

**syncity**

Synergetic Cities for Europe

cooperate  
a handbook  
to co-create the  
urban commons

Ina Ivanceanu, Richard Pfeifer, Catalina Dobre (eds.)

# cooperate

a handbook to co-create the urban commons

This book is based on the results of the Syncity project,  
and was developed in a collaborative effort by the project partners.

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Synergetic Cities  
for Europe

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## Preface

# When a pandemic hits a participatory project

The Syncity project, which ran from 2019 to 2021, focused on the Cureghem neighbourhood in Brussels, Belgium. It was about people exchanging ideas on the present and the future of a neighbourhood that is undergoing major urban transformation pressures. It was about starting new conversations and making connections, between academics, local associations, public authorities, retailers, business people, workers, students and residents. It was about understanding a neighbourhood as a truly social place. Then came COVID-19 and not surprisingly, the onset of the pandemic also affected the Syncity project.

The backbone of communication between the project partners and the residents and users of the neighbourhood was a series of Urban Living Labs: spaces of lively exchange and discussion that were meant to run over a period of two years and address the very tangible challenges faced by the people of Cureghem. This exchange became very difficult from spring 2020 onwards. Many planned events were banned as a preventive measure against the spread of COVID-19, others could only be organised in a much-reduced form and still involving risks. Syncity, as a transnational, applied, participatory and social science-oriented project, thrived on a diverse source base, including contributions from participating residents and users of Cureghem in the context of these Urban Living Labs. Cutting back on these labs obviously had an impact on the course of the project.



*The Syncity team in 2019 and one year later, after the COVID-19 outbreak.*



Over the year, Syncity became more theory-focused than originally intended. In response to this, the team decided to include insights from the whole project process into this handbook, and to broaden its scope with conceptual input, moving back and forth between theory and practice, as the Syncity project did.

The Syncity consortium has endeavoured to make the best of the exceptional situation in 2020 and 2021, to continue the project within its means and to produce useful tools for urban transformation processes. This handbook compiles a compendium of examples and ideas to support urban research and sustainability-oriented transformation in the future, going beyond the Syncity project.

It is to be hoped that this handbook will provide support and encouragement for new participatory action research projects to tackle the challenges of the post-COVID society. The pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities present in urban areas, thus highlighting the crucial importance of an inclusive and accessible public space for everyone.

Thomas Stollenwerk  
for the Syncity team

# Contents

Preface  
Introduction

<b>I.</b>	12	<b>Towards a just and green urban transformation</b>
	14	Eco-cities in response to a global challenge
	16	Citizen participation at the core of urban futures
	21	The concept of emotional co-ownership
	23	Yes, in my backyard: towards urban commons
	26	Co-creation, co-design, co-construction... co-what?
	30	Arrival areas: chance and challenge
	38	How to support sustainability in arrival areas?
	40	Eight criteria for reflection and self-evaluation

<b>II.</b>	50	<b>From listening to transformation: A step by step guide</b>
	54	Phase 0: Create your project
	60	Phase 1: Relate to the needs of residents and users
	64	Phase 2: Engage stakeholders for co-creation
	69	Phase 3: Co-design and transfer
	74	Phase 4: Co-construct

<b>III.</b>	76	<b>Research at the interface of past, present and future</b>
	78	Exploring the relationship between people and spaces
	81	The Urban Innovation Week: a transdisciplinary encounter with a neighbourhood
	85	Syntopia: from participatory research to a draft for a life skill building
	94	Life Cycle Assessment: ecological challenges and sustainability transitions

<b>IV.</b>	100	<b>Urban Living Labs 2.0: a new generation</b>
	102	What is an Urban Living Lab, and why hold one?
	107	Examples from the world
	108	Incubators of the urban commons
	111	Cooperation: the sweet spot where change can evolve
	118	What if: participatory scenario making for a desirable future

<b>V.</b>	122	<b>New tools for stakeholder engagement</b>
	124	Power, knowledge, commoning: two new tools
	126	Tool 1: The stakeholder balance tool
	132	Tool 2: The stakeholder commoning matrix
	140	Exploring new pathways: from analogue to digital
	144	Kju:Ti — the digital question tree
	151	Cureghem tales — the map-based blog

	156	<b>Conclusion</b>
	159	References
	165	Acknowledgements

# Introduction

## From a project to an approach

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This section presents the Syncity project and explains how it led to an innovative approach for urban transformation and planning. It introduces the five parts of the book and how to use them.

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This handbook presents the Syncity approach: an innovative way to make urban planning sustainability-driven and stakeholder-inclusive — in particular for arrival areas in European cities. It is based on the experiences and results derived from the Syncity project, combined with the expertise of the team in the fields of architecture, social geography, urban planning, social work, ecological process evaluation, participation, sociology, and transdisciplinary communication.

Syncity — Synergetic Cities for Europe, funded by JPI Urban Europe, was a research and innovation project between Austrian and Belgian partners, carried out from 2019 to 2021. How to make urban transformation processes more just and green? In exchange with experiences, learnings and good practice from Vienna, the Syncity project explored this question in the real-life context of Cureghem, a city quarter within the municipality of Anderlecht in the Brussels Region. Cureghem has historically been an “arrival area” for immigrants in Brussels, and still is. The local population faces various challenges, such as high unemployment, a precarious housing situation, a lack of public spaces and ecological hotspots. The Syncity toolbox and this book present a hands-on approach to lay a basis for improvement.

Rooted in participatory research and action, the toolbox and this handbook are designed to inspire and support your own urban project. Successes and failures of a three years transdisciplinary process marked by many open, experimental moments are reflected here.



*What should researchers know before they start working in a neighbourhood? A Syncity brainstorming session.*

- ▶ Find the tools on the USB stick, or scan the QR code on the last page of this book.
- ▶ Find the method cards in the box, or a digital version on the USB stick and in the repository (QR code).

**INFO:** The handbook is composed of five standalone parts that you can read in any preferable order, or independently from each other. The sidebar links to the different parts of the book if you want to go deeper into a specific topic and offers practical info boxes and hints from reality.

The Syncity toolbox contains

- the handbook
- ten tools to make your urban project engaging and sustainability-oriented
- eleven method cards for participatory action

This handbook is composed of five parts.

- **Part I** outlines the framework for urban sustainability and citizen participation. How can both paradigms be knitted together in an enriching way? This part lays out the main concepts behind the approach, presents eight Sustainability Criteria developed by the project, and discusses ideas about creating urban commons and emotional co-ownership by stakeholders, especially of vulnerable groups. How can they attain a better position for change making within urban transformation?
- **Part II** offers a step-by-step guide for setting up a stakeholder-inclusive process within a framework of urban sustainability. It is based to a considerable extent on experiences in Cureghem and is aimed at neighbourhoods facing strong transformation pressure.
- **Part III** describes innovative approaches to research in an urban transformation context, based on the combination of participatory action research and Life Cycle Assessment, and presents “Syntopia” — a future vision for a building which in itself enhances social, ecological and economic sustainability in a neighbourhood.
- **Part IV** explores the concept of Urban Living Labs and their next generation — Transformative Labs. It deals with the benefits of co-creation, co-design and co-construction processes, following the idea to include residents and users of a site as active partners into urban transformation.
- **Part V** offers two new stakeholder tools developed by Syncity to better understand a stakeholder landscape, and presents innovative practical ways of engagement in the analogue and the digital world: a laboratory on wheels, the app Kju:ti and the map-based blog Cureghem tales.

Whether you are a member of a city authority or an NGO, an architect or a participant in a community organisation, a private developer or an urban activist: this handbook and the material in the toolbox are there to help you steer a path through urban transformation projects, aiming at participation and sustainability.

The editors  
for the Syncity core team

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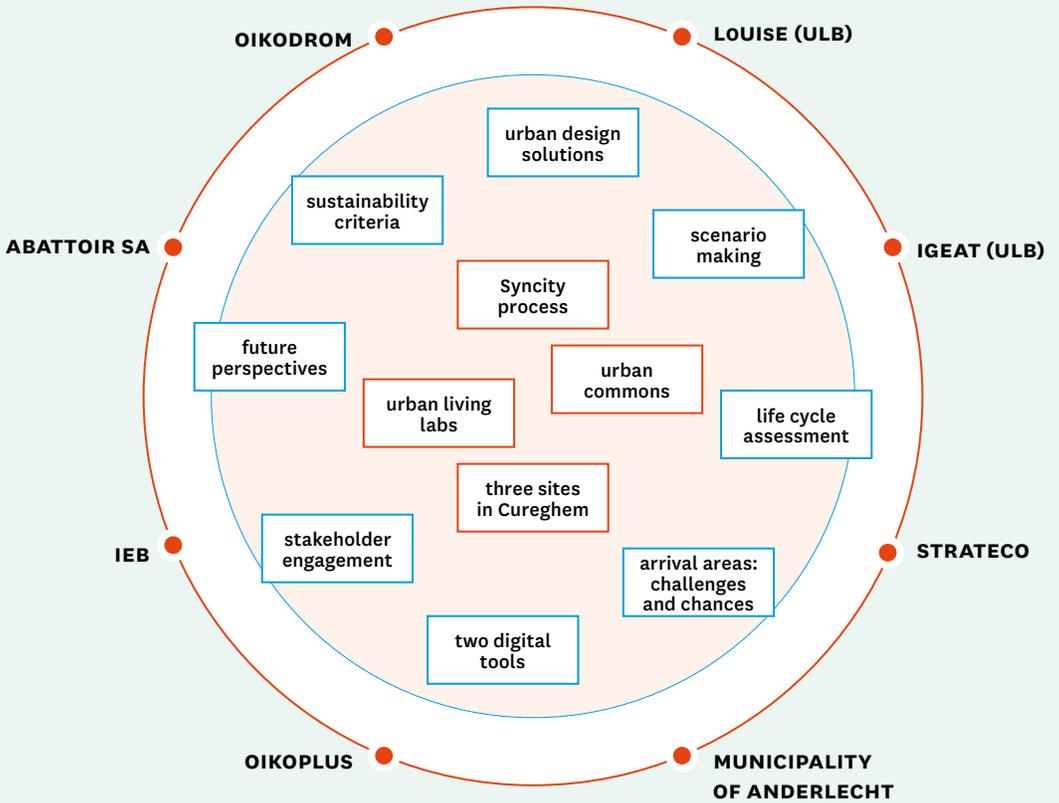
René Kollmann

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Michael Anranter, Ina Ivanceanu,  
Thomas Stollenwerk

# The Syncity project: partners and mind map



This handbook was developed in a collaborative effort between the Syncity partners.

[www.syncity4.eu](http://www.syncity4.eu)

Citizens as agents of change in their neighbourhoods: this handbook offers a step-by-step guide for urban projects and lots of ideas to develop the urban commons together, especially in disadvantaged urban areas. From co-creation towards shared governance: Explore the landscape of future-oriented urban transformation with helpful concepts, inspiring tools and plenty of examples and lessons from real life.



**syncity**

Synergetic Cities for Europe

engage

11 methods

+

apply

10 tools

These methods and tools were compiled  
in the frame of the Syncity project.  
[www.syncity4.eu](http://www.syncity4.eu)

Practical support for everyone who wants  
to make urban change more just and green:

- 11 methods to engage: hands-on, public space oriented, with short instruction manuals on cards. How does each method work, what is the result, what budget, competences and material do you need?
- 10 tools to apply: do the sustainability self-check, build and further develop the Kju:Ti source code to facilitate easy going participation, use the commoning matrix to find out who can develop commons in a neighbourhood, and much more.



**syncity**

Synergetic Cities for Europe

apply

10 tools  
for engaging and  
sustainability-  
oriented urban  
projects



# apply

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10 tools to make your urban project engaging and sustainability-oriented: Find them on the Syncity USB-stick or scan the QR code on the front of this card.

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## Your project at a glance

Communicate your ideas easily to convince partners to join or governmental bodies to fund.

\*

## Neighbourhood tales

A guide to create your own tales — bring a place or a city quarter alive with storytelling and maps

\*

## Sustainability self-check

Is your urban project sustainability-oriented? Use our tool for self-reflection and improvement.

\*

## Kju:Ti code

Try the Kju:Ti code as a basis for an ICT tool that encourages participation through direct communication.

\*

## Stakeholder template

Collect information on stakeholders involved with your site as a solid basis for further work.

\*

## The stakeholder balance tool

Cluster your stakeholders to prepare for upcoming project activities and to ensure you don't forget anyone.

\*

## The stakeholder commoning matrix

Which stakeholders are most likely to create the urban commons? This tool helps you to find out.

\*

## The Urbodrom game

Use a playful method to engage citizens in sustainability-oriented urban planning.

\*

## The ELAS calculator

Assess energy demand, ecological footprint or CO<sub>2</sub> life cycle emissions and estimate future developments.

\*

## Handbook and 11 method cards

Find the complete version of the handbook and the Syncity method cards as PDF files.