

## Welcome to the Urban Rooms Toolkit

Here you will find all you need to know about setting up an Urban Room. In this Toolkit you can read the **STORIES**, get the **KNOWHOW** and discover the **METHODS** that have been tried and tested by the Urban Rooms Network

### The Urban Rooms Toolkit includes the following sections:

- **Urban Rooms?:** In this section we introduce the Urban Room as a tool for place-based community engagement - its ethos, the forms it can take and who might benefit from setting one up.
- **Stories:** Here you can read stories of Urban Rooms across the UK - how they were set up, their aims, challenges, activities and the impact they had on their place.
- **Knowhow:** Here you can get the knowhow of how to make the case, set up, resource and operate an Urban Room - based on real experience from the Urban Rooms Network.
- **Methods:** Here you can discover the methods (activities, techniques and tools) that have been tried and tested in Urban Rooms to foster inclusive and creative engagement.

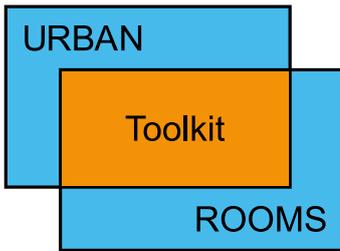
This document is a downloadable, printer friendly version of the Urban Rooms Toolkit which can be found at [urbanroomstoolkit.org](http://urbanroomstoolkit.org)

The Urban Rooms Toolkit is a public resource to be used, downloaded and shared by anyone interested in situated creative community engagement in placemaking. If you have any ideas or experience you would like to share and potentially contribute to the Toolkit please join the Urban Rooms Network!

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## Urban Room?

### What is an Urban Room?

An Urban Room is a space where people can come together to help create a future for their local area.

Are you...

- a community activist supporting people to have their say in local issues?
- a council officer hoping to engage communities in conversations about local development?
- a creative practitioner commissioned to co-design the future of a place with local people?
- a university lecturer working in architecture or planning and seeking opportunities to partner with local people to share knowledge and ideas?

...then an Urban Room could help you develop those creative, meaningful conversations in the places that matter to people.

Urban Rooms share these principles:

- 1 . a focus on our shared built environment - streets, neighbourhoods and public spaces
- 2 . an open door - all welcome, especially those who are traditionally under-represented in decision making about the future of our towns and cities
- 3 . exploration through creative activities - to prompt curiosity and fresh thinking
- 4 . to be 'on-site', that is, located in the places that are being discussed

**Image and Credit:**  
Croydon Council



The term 'Urban Room' was first coined in 2015 by the [Farrell Review](#) which recommended that every town and city should have one. Since then many places across the UK have benefited from Urban Rooms. In 2015 the [Urban Rooms Network](#) formed to support groups and organisations that wish to set up their own Urban Room in their place.

This is the Urban Rooms Network definition of an Urban Room:

"Every town and city should have a physical space where people can go to understand, debate and get involved in the past, present and future of where they live, work and play.

The purpose of these Urban Rooms is to foster meaningful connections between people and place, using creative methods of engagement to encourage active participation in the future of our buildings, streets and neighbourhoods."

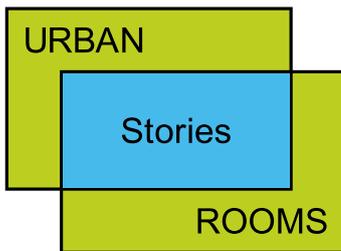
Urban Rooms Network

An Urban Room can be:

- inside a building or outside in public space
- open for just a few days, a few weeks or months, or for years
- many different things: a shop; a market stall, a milk float, a tree house, a clearing in the woods; hosted in a public square, a corner of a public library, a community centre or a supermarket...
- facilitated by a variety of organisations: community groups, local authorities, arts organisations, universities



**Image:**  
Climate Hub, Live Works  
Credit: The University of  
Sheffield

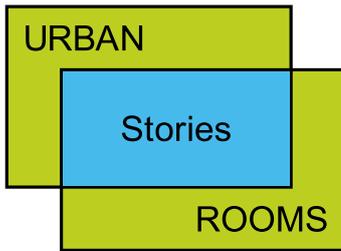


**Here you can read stories of Urban Rooms across the UK - how they were set up, their aims, challenges, activities and the impact they had on their place.**

**The Urban Rooms Stories included in this section are:**

- Urban Room Folkestone
- Nottingham Urban Room
- Live Works, Sheffield
- Urban Room Blackburn
- Church Street Urban Room
- Croydon Urban Room

This document is a section of the Urban Rooms Toolkit which can be found at [urbanroomstoolkit.org](http://urbanroomstoolkit.org)



# Urban Room Folkestone

**Location:**

1 The Plaza, Folkestone.

**Run by:**

Founded by Diane Dever, now operated by The Urban Room Folkestone Association (URFA).

**Commissioned by:**

Originally commissioned by the 2017 Creative Folkestone Triennial.

**Date:**

2017 to present.

**Timing:**

Originally temporary for the 2017 Triennial, now permanent in our new location.

**Space:**

In a former tourist information office in the heart of the harbour/old town/ Creative Quarter

**Description:**

UR Folkestone is a space for civic discussions about the town and wider societal/global topics such as climate change. UR Folkestone sits in an area which has seen significant arts-led investment and development by a wealthy local businessman and the charity he established, Creative Folkestone, who are a key partner. UR Folkestone works in dialogue with decision makers. Folkestone Fringe (a local arts organisation) manage the space and curate the programme. They use urban arts led strategies to engage people in conversation and activity that focused attention on placemaking that is beneficial to all. The newly-expanded Urban Room Folkestone Association acts as a de-facto board to guide UR Folkestone activity.



**Image:**

UR Folkestone  
Credit: Igor Emmerich

**Aims of the UR:**

The aim of URF is to develop the general population's understanding of Folkestone's urban environment and from this basis host discussions about the future of the town. The ideas of 'civicness' and citizenship are crucial to our work, encouraging people to bring their skills and ideas for the wider benefit of the town. Central to our work is the idea of URF as a neutral space, not beholden to any one stakeholder, and also as a safe space to share thoughts and feelings about the town. We are open to the public five days a week and all are welcome. We actively encourage others to use the space to host meetings, for events and exhibitions that are in some way 'civic'.

**How was the UR funded and resourced?**

Originally funded by the Triennial. Subsequently privately funded and staffed by two individuals who set up the URFA. Some ad-hoc funding from Creative Folkestone, District Council, Town Council. Where specific events/programmes are delivered by Folkestone Fringe this is often funded by the Arts Council, Town Council and in the past the EU via the Creative Europe programme.

**Activities of the UR:**

URF hosts a permanent exhibition of the Urban Analysis, a geographical and historical analysis of the town, showing its development from 10,000BC-Present. We also host an Urban Library. Our exhibition space hosts work by others that in some way relates to the town, recent exhibitions have been art, history, geography and climate-focused. When exhibitions begin or end we hold 'civic lunches' bringing local people and key stakeholders together to discuss themes relating to the exhibition, 'breaking bread' and discussing topics over a meal are a key way we bring people together. Each year Folkestone Fringe delivers 'The Festival of Looking' which focuses on urbanism and for which URF is the focal point. Folkestone Fringe are well networked and support our activity with marketing.

**Image:**

UR Folkestone

Credit: Igor Emmerich

We want visitors to the urban room to feel relaxed and unpressured, to feel comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings. All discussions must be civil, we actively discourage excessive confrontation, interrupting, raised voices, etc. We are open to all and through encouraging others to use the space, we hope to engage audiences outside of those we already work with. With some project work we take to the streets and grow our audience. We have a great relationship with the primary school local to us, who visit when they are doing project work on Folkestone's past and future. However limited resources and staff time affects our ability to reach out to new audiences beyond those passing by, participating in projects and coming to events. URF is primarily documented through its website, where all past events can still be seen. The website also hosts useful resources such as the Urban Analysis.

**Image:**

UR Folkestone

Credit: Igor Emmerich

**Impact of the UR:****On placemaking:**

The Urban Room has hosted public exhibitions and discussions aimed at shaping the future of several important undeveloped sites in Folkestone, particularly the former gasworks and disused harbour train line, the former of which is now being developed. The founder, Diane Dever regularly consults with key stakeholders and developers in the town in regards to audience development for arts-led placemaking. URF in some sense offers a space to analyse, critique and learn from the particular version of arts-led placemaking that is happening in Folkestone.

**On participants:**

Participants in URF activities are actively engaging in the civic life of the town, they develop a greater sense of community and of having some say on what happens in and to the town. All visitors develop their understanding of Folkestone as a place, and many engage in discussions about what the future could or should look like.

**On the host organisation:**

URF doesn't have a single host organisation. But for those organisations that we work with or that use the space the main impact is to see their own place in the town, and to see how they can and do contribute. For Folkestone Fringe the Urban Room serves to maintain the focus of their arts activity on the place of Folkestone and on using arts to talk about and shape the town.

**What was the primary challenge for your UR and how did you tackle it?**

Probably the main challenge for URF is establishing formal relationships with the key stakeholders in the town. The problem with not being funded by or established by any of these organisations is that they tend to be less interested in engaging. In particular, getting the district council to engage with us has been a slow process, but through gentle, consistent pressure we are opening channels of dialogue and working with them more and more.

**What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?**

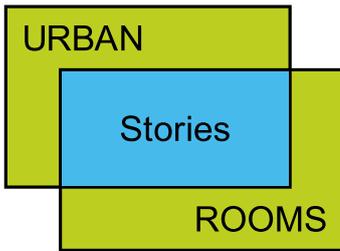
Focus on getting as wide a range of people as possible to feel some sense of ownership of or connection to the space. If someone wants to do something in your Urban Room, try to say yes, whether it's yoga, sewing, performance art, or a gig, because this is what gets people in and looking at what's on the walls and having conversations about it. Obviously there are limits to this, but at URF as long as something can in some way be seen as 'civic' then we are happy to host it.

**Image:**

UR Folkestone

Credit: Igor Emmerich

**More information:**[www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/](http://www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/)[www.urbanroomfolkestone.net/about-ur/](http://www.urbanroomfolkestone.net/about-ur/)[www.urbanroomfolkestone.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Urban-Analysis\\_2016..pdf](http://www.urbanroomfolkestone.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Urban-Analysis_2016..pdf)[www.creativefolkestone.org.uk/artists/diane-dever-and-the-decorators-artworks/](http://www.creativefolkestone.org.uk/artists/diane-dever-and-the-decorators-artworks/)



# Nottingham Urban Room

**Location:**

38 Carrington Street, Nottingham.

**Run by:**

Urban Room Steering Group.

**Commissioned by:**

Urban Room Partnership: Nottingham City Council; Historic England; Urban Design Group; RIBA; NDSA; University of Nottingham; Nottingham Trent University.

**Date:**

2018-2020.

**Timing:**

Temporary shop lease 2018-2020, then as a pop-up. Due to reopen in March 2024 as a permanent UR.

**Space:**

Renovated former shop in a historic building within a city centre regeneration area.

**Description:**

The Urban Room was located in a high street shop renovated through a Townscape Heritage Scheme. The premises offered ground floor space for exhibitions and events and a basement available to hire for workshops, meetings and events. The Urban Room was a fundamental vehicle for the delivery of the Co-PLACE programme: a neutral space with an inspirational and creative atmosphere that helped people relax and gave them the confidence to participate in activities, given the friendly and welcoming environment. In the wake of the 2020 Pandemic Crisis, during the first lock-down, the Urban Room evolved into a virtual platform to continue to serve the community and provide ongoing opportunities for the delivery of Co-PLACE.



**Image and Credit:**

Nottingham Urban Room

### **Aims of the UR:**

The Urban Room is a space for everyone with an interest in making Nottingham a better place and creating safe and exciting spaces in the city. We all have a role to play in making Nottingham a welcoming and supporting place where people want to live. Together, we can build a city that we are proud of, one that future generations love and treasure. The priorities of the UR align with the United Nations sustainable development goals:

- Climate change
- Social inclusion
- Public health
- Place democracy
- Economic recovery
- Education and skills

### **How was the UR funded and resourced?**

Lottery Fund Heritage Action Zone; in kind and donations from partners.

### **Activities of the UR:**

The Nottingham UR employed various methods including drawing and printing workshops, photography exhibitions, architectural trails, presentations and conversations. During the Design Quality Framework engagement project we used 'social eating', where event participants prepare and share a meal together, as a tool to collect data and to generate and strengthen social networks. Local growing networks provided the produce and catered for informal meals that helped to generate a relaxed and communal atmosphere where participants felt confident and at ease to discuss potentially sensitive issues.



**Image and Credit:**  
Nottingham Urban Room

**Impact of the UR:****On placemaking:**

The Urban Room was regularly used for engagement and conversations on pretty much every development being consulted in Nottingham, as well as a base office for the Heritage Panel and other place-based organisations. Engagement regarding the co-production of design guidance and policy in the city also happened at the urban room, as well as training for officers, planning committee, industry and community groups.

**On participants:**

Visitors who have participated in the Urban Room events and activities have been empowered through gaining interpersonal skills (socialising, forming new partnerships, finding ways to achieve their goals through collaboration, cross age engagement, etc.) as well as furthering their knowledge of their environment. Visitor feedback generally praised the relaxed, neutral atmosphere and the fact that participants did not feel like they were at an institution with a pre-loaded agenda. Feedback from the Social Eating sessions repeatedly reflected the success of this communal approach. Participants said that sharing a table with food was a powerful way to bring people together.

**Image and Credit:**

Nottingham Urban Room

**On the host organisation:**

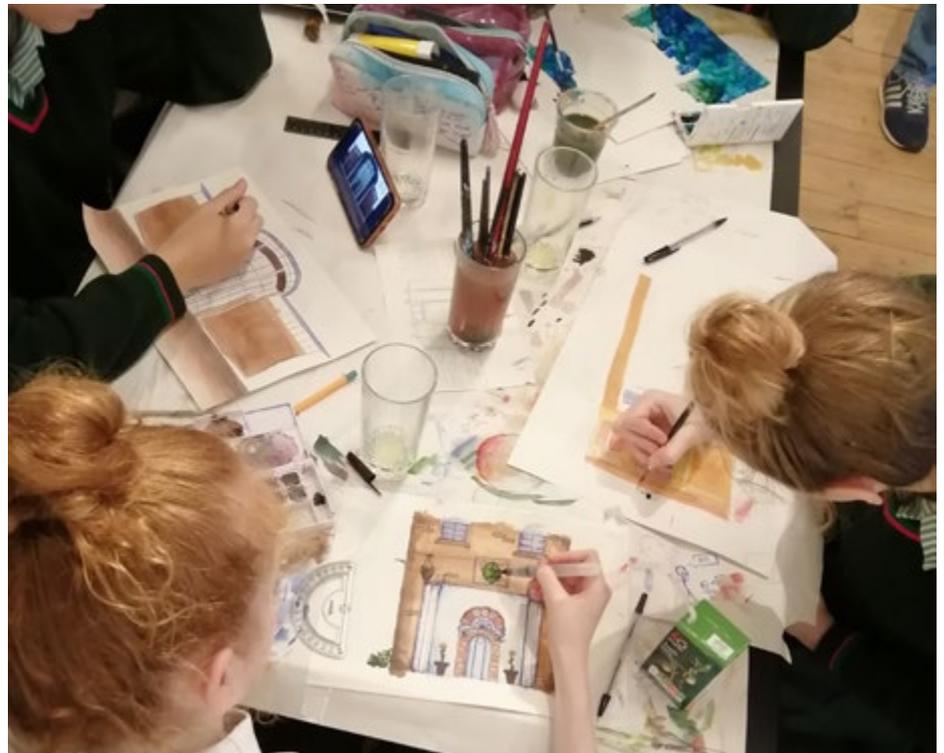
The UR was a fundamental vehicle for the partners - to disseminate their expertise, find volunteering action, reach out to people, develop skills through collaboration and action research, etc. Our Social Eating events were critically important to showcase how existing social assets and tools can be integrated successfully in planning processes.

**What was the primary challenge for your UR and how did you tackle it?**

Funding to support a physical space - we had Lottery Funds for 5 years but once that time lapsed we lost the shop. Now we are negotiating some rent relief from a city council building to re-open in another location.

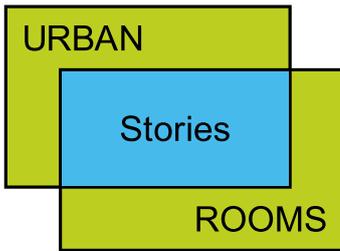
**What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?**

It can be incredibly rewarding and exciting for participants and the public. It requires a lot of work and volunteering input. Be prepared to work hard and think outside the box to make it happen.



**Image and Credit:**  
Nottingham Urban Room

**More information:**  
[www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/](http://www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/)  
[www.38carringtonstreet.org.uk](http://www.38carringtonstreet.org.uk)  
[www.mynottinghamnews.co.uk/nottinghams-urban-room-officially-opens-on-carrington-street/](http://www.mynottinghamnews.co.uk/nottinghams-urban-room-officially-opens-on-carrington-street/)



# Live Works

**Location:**

108 The Moor, Sheffield.

**Run by:**

University of Sheffield, School of Architecture.

**Commissioned by:**

University of Sheffield, School of Architecture.

**Date:**

2014 to present.

**Timing:**

Permanent (with occasional pop-up URs in neighbourhoods).

**Space:**

Old post-office on pedestrianised city centre shopping street.

**Description:**

Live Works is located on a busy shopping street in the heart of Sheffield city centre. It is a generous ground floor space with level access and big windows to the street. It offers a changing programme of events, exhibitions and activities, providing opportunities for people to share knowledge and ideas about the past, present and future of Sheffield's built environment. It is also a learning space where architecture students and researchers collaborate with community groups on 'live projects' to develop socially and environmentally sustainable design solutions for the city's buildings, streets and neighbourhoods. The Urban Room also has a makerspace, run by Aalfy, a social enterprise that holds regular events to support local people to design, make and sell their own products using digital technologies.



**Image:**

Live Works workshop  
Credit: Empowering Design Practices

**Aims of the UR:**

Live Works' aim is to provide an inclusive and creative space for collaboration between the university, civic organisations and community groups in Sheffield. Through facilitating exploratory and curious conversations between groups in the city who don't usually work together we open up the processes of production of the urban environment to new ideas and approaches. We believe passionately that the city, its neighbourhoods, high streets and buildings will be more purposeful, attractive, sustainable and inclusive if a wider cross-section of people are involved in its production. We work hard to connect with marginalised groups and support them to contribute their local expertise through co-design activities. Live Works aims to break down silos, acting as a bridge between academic and city communities: to make our teaching and research more effective; to build collaboration across the city; to improve local placemaking.

**How was the UR funded and resourced?**

Core funding provided by the University of Sheffield. Additional support for premises from external partners Renew Sheffield, The Moor and Sheffield BID for premises refurbishment, reduced rent and business rates relief. Projects and activities are funded on an ad-hoc basis from various sources inc. National Lottery, Levelling-Up Fund, UK & EU research funding. In-kind funding via UoS student engaged learning modules and staff research activities.

**Activities of the UR:**

Live Works is used on a weekly basis by architecture students working on design projects and by a drop-in 'laser cafe' run by our partners Aalfy. In addition to these regular activities we hold workshops, events, debates and exhibitions that focus on specific themes or projects in the city. We focus on creative methods of engagement, supported by the design and making skills of our staff and students. We use models, drawings, collective mapping and making, projections, film, 1:1 installations, VR & AR to create a space, both inside and outside the Urban Room, that is playful, experimental and asks 'what if?' about



**Image and Credit:**  
Live Works

the future of our city. We also open up the Urban Room to community groups to run their own events, e.g. South Yorkshire Climate Alliance, Men Up North, Sheffield Civic Trust and a local co-housing group. Live Works builds on over 20 years of experience of Live Projects at the School of Architecture and over that time we have developed extensive networks of partners across the city. We prioritise working in areas of deprivation with under-represented groups and aim to make our work as accessible, transparent and jargon-free as possible. We aim to understand both the tangible and intangible impact of our work through collective evaluation with participants and partners through collection of data, interviews, film, stories and testimonials.

**Image and Credit:**  
Live Works



## Impact of the UR:

### On placemaking:

Live Works has played a key role in establishing and delivering the co-production of both civic and community projects in Sheffield. We have hosted events and workshops to support community-led development of adventure playgrounds, social housing and city-centre regeneration projects. After many years of campaigning with local stakeholders for a community-led development of the Castlegate area of the city centre the resulting shared vision has attracted £17M levelling-up funding. We are currently working with Sheffield City Council to run a programme of co-production workshops in the Urban Room with over 30 city organisations to deliver this vision.

### On participants:

Visitors and participants have welcomed having a space in the city centre dedicated to opening up conversations and debate about the urban environment. It has become clear that the Urban Room is a new, much needed typology on our high street, where local people can share their knowledge and experiences of and ideas for their local area. Through the Urban Room people have accessed information about local projects, made connections with the University and contributed to debate around important subjects in our city such as the climate emergency, gentrification and the future of the high street.

**On the host organisation:**

The School of Architecture is located at the top of the Arts Tower, a landmark building in Sheffield, with panoramic views across the city. Although this is a wonderful vantage point to work from, it can result in a sense of disconnection from the city and its communities. Rather than being removed from the city, at Live Works we take our place within it and this has fundamentally changed how we think about, produce and communicate our work. Live Works has helped us understand the value of our work beyond academia and architecture practice, developing valuable skills of community development, public engagement and advocacy to our students.

**What was the primary challenge for your UR and how did you tackle it?**

Despite being able to use the space regularly with student activities and the events offered by our partners it is still a challenge to keep the Urban Room animated. Outside university term-time, over holiday periods and the summer months which can be times of high footfall in the city but when teaching activities are at a minimum, it can be a challenge to keep the space active and engaging. We have collaborated with community groups to host their events in the urban room during these periods - helping to extend our networks, providing much needed space for community engagement in the city centre, while keeping the Urban Room animated.

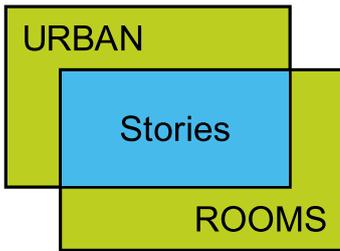
**What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?**

It takes a lot of resources to initiate and sustain an Urban Room, especially a permanent one like Live Works. We have found that reaching out to civic and community organisations that share our ethos of creative engagement has been vital to setting up and running Live Works. Forming strong partnerships with these groups has enabled us to access funding, share staffing, material resources and the operation of the Urban Room.

**Image and Credit:**  
Live Works

**More information:**

[www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/](http://www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/)  
[www.live-works.org](http://www.live-works.org)  
[www.liveprojects.org](http://www.liveprojects.org)  
[www.aalfy.org](http://www.aalfy.org)  
[www.renewsheffield.co.uk](http://www.renewsheffield.co.uk)



## Urban Room Blackburn

**Location:**

Blackburn Town Centre.  
Primary address, 65 King William Street.

**Run by:**

Initiated by Claire Tymon, Blackburn is Open Project Director for Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.

**Commissioned by:**

Blackburn with Darwen BC.

**Date:**

2014 to present.

**Timing:**

Blackburn Urban Room was part of the Blackburn is Open creative regeneration programme that ran from January 2014 to July 2016.

The Urban Room hosted intensive month-long event programmes, that took place on three occasions between 2014-2016:

October 2014  
May 2015  
July 2016

**Space:**

Activities took place across the whole town centre including the bus station, Thwaites brewery (now demolished), Cotton Exchange, Leeds Liverpool canal.

**Description:**

Blackburn is Open (BIO) had a permanent space which consisted of two empty shop units on the high street, opposite the Town Hall and Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. The space was managed by the Cultural Planner and BIO Project Director Claire Tymon, employed by Blackburn with Darwen BC. Whilst the space wasn't officially an Urban Room (the term UR was not widely known when the BIO project launched), it included many features and roles which have now been adopted by the URN.

For Blackburn, the Urban Room also took the shape of an annual month-long festival of ideas, animation of derelict spaces and artistic interventions, including Blackburn Open Walls - an annual artist-led street art festival.



**Image and Credit:**

Urban Room Blackburn



would be programmed, including exhibitions, performances, and artisan markets.

Other monthly events included an artist network event and a Drink and Draw, which soon became too popular to host in the space and moved to an empty church, which soon became a permanent art centre.

The month-long festival programme included exhibitions, workshops, talks, street art festival, guided walks, show and tell activities and symposiums. The exhibitions were specially commissioned, responding to opportunities or challenges in the local area.

URB was part of a wider creative manifesto for the town centre called Blackburn is Open. Open to ideas. Open to Business. Open to You. Therefore, URB was open, inviting, inclusive and popular! Audiences and participants understood it was part of a wider vision and ambition to include more local people and visitors to take part in the conversation and share ideas, to question why things were the way they were, and feel confident to design and deliver projects, events or even new businesses themselves.

### **Impact of the UR:**

#### **On placemaking:**

Good design was at the heart of the Urban Room, which reflected the ethos and values of the space and the programme. It also enabled good marketing materials and press coverage, attracting high profile advocates and sponsorship opportunities. URB created a mechanism for local voices to be represented and heard in the future of the town, providing inspiration and creativity to a range of place-makers and decision-makers.



**Image and Credit:**  
Urban Room Blackburn

**On participants:**

Nearly all the URB events and activities were free of charge, and the majority of the project budget was spent on marketing and communications - ensuring information reached as many residents, businesses, schools and stakeholders. Most activities were co-designed and delivered by the local creative community, ensuring they were accessible, inclusive, relevant and interesting.

**On the host organisation:**

Urban Room Blackburn was the UK's first urban room and attracted positive media coverage and support from the team at the Farrell Review. The Urban Room concept provided an open framework or brand in which to express the vision and aims, and enabled us to connect our work with a government White Paper. URB was also able to host the Urban Room Network which provided a unique opportunity for critical feedback and showcase the programme to a nation-wide audience.

**What was the primary challenge for your UR and how did you tackle it?**

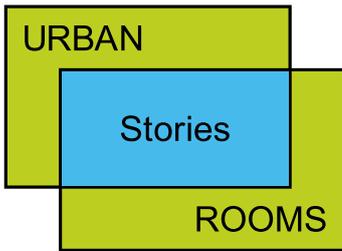
Accepting Urban Room Blackburn was a temporary intervention to help demonstrate best practice principles when engaging local communities and businesses in creative ways. Unfortunately not enough was done to ensure its sustainability. Engaging planners, architects, developers and decision makers in the design and delivery of the activities would have helped with this. As a consequence, the programme did not continue once the Project Director left the role.

**What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?**

- Don't start with the budget, start with the purpose then identify the partners and participants. The finance will follow!
- Ensure there is an ethical framework in place at the start - be open and transparent about the decision-making processes, especially if the UR is being implemented as a consultation tool.
- Pay all freelancers for their time and contribution, and ensure a budget is available to pay expenses to community / volunteer participants. Do not cut corners due to lack of budget - budget can always be found to ensure UR are inclusive and accessible.
- If possible, share all documentation on a public platform like Facebook, Instagram, or a blog so that those unable to participate in person have access to the information and are able to contribute.
- Recruit advocates if possible - people who understand the context and bring new perspectives and can advocate for the purpose of the UR.
- Raise the profile of your UR - decision-makers will most likely listen to the outcomes and open to different perspectives.
- Be as creative and design-led as possible.

**More information:**

<https://www.facebook.com/urbanroomblackburn/photos>  
<https://www.blackburnbid.co.uk/urban-room-blackburn/>  
<https://theshuttle.org.uk/blackburn-open-launches-uks-first-urban-room/>



## Church Street Urban Room

**Location:**

Westminster, London.

**Run by:**

Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum.

**Commissioned by:**

Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum.

**Date:**

September - October 2015 (7 week period).

**Timing:**

Temporary.

**Space:**

Shop front.

**Description:**

Church Street Urban Room was held as part of a process to develop a neighbourhood plan for the multicultural and deprived Church Street Ward in Westminster, London. It was hosted in a vacant shop unit on Church Street, a shopping and market street in the heart of the area, and hosted a full programme of engagement events, animated by a series of community activities and displays. In the seven week period this 'part meeting place, part exhibition, part festival' welcomed over 1000 visitors.

CSWNF invited submissions from 'everyone who knows and loves the neighbourhood' to suggest activities and uses for the Urban Room, under the banner 'Create This Street'. The Urban Room featured exhibitions about local heritage, current issues and future plans alongside an ever-changing programme of workshops, performances and activities.

The Urban Room engaged more than 1000 visitors from a wide cross-section of the community. Over the seven weeks around 30 local organisations used the space to run activities and engage people in debate about the future of the local area.



**Image:**

Church Street Urban Room  
Credit: Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum

### Aims of the UR:

The Church Street Urban Room was set up in response to the consultation fatigue and disengagement apparent in the local community towards development in their streets and neighbourhood. The Urban Room brought a fresh interactive approach offering open access for all the community to a short and dynamic programme of events and activities.

The theme of the Urban Room 'Create This Street' aimed to encourage many more people in the Church Street Ward to participate and, importantly, influence decisions about the area's future with the following invitation:

"The Church Street area is changing. The Urban Room is everyone's room. It's a free community space for exploring the past and planning the future...to share ideas, talk, voice concerns, resist, debate, object, suggest, perform, entertain, be entertained, get creative, learn a skill, innovate, volunteer, exhibit art, dance, sing, work out, network, crowd fund, have coffee, have fun, chat, socialise, promote your business, promote your services, promote your group, promote your talent, promote yourself, be active, or just observe, do anything...just be part of it."

### Image:

Church Street Urban Room  
Credit: Church Street Ward  
Neighbourhood Forum



### How was the UR funded and resourced?

The Church Street Urban Room was a partnership between the Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum (CSWNF), Westminster Council and numerous local community groups, charities, civic organisations and local businesses. CSWNF and key partners supplied the core team, supported by many volunteers from the local community. The Urban Room hosted a wide range of activities showcasing the enterprise and creativity of the local community. The space was free to use with the cost of the events covered by the groups and individuals who facilitated them. Voluntary donations were requested from those who could contribute to support the overall running of the UR.

**Activities of the UR:**

Over the 7 week period the Church Street Urban Room hosted 50 events and activities, collaborated with 30 local organisations, and presented 8 displays in the space. Exhibitions and events presented varied subject matter, discourse of the built environment was facilitated through discussions on development sites within the ward, whilst complementary events were utilised to inhabit and engage local residents in the space.

Focussed engagement was held on 7 neighbourhood planning themes including housing, heritage, health and wellbeing and the market. Community events hosted included dance and sports displays, Eid feast, death café, health & wellbeing activities, arts, crafts & open mike, video diary room, walking tour, community meetings.

Careful thought and preparation was undertaken to ensure that the Urban Room was as inclusive and accessible as possible. The shop premises were fully accessible and marketing material was made available in both English & Arabic. 'Champions' were recruited to represent certain groups to ensure marginalised groups were invited to help shape the UR and fully participate in targeted entertainments & events.

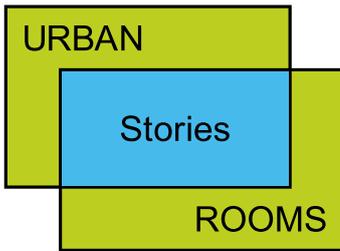
**Impact of the UR:**

**On placemaking:**

The Urban Room helped to identify and define specific themes for the development of the neighbourhood plan. It revealed latent interest, expertise and knowledge in the community around built environment issues and it strengthened community ties and encouraged new volunteers to join CSWNF and other community groups. It delivered rich and diverse community engagement in the past, present and future of the Church Street Ward and highlighted the development issues that mattered most to local people.



**Image:**  
Church Street Urban Room  
Credit: Church Street Ward  
Neighbourhood Forum



## Croydon Urban Room

**Location:**

The Parent is located in Croydon Town Centre, whilst the Atelier travels across the borough.

**Run by:**

Croydon Placemaking Team - Spatial Planning.

**Commissioned by:**

Croydon Council.

**Date:**

First pilot was in 2019. Next iteration is planned for autumn 2022 - 2023.

**Timing:**

2019 pilot - 6 weeks; 2022-23 programme - 18 months.

**Space:**

Shopfront and workspace + website.

**Description:**

The Croydon 'Urban Room' is a physical home for public participation in the shaping of Croydon; fostering meaningful connection between people and place; past, present and future.

The Croydon Urban Room has been delivered as a series of pilots. First launched in 2019 as part of the Local Plan Review consultation, the Croydon Council Cabinet Report in August 2021 proposed to re-establish the Croydon Urban Room in 2022 - 2023, to be a physical manifestation and focus for catalysing the sustainable renewal and vitality of Croydon town centre.

The project has collaborated with a diverse and evolving group of partners in Croydon and beyond, including GLA, Central Saint Martins, Migrants Bureau, VU City, Connected Cities Catapult, Museum of Croydon, Turf Projects, UCL, Kingston University, alongside local business owners, landowners, Croydon council colleagues, residents, schools and youth programmes.

**Image:**

Croydon Urban Room Pilot, 2019.

Credit: Ruth Ward.



**Aims of the UR:**

Planning is often top-down, political and inaccessible to many. At Croydon we are seeking to disrupt this norm and make planning populist, through a physical and online space for exhibition, events and active participation that is accessible and part of everyday life.

Our overarching aim is to democratise access and understanding of the planning process specifically through education and open dialogue, focusing particularly on underrepresented communities. We see this as the fundamental step in ensuring that the built environment of Croydon is for all that live, work and visit here.

Its key objectives in its 2022-23 iteration are:

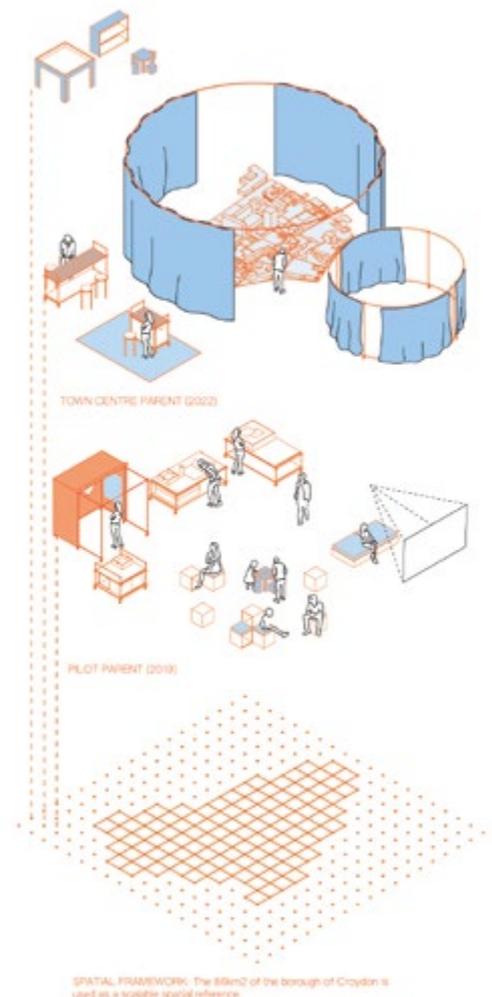
- to make future planning and placemaking accessible and inclusive, through upskilling, empowering, building and sharing knowledge and skills to generate feasible, economically viable ideas and proposals for the Town Centre Recovery Vision, presented within exhibitions, events and learning programmes
- to provide a physical manifestation and focus to the Croydon Town Centre Community Collective and Town Centre visioning, resulting in the preparation of a community informed Action Plan for the future of the Town Centre
- to create a collective space for exchange and test new forms of town centre and retail space activity by occupying an empty shop unit in the town centre.

**How was the UR funded and resourced?**

2019 Pilot - Local Plan consultation budget.

2022-23 programme - mixed funding including s106, in kind contributions, GLA Growth Zone funding.

**Image and Credit:**  
Croydon Urban Room



### **Activities of the UR:**

The project has an established and collaborative exhibition and events programme, including:

#### *Planning shopfront (to inform)*

The physical shopfront space provides a de-institutionalised public project space for civil servants to do their work, where the public can observe, enquire and participate in council projects live 'in action', and where the two can collaborate and exchange.

#### *Reciprocal learning programme (to educate)*

An education programme open to members of the public, all community groups, industry and council staff, and designed for reciprocal exchange, for individuals to share perspectives and expertise.

#### *Live exhibition/archive (to collaborate & create)*

A live archive and exhibition space for the public, industry and government to research, explore and collaborate.

#### *Creative membership (to inspire)*

Membership initiatives are the foundation of empowering civic agency in practice; providing formalised forums for influence and feedback, via physical and digital networks.



**Image:**

Croydon Urban Room Pilot, 2019  
Credit: Ruth Ward

### **Impact of the UR:**

#### **On placemaking:**

The conversations, output and contributions collated and exhibited in the Urban Room Pilot in 2019 helped to inform the review of the Local Plan.

The 2022-23 programme will be focused on the Croydon Town Centre, providing a space for ideas exchange and imagining the future of the area. The activities and ideas will result in a practical Action Plan for the Town Centre.

**On participants:**

The exhibitions, participation methodologies and activities - particularly the Planning Game - help to explain complex planning processes in an accessible and inclusive way. This resulted in a broader participation reach, particularly in young people, during the 2019 Pilot.

**On the host organisation:**

The methodologies set out in the Urban Room project have influenced and informed the Croydon Placemaking teams wider practice of working, across the various scales and outputs; from policy and masterplanning through to design advice, public realm design. The Urban Room allows us to develop and nurture a closer relationship with the public we serve, as local government officers. It has also allowed the team to connect and collaborate with a wider range of industrial, business and community partners - sharing resources and knowledge.

The Urban Room project has been used as a precedent for many other Councils, including Enfield, Kingston, and Watford.

**What was the primary challenge for your UR and how did you tackle it?**

The primary challenge for the Croydon Urban Room is related to funding and ongoing resourcing, given the financial limitations and resource pressures within a local government context. To respond to this, the Croydon Urban Room is purposefully additive and flexible, in design and focus, to align with physical and funding opportunities as and when they become available. This has been a key to the success, working incrementally and with an agile framework of physical furniture, programmatic partners, and methodologies that can grow and iterate over time.

**What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?**

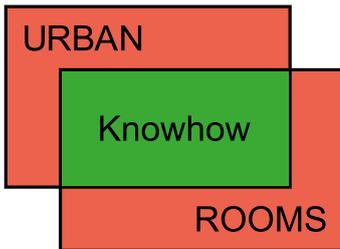
To be ambitious (for the long term) and embrace work-in-progress (in the meantime). In our experience, many of the relationships, partnerships and knowledge sharing initiated in 2019 are now resulting in really exciting outcomes, but it takes time!

**Image:**

Croydon Urban Room Pilot, 2019  
Credit: Ruth Ward

**More information:**

[www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/croydonurbanroom.croydon.gov.uk](http://www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/croydonurbanroom.croydon.gov.uk)  
[www.nla.london/projects/croydon-urban-room](http://www.nla.london/projects/croydon-urban-room)



Here you can get the knowhow of how to make the case, set up, resource and operate an Urban Room - based on real experience from the Urban Rooms Network.

The Urban Rooms Knowhow is broken down into the following sub sections:

■ **Making the Case:**

- How can an Urban Room help?
- How can an Urban Room help a community group?
- How could an Urban Room help a local authority?
- How could an Urban Room help a creative practitioner?
- How could an Urban Room help a university?

■ **Set Up:**

- How do we know when to set up an Urban Room?
- How can we find a space?
- How can we fund the space?
- How can we fund our activities?
- How can we design and fit out an Urban Room?
- How can we find partners?
- [How do we create a team?
- How can we find an audience?

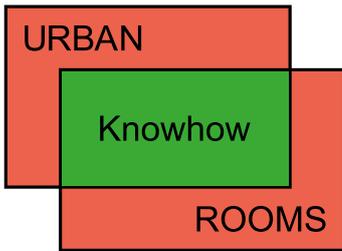
■ **Up and Running:**

- How can we create a welcoming space?
- How can we ensure that the Urban Room is inclusive to all?
- How can the Urban Room build a community agency?
- How can we reach out to under-represented groups?
- How can we keep the Urban Room animated?
- How can digital methods enhance an Urban Room?

■ **What's Next?:**

- How can we evaluate what we've done?
- How can we create a legacy for the Urban Room?

This document is a section of the Urban Rooms Toolkit which can be found at [urbanroomstoolkit.org](http://urbanroomstoolkit.org)



## How can an Urban Room help?

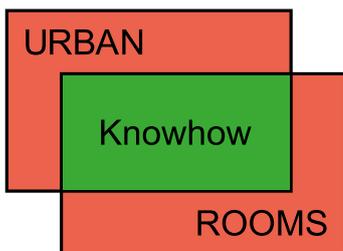
Many public and voluntary organisations across the UK have found Urban Rooms to be a useful mechanism to engage people in current issues about their local area. Public sector funding is increasingly linked to expectations around public engagement, with funders requiring robust evidence of diverse community involvement to inform funding applications and project delivery.

The Urban Room model offers a situated approach to public engagement that can, if done creatively and sensitively, encourage marginalised and under-represented groups to contribute their knowledge, ideas and experiences. Urban Rooms come in all shapes, sizes and timescales, and this flexibility brings a level of responsiveness to location, audience and context that encourages meaningful and productive collaboration.

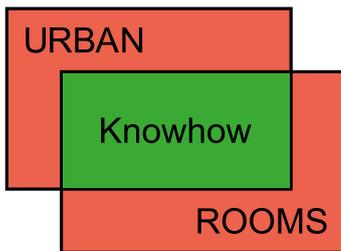
Rather than expecting people to seek out opportunities to participate, the Urban Room is on their high street, in their park or has popped up at their local market. It can also be accompanied by an online space, with an archive of maps, plans and discussions. In this way the Urban Room is breaking down the traditional barriers that exist in public involvement in placemaking, offering a space for a much more inclusive, informed and creative level of participation.



**Image:**  
Pitsmoor Kitchen Live Project  
Credit: University of Sheffield



Whether you are working in a local authority, a volunteer in a community group, a university researcher or a creative producer, an Urban Room could be the means to reach new audiences and engage them in their place to develop successful outcomes for your project. An Urban Room can demonstrate the direct and tangible community engagement that can be vital to meeting funding objectives and delivering better and more sustainable placemaking.



## How can an Urban Room help a community group?

Community groups and local initiatives can benefit from using Urban Rooms as mechanisms to widen participation in their local area and to encourage marginalised and under-represented groups to contribute their knowledge, ideas and experiences. In this way the Urban Room is breaking down the traditional barriers that exist in public involvement in placemaking, offering a space for a much more inclusive, informed and creative level of participation at a grassroots level.

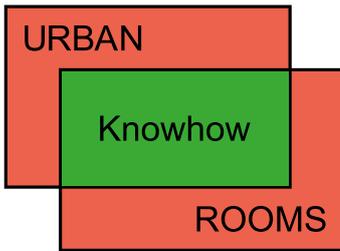
Community groups can bring a vast wealth of knowledge and lived experience to an Urban Room, to share and build on with others. These groups could have a particular focus, for example, heritage, education, diversity, sustainability or ecology. Or they could be more generally interested in a local area, such as neighbourhood forums or residents' associations. They may focus on engaging people in specific local issues such as the development of a neighbourhood plan, the regeneration of a high street or the development of a local sustainability strategy. Or they may be asking wider questions about longer-term futures of their area.



**Image:**

Caribbean Sports Club Live Project

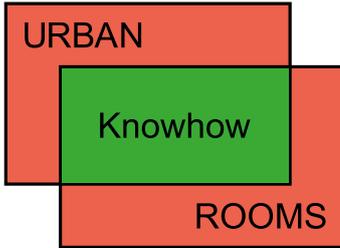
Credit: University of Sheffield



An Urban Room can create the space for a community group to explore these areas with local people to:

- reveal and recognise the current value (social, physical, cultural, economic) of the local area
- place local issues within a larger regional, national or global context, e.g. levelling up, social inequality, climate emergency, scarcity of resources
- clearly communicate information about local planning policy and development strategies
- form consensus around issues in the local environment and to build coalitions to support, advocate for, or protest against, accordingly

For a community group to make the most of their Urban Room they should reach out to under-represented groups and to local decision-makers.



## How can an Urban Room help a local authority?

Local authorities can benefit from using Urban Rooms as mechanisms to widen participation in their local area. Urban Rooms can be effective in opening up participation to marginalised and under-represented groups who wouldn't usually have access to or contribute to the more conventional forms of consultation and engagement. In this way, the Urban Room is breaking down the traditional barriers that exist in public involvement in placemaking, offering a space for a much more inclusive, informed and creative form of direct democracy.

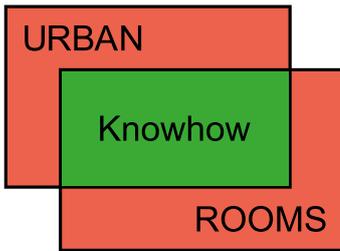
An Urban Room can offer local people the opportunity to contribute their knowledge, ideas and experiences to local planning frameworks, regeneration strategies and more specific development plans. The situated nature of the Urban Room means that this engagement can go beyond merely gauging public opinion through conventional methods of consultation and can embrace more active participation of communities over time.



**Image:**

Croydon Urban Room

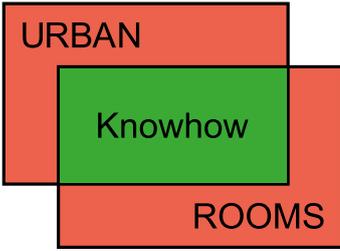
Credit: Croydon Urban Room / Ruth Ward



An Urban Room can create the space for a local authority to:

- offer local people a welcoming and accessible introduction to the processes of placemaking
- test and develop more engaged, inclusive and process-led planning approaches and frameworks
- build agency, cooperation and support within communities
- empower community interests in the specific or general development of local places
- open up to new and overlooked local ideas, skills, knowledges and networks
- evidence meaningful and inclusive community participation for current and future funders

For a local authority to make the most of their Urban Room they should embrace creative methods, possibly in partnership with artists, designers or creative practitioners. This brings in specialist creative engagement expertise, often with detailed knowledge of the local area, and can help to build capacity, skills and trust between local government and communities.

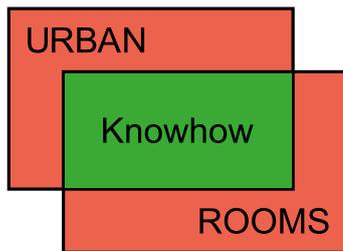


# How can an Urban Room help a creative practitioner?

Creative practitioners, such as artists, architects, makers, performers and writers who are working in the field of socially-engaged practice, can benefit from using Urban Rooms as mechanisms to form partnerships with communities. The situated nature of the Urban Room means that these partnerships can evolve over time through open exploration, testing and iteration. Urban Rooms can host activities, exhibitions, displays and performances that reveal, value and celebrate the cultural wealth of a local area, including its built heritage, traditions, public artworks, cultural institutions, stories and archives.



Image and Credit:  
UR Folkestone

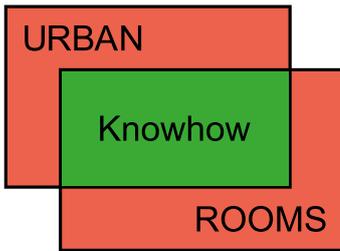


This gathering of knowledge and material about a place's past and present can become a solid foundation upon which to base further explorations of possible futures of place. Many socially-engaged arts organisations, artists and creative practitioners have found that the Urban Room methodology suits the way they work due to its potential to facilitate a long-term creative and situated approach to community engagement.

An Urban Room can create the space for a creative practitioner to:

- reveal and recognise the current cultural value of the local area
- form consensus around issues in the local environment and to build coalitions to support, advocate for or protest against, accordingly
- build agency, cooperation and support within communities
- help foster a sense of cultural identity in the specific or general development of local places
- challenge and renew perspectives and approaches to shaping places
- evidence meaningful and inclusive community participation for current and future funders

For a creative practitioner to make the most of their Urban Room they should partner with local built environment professionals and policy-makers engaged in regeneration.



## How can an Urban Room help a university?

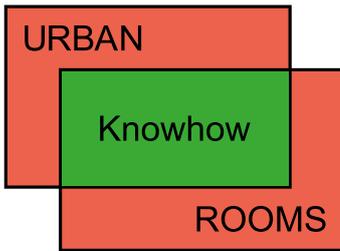
University researchers and educators can benefit from using Urban Rooms as mechanisms to form partnerships with community groups and initiatives, and with civic organisations. The Urban Room creates a space for encounter, conversation and collaboration in the local city or town, outside the often hard to access spaces of the university campus. This space can host educational activities, presentations, exhibitions, debates and workshops.

The Urban Room can become a catalyst and a venue for knowledge exchange if designed and operated as a space for mutually beneficial projects between the community and the university. The focus on the built environment lends itself well to the Urban Room being hosted by architecture, urban design and planning departments, however other departments such as archaeology, education, history, computer science and public health may also benefit from the city collaborations that an Urban Room can foster. An Urban Room offers a situated project-based approach to teaching and research and so can encourage a more interdisciplinary approach to civic engagement.



**Image:**

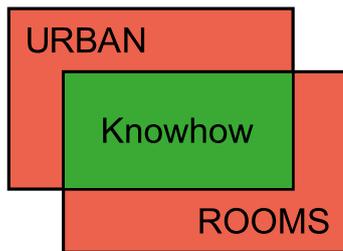
Climate Matters Live Project  
Credit: University of Sheffield



An Urban Room can create the space for a university to:

- foster civic relationships with communities, organisations and institutions in the city
- enhancing students' education and developing their employability skills through 'live projects' and action research
- showcase the relevance of its research and teaching activities to its host city
- develop opportunities to make a difference through socially-engaged research and teaching projects, leading to meaningful knowledge exchange and civic impact
- put theory and research into practice, potentially opening up opportunities for follow-on resourcing for new research and teaching projects
- develop opportunities for interdisciplinary research
- evidence useful and inclusive civic and community participation for current and future funders

For a university to make the most of their Urban Room they should guard against extractive methods and ensure that the community relationships formed through the Urban Room are supported and sustained over the long-term.



## How do we know when to set up an Urban Room?

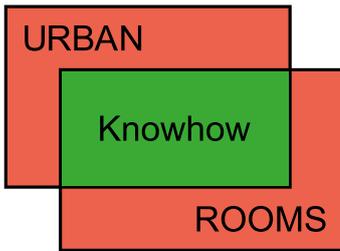
The timing and duration of an Urban Room needs to be considered carefully, taking into account multiple factors: intended aims, availability of resources, availability of space, time of year, etc. The durational and location-based nature of Urban Rooms distinguish them from other forms of community engagement that focus on placemaking.

Urban Rooms are inherently flexible and so can respond well to the ever-changing nature of the urban environment. A permanent Urban Room can become an established presence in a town centre or on a high street, offering a long-term and regular point-of-contact between the local community and placemaking. Temporary or pop-up Urban Rooms can be more targeted and closely aligned with specific development projects, policy frameworks, festivals or other calendar events.



**Image:**

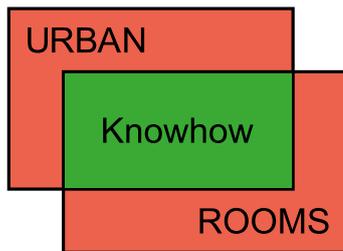
Shad Thames Walking Tour  
Credit: STAMP (Shad Thames  
Area Management Partnership)



Some Urban Rooms begin as a pop-up, for example, a temporary occupation of a shopfront or a mobile unit. This is an effective method of piloting the Urban Room methodology without committing to longer-term costs and resourcing. Once tested, documented and evaluated this prototype can serve as a 'proof-of-concept' to make the case for longer-term investment in a more permanent Urban Room. Other Urban Rooms have been set-up as a result of previous community engagement identifying a need or desire for an in-situ space to deepen relationships with the place. Utilising these different models of Urban Room can be an effective way to work within the limitations of funding, finite resources and premises availability, to build a more resilient approach to your Urban Room.

The Urban Room approach does require a certain duration, however. It is questionable whether meaningful engagement can happen solely within a single day of activity. Urban Room practice aims to build relationships between communities and their place and this can only happen over time. At the very least Urban Rooms should offer people the opportunity for a return visit, whether it's the next day or the next week.

The Urban Room model is responsive and agile, with multiple options for type, timescale and duration available to suit the context for engagement.



## How can we find a space?

Getting hold of a space is one of the key challenges in setting up an Urban Room. Experience from URN members show that there is no single or universal solution to this and finding space usually involves gaining a detailed understanding of local context and making lots of enquiries!

When looking for a suitable space for an Urban Room you should consider the following:

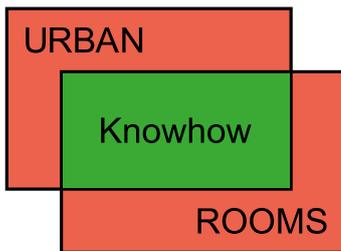
- accessibility - the space should be as easy as possible to access for people of all abilities. A ground floor space with a level access is ideal, if on an upper floor the space should be easily accessible via lift.
- visibility - look for spaces in busy centres with high footfall so that as many people as possible can become aware of the UR. For example, this might be on the high street, in a market, a shopping centre, a 24hr supermarket, a park, a public square, a library, a festival site - think creatively!



**Image:**

Use and Beauty Parlour, Live Works

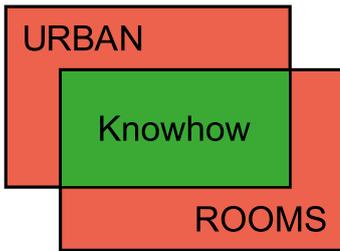
Credit: University of Sheffield



- connecting with under-represented groups - consider locating your UR in neighbourhoods or other areas where you can engage people who tend to be under-represented in placemaking including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, people of colour, young people, people with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community.

Here are some ideas from URN members of how you might identify potential spaces:

- some towns and cities have local initiatives to promote meanwhile use or to incubate start-ups, e.g. [Renew Sheffield](#), [Brent Council](#), [Open Doors Bradford](#)
- contacting agents of private landlords may open up opportunities for a short-term let to fill an empty shopfront, animate street frontages and potentially attract business rate relief
- local authorities are increasingly looking for ways in which to strengthen community participation in local decision-making - try contacting the Local Area or Community Committee, local councillors, council regeneration teams - they may be able to provide access to council-owned properties or help broker relationships with other owners
- many local organisations and businesses are open to hosting public engagement activities that align with their charitable status, public funding remit or corporate social responsibility - try approaching local community centres, churches, libraries, supermarkets, market managers, festival organisers etc.
- remember, an UR doesn't need to be inside - consider renting a market stall, remodelling a van, building a pop-up pavilion - think outside the box!



## How can we fund the space?

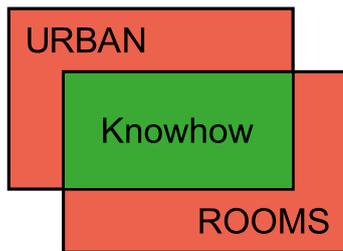
Costs vary enormously across different models and timescales of Urban Rooms. A pop-up Urban Room for a few days in an indoor market might cost a few hundred pounds in rent, while a permanent Urban Room in a city centre shop might run into the thousands per year in rent, business rates and utilities.

Here are some ideas of where the funding for your Urban Room might come from and things to consider in putting your budget together:

- core funding - an UR can be an effective mechanism for civic, cultural and educational organisations such as universities, local authorities and ACE National Portfolio Organisations to demonstrate their commitment to and impact from public engagement, knowledge exchange, outreach and community engagement
- project funding - when applying for ad-hoc funding for arts, community development, heritage, innovation and research projects it may be possible to include UR premises costs as part of the wider project budget



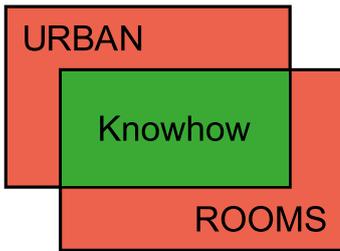
**Image and Credit:**  
Urban Room Nottingham



- business rates relief - your UR premises may be eligible for substantial business rates relief if you are, or are partnering with, a charity or not-for-profit organisation
- partnerships - forming partnerships with other like-minded groups or with mutual interests are a great way to build resilience around your UR and potentially to share costs or receive free/in-kind support
- rent reduction - sometimes owners of empty shops and other spaces are keen to see them occupied and animated in order to enhance the rest of the building, street front or block, in which case, you may be able to negotiate a rent reduction

Receiving funding usually relies on having good evidence that an Urban Room is an appropriate method to engage people effectively about their local area. It can be useful therefore to run a short pop-up or temporary Urban Room to trial the method and act as a 'proof of concept' for applying for funding to roll out a longer-term Urban Room (see 'How do we know when to set up an Urban Room?'). The [Urban Rooms Network](#) is also a good source of knowledge and experience and aims to support making the case for new Urban Rooms with past examples and evidence, primarily through this Toolkit.

Aim to build a resilient funding structure that integrates core with project funding, and draws on funding from different partners, to avoid a single, potentially precarious funding stream. The Urban Room model is responsive and agile, with multiple options for type, timescale and duration available to suit the different levels of funding available.



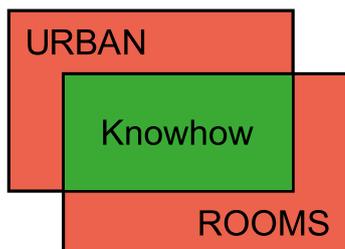
## How can we fund our activities?

In addition to funding the space of the Urban Room you will need to also find funding for the activities you want to deliver in the space. Activities costs can include materials, staffing costs (facilitation, curation, volunteer expenses), catering, speakers fees, co-researchers fees, etc.

If the Urban Room is supported over the long-term by your organisation you may be able to cover some of this through core funding (particularly permanent staff costs). However, most Urban Rooms rely on ad-hoc project funding to cover the costs of their activities and to pay the team. Each Urban Room will have differing options for funding, depending on the host organisation, the partners, the area of focus and the location.

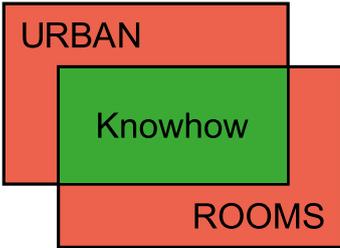


**Image:**  
Trowbridge Urban Room  
Credit: Trowbridge Urban Room



Here are some ideas from Urban Rooms:

- be clear about your objectives for the UR, this will help you identify potential funding sources to approach, e.g. heritage, community development, arts, diversity, innovation, health and wellbeing
- identify local funds that are specific to your place, e.g. local assemblies, town trusts, charities, philanthropists, campaigns
- be aware of national and regional areas of policy focus, there may be funds available through these, e.g. levelling up, covid recovery, cultural strategies, zero-carbon
- can you partner with a larger or more established organisation (in industry, healthcare, arts, local government) on an existing project or programme, or on a joint application? this may increase your chances, build your capacity and the effectiveness of the UR at the same time
- can you partner with enterprising creative freelancers (architects, designers, artists, filmmakers) in your area to your mutual benefit?  
- they can bring agile approaches to fundraising as well as creative input into your UR activities
- establish robust methods of monitoring, documentation, data collection and evaluation of all your UR activities - this will help you build a strong evidence base against KPIs and other criteria that are important for future funders
- URs can struggle to sustain themselves if they become reliant on single sources of funding or serial short-term project funding - try to build an agile and resilient approach to funding, responding to funding opportunities when they arise and possibly combining different types of funding from different sectors



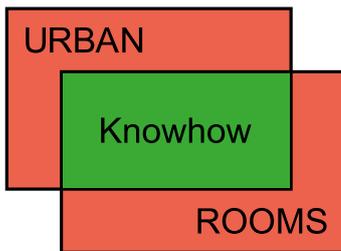
## How can we design and fit out an Urban Room?

Design plays an important role in the creation of an Urban Room. A well designed Urban Room will be welcoming to people, inviting them to engage and interact with exhibits and activities, and will give them space to relax, reflect, socialise and be inspired. People instinctively recognise a well-designed environment and the more attention that has gone into the design of a space the more visitors will feel cared for and valued.

Most Urban Rooms are set up on a shoestring budget and yet, even so, it is possible to implement good design concepts through being resourceful and creative with what is available. Design can feed into the success of an Urban Room at many levels: graphic design of logos, posters, leaflets; design of the space itself; design of the furniture, display units & fittings; design of the activities and exhibitions.



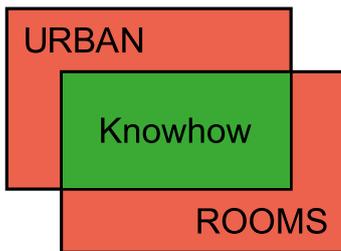
**Image and Credit:**  
Urban Room Rochdale



The design of the Urban Room can make clear connections to the characteristics and identity of the local area - simultaneously situating the Urban Room clearly in the place while also celebrating its richness.

Here are more suggestions of things to consider in the design of your Urban Room:

- try to make the UR space flexible and resourceful for users - consider moveable, adaptable and demountable furniture, screens and display units
- you can start with a smaller set up and then add, expand and adapt as the UR develops - this approach can align nicely with a work-in-progress approach to the whole UR, where incremental growth, accumulation and responsive adaptation are embraced as part of the UR methodology
- are there creatives in the local area who you can commission for elements of the design work? This will help to nurture local design talent while bringing in fresh ideas into the UR
- are there any local businesses who could sponsor or gift/discount any of the materials for the fit-out?
- consider how the design approach can invite people to engage with specific themes of the UR: sustainable use of materials; the circular economy; collective practices; health and wellbeing; ecology; connection to heritage; arts and culture
- think ahead to when the UR closes or moves - can the fit-out be demountable/mobile? Develop a design identity that is transferable between different phases and locations of UR - this helps to build recognition and sustain connection between the UR, people and place



## How can we build partnerships?

Most Urban Rooms are founded on strong partnerships between groups and organisations who share the same ethos and goals. Partnerships build confidence, resilience and capacity, helping to share the set-up, management, animation, costs and legacy of the Urban Room. Partners can bring together networks, expertise and contacts to form a critical mass around the project; raising awareness of issues and campaigns and exerting collective pressure on decision-makers.

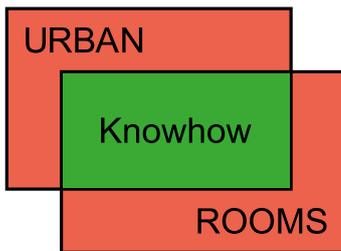
However, you and your partners need to ensure your aims are compatible and are honest about your own expectations. Ask yourselves 'what does success look like' for each of you. Establish a clear agreement towards how you will collaborate, what you are asking of each other and how you will communicate with each other, especially when things don't go according to plan!



**Image :**

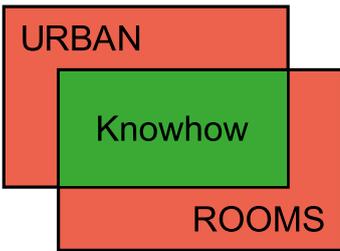
Watford Urban Room

Credit: University of Sheffield



Here are some more points of advice from our members:

- be open to serendipity and accidental encounters - new partners can emerge once your UR is up and running, be curious and follow up enquiries - your best partner might be a group or organisation you don't know yet!
- reach outside your bubble - go beyond your sector or discipline - our cities and towns are complex and so we need to build partnerships across traditional silos to meet future challenges effectively
- you may have different partners at different stages according to their expertise and capacity, e.g. initiation & set-up, operation, dissemination and follow-on activity
- aim to build partnerships between the grass-roots and civic scales to the mutual benefit of both - if you are from a large civic organisation such as a local authority or university, how can you work with smaller community groups to learn from their local knowledge and expertise? If you are a small community group how can you work with larger organisations who share your agenda and may be able to promote and support you in your work
- multiple partners hosting an UR helps to create openness and avoids one partner's agenda dominating the space
- recognise the limitations of your audience and networks and reach out to partners who can help you diversify your audience, e.g. charities and community groups who represent marginalised and under-represented groups
- building partnerships can be a slow process, especially with large civic institutions, but keep the channels of dialogue open and through gentle, consistent pressure, new opportunities for collaboration can develop



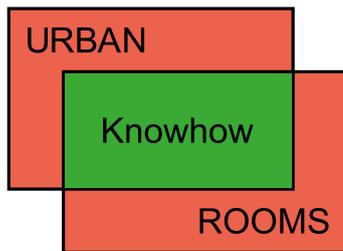
## How do we build a team?

Setting up an Urban Room can be very labour intensive and requires tenacity, commitment and imagination. Running an Urban Room also requires plenty of time and energy, and the ability to engage diverse people in meaningful conversations about the built environment through creative engagement activities. To cover these attributes and skill sets, and to share the workload, you should try to build a strong and resilient team that can work well together to deliver a successful Urban Room.

Often the initial vision for an Urban Room comes from an individual or small group with a passion for participatory placemaking. It is important to maintain that vision while expanding the team in order to deliver the Urban Room in reality. This team can consist of colleagues, partners, students and volunteers - all supporting the Urban Room in different ways at different times.

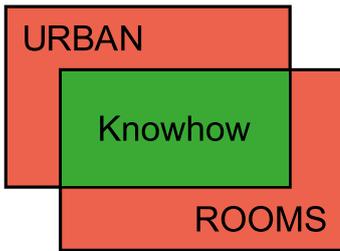


**Image and Credit:**  
Urban Room Rochdale



Urban Room Network members offer these points of advice:

- think carefully about the skill sets that are required, i.e. you may need team members with expertise on: specific issues in the built environment; working with particular demographics; creative methods of participation; workshop facilitation; fundraising; communication and publicity; film and photography; evaluation; budget management
- what methods (i.e. tools and activities) do you want to use in your UR? This will help you define the skills you are looking for in team members. Of course, this can work the other way - what methods can your existing team offer?
- be clear about the level of involvement you are asking for and what will the team members get in return, e.g. skills, space for their own activities, connections, payment
- remember to cover the mundane yet incredibly important activities e.g. opening the premises and locking up, cleaning, greeting visitors, scheduling, etc.
- ensure you have the right policies and procedures in place eg. safeguarding, lone-working, health and safety, code of conduct etc to support the wellbeing and safety of your team



## How can we find an audience?

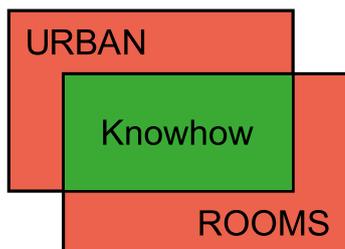
There is nothing more disheartening than spending lots of time and energy setting up a space for public engagement, only to find that no one comes in and takes part. Alongside the work preparing the space and activities you will also need to communicate to as wide an audience as possible in preparation for the opening of the Urban Room.

As well as having a clear strategy to publicise your Urban Room before it opens it's important to keep reaching out to build and diversify your audience throughout the UR programme. Identifying and understanding your targeted audience(s) is crucial and needs some careful consideration as you plan your Urban Room activities.

Try to avoid generalisation and develop a more specific situated understanding of potential audiences - for example, what groups do the terms 'the general public', 'the community', 'students' actually refer to, in your local area? Making connections with local schools, colleges, universities, libraries, friends groups, social clubs, art collectives, places of worship and shopping centres can help you to gain a more specific understanding of potential audiences in your area. Indeed, the term 'audience' also needs consideration - we look at this in the section 'How can we build a sense of community?'.



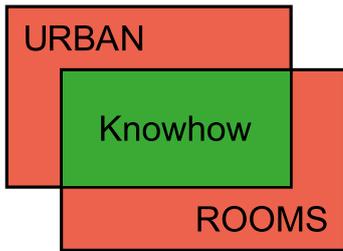
**Image:**  
Church Street Urban Room  
Credit: Church Street Ward  
Neighbourhood Forum



Here are some more tips from the Urban Room Network on how to ensure that whenever you open the door to the Urban Room people are there, ready to come in and participate:

- try to open during busy times of the day, week and (school) year - can you coincide your activities with market days, annual festivals and local celebrations?
- publicise the UR before its opening with social media announcements, local press articles, 'coming soon' posters on the premises, community radio/tv
- ask your community, professional, civic networks, and their leaders, to spread the word
- produce well designed and engaging graphic material to use in your publicity and in the UR itself - bear in mind that people may not know what an UR is, so use clear and jargon-free language to explain
- once the UR is up and running ask participants to spread the word to their friends, family, colleagues - have well-designed clear pamphlets available to take away and share
- partnering with other groups in the community and publicising through their networks can help to promote the UR to under-represented groups
- keep up the publicity of the UR throughout the programme, invite local press to specific events, updates on social media
- present information and communications in a number of languages, especially if engaging in areas which have diverse communities

Maximising the numbers of people coming into the Urban Room, engaging with activities and participating in discussion about the local area is important. However, just as important is the quality of those encounters, and we turn to this in the next section 'Up and Running'...



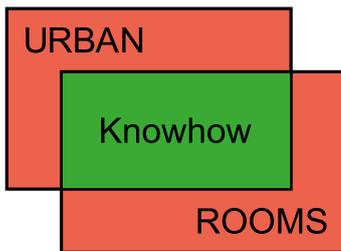
# How can we create a welcoming space?

Urban Rooms aim to offer an open invitation to everyone, so that anyone can get involved in conversations about the past, present and future of their place. It is crucial, therefore, to do all we can to create a welcoming environment and consider the multiple ways that the space, the team, the communications, and actions of the Urban Room can embody this.

If we work within the areas of architecture, arts, planning, local development, community engagement etc. we are more than likely to feel a lot more comfortable in an Urban Room environment than others who don't have that experience or expertise. It's vital therefore to take time to deliberately identify, understand and design out the barriers that can often be present and can hinder or even stop people getting involved.

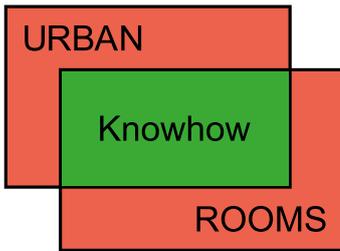


**Image:**  
Church Street Urban Room activities  
Credit: Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum



Here are some suggestions from past Urban Room experience:

- walking through a door into an unknown space can be a barrier to many people - can the door be propped open and/or can a team member be there to greet visitors?
- consider how you communicate visually, employ graphics that are clear and engaging and make sure any text is friendly, explanatory and jargon-free
- although you and your funders may want to have their logos on view in a prime location, this may cause visitors to read the UR as institutional in a way that is off-putting. Consider placing these logos and clear information about sponsorship, funding etc further into the space. More generally, it can be helpful to 'de-institutionalise' the appearance of the space and the language used as much as possible
- open up the space visually so that people can see in through the windows as they pass by, invite their curiosity by having tasters of the UR activities outside, invite them to play before fully engaging them in UR conversations e.g. Watford UR featured a piano for anyone to play
- have people on your team who are naturally welcoming and friendly, to act as ambassadors for the UR, to greet, invite and explain what's going on
- many successful URs take a work-in-progress approach - prioritising the processes of engagement and showcasing the material accumulated by these processes rather than focussing on the production of specific outcomes. This way of working also intuitively communicates the welcoming ethos of the UR - rather than an inflexible product, people can see that the UR is being built and shaped by people, and welcomes what they have to offer
- offer a varied range of engaging and creative activities in the UR, some may be rooted in placemaking, but others may not and you could partner with other groups to deliver these, e.g. Church St UR in Westminster hosted a multitude of activities alongside those that focused on the local environment, including open mic nights, a food festival and a capoeira workshop
- be open to incorporating new ideas for activities, events and collaborations as people get involved - taking this responsive approach can help to tune the UR to become more locally relevant and welcoming. This approach can also create mutually beneficial exchanges - opening up the use of UR to new local partners can help to foster strong partnerships



## How can we ensure that the UR is inclusive to all?

The Urban Room ethos is to actively welcome input from people of diverse abilities, ages, genders and races. In order to be this inclusive an Urban Room needs to be an easily accessible space, where people know that their experiences, backgrounds and ideas are valued, and where everyone feels safe and protected from threatening or abusive speech and behaviour.

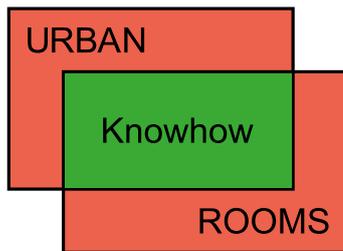
Key to the inclusive nature of the Urban Room is its open, exploratory nature. More conventional public engagement programmes tend to 'consult' or 'inform' local people on specific development proposals in their area, often when many of the decisions around that proposal have already been made. Urban Rooms try to bring people into discussions about the local environment much earlier, to engage them in strategic thinking, visioning and action on the ground, in order to build capacity in placemaking at all stages of the process. This openness sets the conditions for a much more inclusive approach to placemaking where the diverse cultures, experiences and knowledge across a community can contribute to the shaping of place identity.



**Image:**

Play/grounds Live Project event at Live Works

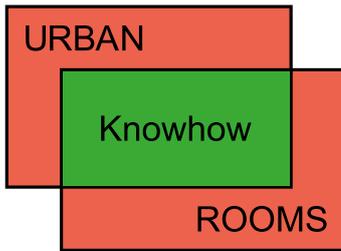
Credit: University of Sheffield



The choice of location and premises is key to this ambition around accessibility and inclusion. Focus on physical accessibility (flat ground floor access is optimum), high footfall and consciously situating the Urban Room in places where marginalised groups live, work and socialise. Utilise nomadic, pop-up or temporary models of Urban Room to reach such groups in their place, as an alternative or complementary approach to a city centre location. Options for premises are looked at in further detail in the section 'How can we find a space?'

Urban Rooms should be safe spaces where those who tend to be marginalised in placemaking feel welcome to contribute. This means that we should do all we can to encourage tolerance and respect while not accepting exclusionary or aggressive behaviour. It can be useful to draw up a 'charter' to encourage acceptable behaviour in your Urban Room and have this displayed prominently in the space; on a wall, window or noticeboard. This can then be referred to if you need to ask a participant to moderate their behaviour.

An Urban Room can take an active role in offering a forum for different voices to be heard in a neutral and supportive space. This can help to bring people together to find common ground, especially if there are tensions between communities over place issues in their local area. Bear in mind, however, that such events need skilled facilitators who can navigate what can be complex and difficult conversations with care and sensitivity to ensure that all voices are heard and valued.



## How can the Urban Room build community agency?

In a previous section ‘How do we find an audience?’ we suggested ways to increase the amount and diversity of visitors to the Urban Room. However, getting people through the door for the initial engagement or conversation is only the beginning of a deeper relationship that the Urban Room should seek to nurture with the local community. Indeed, we need to move rapidly beyond the idea of engaging an ‘audience’ to ask how we can turn that audience into an engaged network of stakeholders who share a sense of authorship and ownership towards the Urban Room and an increasing sense of agency towards their place.

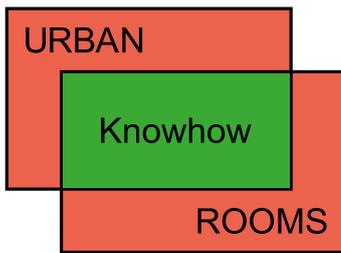
Some Urban Rooms (e.g. Church St, Westminster and STAMP) develop out of an explicit need for a space where local people can gather to be heard on issues in their local area. These Urban Rooms emerge from an existing context of community organising that would clearly benefit from a physical space to engage and mobilise further. Other Urban Rooms open without necessarily having such a strong clear network of local stakeholders but can be instrumental in building such partnerships (e.g. UR Blackburn and Live Works, Sheffield). In all these situations Urban Rooms can have a galvanising effect, creating a new community infrastructure that can bring together, motivate and support local action.



**Image:**

South Yorkshire Climate Hub at Live Works

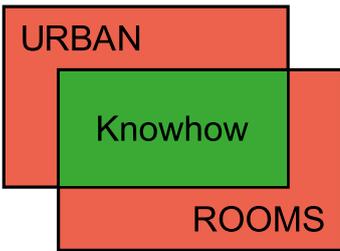
Credit: University of Sheffield



One of the prime objectives of an Urban Room therefore should be to create a space where partnerships and networks can flourish, and where local people can feel empowered to make a difference collectively in their local area. To create a space that can help to build this sense of agency within the community consider how your Urban Room can:

- connect local people with local leaders, policy-makers and ambassadors through active facilitating of events, debates and presentations around local issues
- dispel institutional and professional jargon, and unpack the complexity of planning, development and design issues/ opportunities – making visible and accessible the processes of change
- empower unheard voices by actively inviting marginalised groups to take a place at the table
- recognise, value and celebrate the contribution of local people in an accumulating display in the UR, showcasing the growing sense of ownership and agency towards the UR and the local area
- shift and disrupt the power of any large institutions (local authority, university, etc.) that are funding or supporting the UR, by creating opportunities for community groups to host events and activities in the UR – a rolling programme of events hosted by multiple community groups can be a very successful approach to sharing ownership of the UR

The success of this approach relies upon the building of trust between the Urban Room and the local community. It is impossible for a Urban Room to be completely neutral but transparency around its funding, objectives and governance is essential if it is to take the role of ‘honest broker’ in building the urban capacity of local networks.



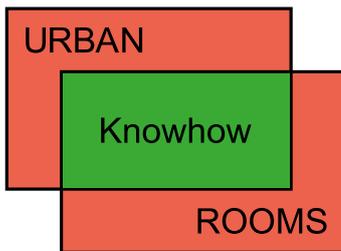
## How can we reach out to under-represented groups?

Central to the Urban Room ethos is inclusivity and diversity. Most discussions and decisions about the built environment tend to occur amongst professionals, policy makers, and committed and passionate members of the community who find ways to be heard. To counter this exclusionary tradition and to alleviate the lack of agency that so many people feel about the future of their own neighbourhood, town centre or city an Urban Room should be available for as broad a range of the population to access as possible.

This means at every stage of your Urban Room you need to actively work towards widening accessibility and inclusion - always asking the questions - who is missing from the table? who's voice isn't yet heard? what can we do to invite, hear and value those voices?



**Image:**  
Croydon Urban Room  
Credit: Croydon Urban Room / Ruth Ward

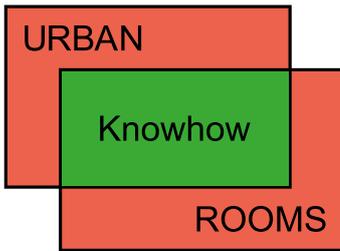


Opening up the Urban Room to under-represented groups and individuals in the local area has been touched upon in the previous sections 'How can we build partnerships?' 'How can we find an audience?' and 'How can the Urban Room build community agency?'. To expand upon this further:

- to maximise chances for as diverse an audience as possible the UR needs to be welcoming, engaging, and relevant to their experiences – can you partner with established local groups and local leaders to advocate on behalf of under-represented communities, develop relevant programmes and to publicise the UR's activities?
- can you host under-represented community groups in the UR to hold their own events - to support them in developing their community networks and to broaden the audience for the UR?
- the UR methodology is inherently flexible and responsive - pop-up, satellite, temporary and mobile URs can be very effective in reaching out to under-represented communities
- it can help to define activities for specific groups, rather than targeting all groups all the time – do these groups have any specific accessibility issues that you need to consider?

Building relationships with under-represented groups takes time to overcome the suspicion and disenchantment many communities feel, especially towards large institutions such as universities and local authorities. These partnerships need to be built on trust and respect in order to dispel the legacy of the exclusionary and extractive interactions that often occur in conventional engagement.

Many people don't engage with development or urban subjects because they don't believe they have agency towards the development of their local area. An Urban Room can be a useful tool to make strong connections between people and place, to highlight what's at stake (e.g. health and wellbeing, local identity, community infrastructure, sustainability, heritage, etc.) and to highlight the avenues for collective and individual civic agency that emerge from those connections.



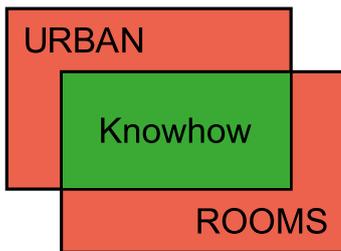
## How can we keep the Urban Room animated?

One of the biggest challenges as reported by Urban Room Networks members is keeping their Urban Rooms animated over an extended period of time. A successful UR is busy and active, offering enough variety to entice visitors to come again and deepen their relationship with the space. A consistently empty or closed UR can be disheartening to people and it's vital to communicate clearly to visitors when and for how long the UR will be open.

When planning your Urban Room, consider how long you can keep the space animated with the resources, helpers, partners and energy you have available to you. It's better to have a dynamic Urban Room over several days than a quiet Urban Room stretched thin over several weeks.

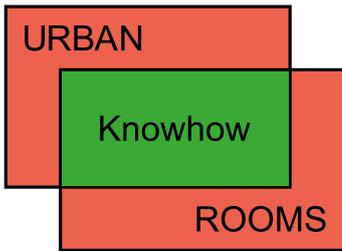


**Image and Credit:**  
UR Folkestone



Here are some more tips from URN members:

- offer lots of different ways for people to participate and learn, individually or collectively - a range of activities creates energy and vibrancy in the space, as long as they are complementary!
- focus on getting as wide a range of people as possible to feel some sense of ownership of or connection to the space. If someone wants to do something in your UR, try to say yes, whether it's yoga, sewing, performance art, or a gig. Give a reason for people to come in regularly because this is what gets people through the door to then look at what's on the walls and have a conversation about it
- offer a programme of activities that are creative and playful to engage people in a variety of ways and to keep the UR active, dynamic and fresh for every visit
- throw away the 'consultation' rule-book! engage creatives and designers to create and communicate activities that are unexpected, thought-provoking and out of the everyday - to stimulate, provoke and intrigue people
- create displays of the outputs of previous activities that accumulate in the space over time - this gives people a reason to return, to see how things have changed and how they have contributed to this

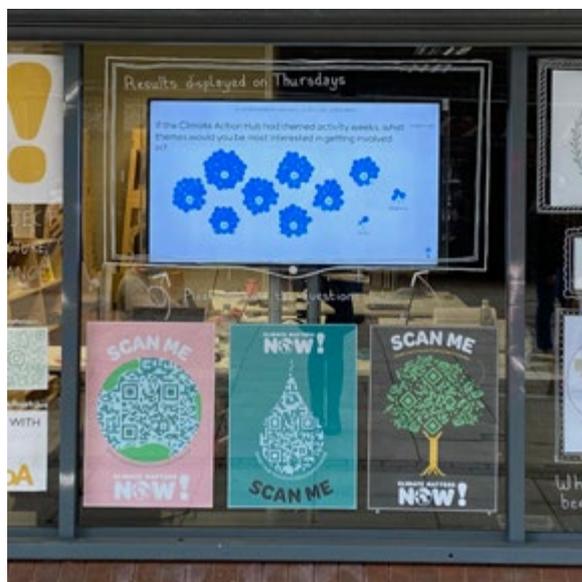


## How can digital methods enhance an Urban Room?

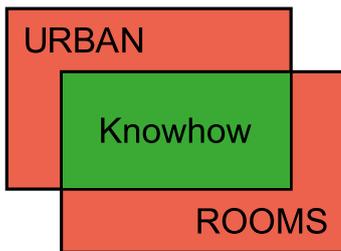
There are many ways in which digital forms of engagement can be used to enhance the in-person activities in the Urban Room. Being 'on-site' is an intrinsic aspect of the Urban Room methodology, i.e. being physically present in the location that is being discussed. This physical connection to a place cannot be created through digital means solely, however, digital methods can enhance and sustain an Urban Room while in operation and after it closes.

The use of digital methods of engagement has escalated as a result of the covid pandemic and many more people are used to working and socialising online. This opens up clear possibilities to create hybrid Urban Rooms that exist both in physical and digital space, making the most of the engagement possibilities of both.

In considering accessibility digital engagement methods are often assumed to be more accessible than access to a physical space. However, we need to be mindful that many people, often from already under-represented groups, do not have the technology, connection or digital literacy to engage in this way. Both in-person and digital approaches pose challenges to access and a hybrid approach can help to alleviate some of these challenges.



**Image:**  
Digital Window at Live Works  
Credit: University of Sheffield



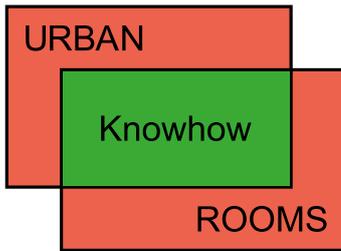
We also need to be aware that digital and in-person engagement is not the same - people express themselves differently online than when they are in a room together. The Urban Room methodology is to open up conversations, share knowledge and ideas, and explore collectively and creatively the past, present and future of a place - our experience shows us that this happens best in-person, on-site.

Here are some digital methods that can help to enhance your Urban Room (some of the applications listed have free versions but most require subscription):

- the use of social media, website and online newsletters can improve levels of engagement, especially if they are well designed and communicate the richness and creativity of the UR through images, films, audio etc.
- the use of QR codes within the UR and window display is a useful way for people to access further information
- digital survey tools, such as Mentimeter, are useful to gather data and gauge participants opinions on local issues
- digital whiteboards, such as Miro, are useful for online workshops and to share ideas, precedents and designs
- digital models such as VU City and Digital Urban visualise in 3D the topography, buildings and infrastructure of a place
- digital mapping platforms such as Commonplace and Mapping for Change offer collective mapping of physical, cultural or social aspects of a place
- online meeting platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet are useful to invite remote speakers to contribute to UR activities

Further knowhow from Urban Room Network members:

- digital tools can enhance your physical UR - consider how you can display digital models, mapping and creative activities within the space to engage people further
- using digital tools creates a real-time archive of conversations and activities - this can be very helpful in sustaining your UR once it has closed or is in transition
- some digital tools can be expensive but there are lower cost approaches that you could take, e.g. using open-source software. Are there any groups or individuals in your networks with expertise in this area that can help you?



## How can we evaluate what we've done?

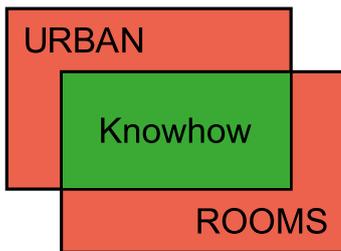
Although evaluation is often thought of as something that's done at the end of a project it really needs to be planned at the start and embedded throughout. Evaluation captures the learning and impact from an Urban Room to inform ongoing placemaking and any further engagement that follows on. Building a thorough and robust evaluation strategy that captures all aspects of your Urban Room will help to provide the project feedback required by your funders and the evidence that will help you to secure further funding and support.

Evaluation is the means to demonstrate that the Urban Room (hopefully) fulfilled its objectives. It is also a way to capture the more unexpected outcomes from your Urban Room, things that you couldn't have predicted at the start but that have proven to have been very useful, impactful and meaningful for your visitors, partners and for the local area.

Your evaluation will rely upon the collection of two types of data:

- quantitative data, such as visitor numbers, repeat visits, average dwell time, active participation, volunteer hours, social media likes etc.



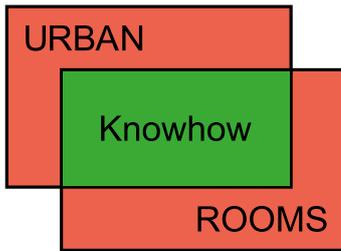


- qualitative outcomes that result from the UR activities and conversations, such as changes in people's perception, their growth in knowledge and change in behaviour

A combination of facts and figures, testimonials, quotes and images can offer compelling evidence of the success of your UR and the impact it has had in building better relationships between people and place. As you evaluate your Urban Room you should continually be answering the question 'so what?' - that is, what difference did your Urban Room activities and events actually make to the people who contributed and to the place you explored together? It's in identifying this difference that you can demonstrate the impact of your Urban Room and make a case for the next one!

Here are some further suggestions from URN members from their experience of evaluating Urban Rooms:

- give proper time and resourcing to a rich documentation of both the process and outcomes of the UR - use a wide range of tools to record the activities, encounters and conversations in the UR, e.g. photography, video, audio, online archives, interviews, quotes, stories, drawing etc.
- align your evaluation with the requirements of your funders and anyone you wish to gain support from in the future in terms of funding or commissioning criteria, KPIs or performance targets
- be clear about the different aspects of the UR that you can evaluate - for instance make sure you capture informal as well as formal interactions, the process as well as the outputs and how the UR has impacted upon its participants, its partners and your organisation
- remember to record how the environment around the UR changes while it's open - a UR is not only a place for engagement about the built environment, it can also transform the place in which it is located. URs act as prototypes for new types of community-focused functions and activities on the high street and it is important to evaluate their impact upon their place as well as the people who use them.
- are there any experts in your networks who you can commission to evaluate your UR - bringing a fresh pair of eyes to the process at the same time?
- the Theory of Change model can be a very useful framework to structure your evaluation around - it prompts you to assess clearly the outputs and outcomes of your UR in relation to your initial aims and objectives for the UR



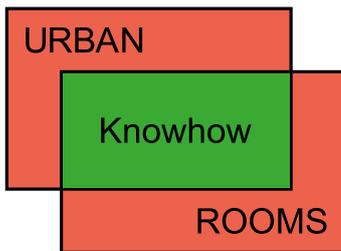
# How can we create a legacy for the Urban Room?

Beyond understanding the impact that each Urban Room has had directly on their local place and the people who have taken part in the project, we should strive to develop and sustain a growing infrastructure of place-based creative community engagement - through follow-on Urban Rooms or related initiatives and programmes.

Long-term transformation of placemaking through community participation takes time and sustained effort. The movement is still in its infancy and although interest is growing rapidly, with many Urban Rooms proposed across the UK, the systemic transformation of the practice and policy of placemaking towards greater democracy and inclusion that the Urban Room methodology advocates for is a long-term goal. It is therefore important to not think about your Urban Room in isolation, but as part of a distributed network of Urban Rooms across the UK, each helping through their legacy to strengthen community engagement in placemaking.

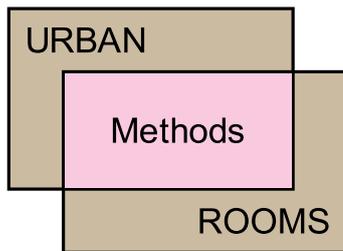


**Image and Credit:**  
Ruthin Futures



Ideas of how to strengthen the legacy of your Urban Room:

- join the Urban Rooms Network! - we will help you disseminate your UR, share knowhow and connect with groups across different sectors, scales and localities to support you in your engagement work
- through your UR identify and support individuals and groups in the community who can continue to engage local people in placemaking either when the UR has closed, or by taking on the running of the UR - is it possible for your organisation to continue to fund this person or group to do this? Perhaps you can take on an advisory role while they take on greater responsibility of the day to day running of the UR?
- URs are excellent tools to make connections between neighbourhoods, towns and cities and to reveal the interdependence of systems such as food, transport, services, materials and knowledge. They are also useful in helping to place local issues within a bigger picture - making sense of how regional and national systems, policies and structures manifest at a local scale. Making the most of these connections and interdependencies can help to enhance the impact of the UR's findings and sustain its legacy
- can the fittings, props, displays etc of the UR be hosted and exhibited elsewhere in the area once the UR has closed? In a Town Hall, library, public space, etc?
- can your engagement props be designed so they can be demounted and reused elsewhere so that they have an afterlife?
- through the life of the UR, make as many connections with policy-makers and community leaders as possible in order to open up avenues of communication between the UR, the community and local decision-makers that can persist even after the UR closes
- share your good work - be as transparent as possible in sharing the process and outcomes of the UR for others to learn from and possibly implement in their place

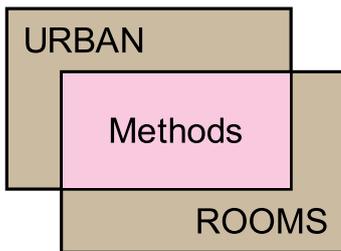


**This section of the UR Toolkit is a collection of methods, i.e. the activities and techniques that you might use in your Urban Room to engage people creatively in exploring the past, present and future of their local area. These methods have been tried and tested in past and current Urban Rooms and here we reflect upon their effectiveness and give advice on how to make them as engaging, accessible and inclusive as possible.**

**The Urban Rooms Methods included in this section are grouped as follows:**

- **Walks:** trails, heritage tours, themed walks, expert guides
- **Drawings:** urban sketching, what if?, collective drawings
- **Maps and Mapping:** collective mapping, collective photography, historic maps, mapping senses, digital mapping
- **Models:** interactive models, playful models, collective models, digital models
- **Art Methods:** installation, storytelling, performance, writing
- **Conversational:** local expert presentations, themed debates, shared meals
- **Action:** activism, 1:1 transformation
- **Play:** games, competitions, digital games

This document is a section of the Urban Rooms Toolkit which can be found at [urbanroomstoolkit.org](http://urbanroomstoolkit.org)



**In deciding on the methods in your Urban Room you should consider the following:**

**What are you trying to achieve?**

Be clear about your aims to help you find the methods that will work for you. Are you aiming to understand and develop a sense of place? Foster community cohesion, capacity and skills? Reveal and share diverse histories, knowledge and experiences? Develop new design ideas for place futures? Some methods suit one-off engagement events, others suit longer-term engagement that can accumulate over time.

**How will you support these activities?**

Do you have facilitators with the skills to guide people or do you need to engage others to contribute specific expertise, e.g artists, photographers, tour guides, built environment professionals etc.?

**Can you offer multiple activities at the same time?**

This broadens the appeal of the Urban Room and helps to build a rich context for engagement.

**Can you exhibit the results of the activities?**

A public exhibition of the maps, drawings, photographs, archive material, objects that are collected and produced in the Urban Room can be a really effective way of demonstrating the rich history and potential of an area, to build communal ownership of the room and to catalyse new conversations and ideas.

**How can your activities widen participation to groups and individuals who tend to be marginalised in traditional engagement?**

Encourage wherever possible opening up conversations to include diverse voices, stories, histories and futures.

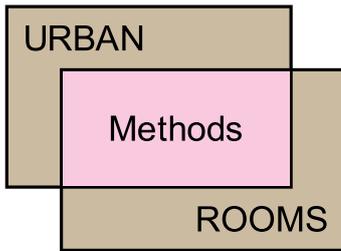
**Can you enhance the activities in the Urban Room with digital methods of engagement, e.g. website, social media, interactive mapping tools?**

This will widen the reach of your engagement, bring in new audiences and potentially create a digital resource to act as a useful advocacy tool.

**How will you document thoroughly, both the processes and the outputs of the activities?**

This can be done through photography, film and audio. However, this needs sensitivity and you should make it clear to participants that they could be recorded, giving them a chance to opt out.

**For further advice on how to set up, run and make the most of your Urban Room, go to the Knowhow section.**



# Trails

## Description of Method:

Self-led exploration of an urban environment using a trail or route accessed via an Urban Room. The trail may be a digital resource or a printed version. Trails suggest a walking route to highlight points of interest in the local area: historic sites, development opportunities, artworks, local food etc.

## Purpose of Method:

Trails encourage and support an individual exploration of place, without necessitating a pre-organised tour. They aim to heighten the individual's experience of the built environment, revealing new places or observations of a neighbourhood, town or city.

## Suitable Audience:

Suitable for a wide audience of all ages: residents, visitors, school classes. Consideration needs to be given to accessibility for people with limited abilities. Think about how you might gather suggestions for additions to the trail or for new types of trail.

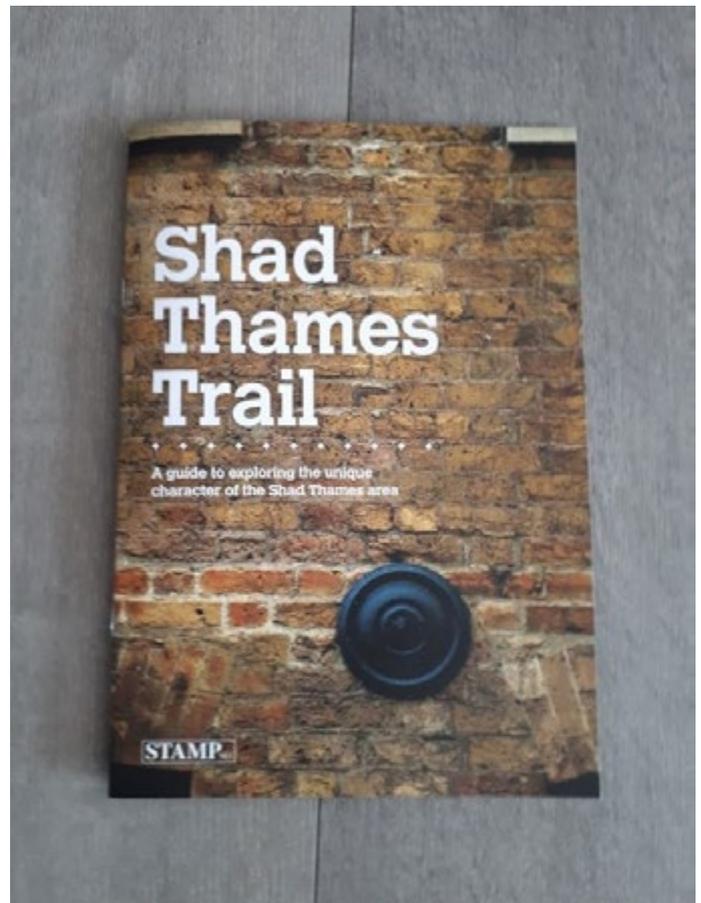
## Shad Thames Area Management Partnership

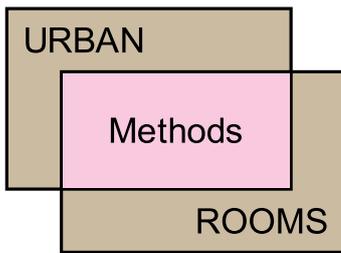
The Shad Thames Trail is a self-guided walk to explore the 'unique character of the Shad Thames area'. The Trail was written by a local resident and supported by a local historian and photographer. It can be [downloaded for free from STAMP's website](#).

### Image:

Shad Thames Trail

Credit: STAMP (Shad Thames Area Management Partnership)





## Heritage Tours

### Description of Method:

Collective walking through an urban environment observing places of specific historical and heritage value. Often led by a local expert.

### Purpose of Method:

Using shared interests in heritage to open up conversations and debate about the past, present and future of a local area. An opportunity to reflect on the heritage of a place and reveal hidden stories and assets in the local environment and also to highlight the contemporary relevance of heritage in placemaking. This helps to cultivate a sense of pride, stewardship and identity with a place that can then form the basis of meaningful conversations about the future. Heritage walks can be fun and accessible, opening up opportunities for local people to share knowledge and the diversity of lived experience, and for children and young people to engage with the histories of their place and contribute new stories.

### Suitable Audience:

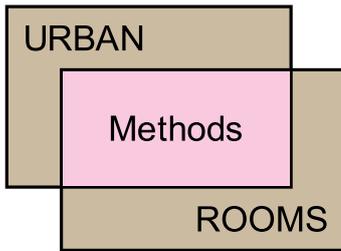
Suitable for a wide audience of all ages. Consideration needs to be given to accessibility for people with limited abilities.

**Shad Thames Area Management Partnership**  
STAMP offers walks on local heritage themes, e.g. a “brewing walk” of the Courage Yard brewery, including a visit from dray horses and talks from entrepreneurs involved in nearby microbreweries.

### Image:

Drayhorses Shad Thames  
Credit: STAMP (Shad Thames Area Management Partnership)





## Themed Walks

### Description of Method:

Guided group walks that are organised around a theme to highlight valuable physical, social and cultural assets in the urban environment.

### Purpose of Method:

A themed walk can connect different types of urban assets: buildings, natural features, social history, artworks, viewpoints etc. They can celebrate the richness of the urban environment, local knowledge and lived experience, and raise aspirations for new development. They can be curated and led by local community groups, experts and enthusiasts, academics and artists.

### Suitable Audience:

Suitable for a wide audience of all ages. Consideration needs to be given to accessibility for people with limited abilities.

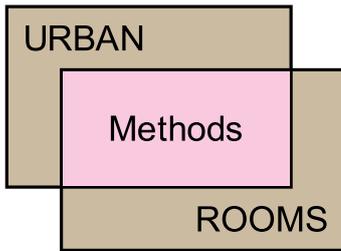
### Wealthy City Walks

A series of walking tours, starting from Live Works UR, that presented six themed routes through Sheffield; independent trade, street art, social activity, art and culture, nature and history. Created in partnership with [Ruskin in Sheffield](#), the tours aimed to reveal the multiple 'wealths' of the city.

### Image:

Wealthy City Walks  
Credit: University of Sheffield





## Expert Guides

### Description of Method:

Walks that are curated and hosted by a local expert, enthusiast, historian, writer, maker, artist, academic etc. These walks reveal the rich knowledge and expertise within local communities about their places.

### Purpose of Method:

Championing the valuable, but often hidden, existing knowledge of a place that is held by local people. Forming connections and networks between individuals and groups who share specific interests in their local area, and in so doing building local capacity to initiate projects and campaigns.

### Suitable Audience:

Generally suitable for a wide audience of all ages. Specific themes will attract individuals and groups who share a similar interest. Consider how you can reach individuals who share this interest but aren't already connected through established groups. Consideration also needs to be given to accessibility for people with limited abilities.

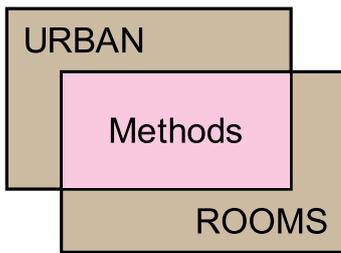
### Poetry Navigation

A walk along the Sheffield and Tinsley canal system, interspersed with performances by local poets, curated and led by Longbarrow Press as part of The Arrival Zone project 2012 (a proto-Urban Room!)

### Image:

Poetry Navigation  
Credit: University of Sheffield





# Urban Sketching

## Description of Method:

Drawing activity documenting existing features (buildings, architectural details, natural features, artworks, views etc.) of an area. Taking place in the Urban Room using photographs of existing, or through on-site sketching during a walk. Can be produced through the use of multiple media: pencil sketches, painting, collage of photos, printing, silhouette and contribute to an accumulating exhibition throughout the period of the Urban Room. Consider offering artist-led workshops where people can learn specific skills, media and techniques while also exploring their urban environment.

## Purpose of Method:

Spending time drawing the existing townscape, buildings, and views of a place can help to celebrate and valorise local heritage, design quality, craftsmanship and vernacular. Accumulating exhibitions can make evident the richness of a place, seen through many eyes. Conversations flow easily while people focus on drawing, prompting further sharing of stories, memories of a place's past, and ideas for its future.

## Suitable Audience:

Drawing activities are engaging for many people, especially children and young people - individually or in groups. Some people lack confidence in their drawing skills so aim to create a supportive, informal environment with a broad range of media and techniques available for people to try out, with encouragement from facilitators/artists.

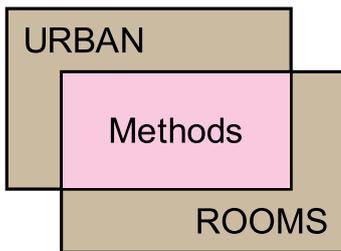
## ReMake Castlegate

In the project 'ReMake Castlegate' a collective model created over two weeks by visitors included many drawings and models of existing buildings by local people.

### Image :

ReMake Castlegate  
Credit: University of Sheffield





## 'What if?' Drawings

### Description of Method:

Drawings can describe a place in the past, as it currently exists and in its possible futures. Within public engagement we often see drawings that are produced by professionals to illustrate a proposed scheme and invite feedback. However, in Urban Room practice we often use drawings differently to this - instead, drawings become tools to prompt discussion between people, to share ideas and to raise aspirations for a place. Rather than the conventional types of computer or technical drawings of plans, sections and elevations that professionals employ you can use the following to open up conversation:

- collage, printing, hand drawing, sketching, reuse of existing images
- views, storyboards, narrative-based drawings
- drawing collectively - simultaneously or taking turns

### Purpose of Method:

This method encourages people to visualise and share their hopes and dreams for local buildings, streets and neighbourhoods. These drawings are sometimes called 'What If?' drawings because they pose questions about potential futures for a place. They open up possibilities, form connections between people with shared values and become advocacy tools to campaign for positive change.

### Suitable Audience:

Drawing activities are engaging for many people, especially children and young people. Since some people may lack confidence in their drawing skills you should aim to create a supportive, informal environment with a broad range of media and techniques available for people to try out, with encouragement from facilitators/artists. When leading a drawing activity about the future of a place try to use informal and engaging techniques that invite conversation and speculation.

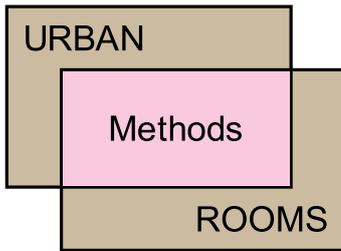
### Portland Works

Working with architecture students, local school children make 'what if' collages for the future of a historic building, using photographs and images from magazines.

### Image:

Portland Works Live Project  
Credit: University of Sheffield





# Collective Drawings

## Description of Method:

The production of a drawing collectively by a group of people. These drawings can be large in scale, combine multiple media and types of drawing. They can be produced by the group simultaneously or through taking turns. They can be drawings of places as they are now or they can illustrate ideas for the future of a place. They can present an overall vision or multiple overlapping and maybe contradictory viewpoints.

## Purpose of Method:

This method encourages people to visualise collectively and share freely their knowledge of their place and their ideas for local buildings, streets and neighbourhoods. Drawing as a collective act brings people together around a table and encourages conversation and sharing of ideas and stories. Collective drawing is a tool to both represent and cultivate ideas. It can be a celebratory and playful experience that can build connections within a group of people.

## Suitable Audience:

Drawing activities are engaging for many people, especially children and young people. Some people may lack confidence in their drawing skills so collective drawing can help to create a supportive, informal environment for people to take part in.

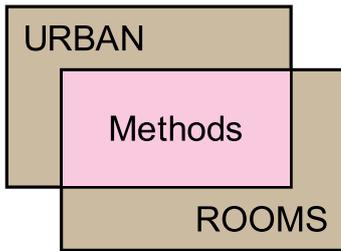
## Encounter Arts and Live Works

This collective mapping was produced by young people of the Wybourn estate in Sheffield, working with Encounters Arts and architecture students.

### Image:

Wybourn Drawing  
Credit: University of Sheffield





# Collective Mapping

## Description of Method:

Mapping is a broad term to cover the observation, revealing and recording of both physical and intangible aspects of the built environment. Mapping as a method can open up a wide range of creative possibilities and questions such as - What information should be mapped? Who makes the maps? What are maps for? Information can be gathered individually or collectively, through walks, archival research, conversations and can be communicated via many different means, e.g. photography, writing, drawing, film, found objects. Activities can add new knowledge to existing maps or create new, personal and communal maps. These maps can become key features within an Urban Room, growing over time as new participants contribute and acting as starting points for conversation with first-time visitors.

## Purpose of Method:

When produced as a collective endeavour mapping can share and promote the understanding of different lived experiences, stories, memories and knowledges. While mapping tends to focus on the past and present context of a local area, the mapping process can be a useful catalyst for the development of new ideas and visualisation of possibilities for the future of an area. Maps can demonstrate the richness and complexity of an area, showing common agreement about the value of some aspects of the built environment, while revealing differences in opinion about others. Collective mapping can highlight how groups experience the built environment differently according to gender, race, ability and age.

## Suitable Audience:

People find maps, in all their variety, very engaging - from traditional cartography to hand-drawn memory maps. The wide variety of mapping techniques means that this is a method that many people can take part in with encouragement and support from on-site Urban Room facilitators.

## Urban Room Rochdale

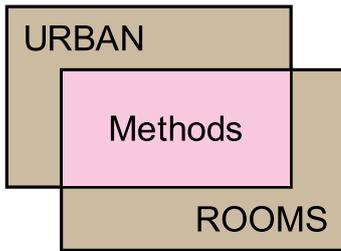
Visitors were invited to contribute their experiences and impressions about the town to a 'Psychogeography of Rochdale'. This collective map developed over the duration of the Urban Room, revealing the quality of the place.

## Image:

Urban Room Rochdale

Credit: Urban Room Rochdale / Local





# Collective Photography

## Description of Method:

Engaging with the urban environment through film and photography - using cameras, smart phones or disposable cameras. Groups walk around the local area recording the features, views and moments they are interested in and drawn to. Returning to the Urban Room they share these recordings, discuss and reflect upon them, and work with Urban Room facilitators to exhibit them in the Urban Room. Consider offering photographer-led workshops where people can learn specific photography skills and techniques while also mapping their urban environment.

## Purpose of Method:

For local people to record what they value in their local area and to share this with others. To reveal information that can otherwise be ignored or undervalued yet has significance for individuals or specific groups. To create a living archive of an area that can accumulate over time in an Urban Room and communicate the diversity and richness of a place.

## Suitable Audience:

Suitable for a wide audience of all ages. Consideration needs to be given to accessibility for people with limited abilities and to inclusion for people who need support to use the cameras.

## Blackburn is Open

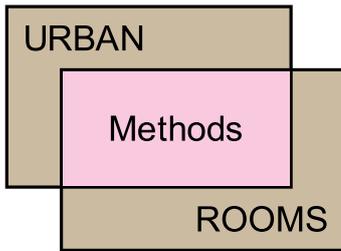
This exhibition 'Hidden Blackburn' showcased photography of the town as part of the Blackburn is Open Urban Room programme.

### Image:

Hidden Blackburn

Credit: Blackburn is Open





## Historic Maps

### Description of Method:

A display of historic maps and other archive material in the Urban Room itself or as part of a digital engagement platform. This exhibition could include historic maps from different eras, highlighting specific buildings or features of interest, complemented by historic photos and archive material from local papers, registers, census data etc.

### Purpose of Method:

To engage people in the history of their place and how it has changed over time. This method supports reflection on the built environment and opens up conversations about the ever-changing nature of the urban environment. The display can draw upon historical/heritage knowledge to inform future ambitions and to encourage a site-specific and locally relevant response in any future developments.

### Suitable Audience:

People tend to be fascinated by the history of their place and the differences between then and now. There are many heritage-focussed 'Friends of' groups across the country who hold an enormous amount of information, material and knowledge about their local areas. These groups could help you support the Urban Room activities through Heritage Walks, Expert Guides and Trails. A heritage-focussed exhibition can also prompt the question 'whose heritage?' and open up new readings of heritage from under-represented groups in the local area to include stories and knowledge that is often overlooked.

### Nottingham Broadmarsh

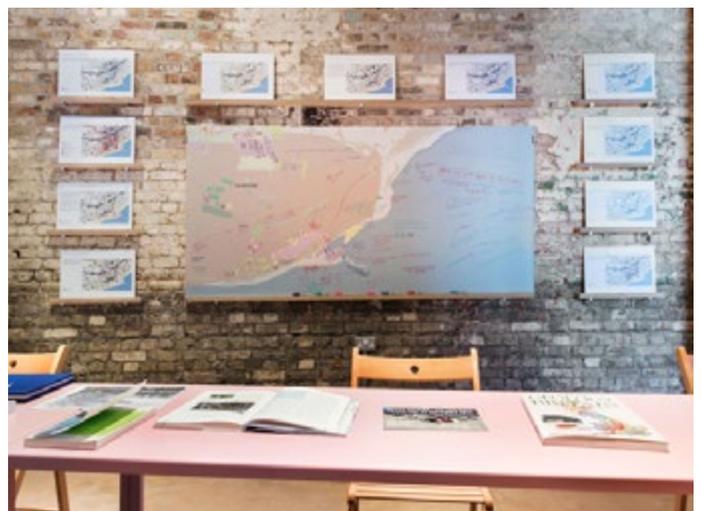
In 2020 Nottingham City Council engaged a wide range of local people in the future of the Broadmarsh shopping centre through an extensive digital platform '[Big Conversation](#)' which featured a large amount of historic maps and information in order to set the context for the conversation about the area's future.

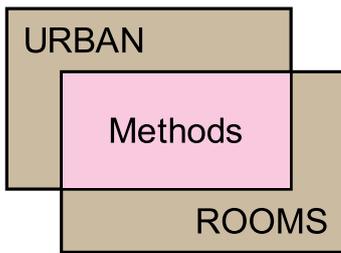
### Urban Analysis, Folkestone

UR Folkestone hosts a permanent exhibition of the 'Urban Analysis', a geographical and historical analysis of the town, showing its development from 10,000BC-Present.

### Image:

UR Folkestone  
Credit: UR Folkestone, Thierry Bal





# Mapping Senses

## Description of Method:

Using the senses (Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, and Touch) to explore our relationship to a place and how we may develop ideas to heighten our human senses or create sensory experiences. The sixth sense is linked to our emotional response to a place - what we like and dislike, where we feel safe or inspired. Designing a range of participatory activities and experiences, and asking questions to gain a deeper understanding of how we want to engage with place. For example, for taste you can ask about your favourite restaurant, or where does the participant recommend you go for lunch. What recipes or ingredients are associated with the place - are these linked to heritage or cultural associations, or an established, award winning, family-run business.

## Purpose of Method:

Provides an alternative approach to researching how we engage with or interact within a space or place. Invites local residents, businesses and young people to explore the town through a series of different interactive activities using their senses to contribute ideas, engage in conversation, tell stories and share their visions of the town centre, neighbourhood, a new building or public space.

## Suitable Audience:

Everyone! This method provides an accessible and inclusive approach to engaging a wide audience.

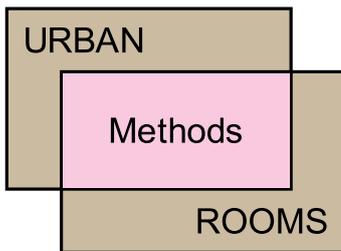
## Urban Room Rochdale

Creative engagement tools were used at Urban Room Rochdale to facilitate conversations with residents about the local urban environment. Smell, colour, and sounds associated with the area were collated and mapped, documenting the experience of place. Imagine a future Rochdale... What do you hear? What are the tastes? What does it look like? How does it smell? What can you feel?

### Image:

Urban Room Rochdale  
Credit: Urban Room Rochdale / Local





## Digital Mapping

### Description of Method:

Digital platforms can offer an alternative to the physical mapping methods described previously. These can be off-the-shelf or bespoke digital platforms to collectively map physical, cultural or social aspects of a place. Some platforms such as Commonplace and Mapping for Change are well established and work predominantly with local authorities, development groups and larger civic institutions. They offer a mapping interface that can be stand alone or embedded within a client's project website.

### Purpose of Method:

Digital mapping can widen participation in community engagement. It moves the mapping beyond the physical confines of the Urban Room and makes it accessible remotely and outside Urban Room opening times. It bypasses any physical accessibility barriers the Urban Room may present and opens up opportunities for participation to those who would struggle to reach the Urban Room due to disabilities, transport challenges etc. The accumulation of data on an online map is a clear demonstration of engagement and it immediately creates an archive of the mapping that remains once the Urban Room is closed.

### Suitable Audience:

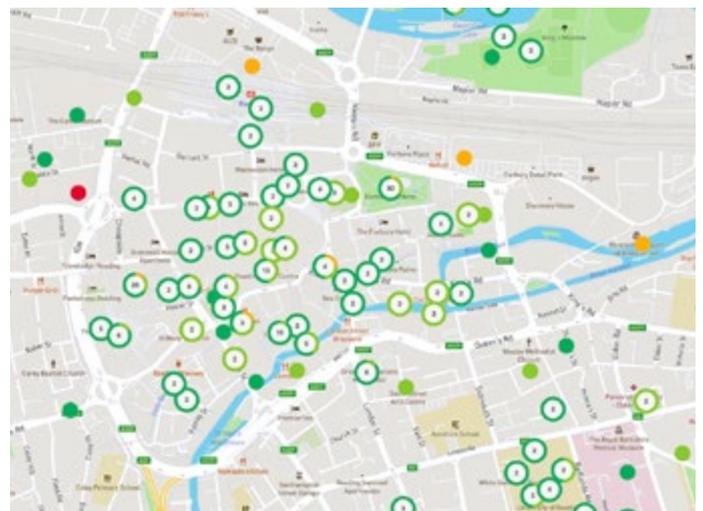
Anyone with access to the internet, computer or smartphone. Digital methods, although widely thought of as 'accessible' still cannot readily be used by the 1 in 20 households who don't have access to the internet in the UK.

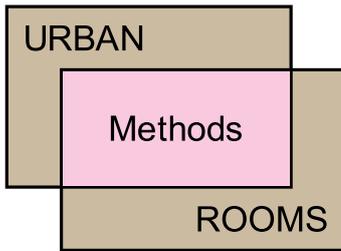
### Your Place Our Place

Public engagement continued beyond the space of the [Reading UR](#) through the online mapping service Commonplace. Residents mapped areas according to specific criteria e.g. 'connect to nature', 'sense of belonging', 'sense of wonder', 'easy to get around'.

### Image and Credit:

Your Place Our Place, Reading Urban Room





# Interactive Models

## Description of Method:

Model making is a creative and engaging process that visualises in 3D ideas for new structures and potential transformations of existing buildings and spaces. There are a wide range of types of models from quick concept models to highly detailed design models and they can be made from many different materials including card, clay, wood, cardboard and waste or recycled materials. Digital fabrication technology, if available, can also be used to create models with 3D printers and laser cutters.

## Purpose of Method:

In an Urban Room setting interactive models are an effective and tactile method to engage people in a dynamic conversation about a design. Interactive models can be altered, changed and adapted as an immediate and engaging way to visualise the development of design ideas.

## Suitable Audience:

Model making activities can be very popular across all age groups. However, thought should be given to supporting those who may feel they don't have the skills or creativity to join in. This can be a good opportunity to offer skills training in handmade and digital methods.

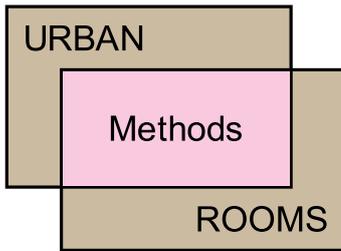
## Live Works

This model was co-designed with the local community and produced by architecture students. It shows a vision for Meersbrook Hall in Sheffield and has removable internal walls to demonstrate the phased remodelling of the building.

### Image:

Making Meersbrook Live Project  
Credit: University of Sheffield





## Playful Models

### Description of Method:

Not all models need to be to scale and precise. In fact some of the most engaging and creative models are made of unexpected and playful materials. Making models can be a messy and fun process using anything to hand such as junk materials, textiles, building waste...or cake!

### Purpose of Method:

Within public engagement we often see models that are produced by professionals to illustrate a proposed scheme and invite feedback. However, in Urban Room practice we often use models as active tools to engage people more directly - to prompt discussion, to share ideas and to raise aspirations for a place. Playful modelling breaks down conventional barriers and invites people to explore their place and its future in 3D.

### Suitable Audience:

Modelmaking is engaging for many people of all ages. Since some people may lack confidence in their modelling skills you should aim to create a supportive, informal environment with a broad range of media and techniques available for people to try out, with encouragement from facilitators/artists.

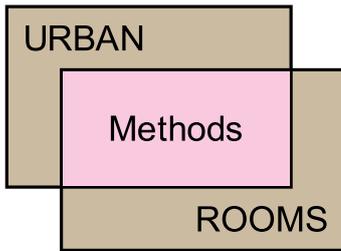
### Portland Works

Here are two models of Portland Works in Sheffield, one is to scale and very precisely made from laser-cut timber, the other is made of cake!

#### Image :

Portland Works Live Project  
Credit: University of Sheffield





## Collective Models

### Description of Method:

Making a model through collaboration with other people is a very engaging way to both to visualise design ideas and to open up conversations about place. Collective models can be large in format, accumulate and change over time and provide a centrepiece to the Urban Room.

### Purpose of Method:

In collaborative model making the process of construction is just as important as the end product. The activity can prompt diverse participants to share ideas, opinions and experiences, alongside the creation of the model itself, and a documentation of these conversations can add richness to the display. Large scale collective modelling can be a very direct and playful method that engages people on a physical level to explore their surroundings and relationship with their built environment.

### Suitable Audience:

Model making activities can be very popular across all age groups. However, thought should be given to supporting those who may feel they don't have the skills or creativity to join in. The choice of scale and materials is important in making the model as inclusive as possible - simple materials such as card, cardboard and junk modelling materials are useful here.

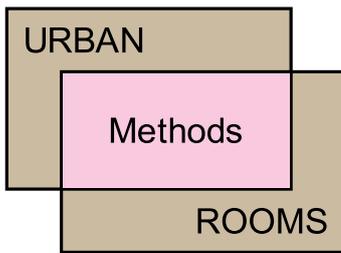
### Live Works

For the project ReMake Castlegate Live Works UR worked with people to produce a 1:200 model of Castlegate, Sheffield showing existing and future buildings, while collecting stories, memories and opinions about the area.

#### Image:

ReMake Castlegate  
Credit: Live Works





## Digital Models

### Description of Method:

Digital models can offer an alternative to the physical modelling methods described previously. These can be off-the-shelf or bespoke digital models that visualise in 3D the topography, buildings and infrastructure of a place. These digital models can be accessed via immersive technologies such as AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality), or via a more conventional display screen.

Some Urban Rooms have used established platforms such as VU City and Digital Urban that offer the opportunity to test new developments in the context of an existing city digital model. Other Urban Rooms have created their own digital city models, often in collaboration with local Universities.

Another type of digital model is of the Urban Room itself - giving remote visitors an opportunity to enter a simulation of the space and explore the exhibits within it.

### Purpose of Method:

Digital models offer a quick and engaging way to visualise the development of design ideas. They often allow options to be tested in digital city space and designs to be rapidly iterated. A digital model can also take its place amongst the physical exhibits in the Urban Room, enhancing the activities offered and creating a rich hybrid experience.

A digital Urban Room model communicates the existence of the physical space more widely and offers and type of Urban Room experience for those who cannot access the Urban Room itself or after the Urban Room has closed.

### Suitable Audience:

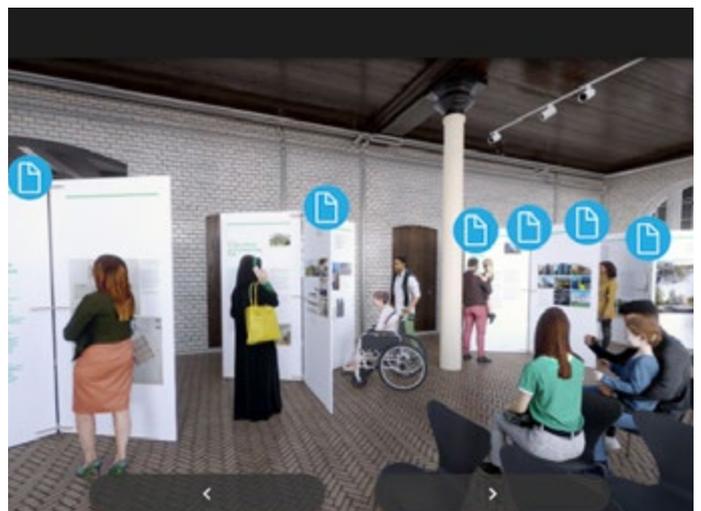
Similar to other digital methods, digital models can enable wider participation, beyond the physical space of the Urban Room, although not everyone has the capacity to access this sophisticated data online.

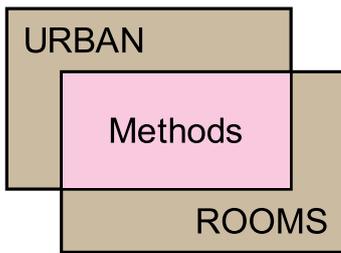
### Space for Architecture, Carbon and Environment

SpACE (Space for Architecture, Carbon and Environment) held discussions and events that addressed the climate emergency. Following its completion after a 5-week period the exhibition at SpACE was replicated digitally, creating a 'Virtual Engage' room on their website. Devised by Arup, the virtual room visualises the physical space, and allows users to navigate the room, clicking on exhibition boards to reveal information that had been presented at the venue.

### Image:

SpACE Virtual Room  
Credit: SpACE Urban Room, Edinburgh





# Installation

## Description of Method:

The creation of site-specific installations in, or in association with, the Urban Room. These can be permanent features of the Urban Room or temporary pieces that are part of specific events or activities. They can be physical or digital, or hybrid combinations of the two. They can be constructed of a huge range of materials and media and often integrate data, audio and video display. Installations can be interactive and playful - inviting active engagement from visitors.

## Purpose of Method:

Installations can inject energy into an Urban Room, if they are well conceived and engaging. They can be very successful in drawing visitors to the space and engaging them in active participation with the themes of the Urban Room. Good installations can bring a different perspective to everyday spaces and artefacts in the local area. Commissioning installations can be an effective way of engaging artists and creatives, from both the local area and beyond, to introduce new perspectives on the built environment and its social, political and cultural contexts. Installations can prompt new questions about the nature, accessibility and purpose of public spaces and buildings.

## Suitable Audience:

Installations can engage a wide audience through their playfulness and experimental nature. They can draw in people who wouldn't otherwise engage in more conventional Urban Room activities. Consider issues of accessibility and have facilitators on hand to encourage participation.

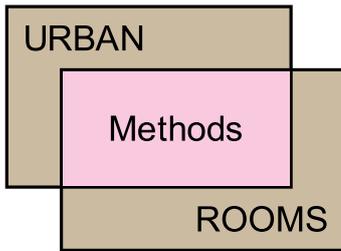
## Urban Room Folkestone

Urban Room Folkestone commissioned an installation 'Fortune Here' by artist genuinefake on the seafront, as part of the Folkestone Triennial 2021. The playful spaces created aimed to "reflect on how the development of the urban environment can keep up with concurrent and entangled societal change and evolving global norms."

### Image:

Folkestone Triennial  
Credit: Urban Room Folkestone





# Storytelling

## Description of Method:

Storytelling is an engaging activity to situate in an Urban Room and can be done in person or via the display of films or audio within the space. This method complements the more conventional methods of presentations and can offer insight into the stories and lived experiences of groups and individuals within the community. Stories can be told by members of the community themselves or narrated by professional storytellers.

## Purpose of Method:

Storytelling can reveal the hidden experiences and interests of the local community in its connection to place. Whether it's in the narrating of the stories of people's lives, past and present, or in the more speculative stories of possible futures, storytelling can reveal the richness and potential of a place in multiple and varied ways.

## Suitable Audience:

This method is engaging for a wide audience and stories can be tailored to appeal to specific age groups or interests. If displaying video stories within the Urban Room consider using subtitles for the hard of hearing or if in a space with other activities going on simultaneously.

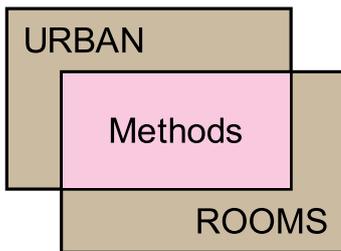
## Language Location and Me

A programme of activities at UR Folkestone in 2017 that explored the boundaries of speech and how language affects our perceptions of ourselves and others. This included performance readings from local and national poets to explore cultural identity and heritage, and what it means to declare one's home and nationhood.

### Image:

Urban Room Folkestone  
Credit: Urban Room Folkestone /  
Susanna Howard





## Performance

### Description of Method:

Performance can bring vitality to the Urban Room through the spoken word, music, comedy and drama. It can be done in person or through the display of films or audio within the space.

This method can enhance the space, engage new and diverse audiences and can offer insight into the interests, challenges, stories and lived experiences of groups and individuals within the community.

Performance can be done by local people, schools, local drama groups and professional performers.

### Purpose of Method:

Hosting performance within the Urban Room space can create moments of intensity and focus around specific themes and issues in the local area.

Performances can bring a sense of occasion and create structure within an Urban Room programme.

These one-off events within the ongoing Urban Room activity can bring new audiences into the space, to then engage them in conversations about their place. Performances need not be directly connected to Urban Room themes - hosting a local band or spoken word performer is a great way to support local talent, create a sense of community around the Urban Room and raise awareness of issues that can be followed up later.

### Suitable Audience:

Performance can attract a wide range of audiences - consider inviting specific performers to reach out to under-represented groups in your area. Children are especially drawn to performance and so consider making connections with schools and holiday clubs for supervised visits to the Urban Room.

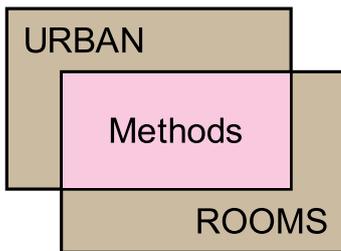
### Pop-Up Climate Hub

Madame Zucchini performing to children outside Live Works UR as part of the South Yorkshire Climate Alliance pop-up Climate Hub, raising awareness about food and the climate.

#### Image:

Madame Zucchini  
Credit: Live Works





## Writing

### Description of Method:

Writing is often overlooked as an engagement technique and yet the written word features in a wide range of engagement activities. Post-it notes are commonplace in public engagement and they are clearly useful to gather short comments, keywords and prompts. However, the written word can be more consciously present in the Urban Room as a creative technique that can reveal deeper insight. Written accounts of individual stories of place can be very powerful testimonies of the importance of place in people's lives - stories of family, work, childhood, migration, social events and upheaval, all play out in the context of our buildings, streets and neighbourhoods. Collective writing, whether poetry or prose, can help to formulate and express shared values and visions for the future of a place - capturing the mood in the room, whether it be hope, anxiety, anger or optimism.

### Purpose of Method:

Focusing on writing within the Urban Room adds another layer of insights, experiences and qualities to those revealed by other activities such as drawing, model making, conversation etc. Both the process and the outputs of writing activities are valuable within engagement. The act of writing individually can prompt reflection and tap into the detail of personal experience. The act of writing collectively prompts discussion and the sharing of ideas. An Urban Room can act as a community archive of these stories and ideas, valuing and displaying them, to build a sense of identity and communality.

### Suitable Audience:

Most people will be happy to engage with writing in some way, according to their confidence and availability. However, some people may be nervous about writing in public or cannot write - in these

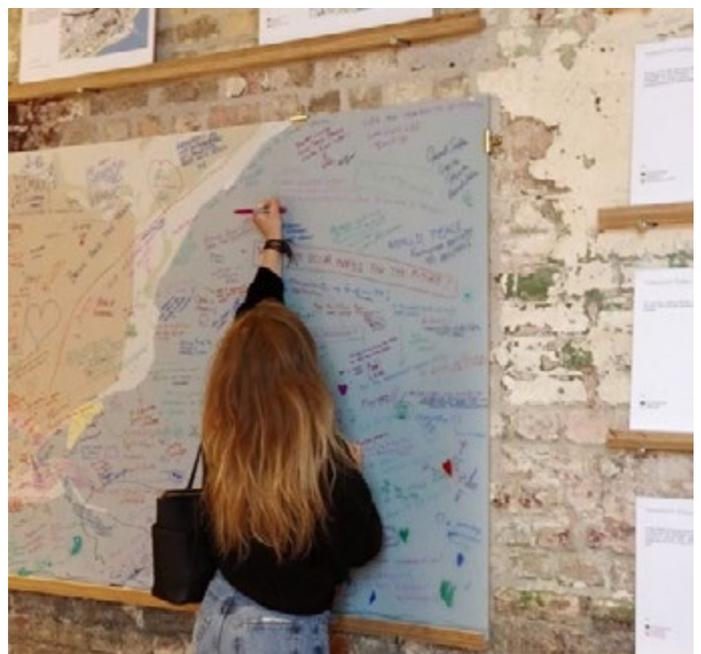
cases they may be happy to tell you their thoughts and stories while you write for them. Including writing in different languages in the Urban Room can celebrate the diversity of a local area. Make these writing activities as enjoyable and engaging as possible - big sheets of paper, colourful pens, playful prompts and intriguing questions all help. Consider working with storytellers, poets and writers to help facilitate these exercises.

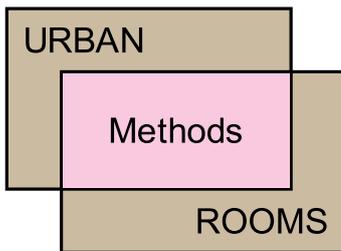
### Folkestone Urban Room

Alongside its 'Urban Analysis' permanent exhibition, UR Folkestone invited visitors to write their recollections, stories and ideas on an accumulating wall display.

### Image and Credit:

Urban Room Folkestone





# Local Expert Presentations

## Description of Method:

A talk, lecture or class offered by an invited guest to the Urban Room, often a local resident or professional who has a specific area of expertise or knowledge. These presentations can be held as on-off events or form part of a series of talks through the Urban Room programme.

## Purpose of Method:

Local experts can contribute knowledge, skills and experience on a wide range of issues and aspects of the local built environment, e.g. heritage, social history, archaeology, architecture, local craft & traditions, transport, ecology. A series of such talks can reveal the richness and diversity of an area, giving a greater understanding from which to discuss the future of that place. Inviting local experts into the Urban Room can help to build a sense of community stewardship around the Urban Room which can lead to volunteering and other support. Many people are interested in local issues and many places already have 'Friends of' groups that share and campaign around these issues. Inviting these groups to the Urban Room to give talks will support them to share their knowledge and to widen their membership.

## Suitable Audience:

Themed presentations from local experts can be very engaging for a wide range of audiences. Inviting local experts from marginalised groups in the community will broaden your audience and open up discussions to include more diverse ideas and experiences.

## Play/Grounds

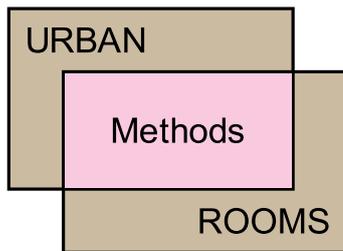
A series of talks hosted by Live Works UR about the role of adventure playgrounds in the city included a presentation from local playworker Yanina Koszalinski on the history of Sheffield playgrounds.

### Image:

Play/Grounds, Live Works

Credit: University of Sheffield





## Themed Debates

### Description of Method:

An event or series of events within an Urban Room programme where a specific theme is explored collectively. This usually comprises presentations from local experts, professionals in the field and campaigners advocating for a particular approach or action. After listening to the presentations participants will discuss the theme to reach a consensus, or at least a deeper understanding of the issues at stake. The theme could be a specific local issue or it could be about exploring how a global issue impacts on a local scale. It's important to consider how you will disseminate and follow up the findings of the debate e.g. displayed in the Urban Room, advocacy to policy-makers, covered in the local press etc.

### Purpose of Method:

Holding a themed debate creates a focus of attention in the Urban Room upon a specific issue, challenge or opportunity. It allows diverse and potentially conflicting opinions, ideas and voices to be heard and discussed within a safe, structured context. It reveals local knowledge on important issues and can help to develop support networks for campaigning, advocacy and action. There are few spaces in the city for people to come together to debate issues that impact upon their place and the Urban Room can fulfil an important role in offering such a space.

### Suitable Audience:

These debates should be disseminated widely so that as diverse a group of people can take part as possible. The invited speakers should also be diverse and drawn from community groups, local authority, academia, business and the public sector to present a broad range of opinions. Specific facilitation skills are required to organise, moderate and mediate these debates so that they are safe, respectful and constructive.

### SpACE

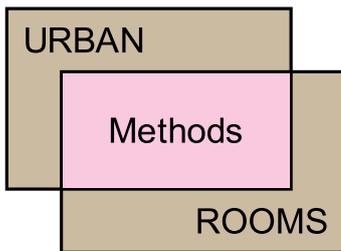
SpACE (Space for Architecture, Carbon and Environment), Edinburgh, led a series of exhibitions and events over 5 weeks that addressed 'the climate emergency - and how the built environment affects it'. SpACE coincided with the COP26 summit in Glasgow, with public debates hosted at the pop-up Urban Room.

### Image:

SpACE

Credit: Rab Bennetts /  
Maverick Photo Agency





## Shared Meals

### Description of Method:

Sitting round a table, sharing food and conversation as an activity in itself or as part of a larger event or programme.

### Purpose of Method:

Eating together in the Urban Room is an enjoyable and informal way to get to know others, share ideas and form networks. The food itself can celebrate the produce, traditions and diverse cultures of a local area. The food could be catered by local independent businesses, thus supporting the local economy. Or you could organise a 'food fuddle' where guests bring their own contributions to the collective meal, thus creating a shared sense of ownership of the event. A collective meal can be a useful activity to consolidate connections that have started to form in earlier events or to break the ice at the start of a session.

### Suitable Audience:

This is an inclusive activity that most people can enjoy. Be aware, however, of allergies and dietary preferences and make sure that the ingredients of the food are clearly made available.

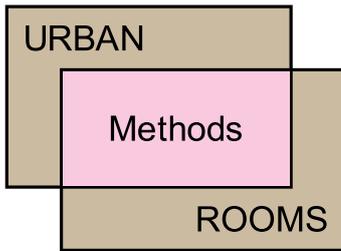
### Nottingham Urban Room

A 'social eating' event where participants prepare and share a meal together, as a tool to collect data and to generate and strengthen social networks. Local growing networks provided the produce and catered for informal meals that helped to generate a relaxed and communal atmosphere where participants felt confident and at ease to discuss potentially sensitive issues.

### Image and Credit:

Nottingham Urban Room





# Activism

## Description of Method:

Displays, walks, performances or events staged to support or oppose specific issues or proposals in the local area. Activism can occur inside or in the windows of the Urban Room, or can spill out into the surrounding area.

## Purpose of Method:

The Urban Room methodology is to create a space for open and transparent exploration of issues in the local area. Specific areas of concern may emerge from this exploration that participants in the Urban Room feel motivated to directly support or oppose. Activism crystallises this concern into an action that brings the issue into the public realm, communicates it more widely in the hope of gaining further support, and calls for a response from decision-makers. Ultimately activism aims to build enough campaigning strength to lead to changes that benefit local communities and their place.

## Suitable Audience:

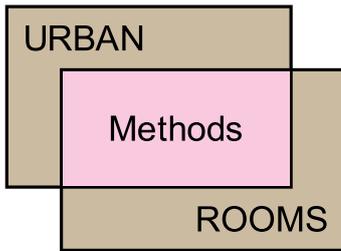
This is a method that involves a high level of engagement from participants. Not everyone will feel comfortable engaging in direct action and all participation should be entirely voluntary. Aim for buy-in for activism from as wide a range of local people as possible to ensure that it is as representative as possible and not in danger of being hijacked by a small but vocal group that doesn't represent the wider community. The audience for this activism will be local people more widely, the press and decision-makers.

## Empowerment / Mythologies / Climate

A display in the windows of Live Works UR, Sheffield celebrating the radical traditions of the city and calling for Climate Action.



Image and Credit:  
Live Works



# 1:1 Transformation

## Description of Method:

Spatial changes at 1:1 scale including remodelling of existing spaces and the transformation of public space through the construction of installations, props, sets and apparatus.

## Purpose of Method:

The Urban Room offers a useful space to prototype design ideas for the future of the local area - whether in the Urban Room itself or in other public spaces and buildings in the local area. The process of designing and constructing the 1:1 transformation can be a useful way to reveal skills, form connections and share ideas between the people involved. Once in-situ the 1:1 transformation acts as a pilot project to map out and test potential scenarios or designs in real time and in the locations that are under consideration. The choice and use of materials can help to raise issues around design, heritage and sustainability. The 1:1 transformation can form the catalyst or centrepiece of an event or performance that draws in wider public engagement.

## Suitable Audience:

Many people of all ages will find 1:1 transformations very engaging to contribute to and interact with. Since some people will lack confidence in their design and construction skills you will need to mentor and support them carefully if you wish them to participate. Consider partnering with a local design school or vocational college who can offer these skills. When carrying out any form of construction health and safety must be a priority and all risks to people's well being mitigated against as much as possible through careful assessment and following safe practices on site.

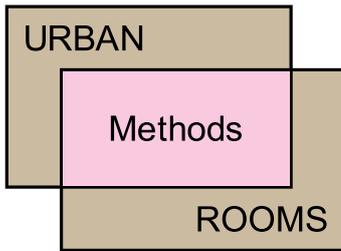
## Blackburn Open Walls

Over 3 years, in association with UR Blackburn, artist Hayley Welsh initiated and delivered a large-scale street art exhibition, [Blackburn Open Walls](#), featuring work from local and international artists.

### Image :

Blackburn Street Art  
Credit: Blackburn is Open / Hayley Walsh





## Games

### Description of Method:

These can be physical or digital and involve interactive, fun and playful activities either in or outside the Urban Room.

### Purpose of Method:

The Urban Room approach should embrace playfulness to create an informal and welcoming atmosphere that encourages participation. Offering games for people of all ages to play can break the ice, create social connections and draw out conversations about people and place along the way. The games can be about the local area and its issues and opportunities (e.g. I-spy trails, neighbourhood monopoly, development role-playing etc) or they can have nothing to do with the built environment but are still useful because of the sense of creativity and playfulness that they help to promote in the Urban Room.

### Suitable Audience:

Children are naturally drawn to games, of course, but it's surprising how many adults are happy to get involved. Some people will be very hesitant and will respond to a bit of encouragement, others will not be interested, and that's fine too.

### Fortune Here

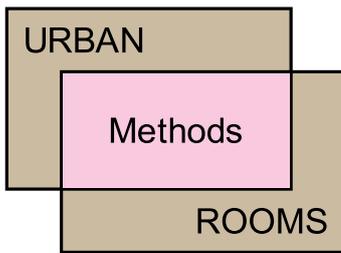
A collaboration between UR Folkestone and artist genuinefake, this pavilion explored Folkestone's 'fortunes' past, present and potential future through the use of themed arcade games and a crazy golf course.

#### Image:

UR Folkestone

Credit: UR Folkestone, Thierry Bal





# Competition

## Description of Method:

A more formal version of the Games method where people are invited to contribute their ideas for the future of their place. In design competitions ideas can be written, drawn or modelled to suit the criteria of the competition. Contributions can range from the pragmatic to the wildly fantastical. The contributions can form an engaging display in the Urban Room. Winners can be chosen in a variety of ways, e.g. voting by the participants, a panel of 'experts', or a public vote. Other forms of competition could involve people submitting their own creative outputs or stories inspired by their place. Winners can have pride of place in the display and maybe awarded a small prize donated by a local business perhaps, and/or a certificate.

## Purpose of Method:

This can be an engaging method to draw out multiple insights and ideas about a specific building or the local area more generally. It is also an effective way of showcasing the creativity and imagination of local people and creating engaging displays within the Urban Room.

## Suitable Audience:

Design competitions in particular are great for school groups to engage in the built environment if facilitated in collaboration with teaching staff. The competition can be launched with presentations and site visits by local experts and followed by a group or individual activity in the Urban Room.

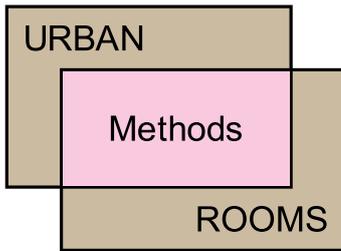
## Build a New Doncaster

In the 'Build a New Doncaster' project Live Works worked with Doncaster Civic Trust on a design competition for schools - here the children are drawing their ideas for the future of their town centre.

### Image :

Build a Better Doncaster  
Credit: University of Sheffield





# Digital Games

## Description of Method:

The use of bespoke or off the shelf digital platforms and technologies to engage in a playful manner with the environment of the local area. Existing and future scenarios can be modelled and explored in platforms such as Roblox and Minecraft. AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) immersive technologies can engage people in exploring buildings and spaces that no longer exist or future design ideas that have been proposed. Some projects use bespoke platforms to create their own games e.g. [this place \[of mine\]](#) where young people in Greater Manchester were supported in co-imagining the future of highstreets, learning digital skills that enabled the production of digital artworks and an 'immersive online world'.

## Purpose of Method:

Digital games can offer an engaging and sometimes immersive level of interactivity. They can present a virtual environment freed from real life constraints that can allow freedom to explore and creative ideas to flow.

## Suitable Audience:

We think of children and young people as being the audience with the most affinity to digital games. However more and more people of all ages are becoming used to digital interfaces and, perhaps with some support, a large number of visitors will be able to participate. Digital engagement is also inclusive to those who may face challenges to engaging in person or have limited access to transport or mobility.

## Experience Castlegate

An AR installation bringing Sheffield Castle to life within a physical model of contemporary Castlegate.

### Image :

Experience Castlegate  
Credit: University of Sheffield



## Acknowledgements:

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Graphic design by [Jon Cannon](#)  
Website design by [Ross Bennett](#)

The Urban Rooms Toolkit is a public resource to be used, downloaded and shared by anyone interested in situated creative community engagement in placemaking. If you have any ideas or experience you would like to share and potentially contribute to the Toolkit please join the [Urban Rooms Network](#)!

This document is a downloadable, printer friendly version of the Urban Rooms Toolkit which can be found at [urbanroomstoolkit.org](http://urbanroomstoolkit.org)

