

(Re) Imagining Urban Spaces for Art and Culture

**A Guidebook For
Cultural Actors**
Adaptive Toolkit

Written by Jisu Kim, Polen Biçer, Rodrigo Camberos Garcia Sancho, Cáit Healy, Emma Duell

In collaboration with Hanna Olsson, Ludvig Granqvist at Trans Europe Halles

Project Seminar of Applied Urban Research 2025/2026

In fulfillment of the Master of Urban Studies
Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Université Libre de Bruxelles

Adaptive Toolkit

A Living Tool for Different Cities, Different Resources, Different Possibilities

A strategy that works in Lund may not work in Brussels. A municipal building that can become a shared cultural hub in one city may be legally unavailable in another. A vacant shop may be affordable in a small city but impossible to rent in a metropolitan centre. A heritage building may offer strong cultural identity, but require technical upgrades, accessibility investment, or long administrative negotiations.

For this reason, this toolkit does not propose one fixed pathway. Instead, it helps cultural actors, municipalities, and intermediary organisations identify which pathway is most realistic in their own context. We are not looking for an “ideal” cultural space, we are investigating the possibilities of spaces which realistically can be activated, negotiated, shared, tested, or sustained.

Title	Function
Read the City First	Spatial, institutional, financial, social and environmental conditions
Pathway 1: Use What Is Empty	Activating empty or underused spaces
Pathway 2: Share What Already Exists	Shared use of public, private, or civic spaces
Pathway 3: Move Culture Around	Mobile and temporary cultural spaces
Pathway 4: Transform What Has Memory	Reusing heritage and older buildings
Pathway 5: Start Without a Building	Beginning with programmes and networks
Cultural Space Pathway Matrix	Matching local needs with helpful pathways
Adaptation Canvas	Tailoring a pathway for each place or group
From Prototype to Policy	Turning small tests into direction for policy

Adaptive Toolkit

How To Read?

This toolkit is not intended to be read from cover to cover like a fixed guide. Rather, it is designed as a flexible guide that can be approached from different angles depending on the unique circumstances of each city, organisation, or project.

Some users may start with open-ended questions. Others may begin with community needs, economic constraints, mobility issues, historic buildings, or infrastructure gaps. For this reason, the pathways presented in the toolkit are not rigid categories or step-by-step formulas. Rather, they are potential directions that may overlap, converge, or evolve over time.

The toolkit yields the best results when used with a reflective approach. Instead of asking, “Which model should we copy?” it is beneficial to start with an inventory of asset management, aiming to ask:

What already exists in our city?
What resources are available?
What factors hinder access to the space?
What types of cultural practices are currently not being supported?
What is realistically possible in this context?

Users are encouraged to move between sections, combine different paths, adapt suggestions, and even reject specific approaches that do not align with local conditions.

This toolkit should be understood not as a template or a definitive solution, but rather as a framework for discussion, experimentation, and negotiation. Its purpose is not to produce identical cultural spaces in different cities, but to help identify locally grounded possibilities for creating, sustaining, and envisioning cultural infrastructure in diverse ways.

Read the City First

Spatial Conditions

- Are there vacant or underused buildings?
- Are there empty shops, offices, schools, industrial sites, municipal rooms, markets, libraries, sports facilities, or heritage buildings?
- Are spaces concentrated in the city centre or spread across neighbourhoods?
- Are peripheral areas underserved by cultural infrastructure?
- Is temporary use legally or practically possible?
- Are there spaces that are empty only at certain times of day or week?

Institutional Conditions

- Is the municipality open to cultural collaboration?
- Is there a cultural department or one-stop contact point?
- Are public procurement, leasing, or subsidy rules flexible or restrictive?
- Can public buildings be used by external actors?
- Are there existing cultural strategies?
- Are there intermediaries who can negotiate between owners and cultural actors?

Financial Conditions

- Are rents high or relatively affordable?
- Are grants available?
- Can spaces be subsidised?
- Can costs be shared?
- Is there philanthropic, EU, municipal, or private support?
- Can cultural actors generate some income without compromising accessibility?

Social and Cultural Conditions

- Who needs cultural space most?
- Are artists lacking production space?
- Are residents lacking accessible cultural venues?
- Are young people, migrant communities, elderly people, disabled users, or informal groups underserved?
- Is there trust between institutions and cultural actors?
- Are communities at risk of displacement?

Environmental Conditions

- Can existing buildings be reused?
- Are there climate or energy constraints?
- Are buildings poorly insulated?
- Is public transport access strong?
- Can circular materials or shared resources be used?
- Does the project reduce or increase environmental pressure?

Pathway 01

Use What is Empty

The city has vacant shops, offices, public buildings, industrial sites, or commercial premises.

Possible models

Temporary cultural use
 Meanwhile spaces
 Short-term occupancy agreement
 Vacant-to-cultural matchmaking
 Low-cost artist workspace
 Pop-up exhibitions or rehearsal rooms

Works well for:

experimental projects, early-stage collectives, low-budget cultural actors, cities with visible vacancy, and testing demand before long-term investment.

Be careful about:

short-term instability, legal uncertainty, hidden renovation costs, gentrification risk, rural or low-density areas, and cities with limited permanent space.

Pathway 02

Share What Already Exists

The city has few vacant buildings but many underused existing facilities.

Possible models

Evening use of schools
 Weekend use of municipal halls
 Cultural use of sports facilities
 Shared use of libraries, markets, town halls, religious or civic buildings
 Co-location with social, educational, or community services

Works well for:

cities with limited budgets, municipalities with existing public assets, cultural actors needing visibility, community-based programming, and small- and medium-scale activities.

Be careful about:

low autonomy, storage limitations, lack of technical infrastructure, and cultural use being treated as secondary.

Pathway 03

Move Culture Around

Cultural infrastructure is unevenly distributed, peripheral areas are underserved, or communities face mobility barriers.

Possible models:

Mobile cultural bus
Modular stage or pavilion
Temporary neighbourhood installation
Travelling workshop unit
Pop-up cultural equipment kit
Seasonal outdoor cultural programme

Works well for:

children and young people, peripheral neighbourhoods, rural or low-density areas, and cities with limited permanent space.

Be careful about:

permits, weather dependency, electricity and water access, and staff capacity.

Pathway 04

Transform What Has Memory

The city has heritage buildings, former industrial sites, old schools, stations, warehouses, or symbolic spaces.

Possible models:

Adaptive reuse
Cultural heritage hub
Creative production centre
Community memory space
Mixed cultural and social facility
Long-term regeneration project

Works well for:

long-term cultural anchoring, cities with strong heritage identity, institutional partnerships, larger cultural organisations, and sustainability-oriented strategies.

Be careful about:

high renovation costs, heritage restrictions, accessibility limitations, and the risk of culture-led gentrification.

Pathway 05

Start Without a Building

There is no immediate access to space, but there is cultural energy, community need, or strong networks.

Possible models:

Programme-first approach

Nomadic cultural collective

Partnerships with existing venues

Cultural mapping before space negotiation

Temporary events as evidence-building

Digital or hybrid cultural platform leading to physical space later

Works well for:

early-stage initiatives, informal collectives, cities with high rents, contexts with bureaucratic barriers, and groups that need to build legitimacy first.

Be careful about:

lack of continuity, weak visibility, and difficulty building a long-term identity.

Cultural Space Pathway Matrix

Choose your local condition	Strongest pathway	Secondary option
Many vacant buildings	→ Use What Is Empty	→ Transform What Has Memory
Few vacant buildings	→ Share What Already Exists	→ Start Without a Building
High rents	→ Share What Already Exists	→ Move Culture Around
Strong municipal support	→ Use What Is Empty	→ Transform What Has Memory
Weak municipal support	→ Start Without a Building	→ Build coalition first
Peripheral areas underserved	→ Move Culture Around	→ Share What Already Exists
Strong heritage assets	→ Transform What Has Memory	→ Shared civic use
Low cultural participation	→ Move Culture Around	→ Community co-design
Strong artist network	→ Shared studios / cooperative model	→ Adaptive reuse
Limited funding	→ Start small / shared use	→ Mobile low-cost model
Need for long-term stability	→ Adaptive reuse	→ Public-community partnership
Need for experimentation	→ Temporary use	→ Pop-up / mobile model
Risk of gentrification	→ Community governance	→ Affordability safeguards
Lack of data	→ Mapping and surveys first	→ Pilot and document

Build Your Own Pathway

Instead of filling in a single canvas, cultural actors and cities can build a pathway adapted to their own context.

Step 1: Define your city condition

Complete the sentence:

In our city, the main spatial challenge is...

- There are spaces, but they are too expensive.
- There are public buildings, but they are difficult to access.
- There is cultural energy, but no permanent infrastructure.
- There are heritage buildings, but renovation is costly.
- There are peripheral neighbourhoods with little cultural provision.
- There are policies, but implementation is weak.

Step 2: Define your strongest resource

Complete the sentence:

Our strongest resource is...

- A strong artist network
- Municipal support
- Empty buildings
- Community demand
- Existing public facilities
- Heritage identity
- EU funding opportunities
- A university partner
- A motivated property owner
- A mobile programme
- Local knowledge

Step 3: Define your biggest constraint

Complete the sentence:

Our biggest constraint is...

- High rent
- Lack of legal clarity
- No long-term funding
- Weak technical infrastructure
- Limited staff capacity
- Lack of trust
- Poor transport access
- Heritage restrictions
- Safety requirements
- Political uncertainty

Build Your Own Pathway

Step 4: Select a pathway combination

Choose one primary pathway and one supporting pathway.

Our pathway combination is:

	Primary pathway	Supporting pathway
A	Use What Is Empty	Share What Already Exists
B	Use What Is Empty	Start Without a Building
C	Share What Already Exists	Move Culture Around
D	Move Culture Around	Start Without a Building
E	Transform What Has Memory	Share What Already Exists
F	Transform What Has Memory	Use What Is Empty
G	Start Without a Building	Mapping and coalition-building

Step 5: Decide the first realistic action

Choose one:

- Map existing cultural spaces
- Identify vacant or underused spaces
- Talk to cultural actors
- Talk to the municipality
- Contact property owners
- Test a one-day pilot
- Share space with another organisation
- Apply for small-scale funding
- Create a coalition
- Document barriers
- Build a public argument
- Negotiate temporary access

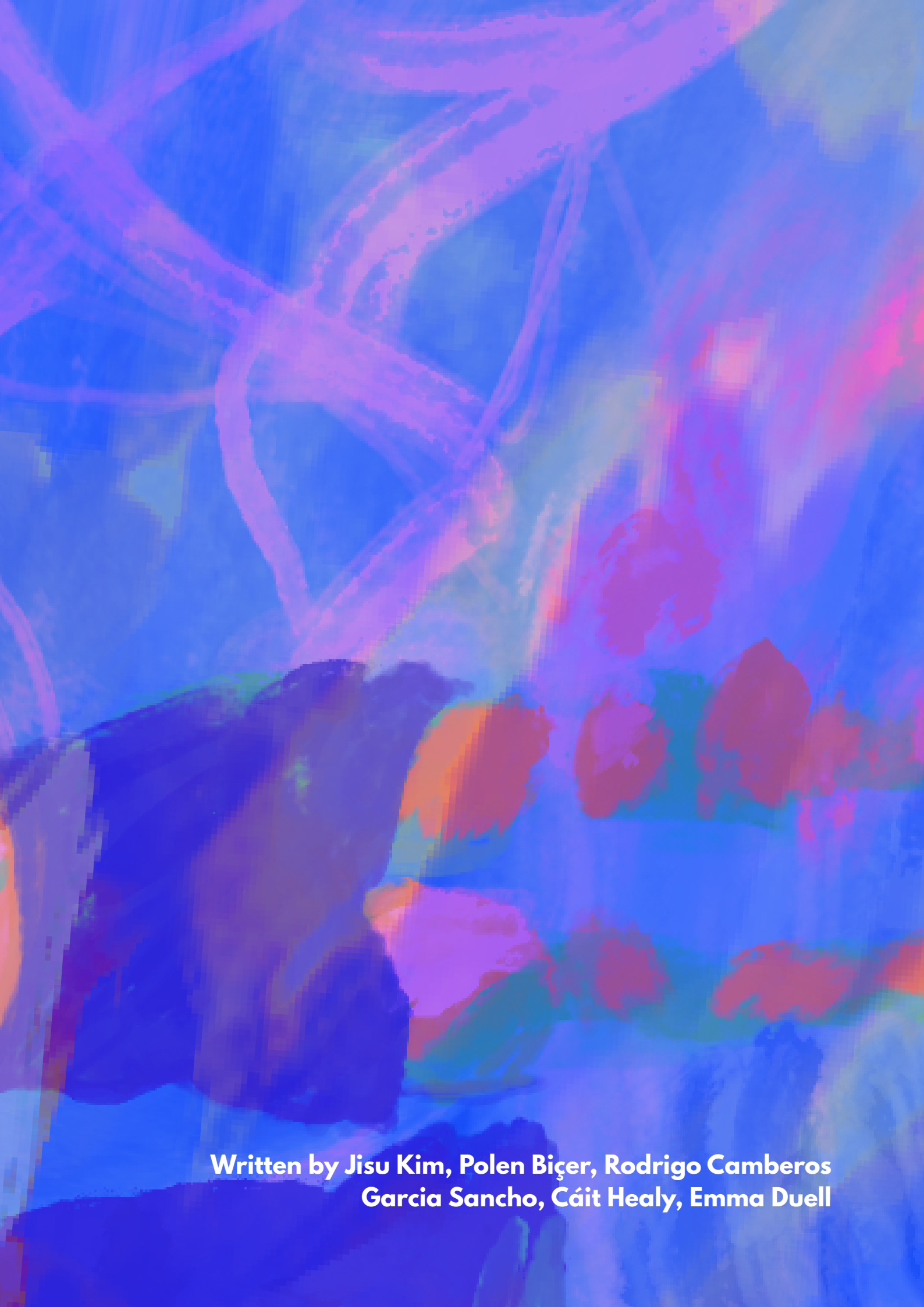
From Prototype To Policy

After each pilot, document:

- Who used the space?
- Who could not access it?
- What worked?
- What failed?
- What barriers appeared?
- What support was needed?
- What value did the activity create?
- What would make it sustainable?
- What should the municipality, owner, or funder, change?

Eurocities: Future Cultural Spaces in Cities: Emerging Trends (2025)





**Written by Jisu Kim, Polen Biçer, Rodrigo Camberos
Garcia Sancho, Cáit Healy, Emma Duell**