

Urban Doers Community

La Papiro

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The Sustainable City Promoter

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Abstract

The Sustainable City Promoter (SCP) project, initiated by Alice Lunardon in 2019, aims to reimagine railway stations as multiservice urban hubs promoting sustainable mobility, renewable energy production and consumption, adopting a circular economy functioning, and aggregating proximity services to serve inhabitants and commuters' daily needs. SCP transforms stations from mere transportation nodes into integral components of the city's social and economic fabric. The project promotes circular economy practices by reusing and recycling materials, energy, water, and waste within the station environment, influencing surrounding urban areas to adopt similar sustainable practices. By focusing on stations as vibrant public spaces, the SCP enhances sustainable lifestyles by supporting local economies, and addresses the negative impacts of transportation infrastructure, such as pollution and congestion.

The project's pilot initiatives, like the one realised within this Urban Doers programme at Barcelona's Sants Station about KMO food products sold at the station, demonstrate the potential for stations to support local food distribution, reduce unnecessary trips, and boost local production and consumption. This pilot also emphasises the importance of community engagement in designing and implementing new services and fostering innovation, ensuring that the initiatives meet local needs and preferences, enabling a sense of ownership of public spaces and participation among users.

SCP's collaborative approach, involving railway companies, local authorities, NGOs, and communities, is crucial for addressing urban challenges like sustainability, decarbonisation, and energy transition. The project's emphasis on small-scale pilots before scaling up provides a replicable methodology that minimises risks and validates strategies, making it applicable to various urban contexts across Europe. Insights gained from such pilots can inform policy and planning decisions, guiding regulations that support new governance models for implementing sustainability practices and develop more liveable cities. SCP educates the public on the potential of sustainable practices, demonstrating that small, localised actions can have significant impacts.

The success of the SCP model in transforming underused urban spaces into sustainable hubs offers a blueprint that can inspire similar initiatives across different fields, contributing to broader urban revitalisation and sustainability efforts.

Key lessons:

1. Utilising Central Locations for Local Exchange: Railway stations' central locations can effectively facilitate the exchange between local producers and travellers, supporting local economies and promoting sustainability.
2. Transforming Underused Spaces: Repurposing underused spaces in railway stations into multifunctional hubs can meet local needs and provide valuable services, enhancing their utility beyond transportation.
3. Community Engagement and Feedback: Engaging the community through surveys provides essential insights into the needs and preferences of station users, guiding future developments and service enhancements.
4. Promoting Local and Eco-Friendly Products: There is significant interest among commuters in local and eco-friendly products, suggesting that sustainability-focused initiatives are well-received and beneficial.
5. Collaborative Approach for Sustainable Development: Collaboration among various stakeholders, including NGOs, local producers, and railway companies, is crucial for implementing and measuring the impact of new services, ensuring they meet community needs and support sustainable urban development.

An initiative from the “Sustainable City Promoter” project

This initiative comes from a project developed by Alice Lunardon in 2019, called the Sustainable City Promoter (SCP), which focuses on transforming railway stations into sustainable hubs that provide citizens and commuters with access to proximity services, logistic solutions, and green transportation.

It aims to transform stations from being purely transportation infrastructures to integral components of the city's social fabric. Additionally, it aims to make stations cities' “greening engines” by efficiently reusing and recycling materials, energy, water, and waste promoting circular economy. The railway station holds a unique position in the urban environment, serving as a crucial component of the city's infrastructure, a symbol of ongoing transportation development, and a key link to the wider world. Additionally, stations need to address both the negative impacts of transport infrastructure on the urban environment and the inherent challenges of the urban context. Balancing these factors can help stations serve as vibrant public spaces and focal points for urban renewal, enhancing the city's overall urban and socioeconomic quality.

In the past fifty years, the potential of railway stations to contribute to sustainable urban development has largely been overlooked, leading to missed opportunities and challenges. Current practices and theories in station development often fail to fully grasp the station's complex nature. Moreover, railway stations frequently fall between the cracks of transport and urban planning agendas, with fragmented responsibilities resulting in neglect by urban planners and policymakers at local, national, and European levels.

To achieve the realisation of the SCP model, specific topics are being investigated in an EU-funded project, called RAIL4CITIES (2023-2025). Firstly, the role of stations as public spaces for citizens must be analysed, potentially transforming them into

mobility hubs. Secondly, the energy infrastructure of stations should be upgraded to address urban energy challenges, alongside promoting resource circularity. Thirdly, there is a need to assess the overall value of station assets, including social and environmental aspects. Collaboration among stakeholders is crucial, as no single model fits all contexts.

For the DUT Urban Doers programme, Alice Lunardon and the Spanish NGO La Papiro joint their efforts to test one part of the Sustainable City Promoter concept through a small-scale pilot in a real environment. The pilot consisted in exploring local food distribution within a station. The goal is to leverage the central location and accessibility of stations to facilitate exchange between local producers and travellers. It offers transferable knowledge and experiences applicable to various urban settings across Europe. By concentrating on transforming underused stations' spaces, our project can be customised to suit the unique needs of different localities. Through this kind of small-scale pilots, we aim at generating valuable knowledge that can inspire railways and public urban authorities across Europe who can apply and these solutions to address their unique sustainability challenges.

Bringing an idea to reality by collaborating with relevant stakeholders and citizens

In this perspective, we therefore worked in collaboration with the Spanish railway company, ADIF, to test a small-scale pilot in one of their stations in Barcelona: the Sants Station located not far from the centre of the city in between very dense areas, serving both regional and international trains. Citizens from Barcelona and the surrounding region pass through the station every day to go to work and come back home, and in the weekend for visiting places in Catalunya, but also for international trips. Tourists arrive at Sant from France and from Girona's Airport, but also from other big and small cities in Spain. It is the main railway station in the city of Barcelona and was inaugurated in 1979 after lengthy works that were agreed upon at the end of the 1960s. It is the second station in Spain for passenger traffic with more than 43 million in 2017, only behind Madrid-Atocha, of which more than 28 million correspond to suburban traffic. It has two floors, a ground floor and an underground. A hotel from the Barceló chain has been built above the station, and bus docks next to Joan Peiró Square. The bus station located outside the station mainly operates routes to the rest of Spain.

Even though Sants is located in a dense area, where housing is mixed with proximity services, the station itself is cut from the surrounding area by large streets and squares around it. Therefore, to reach those shops and services, people need to walk at least 10-15 minutes.

Our idea has been to test a "proximity shop" to be installed just in front of the station that provides commuters, especially inhabitants of Barcelona, with a take-away box of food from local producers. In this way, commuters, especially those with bikes or scooters, but also car users and pedestrians, can grab the box and go home directly, without the need of going to the supermarket afterwards. Moreover, being this a box with vegetables and fruits from local farmers from Catalunya, enable local production and consumption. Such experiment, thus reinforces the idea that railway stations can function as "supporters" of a smooth and seamless mobility by facilitating the daily commuting of people, and in parallel, supporting local economy, and consumption. All this brings to the idea that stations can effectively become "Sustainable City Promoters" by integrating such new functions in their spaces.

To test this idea, we organised a one-day-event in front of the Sants Station on 7th of June 2024, from 7am to 7pm, in order to be able to offer this to all kind of travellers, tourists, and daily commuters. The food box was provided by a food

cooperative from Catalunya, called Food Coop, which participated also in the event and supported us with selling their products. For measuring the impact of the small-scale-pilot, we interviewed the clients and participants. The interviews were based not only on the interest in the event, but we also asked general questions related to the idea of the station as a Sustainable City Promoter.

Measuring the pilot's impact to unveil its potential

The analysis of the survey responses revealed very interesting data about citizens' interest in purchasing local and kilometre 0 products at the station, and also eventually to install delivery lockers in it. First, the demographic data showed a balance between men and women. Of the 51 respondents, 22 were men and 29 were women. The age of respondents varied significantly: the majority were under 50 years old, with 20 people between 18 and 30 years old and 21 people between 30 and 50 years old. Only 2 respondents were under 18 years of age and 8 were over 50 years of age.

To evaluate the feasibility of the project, it was essential to know the frequency with which respondents visited the station. In this case, they were divided into two categories: those who visit it sporadically and those who visit it at least once or twice a week or even daily. The number of people who came to the station that day due to a particular circumstance was very small.

Additionally, they were asked about the reason for their visit. The majority responded that they used the station to take public transportation. A considerable, although smaller, proportion indicated that the station was used as a meeting point to meet someone. This suggests that the station is a well-known location in the city, frequently used as a reference for meetings. The survey then analysed the means used to get to and from the station. Many respondents indicated that they arrive and leave the station on foot. It is evident that those who walk to the station to take the train return by train. Regarding the services available around the station, respondents expressed the need for infrastructure improvements and the inclusion of additional services. The most in-demand services include quiet spaces for studying and working, dining options, and grocery stores. Many people also highlighted the lack of free public toilets. Furthermore, although not very numerous, a portion of those surveyed indicated that they would like to find lockers for their purchases at the station, which would make it easier to manage their purchases during daily trips. These services would help improve the user experience and make the station a more welcoming and functional place.

These results indicate that the station currently does not offer additional services beyond travel by train or other public transportation. Sants station, although it has shops such as supermarkets and pharmacies, does not attract many visitors other than travellers. However, the fact that many people are there suggests that the station functions as a familiar meeting point.

Regarding purchasing habits, respondents usually make their purchases in supermarkets, stores and local markets. The vast majority of those interviewed affirm that these places are very close to their home, up to a maximum of 15 minutes. In terms of purchasing preferences, many respondents pay attention to the origin of the products and prioritise local products, with high scores in this aspect. There is notable familiarity with the eco-basket concept, indicating an interest in eco-friendly and sustainable products.

A significant number of respondents showed interest in using a food basket collection point at the station. For those who would not use this service, the reasons include the desire to see the products being purchased and the distance from Sants station. Some interviewees indicated that, if the service were available

at other stations closer to their home, they would use it. In general, there is considerable interest in receiving more information about local food.

A small pilot can demonstrate the potential of a bigger project

From this experience, we believe that our small-scale pilot can inspire the railway companies around Europe and enable them in multiplying such tests and activities, by allowing associations, NGOs, groups of volunteers, startups, enterprises, and other public or private initiatives to test their services and measure their impact. In this way, the railway companies can find new functions to spaces in stations, especially those that are empty or underused, especially because they are currently questioning what to do with such infrastructures and how to improve them to offer a better experience to users. The concept here is to push them in trying such new services in order to demonstrate that this can work, instead of only providing basic-but-expensive services to travellers, such as Starbucks, H&M shops, and other multinational firm's shops. We promote local vs global, we promote local production and consumption, and circular economy.

Literature on effective urban planning for sustainable cities highlights the importance of engaging local communities in the design of public spaces, and public infrastructure such as railway stations. It has been demonstrated that planning of public spaces often fails when communities and users do not engage, or stop engaging, with the interventions made. This disengagement can happen if initial interventions ignore existing activities, local assets, and community concerns, leading users and citizens to feel disregarded. This is fully the case of railway stations, that were (and are) built without engaging users and travellers.

The impact of our initiative, then, is to demonstrate to the railways and the cities around Europe that engaging citizens and users into new activities to test new uses of spaces is a good idea that can only bring positive and constructive results. From the interviews, we demonstrate that these kinds of initiatives work well, and they are appreciated by clients, users, and citizens.

Therefore, through the DUT Urban Doers programme and the dissemination that will be done, we want to communicate this to European railways and cities.

In conclusion, the Sustainable City Promoter (SCP) project would significantly impact urban transformation by reimagining railway stations as sustainable, multifunctional hubs that integrate into the city's social and economic fabric. SCP transforms railway stations from being mere transportation points to vital urban hubs that offer diverse services such as proximity services, logistics solutions, and green transportation. This redefinition aligns stations with the broader urban ecosystem, making them integral components of city life.

Stations applying the SCP model would be designed to reuse and recycle materials, energy, water, and waste, thus promoting circular economy and thus influencing the surrounding areas in adopting such sustainable practices. This approach helps to reduce the environmental footprint of urban areas and contributes to sustainable urban development. By focusing on the role of stations as public spaces, SCP aims to create vibrant and inclusive areas that serve as focal points for community activities, thereby enhancing the urban experience for citizens, local communities, travellers, and transport commuters.

SCP initiatives address the challenges of negative impacts of transport infrastructure, such as pollution and congestion, by integrating sustainable practices and technologies, and finding synergies between different transport modes, which improves the quality of urban transport and consequently the quality of urban life. Moreover, initiatives like the local food distribution (like the pilot we have done at

Sants Station) could support local economy - local farmers and producers selling their KMO products directly at the station where people commute every day. This enhances local consumption and economic resilience.

SCP also aims at involving local communities in the design and implementation of new services and facilities at railway stations. This engagement ensures that the initiatives meet local needs and preferences, and unveil underserved needs, fostering a sense of ownership and participation among users and residents. Projects like the proximity-KMO shop at Sants Station demonstrate the potential of stations to offer convenient services such as take-away food boxes, enhancing the daily commuting experience and reducing the need for additional trips to supermarkets or grocery stores.

The SCP project emphasises collaboration among stakeholders, including railway companies, local authorities, NGOs, and local communities. This collaborative approach ensures that the solutions are holistic and address multiple urban challenges, such as urban transport, circular economy, sustainability of the environment in cities, decarbonisation, and environmental protection, and also energy transition. All those challenges are tackled if the SCP model is fully implemented, as all its “pillars” find synergies in solving environmental and social issues. For example, by implementing a seamless urban mobility system that allows commuters to find all eco-transport means available at the station, allows to reduce pollution generated by private cars and vehicles, optimise energy consumption, and optimise trips and the time spent in transport, enhancing active mobility such as biking or walking which is good for the health of people. Moreover, if such eco- means of transport are fuelled by renewable energy, ideally produced at the station, they allow energy saving, local production and from clean sources. All these put in a “system” can tackle different urban challenges at the same time! Another example can be done with the sales of local food products at the station: it allows time optimisation, as people can find their food box when exiting the train before going home, while also allow decarbonisation thanks to the reduction of trips in the city. And, in parallel, they foster local economy by

The ambition of scaling up the SCP project by using small pilots’ initiatives demonstrating the effectiveness of each of the SCP pillars

SCP small-scale-pilots can generate valuable insights and knowledge that can be applied to various urban contexts across Europe and prove its efficiency and impact. The project we have proposed and tested for the UT Urban Doers Community emphasises on small-scale pilots to demonstrate that they really allow for testing and refining solutions before scaling them up while also demonstrating their positive impact, the benefits for the local users and communities, and their effectiveness.

Through the RAIL4CITIES project, an EU-funded project under Horizon Europe, that takes the SCP concept to make it an applicable model and methodology, the team aims at showcasing sustainable practices and innovative urban solutions, educating the public and inspiring other cities and railway companies to adopt similar approaches. Its pilot initiatives and collaborative approach demonstrate the potential for scalable, sustainable urban development that integrates transportation infrastructure into the broader urban fabric. Through these efforts, SCP aims to inspire and guide cities and railway companies across Europe in creating more sustainable, vibrant, and inclusive urban environments.

Inspiring others to make cities more sustainable

Other initiatives can adopt similar practices, even in other contexts not related to transport and stations, leading to a broader adoption of sustainable resource management and demonstrating practical applications of sustainability principles within existing urban infrastructure. For instance, to meet 15-minute city challenges that allow proximity of services, other public infrastructures can function as “hubs” that gather multiple services for citizens. Postal offices, for example, could add new functions for residents so that they could avoid multiple trips in the city for performing the activity they have to do every day.

SCP provides a model that can be adapted to other urban spaces, thus inspiration for other initiatives can be seen also in the perspective of implementing circular economy practices using small pilots that have the power, to demonstrate how small and short actions can unveil the potential of sustainability challenges.

The project also underscores the importance of community engagement in the design and implementation of new services. By involving local residents, SCP fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that initiatives meet local needs and preferences, a practice that can be replicated in other fields to enhance community support and project success.

Additionally, if focusing on small-scale pilots before scaling up, it provides a methodology that other initiatives can follow to minimise risks and validate strategies before large-scale implementation.

Ultimately, insights and data generated by these pilots and tests, particularly from the surveys made during and after them, can inform policy and planning decisions beyond urban development and planning processes, guiding regulations that support sustainable practices and allowing the creation of new governance models that fits sustainability goals and needs for cities’ sustainable development.

Such small pilots are also an opportunity to educate people. If testing an innovative approach, people can see the change and new opportunities. From surveys conducted in stations before our pilot at Sant station, it emerged that people did not even think about the possibility to find a local food supplier at the train station during their commute. Thus, such test demonstrated to them that this is possible and very beneficial for them. That is how innovation is made and implemented.

Successively, it can be spread also to other contexts and public urban spaces, having the insurance that this works and has a good impact. Then replication will be easier and made by citizens themselves, that drive the change.

Learnings from the future

From this experience, we have learnt that such small initiatives may seem irrelevant, but are not at all. The test was more successful, then we would have hoped. There is a lot of potential and funding for local initiatives can really empower groups of people, associations, and innovators, in promoting such initiatives and make a real change in our cities.

One very important aspect to consider is stakeholders engagement, which is fundamental to successfully implement such an initiative. In our case we could use the Europeanwide network of railway companies and thus get the full support from ADIF. Without this, we would not have made it. This is why we want to stress the importance of having all relevant stakeholders on board, and also convince them by selling them a good story and showcasing their collaboration once the pilot is done.