

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?

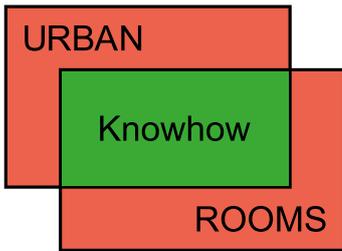
■ **Up and Running:**

- 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



How can an Urban Room help?

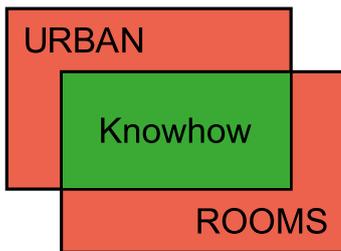
Many public and voluntary organisations across the UK have found Urban Rooms to be a useful mechanism to engage people in current issues about their local area. Public sector funding is increasingly linked to expectations around public engagement, with funders requiring robust evidence of diverse community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

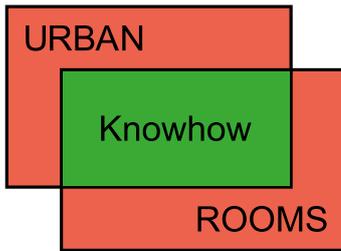
Rather than expecting people to seek out opportunities to participate, the Urban Room is on their high street, in their park or has popped up at their local market. It can also be accompanied by an online space, with an archive of maps, plans and discussions. In this way the Urban Room is breaking down 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.

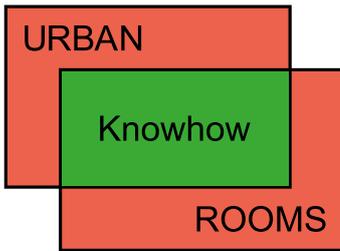
Community groups can bring a vast wealth of knowledge and lived experience to an Urban Room, to share and build on with others. These groups could have a particular focus, for example, heritage, education, diversity, sustainability or ecology. Or they could be more generally interested in a local area, 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

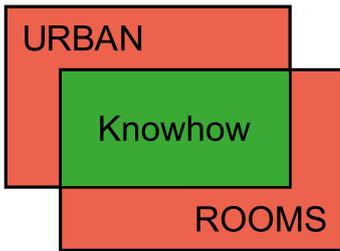
Credit: University of Sheffield



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.

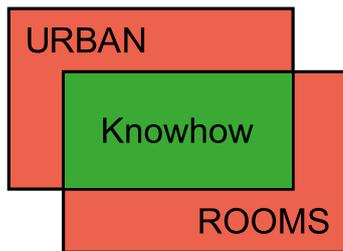
An Urban Room can offer local people the opportunity to contribute their knowledge, ideas and experiences to local planning frameworks, regeneration strategies and more specific development plans. The situated nature of the Urban Room means that this engagement can go beyond merely gauging public opinion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



Image:

Croydon Urban Room

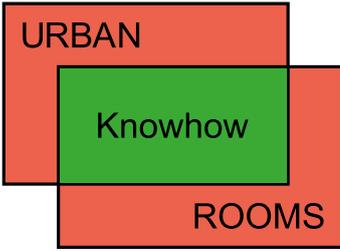
Credit: Croydon Urban Room / Ruth Ward



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.

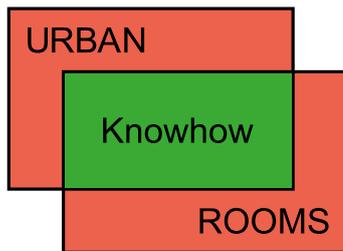


How can an Urban Room help a creative practitioner?

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

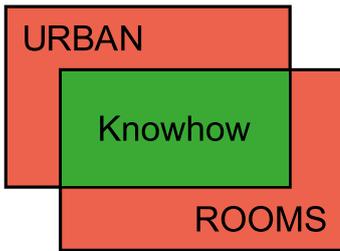


This gathering of knowledge and material about a place's past and present can become a solid foundation upon which to base further explorations of possible futures of place. Many socially-engaged arts organisations, artists and creative practitioners have found that the Urban Room methodology suits the 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?

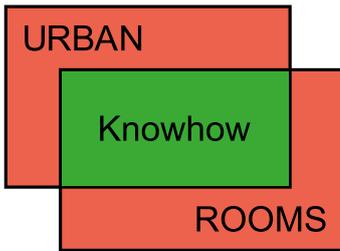
University researchers and educators can benefit from using Urban Rooms as mechanisms to form partnerships with community groups and initiatives, and with civic organisations. The Urban Room creates a space for encounter, conversation and collaboration in the local city or town, outside the often hard 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.



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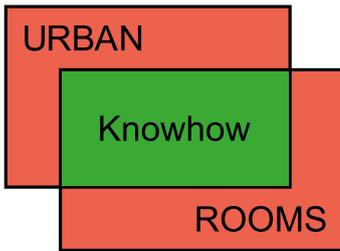
Climate Matters Live Project
Credit: University of Sheffield



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?

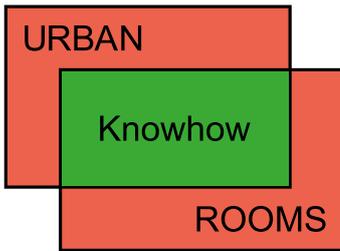
The timing and duration of an Urban Room needs to be considered carefully, taking into account multiple factors: intended aims, availability of resources, availability of space, time of year, etc. The durational and location-based nature of Urban Rooms distinguish them from other forms of community engagement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



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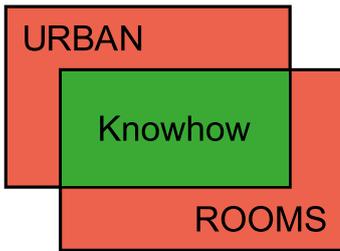
Shad Thames Walking Tour
Credit: STAMP (Shad Thames Area Management Partnership)



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:

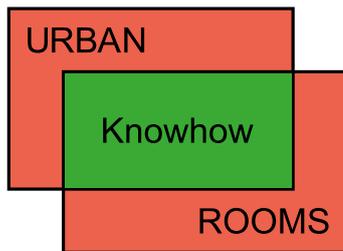
- accessibility - the space should be as easy as possible to access for people of all abilities. A ground floor space with a level access is ideal, if on an upper floor the space should be easily accessible via lift.
- visibility - look for spaces in busy centres with high footfall so that as many people 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

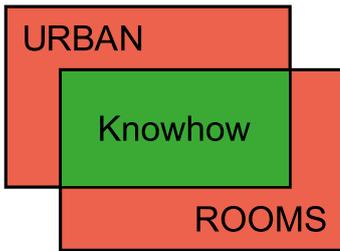
Credit: University of Sheffield



- 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?

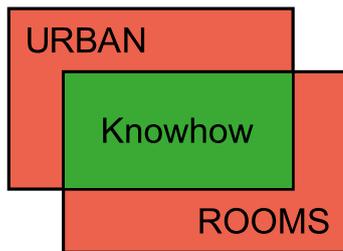
Costs vary enormously across different models and timescales of Urban Rooms. A pop-up Urban Room for a few days in an indoor market might cost a few hundred pounds in rent, while a permanent Urban Room in a city centre shop might run into the thousands per year in rent, business rates and utilities.

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



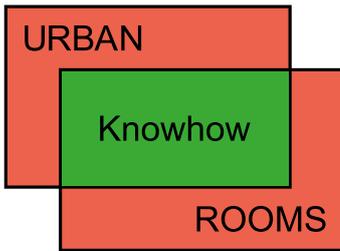
Image and Credit:
Urban Room Nottingham



- 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.



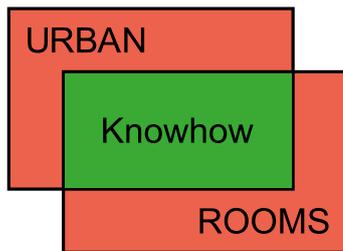
How can we fund our activities?

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.

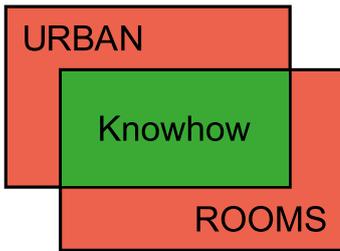


Image:
Trowbridge Urban Room
Credit: Trowbridge Urban Room



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



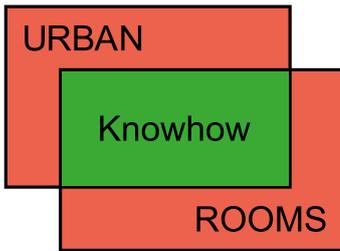
How can we design and fit out an Urban Room?

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.



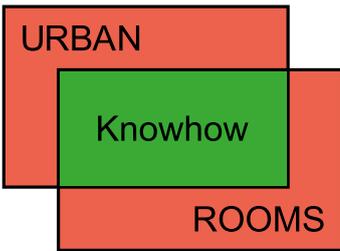
Image and Credit:
Urban Room Rochdale



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



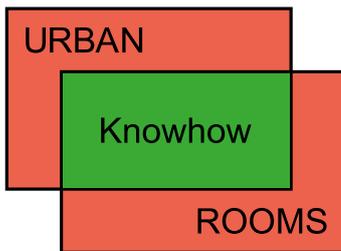
How can we build partnerships?

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!

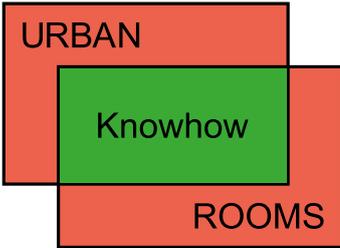


Image :
Watford Urban Room
Credit: University of Sheffield



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



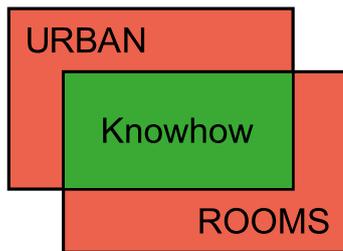
How do we build a team?

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.

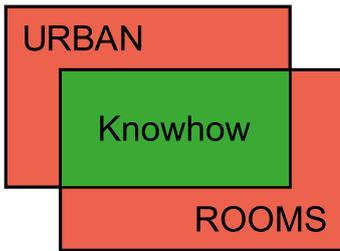


Image and Credit:
Urban Room Rochdale



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.

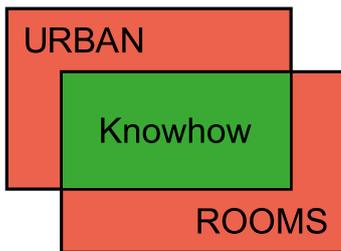
As well as having a clear strategy to publicise your Urban Room before it opens it's important to keep reaching out to build and diversify your audience throughout the UR programme. Identifying and understanding your targeted audience(s) is crucial and needs some careful consideration as you plan your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

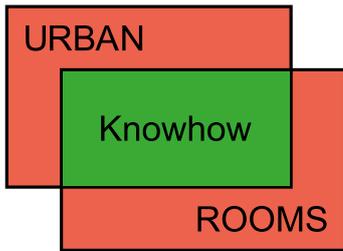
Church Street Urban Room
Credit: Church Street Ward
Neighbourhood Forum



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'...



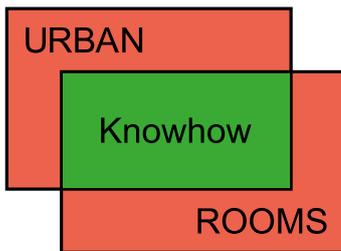
How can we create a welcoming space?

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.

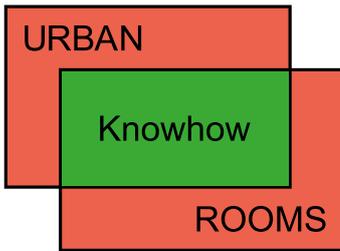


Image:
Church Street Urban Room activities
Credit: Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum



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 a 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.

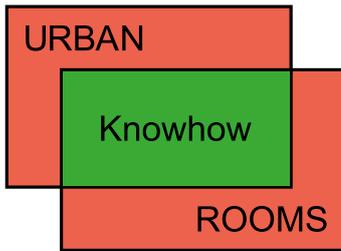
Key to the inclusive nature of the Urban Room is its open, exploratory nature. More conventional public engagement programmes tend to 'consult' or 'inform' local people on specific development proposals in their area, often when many of the decisions around that proposal have already been made. Urban 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

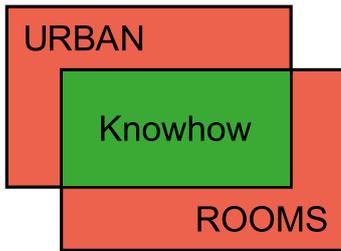
Credit: University of Sheffield



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.

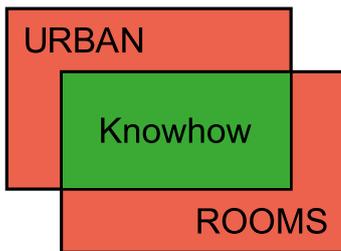
Some Urban Rooms (e.g. Church St, Westminster and STAMP) develop out of an explicit need for a space where local people can gather to be heard on issues in their local area. These Urban Rooms emerge from an existing context of community organising that would clearly benefit from a physical space to engage 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

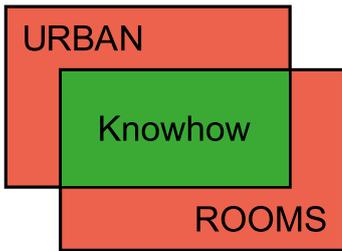
Credit: University of Sheffield



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.



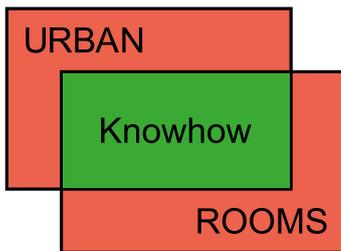
How can we reach out to under-represented groups?

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

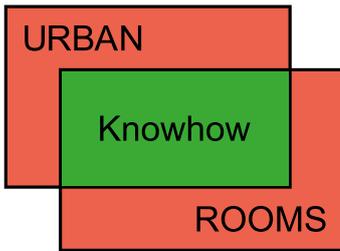


Opening up the Urban Room to under-represented groups and individuals in the local area has been touched upon in the previous sections ‘How can we build partnerships?’ ‘How can we find an audience?’ and ‘How can the Urban Room build community agency?’. To expand upon this further:

- 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.



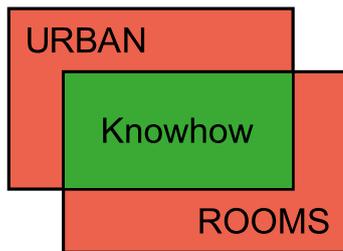
How can we keep the Urban Room animated?

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.

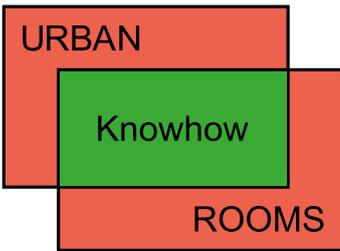


Image and Credit:
UR Folkestone



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.

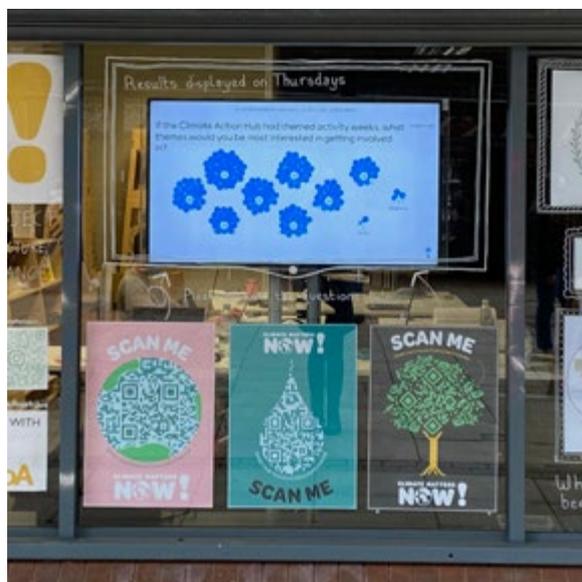
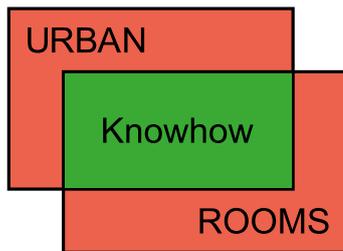


Image:
Digital Window at Live Works
Credit: University of Sheffield



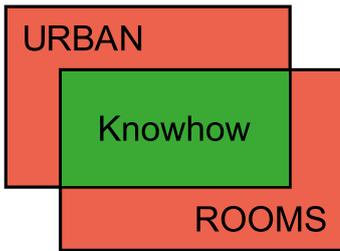
We also need to be aware that digital and in-person engagement is not the same - people express themselves differently online than when they are in a room together. The Urban Room methodology is to open up conversations, share knowledge and ideas, and explore collectively and creatively the past, present 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?

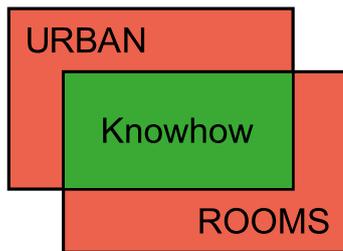
Although evaluation is often thought of as something that's done at the end of a project it really needs to be planned at the start and embedded throughout. Evaluation captures the learning and impact from an Urban Room to inform ongoing placemaking and any further engagement that follows on. Building 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.



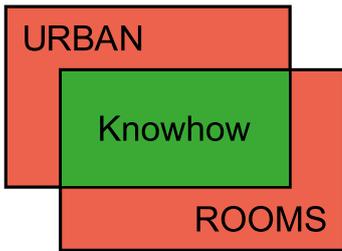


- qualitative outcomes that result from the UR activities and conversations, such as changes in people's perception, their growth in knowledge and change in behaviour

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



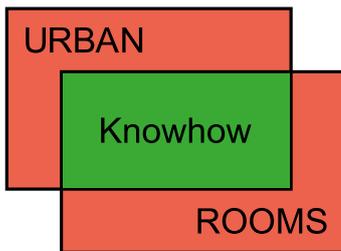
How can we create a legacy for the Urban Room?

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

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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

