as a cooperative, integrating actors, municipalities, and the region as partners, offering spaces for the co-operator’s activities. This project would bring several actors together under the same umbrella, thereby enhancing their communication and marketing, clarifying the reuse offer on the Region, and creating a circularity dynamic within the neighbourhood as well as synergies among the various actors.

Indeed, as previously explained, by centralising services related to reuse and recycling, the hall would offer residents a single point where they could process, repair and/or purchase various types of reused goods (bicycles, textiles, furniture, etc.). This would simplify the process for residents and enhance the efficiency of waste-resource treatment and reuse. By positioning the project as a new shopping centre focused on sustainability and circularity, there is an opportunity to attract a much broader audience, including those less aware of environmental issues.

## Enhancing urban resilience, driving environmental awareness, promote innovation... Transforming the urban context through circularity hub

A Circular Economy Hall project offers numerous benefits for urban transformation, contributing to sustainability (waste reduction and promotion of sustain-

ability), resilience (diversification of treatment sectors, reduction of raw material needs), innovation (stimulating the development of new technologies and valorisation practices), community engagement (raising citizen awareness, encouraging behaviour change), and improved quality of life (reduction of waste treatment emissions). It also boosts the local economy (supporting local businesses and providing sustainable jobs) and promotes cross-sectoral cooperation (public, private, and associative sectors). Therefore, if we were to explain and summarise these main urban challenges our project addresses, they would be the following:

- **Waste management:** a circular economy hall aims to reduce the quantity of waste that is sent to treatment (for recycling or incineration) by promoting their reuse or their upcycling. It also helps to increase the waste collection and their sorting by providing the citizens with a new site, with efficient collection point where to bring their bulky waste near them, with different type of containers available for different type of waste (wood, fabric, electronic, metal...), that can all be reuse by the actors if needed (mutualisation of resources). This contributes to have a better management in urban waste.
- **Carbon footprint reduction:** by minimising the use of raw materials and reducing waste, the project contributes to reducing the carbon footprint of cities, in line with the objectives of sustainability and the fight against climate change. The circular economy helps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the need to produce new materials, which are often energy-intensive and polluting, and, thus, limiting the impact of the extraction phase. The transport of raw materials is also reduced, helping to cut air pollution and the city's overall carbon footprint.
- **Improvement of air and life quality:** by creating a cleaner urban environment and promoting sustainable practices, the Hall improves residents' quality of life and of the air by reducing pollution and providing a healthier living environment. A clean, well-maintained environment has positive effects on the physical and mental health of citizens. Green spaces and sustainable infrastructures, such as community gardens and composting areas, do not only beautify the city, but also provide places for residents to relax and socialise. Depending on the ambition of the project and the location, the Circular Economy Hall can be a living space that welcomes all kinds of people and creates a community dynamic.
- **Support for the local economy:** by creating employment opportunities and supporting local businesses involved in the circular and social economy, our project stimulates the local economy and promotes sustainable economic development. Local repair workshops, second-hand shops and recycling businesses benefit from an increase in demand for their services. In addition, the training and work reintegration programmes offered by the project help to develop local skills and reduce unemployment, particularly among young people and marginalised people.
- **Education and awareness:** the project includes initiatives to raise awareness and educate citizens about sustainable practices (workshops, exhibitions etc), encouraging long-term behavioural change towards more responsible consumption. Workshops, events and awareness campaigns play a key role in informing the public about the benefits of the circular economy and instilling the values of reuse and recycling. By educating children and adults, we are building a culture of sustainability that will endure for generations to come.



- Strengthening urban resilience: by diversifying resource processing techniques and reducing dependence on imported raw materials, our project increases the resilience of cities to economic and environmental troubles. Circular economic systems are more flexible and can better resist external shocks, such as economic crises or shortages of raw materials. Increased resilience also enables communities to bounce back more quickly from disruptive events, maintaining a constant supply of essential resources through reuse and revalorisation.
- Promotion of innovation: by serving as a platform for the development of new recycling technologies and practices, the Hall encourages innovation in the field of the circular economy. Local companies, start-ups and entrepreneurs will find in our project an environment favourable to experimentation and the development of innovative solutions. We are also aiming for partnerships with universities and research centres, enabling new technical discoveries to be transformed into practical applications. We also plan to organise innovation competitions to encourage creativity and entrepreneurial initiative.
- Cross-sectoral cooperation: the project encourages collaboration between different sectors (public, private, associative) and thematic (environment, social cohesion, public cleanliness...), and also between different levels of governance, which is essential for an integrated and coherent urban transformation. Synergy between sectors maximises resources and ensures that initiatives are well coordinated. For example, municipalities can offer incentives for businesses that take part in waste reuse programmes and can also provide the project with their waste flows, while associations can provide the expertise needed to implement community projects. Public-private partnerships are essential for financing and managing larger-scale projects.

In addressing these challenges, our Circular Economy Hall project contributes to creating cities that are more sustainable, resilient, inclusive, and liveable. It also improves the accessibility of circular economy offerings for citizens, who often find the existing options confusing. By aligning with the principles of the Circular Urban Economies Transition Pathway (CUE TP), our project supports the development of urban spaces that integrate efficient resource use with socio-economic considerations. This holistic approach ensures that the interventions we implement not only enhance resource efficiency but also improve urban habitability by addressing the specific needs of our community.

Furthermore, our initiative resonates with the objectives of the 15-minute City Transition Pathway (15mC TP), which emphasises improving accessibility and connectivity for sustainable transport and logistics within a 15-minute radius. By fostering local reuse and recycling networks within our Circular Economy Hall, we contribute to the creation of integrated and mixed-use neighbourhoods. This not only reduces the carbon footprint associated with transportation but also makes it easier for residents to engage with circular economy practices in their daily lives.

Through these strategic alignments, our project not only addresses immediate urban challenges but also builds a foundation for long-term, transformative urban development.

## Challenging conventional by linking the social and the environmental spheres

The main ambitions of our project are both social and environmental. Firstly, we aim to counter current conventional consumption patterns by establishing a “community shopping centre” dedicated entirely to circular economy principles and local resource reuse. The project focuses on resource management by extending the lifespan of resources already available in our cities, thus avoiding

a linear cycle of consumption and disposal. Socially, our project aims to create numerous sustainable job opportunities and training in the field of circular economy, while fostering the creation of new valorisation streams. By enhancing territorial resilience, we also seek to create and strengthen connections among individuals, reuse actors, and public authorities under one roof, promoting territorial symbiosis.

## Commitment to impact: persisting through obstacles

Throughout the study and the development of the project, we encountered several challenges. Indeed, a project as ambitious as a Circular Economy Hall is a long journey, where we often face obstacles. This type of project can hardly be undertaken alone by our non-profit organisation due to its substantial needs in investment. Fundings and partnership research is therefore one of the biggest challenges we face for the project. Similarly, finding a suitable location is also a significant obstacle in the achievement of the project. It is indeed hard to find a space, big enough, that permits considerable logistics, that is attractive, accessible etc... and Brussels urban context makes it even harder to find a suitable location, which is available in the region. When a location is found, important renovation work is typically needed, thus requiring significant financial investment.

Initially, we identified a potential site in collaboration with the Brussels-Capital Region and one of the municipalities. But unfortunately, it did not materialise because too much renovation work had to be done and the final rent was too high for the actors. Another site was found, with a different municipality, which seemed to be ideal for the project: it was centrally located, bigger than any previous site found so far, and did not require any rent for the actors thanks to the fact that it was a municipal asset. But, again, the site proved to be too costly to renovate despite collaboration efforts and was considered financially unviable. Moreover, often, available spaces are only accessible in the long term, complicating planning and commitment, especially without funding.



**Figure 3:** Picture of the second location found. Source: Groupe One

In addition to finding funding, partnerships and a suitable site, we were facing other challenges this time more related to the business model of the project. The business model of the project, although being innovative, poses specific challenges. When willing to address social and environmental issues, it is hard to have an economically viable project, because it does not provide sufficient margin to cover staff and building costs. Funding is often needed and required to ensure the project's long term viability and cover the functional costs of the project. Moreover, as explained above, it is hard to make second hand shopping attractive enough for the citizens, and it is even harder when trying so for various type of target groups.

The marketing positioning of the project is thus complicated in order to achieve sales levels: the hipsters, even though being interested in second hand shopping, often look for the best products, nuggets from brand names; the precarious and fragile public seeks to find products at attractive prices. It can sometimes be hard to please everyone.

Despite these challenges, the significant impact of the project reaffirms our commitment to continue striving for its implementation.

## Key takeaways: perseverance and collaboration for success

However, these experiences provide inspiring lessons for similar initiatives. To achieve this, we have found it necessary to collaborate closely with existing networks of stakeholders through project co-construction workshops. In fact, when we found the first location for the Hall, we started the discussion on the vision and the feasibility of the project for the specific location found. But this could not be achieved without putting all the interested people around the table. Therefore, we organised a workshop with the local actors, the region and the municipality. Even though the project was not implemented in this location, bringing together all this parties was a rich and inspiring moment, and helped enormously in framing the project. Additionally, collaboration with public authorities plays a central role in identifying and acquiring suitable sites, as well as securing funding opportunities.

This experience highlights two crucial elements for implementing such projects: perseverance and collaboration.

## Securing a location as a first step in the development of the project

Looking ahead to further developments, our first priority is to implement the project. As previously explained, finding a location has been a crucial yet unresolved aspect. This will determine the project's ambition, its grounding, accessibility for citizens, and its overall impact. Once a suitable location is secured, discussions can start for the effective co-creation of the project. As explained, it is also important to keep looking for funding. Along these lines, FEDER funding offers a valuable opportunity to support our local circular economy initiatives and strengthen the economic viability of our model. By mobilising these resources, we can finance essential infrastructure, such as sorting and repair centres, as well as training programmes for local workers. FEDER funds can also support research and development into new technologies for reusing resources.

## Expanding our reach: adapting and sharing best practices and model

We aim to expand our project by leveraging the potential of cross-border collaboration through European programmes such as Interreg, for instance. This approach will allow us to explore synergies with European partners and exchange best practices with similar projects, while enhancing our technical capabilities to successfully implement this initiative. Utilising FEDER funding presents a valuable opportunity to support this circular economy initiative and strengthen the model's viability. With these resources, we aim to amplify our impact and encourage other

cities and territories to adopt our adaptable model, which fits various urban contexts. Moreover, the DUT CUE TP and 15mC TP frameworks provide us with a comprehensive vision to implement, scale, and replicate successful solutions. As part of our commitment to continuous improvement and knowledge sharing, we aim to contribute to these transition pathways by documenting our experiences and best practices, thus enriching the portfolio of solutions available for other urban areas seeking to undertake similar transformations.

## Flexibility and adaptability to building sustainable and resilient economic model

Regarding practices and lessons to disseminate more widely, we believe our specific business model stands out as a replicable approach in other cities. By analysing local needs and co-creating with stakeholders, we have demonstrated an effective method for integrating the circular economy into urban fabric. This adaptable and collaborative methodology is a key element of our project. We strongly encourage the adoption of this integrative approach in other European urban contexts, emphasising the importance of economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

It is important to note that one should not always wait for perfect conditions before launching. The key often lies in creating resilient economic models that can adapt. For example, a Recyclerie can start with limited resources and progressively adjust to emerging needs and opportunities and become a hub or a hall. Waiting for ideal conditions can delay innovation and the positive impact these initiatives can have on the community and environment. A flexible model allows for adjustments based on feedback and changing contexts, ensuring greater sustainability and resilience in overcoming challenges.