

Urban Doers Community

PLAN ZERO - Net Zero Neighbourhoods

Editors: Lisa Hudson-Bushart | FFG, Johannes Riegler | FFG



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Name of author(s)	Gosia Marczevska, Ela Janiszewska, Ania Sokołowska, Bartek Idzikowski
Contact Details	info@planzero.pl

Abstract

PLAN ZERO is an association of dedicated city practitioners with municipal experience, committed to advancing practical urban transformations. Our focus is on the importance of planning, participation, and process/project management in addressing the evolving needs of cities, especially in the face of climate challenges. We see urban transition as an incremental and planned process involving residents, local governments and external experts. Our expertise in architecture and urban planning highlights the significance of the spatial dimension and the quality of the built environment, which profoundly affects daily life of people.

Cities are complex systems where every element is interconnected, and thus, problems cannot be addressed in isolation. We believe in holistic approach to urban challenges, particularly to be solved at the neighbourhood scale, which facilitates comprehensive and systematic urban transformation. We recognise the crucial roles of both city administration and residents in driving urban transitions. PLAN ZERO provides guidance for cities striving to become more sustainable and climate-resilient. Our approach empowers local authorities and residents with knowledge, advice, and practical experience, fostering a collaborative effort towards urban improvement.

The cornerstone of our initiative in the Urban Doers programme is to prepare a Net-Zero Neighbourhoods Workshop, aimed at disseminating and explaining the principles of creating climate-friendly, liveable neighbourhoods. Since the term 'Net-Zero Neighbourhood Workshop' encompasses a broad range of topics, we have decided to break it down into thematic modules, addressing specific aspects of urban planning and sustainability. The first module in the series is dedicated to explain the principles of Superblock concept. Through interactive activities and collaborative problem-solving, participants gain hands-on experience in designing sustainable urban spaces.

Our workshop methodology is designed to be adaptable and replicable, allowing it to be tailored to various urban contexts. Our vision encompasses broadening the methodology's impact, forming a global network of urban sustainability practitioners, and supporting community-driven projects that transform workshop insights into real-world urban improvements. By consistently evolving our approach and engaging diverse stakeholders, we aim to significantly contribute to urban transformation and sustainability.

Based on the Telheiras Renewable Energy Community experience, we envisage an energy future aligned with the Positive Energy Districts pathway with multiple energy communities blooming across the European Union, not only increasing renewable energy generation and reducing greenhouse gas emissions but also mitigating energy poverty, strengthening community bonds, and promoting values of energy justice and energy democracy. This pathway remains, however, a mirage, and much more needs to be done to support local communities in developing their own energy-related initiatives. Sharing lessons, building capacity, and inspiring others in the context of European networks can be fundamental to leverage the community energy revolution.

Key lessons:

1. WORKSHOP AS A HEADSPACE FOR CREATIVITY AND EXPLORATION

Workshops create a great headspace to explore and innovate. They provide an invaluable environment that fosters creativity and exploration. They offer participants the opportunity to think freely and generate innovative ideas in a focused and supportive setting.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYFULNESS

Keeping things playful enhances engagement and learning – maintaining a playful and enjoyable atmosphere within workshops encourages active participation and makes the learning process more engaging. This approach helps participants to better absorb and retain complex concepts.

3. GATHERING FEEDBACK

Workshops can help to disseminate concepts as much as they serve as a valuable feedback. Beyond teaching new concepts, workshops might function as a platform for receiving feedback from participants. This bidirectional flow of information aids in refining ideas and enhances the overall effectiveness of the learning process.

4. KEEPING THE FORMAT FLEXIBLE

Building flexible frameworks allows for creative imagination. Flexibility contributes to scalability and replicability, it allows for adaptation.

5. EMPOWERING PEOPLE

Empowering people is crucial for driving meaningful change. Supporting participants to take an active role in the urban planning processes fosters a sense of ownership and motivation. When people feel invested and capable, they are more likely to drive significant and lasting change in their communities.

FOSTERING URBAN CHANGE AT THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SCALE: THE POWER OF WORKSHOPS

Cities are dynamic, they keep evolving and require constant improvement. Especially nowadays when we need to face climate challenges, there is an evident need to act effectively and together. At PLAN ZERO we see urban transition is an

incremental, thought-through and planned process established by residents and local government (sometimes also external experts) in order to address identified challenges or obtain desired objectives. Given that the background of PLAN ZERO is architecture and urban planning, our field of expertise embraces the spatial dimension of the city and a quality of built environment. We firmly believe that the quality of urban spaces has a profound impact on the daily lives of people.

Cities are complex systems, where all elements are linked together. It has become evident that isolated problem-solving approaches are no longer sufficient. Instead, a holistic approach is essential to drive meaningful change and deliver successful urban solutions. Our professional experience throughout the years has demonstrated that working at a scale of a neighbourhood allows driving urban transformation in a comprehensive, systematic way, with very tangible results. Therefore, PLAN ZERO specialises in neighbourhood scale planning, with a particular emphasis on retrofitting existing urban structures. This narrowing enables us to address urban challenges effectively by improving the functionality and sustainability of existing environments.

We believe that urban transition can be initiated from both top-down and bottom-up approaches. City administrations and residents both have critical roles in driving change. Regardless of the origin of the ideas, it is crucial to build consensus and capacity on both ends to facilitate meaningful transformation. Solving the problems of a specific part of the city cannot be achieved in isolation from the residents and users of that area.

PLAN ZERO provides guidance for cities striving to become more sustainable and climate-resilient. Our approach empowers local authorities and residents with knowledge, advice, and practical experience, fostering a collaborative effort towards urban improvement.

One of the primary tools we use in our practice are workshops, which are instrumental in illustrating various urban themes. Workshops serve as a timeframe to create headspace to spark people's imagination with ideas, break down the complexity of problems, help to clarify expectation and educate on possible solutions.

ACHIEVING NET-ZERO WHILE ENHANCING QUALITY OF LIFE

The main urban challenge that PLAN ZERO addresses is achieving a net-zero city that offers a high quality of life for its residents. These workshops are designed to communicate principles of climate-friendly, liveable neighbourhood planning in an accessible and understandable manner.

WORKSHOP PRINCIPLES AND STRUCTURE

The main ambition of the initiative Net-Zero Neighbourhoods Workshop was to establish a methodology which could be used as a tool to explain to participants principles of planning a climate-friendly, walkable neighbourhood in an easy, accessible, understandable way. While not all complexities can or should be simplified, the workshop serves as a platform to initiate the process of reasoning and discussion. No prior preparation or technical knowledge is required to fully participate in the workshop activities. The overall idea was to keep it fun and a little abstract, so that time spent is playful and pleasant, but at the same time meaningful.

A key principle of the workshop was its wide replicability, with only condition that it should be organised and conducted by professionals who have comprehensive understanding of city planning and urban transformation to properly guide participants through complexity of well-planned neighbourhood. All materials used in the workshop, including presentations, surveys, boards, and tokens, are prepared for publication and designed to be easily displayed and printed. This approach ensures that the workshop content can be shared and utilized by others interested in replicating or adapting the methodology.

The term 'Net-Zero Neighbourhood Workshop' encompasses a broad range of topics, so we have decided that it should be further broken down into thematic modules to address specific aspects of urban planning and sustainability. The narrative of the first thematic module is based on exploration of superblock concept, which "enables urban sustainability transitions by strategically reducing motor vehicle through-routes - converting the city into a mosaic of human-scale neighbourhoods without motor vehicle through-traffic - and redesigning public space within neighbourhoods to prioritize active mobility, climate adaptation, local environmental quality, and inclusive public social life" (findings of the Tune-OurBlock Project).

Overview of workshop activities

Since participants do not need any prior preparation, the workshops start with a short introduction of key principles of superblock planning and implementation, along with an overview of successful examples from the European context.

Workshops are designed to engage with a group of up to 50 participants. This setup allows for the formation of 5 separate working tables, each with a team of 10 people, which helps prevent discussions from becoming chaotic. Each team is guided by a facilitator who ensures that all participants have an equal opportunity to voice their opinions and provides professional advice on the assigned tasks.

During the workshop, teams are provided with a board representing a fragment of an abstract city, specifically at the neighbourhood scale (100cmx70cm, 1:2000). This approach is effective because it offers a tangible example that (while limited in scope) is complex enough to reflect the broader urban environment. The facilitator explains the key qualities of the urban fabric, and some public land uses, such as schools, are predetermined to provide a realistic context. Along with the board, participants receive a 'superblock toolkit,' which includes a selection of potential spatial solutions in the form of tokens that should be logically distributed within the neighbourhood. The distribution of elements is a group task that requires consensus among team members, encouraging discussion and facilitating an open exchange of ideas.

After each team finishes their neighbourhood transformation proposal, the facilitator provides a set of questions that explore the probable outcomes of the proposal, prompting participants to consider both the positive and negative effects of their proposed solutions. Following that, each team's proposal is being assessed based on previously established objective criteria, summarised in a form of spreadsheet (for example to account the co-benefits of proposed solutions).

The workshop concludes with the presentation of each team's work and a comparison of the different proposals.

ENHANCING THE UNDERSTANDING OF URBAN COMPLEXITY

The Net-Zero Neighbourhoods Workshop offers several valuable experiences and insights that could inspire others involved in urban planning and sustainability.

One important lesson is that workshops create a valuable headspace for participants. They provide a dedicated time and space for individuals to engage creatively with urban planning concepts and to explore innovative solutions to complex problems. This environment fosters imagination and allows participants to approach urban challenges with fresh perspectives.

The workshop was designed to allow ease replication in different settings. Provided materials can be adapted to various contexts, making it possible for other cities and neighbourhoods to implement similar workshops. This flexibility allows for the methodology to be tailored to local needs while maintaining its core principles. The potential for replication contributes to the broader dissemination of effective urban planning practices.

Proposed workshop format allows an integration of the theoretical principles and practical applications, effectively blending knowledge with a hands-on approach. By using the superblock concept, which is a well-researched urban planning model, participants gain a solid understanding of how to apply academic theories in real-world scenarios. This integration bridges the gap between theory and practice, demonstrating how theoretical concepts can be translated into actionable planning strategies. Participants are encouraged to consider practical aspects such as feasibility, cost and implementation. This focus on practicality ensures that the solutions developed during the workshop are not only innovative but also realistic.

In principle, workshops promote inclusive participation by engaging diverse groups of stakeholders, including residents, city officials, and urban planners. This inclusivity ensures that different viewpoints are considered and that solutions are developed with the input of all relevant parties. It also helps in building consensus and fostering a sense of 'idea ownership' among participants.

Established methodology emphasises collaborative problem-solving. Teams work together to address urban planning challenges, fostering a collaborative environment where diverse perspectives are considered. This collective approach not only enhances creativity but also encourages participants to engage in constructive debates, leading to more innovative and comprehensive solutions. Moreover, providing participants with physical boards and toolkits creates a hands-on learning environment. This tangible approach helps participants visualise and interact with urban planning concepts, making abstract ideas more concrete and accessible. The use of physical tokens and boards allows participants to experiment with spatial solutions and see the immediate impact of their decisions.

Skilled facilitators play a crucial role in guiding the workshop and ensuring that discussions remain productive. They help participants navigate the complexities of urban planning, provide professional advice, and facilitate meaningful discussions. This support enhances the overall learning experience and ensures that participants receive valuable feedback.

By sharing these experiences, PLAN ZERO hopes to inspire other practitioners and organisations to adopt similar methodologies and approaches in their own urban planning efforts. The goal is to promote innovative, practical, and collaborative solutions that address the complex challenges of urban transformation.

IMPROVING AND EXPANDING THE WORKSHOP CONCEPT

The Net-Zero Neighbourhoods Workshop methodology has significant potential for expansion and refinement. By developing additional thematic modules and incorporating new urban planning concepts, the workshop can address a wider range of urban challenges and sustainability issues. This adaptability allows the methodology to remain relevant as new trends and needs in urban planning emerge. We believe that a regularly updating the workshop content is essential in order to incorporate the latest research and best practices in urban planning and sustainability.

There is an opportunity to further improve and expand educational materials, making them more accessible and engaging for a broader audience. High-quality materials can enhance the learning experience and facilitate better understanding of complex urban planning concepts. For instance, creating detailed guides and handbooks that accompany the workshop materials will provide clear instructions, background information, and case studies to support facilitators and participants.

It would also be beneficial to establish a community of practice which can foster collaboration, sharing of best practices, and continuous learning among urban planners and workshop facilitators. This network can support the dissemination and further development of the workshop methodology.

Collecting and incorporating feedback from workshop participants and facilitators is crucial for iterative improvement. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop can lead to more effective and impactful future iterations. Customising the workshop methodology to fit the specific needs and characteristics of different regions is also important. Local urban challenges, cultural contexts, and regulatory frameworks should be considered when adapting the content. Creating a repository of workshop materials, case studies, and best practices that can be accessed by practitioners worldwide will serve as a valuable resource for those looking to implement or adapt the methodology.

Even though originally aimed at driving urban transition in large cities, at PLAN ZERO we see a great potential of workshop to serve as a valuable starting point for a vast number of small and medium-sized cities that may require support and a better understanding in their journey towards achieving net-zero. The adapted methodology should be tested in new locations through pilot workshops, with feedback gathered and refinements made based on local experiences and outcomes.

Further developing the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshop can enhance its effectiveness and maximise its contribution to urban transformation and sustainability. The goal is to create a robust and adaptable methodology that can support cities in their journey toward a more sustainable and resilient future, with the outcomes of the workshop translated into implementation.

Finally, new thematic modules can be added to broaden the range of topics covered in the workshops, allowing them to address emerging urban challenges and sustainability issues more comprehensively. This continuous evolution ensures that the methodology remains relevant and effective in helping cities navigate the complexities of urban transformation and achieve their sustainability goals.

We believe proposed workshops can trigger real-life implementation of solutions, translating participants' ideas into actionable urban planning initiatives that drive tangible improvements in city neighbourhoods. Ways of achieving this can be further explored.

KEY PRACTICES FOR BROADER USE

Use of workshop as a dissemination and participation tool

The use of workshops as a tool for urban planning is a practice that has proven highly effective. These workshops not only engage participants in the planning process but also facilitate a deep understanding of complex urban issues through hands-on activities and collaborative problem-solving. Tailoring the approach to specific challenges and local needs can make it a valuable tool for urban planners worldwide.

Incorporating workshop methodologies into policy development and educational programs can promote broader understanding and support for urban planning initiatives.

Structuring the workflow

Providing participants with design toolkits, such as the 'superblock toolkit,' allows them to explore various spatial solutions and make informed decisions during workshops. These toolkits facilitate creative problem-solving and help visualise different planning options. Design toolkits provide a structured yet flexible framework for participants to experiment with different solutions. This approach helps in making informed decisions and understanding the implications of various design choices. Toolkits encourage participants to think creatively and explore a wide range of possibilities. This creative exploration can lead to innovative solutions that might not emerge through traditional planning methods.

Empowering communities

Involving residents in the planning process empowers them to take an active role in shaping their communities. This empowerment leads to more sustainable and community-driven solutions. Engagement and collaboration in urban planning projects can lead to more effective and inclusive outcomes. This approach can be applied to various types of projects, from small-scale neighbourhood improvements to large-scale urban development. Sharing best practices and lessons learned from collaborative projects can inspire other cities and communities to adopt similar approaches.

Establishing feedback mechanisms

Regular feedback and reflection enable continuous improvement of the workshop methodology. This iterative process ensures that the approach remains relevant and effective in addressing urban planning challenges. Collecting feedback allows for greater adaptability to changing needs and contexts.

By promoting best practices, leveraging successful cases, and applying the learnings from the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshop, urban planners and practitioners can contribute to more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive urban environments. These approaches can inspire and guide efforts to address complex urban challenges and support the development of thriving communities.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE INITIATIVE

We envision the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshop methodology being adopted by urban planners, municipalities, and community organisations across Europe and beyond. Its scalability allows it to be customised and applied to various urban contexts, making it a versatile tool for promoting sustainable urban transformation.

We plan to develop detailed and adaptable toolkits that can be used in different settings, ensuring that the workshop methodology remains relevant and effective regardless of specific urban challenges. Forming partnerships with international organizations and urban planning networks will help spread the methodology and gain broader acceptance. Collaborations with local experts and practitioners will facilitate the adaptation of the approach to diverse contexts.

We foresee ongoing refinement and enhancement of the workshop methodology based on feedback and emerging trends in urban planning and sustainability. This iterative process will ensure that the methodology stays current and incorporates the latest best practices. Creating a repository for resources, case studies, and best practices related to the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshop will support continuous learning and innovation, serving as a valuable resource for practitioners and researchers alike.

We aim for the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshops to contribute to advancing urban sustainability goals. By addressing key challenges related to climate resilience, active mobility, and public space design, the workshops will help create more sustainable and liveable urban environments. We will continue to empower local communities by involving them in the urban planning process, fostering active participation and collaboration to create a sense of ownership and agency among residents.

Increasing outreach efforts to engage a diverse range of community members and stakeholders will ensure that the workshops reach a wider audience and reflect the needs and preferences of different groups. Supporting and encouraging community-led initiatives that emerge from workshop discussions will help translate ideas into actionable projects and drive positive change at the local level.

We envision establishing a global network of practitioners, researchers, and organisations dedicated to advancing urban sustainability and innovation. This network will facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and mutual support. Collaborating on joint projects with other organisations and initiatives will enhance the impact of the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshops and contribute to collective efforts in urban transformation.

In summary, the future of the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods initiative holds great promise for expanding its reach, enhancing its effectiveness, and making a meaningful impact on urban sustainability. By continuously refining our approach, engaging with diverse stakeholders, and fostering collaboration, we aim to drive positive change and contribute to the development of resilient and vibrant urban communities.

Last but not least, introducing new thematic modules of the Net-Zero Neighbourhoods workshops will expand the range of urban-related topics in the future.