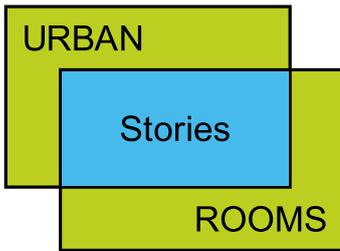


Here you can read stories of Urban Rooms across the UK - how they were set up, their aims, challenges, activities and the impact they had on their place.

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



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?

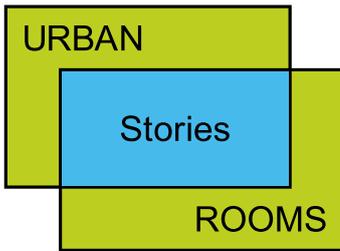
Focus on getting as wide a range of people as possible to feel some sense of ownership of or connection to the space. If someone wants to do something in your Urban Room, try to say yes, whether it's yoga, sewing, performance art, or a gig, because this is what gets people in and looking at what's on 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/www.urbanroomfolkestone.net/about-ur/www.urbanroomfolkestone.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Urban-Analysis_2016..pdfwww.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.



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.

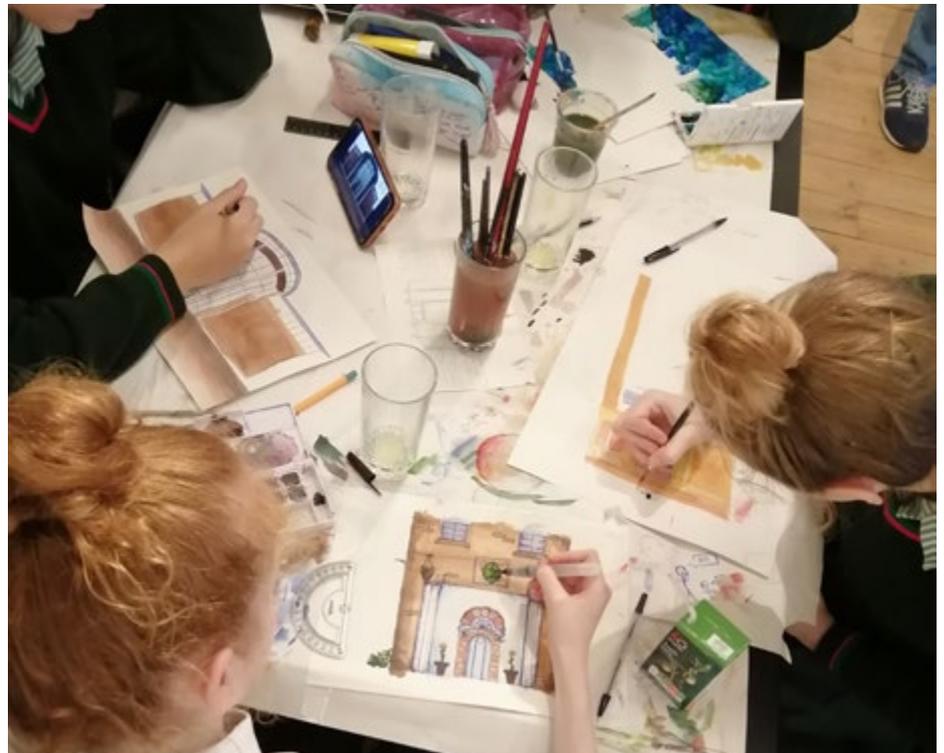
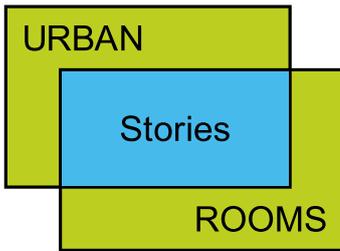


Image and Credit:
Nottingham Urban Room

More information:
www.urbanroomsnetwork.org/network/
www.38carringtonstreet.org.uk
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



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.

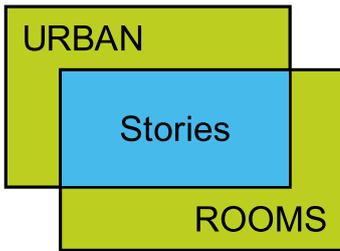
What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?

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/
www.live-works.org
www.liveprojects.org
www.aalfy.org
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

Aims of the UR:

The aim of Urban Room Blackburn (URB) was to increase an awareness of, and participation in the future design and functions in the town centre, whilst creating a space for conversation about heritage, design and placemaking. URB provided a mechanism to commission artists, makers and students to respond to, and reimagine the built environment, in particular the empty derelict buildings, the brutalist architecture and the former Thwaites brewery site, which has since been demolished. URB also provided an opportunity to showcase borough-wide architecture and design projects including the Building Schools for the Future programme.

The month-long annual events programme created a platform for conversation, celebration, education and PR - co-designing a positive narrative for the town, its achievements and opportunities and the communities that make it so unique and interesting.

How was the UR funded and resourced?

Arts Council of England, BwD BC, sponsorship and partnerships.

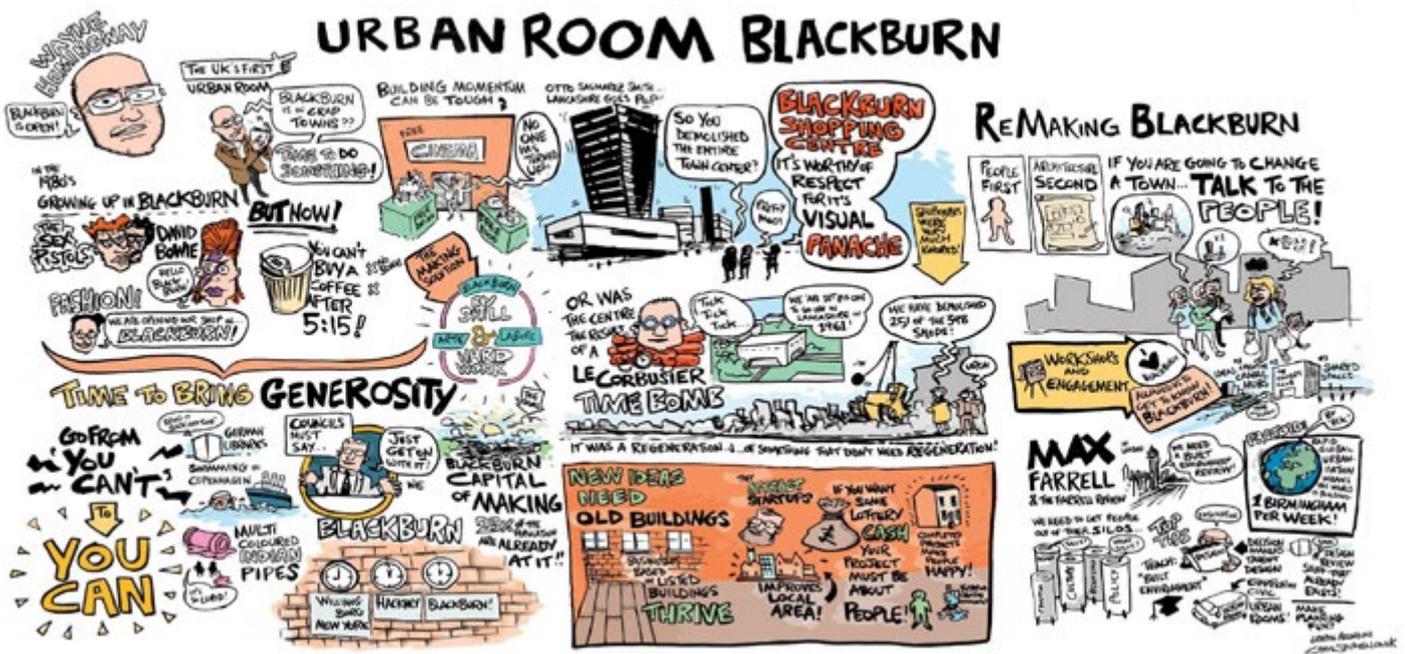


Image: Urban Room Blackburn
 Credit: Urban Room Blackburn / Chris Shipton

Activities of the UR:

Urban Room Blackburn was a temporary space, open 3 days a week for local residents, businesses, artists and young people to pop in and experience exhibitions, engage in conversations about the town and share any ideas to help improve the town. It was also a space to host Council meetings and advocate for the Blackburn is Open manifesto - its aims and ambitions, and achievements.

Urban Room Blackburn also hosted a series of monthly events including First Thursdays - every first Thursday of the month local businesses would stay open until 8pm and a small event programme

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?

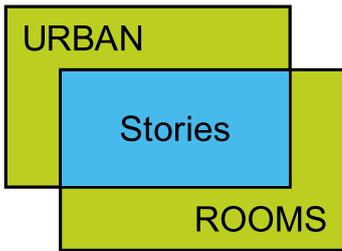
Accepting Urban Room Blackburn was a temporary intervention to help demonstrate best practice principles when engaging local communities and businesses in creative ways. Unfortunately not enough was done to ensure its sustainability. Engaging planners, architects, developers and decision makers in the 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:

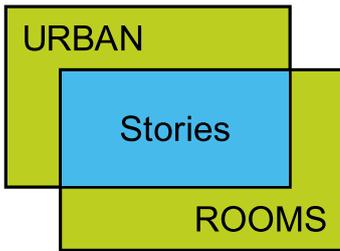
On placemaking:

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:

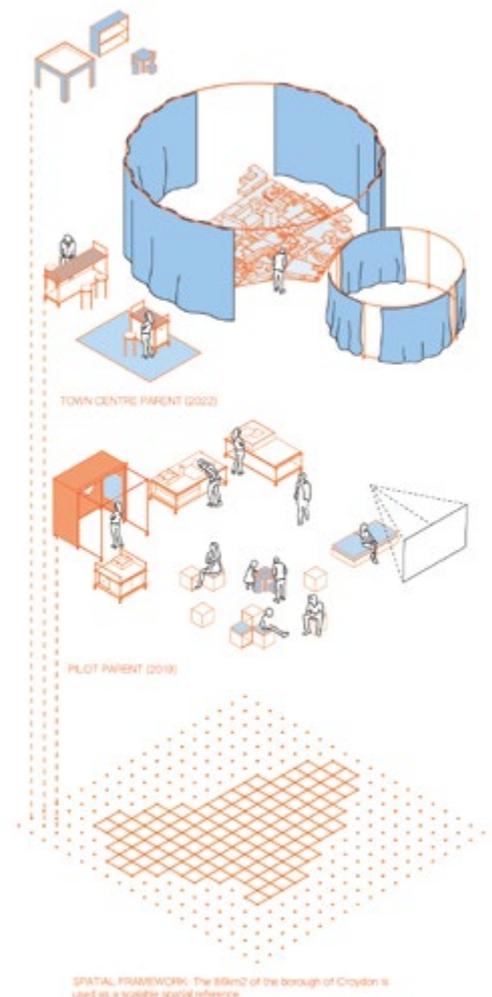
- to make future planning and placemaking accessible and inclusive, through upskilling, empowering, building and sharing knowledge and skills to generate feasible, economically viable ideas and proposals for the Town Centre Recovery Vision, presented within exhibitions, events and learning programmes
- 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
www.nla.london/projects/croydon-urban-room

Acknowledgements:

The Urban Room Toolkit has been funded and supported by The University of Sheffield, the Greater London Authority and [Urban Room Folkestone](#) and the [Urban Rooms Network](#).

It was researched, written and produced by [Live Works](#), [The University of Sheffield, School of Architecture](#) (Carolyn Butterworth, Rosa Turner Wood, James Harrington)

With thanks to Diane Dever and Greg Taylor at [UR Folkestone](#), Claire Tymon at [Local](#), Peter Kemp and Natalie Wells at the [Greater London Authority](#), Kate Riggs at [Croydon Council](#), Laura Alvarez at [Urban Room Nottingham](#), Janet Morris at [STAMP](#)

Also many thanks to our Advisory Group: Sol Pérez Martínez, Akil Scafe-Smith, Simeon Shtebunaev

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

