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# From Artistic Strategies to Placemaking and Capability Development: Approaches to Youth Participation and Trust

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, a decline in youth participation has been widely documented. Existing studies identify a lack of trust between youth and professionals as a contributing factor. This paper presents empirical findings from four urban living labs – Vienna, Panevėžys, Oslo, and Rotterdam – where different participatory approaches were tested ranging from artistic strategies to placemaking and capability development. The findings suggest that trust is an emergent, relational, and processual outcome of participatory engagement itself, which in turn fosters further participation. The paper highlights the importance of labs in shaping trust and the crucial role of intermediary actors within these spaces.

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## Introduction

A wide range of frameworks, models, and toolkits have been developed to support different forms and degrees of youth participation, including the European Commission report on Good Practices of Youth Participation (Checkoway, 2011; Dickson-Hoyle et al., 2018; Macauley et al., 2022; OECD, 2017). While the significance of youth participation is widely recognised, in reality, there have been signs of decreasing social and political participation among youth (Schulz, 2024). Scholars across various fields have studied barriers and challenges to youth participation. Some have identified a relationship between trust and youth participation and argued that the mistrust of policymakers towards younger generations has resulted in a low level of youth participation. Since trust is reciprocal, youth lack belief that their voice will be heard and that their contribution will have any real impact on their daily life (Borkowska-Waszak et al., 2020).

There is an urgent need for professionals (i.e., policymakers and planning practitioners) to better include youth perspectives and agency in decision-making, especially when the decisions taken today have long-term consequences (Dunlop et al., 2021). Although planning decisions are one of them, surprisingly, there is a gap in the planning literature regarding the intersection

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of youth participation and trust (Gurstein et al., 2003; Hagemann et al., 2024). In order to bridge this gap in practice Laurian (2009, p. 386) argues, “planning researchers need to develop appropriate methodological tools to observe and assess interpersonal trust”.

Building on these challenges, this paper focuses on participatory approaches in urban living labs (hereinafter ULL) as a place-based framework for engaging youth in urban planning processes. It draws on insights from the project “TRUSTMAKING. Young creators and responsibilities for the new green transition”, where ULLs are conceptualised as deliberately designed spaces for trust-building between youth and professionals. Drawing on scholarship that frames ULLs as spaces for participation, experimentation, and social learning in real-life urban contexts (e.g., Bulkeley et al., 2016; Voytenko et al., 2016), the project positions youth not merely as consultees but as co-producers of knowledge and urban interventions. Through intermediated collaboration, place-based methods and iterative feedback loops, the ULLs implemented sought to address entrenched power asymmetries and institutional mistrust identified in the literature. In doing so, participation intersecting with trust was operationalised through approaches with repeated interaction, transparency and the visible responsiveness of planning professionals to youth perspectives.

The aim of this paper is to explore, as a research question, whether and how such participatory approaches shape trust between youth and professionals. This paper is structured as follows. First, we review existing literature on youth participation and its intersection with trust, followed by participatory approaches that may foster trust: artistic strategies, placemaking, and capability development. After the methodology section, we present empirical findings from four ULLs in Europe – Vienna, Panevėžys, Oslo, and Rotterdam. We conclude by discussing the intermediary role of the project team within these four ULL settings.

## Youth Participation and Trust in Urban Planning

Youth participation has become a central theme in contemporary urban governance, intersecting political science, social sciences, and citizen science, and is widely recognised for its role in shaping urban development practices. In this context, participatory methodologies, including youth-led evaluations and environmental research initiatives, have shown to foster empowerment, leadership, critical thinking, and community awareness, enabling young people to develop realistic perspectives on local issues (Anselma et al., 2020; Cardarelli et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2020). The integration of mobile technologies has further enhanced youth engagement, promoting advocacy for environmental justice and community well-being (Besenyi et al., 2018). ULLs, in turn, provide experimental spaces in which such participatory approaches can be tested and further developed (Janssen et al., 2025; Budryte, 2025). These participatory frameworks ensure that youth voices inform policies and practices that directly affect their lives (Jaffe & Loebach, 2023).

Despite these opportunities, youth participation faces persistent challenges. Ethical dilemmas, entrenched power dynamics, and perceptions of participatory processes as tokenistic or formalistic can undermine engagement (Cullen & Walsh, 2019; Douglas, 2023; Montero-Sieburth, 2020; Orjuela-Grimm, 2025). Decisions made without meaningful youth input may generate feelings of disenfranchisement, limiting leadership development and civic engagement (Mendes, 2025; Montero-Sieburth, 2020). To address these issues, frameworks emphasizing ethical considerations, inclusivity, and power-sharing are essential to ensure that youth voices are not only heard but respected and integrated into decision-making (Iberri, 2024; Mendes, 2025).

Trust is a critical dimension of effective youth participation, encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioural components. Affective trust, grounded in emotional bonds, respect, and interpersonal relationships, fosters cooperation, social inclusion, and early engagement between youth and experts (Cai & Wei, 2025). Cognitive trust, based on institutional competence and reliability, reflects confidence in the effectiveness of governance structures and urban development processes (Lahno, 2004). Behavioural trust manifests as the willingness to collaborate, take risks, and translate positive attitudes into actions within civic contexts (Yaghi, 2024). All three dimensions are necessary for holistic trust-building strategies.

Research highlights the nuanced role of trust in participatory governance. Trust-based relationships promote productive youth-adult partnerships and increase the likelihood of sustained engagement when transparency, mutual respect, and recognition of contributions are prioritized (Zhang et al., 2023; Swist et al., 2022). Conversely, perceptions of governmental propaganda or mismanaged trust can lead to alienation and scepticism (Wedi et al., 2024). Studies further indicate that early positive participatory experiences correlate with higher civic engagement in adulthood, while low awareness of governance processes diminishes trust and inhibits youth participation (Nikitina et al., 2021). Cultivating trust supports sustainable urban practices, community involvement, and the development of social capital and future civic behaviours (Isaac, 2018; Lansing et al., 2023; Owens & Johnson, 2008; Pourbehi et al., 2021).

In sum, while youth participation is increasingly valued in urban planning, gaps remain in ensuring meaningful engagement and trust-building, particularly in marginalized contexts. Systematic, evidence-based research is needed to identify best practices and assess the impact of participatory initiatives. Understanding and fostering trust is essential for promoting youth agency, enhancing inclusive decision-making, and sustaining democratic participation in urban development processes.

## Approaches to Participation Intersecting with Trust

The existing literature highlights diverse participatory strategies, including artistic practices, placemaking initiatives, and capability development approaches, each offering distinct ways of involving participants. These three approaches are selected in this study based on the specific challenges and conditions of each location. This section reviews these approaches and examines how they intersect with the development of trust between stakeholders, a key condition for sustained participation in urban planning and development processes.

### *Artistic Strategies*

Artistic strategies operate through a “playful *modus operandi*” (Halse, 2010, in Munthe-Kaas, 2015, p. 221, author’s translation), employing play as a valuable tool for perceiving, appropriating, and shaping the city. Drawing on the Situationists’ definition, play is understood as a voluntary activity that exists outside everyday ‘serious’ life, within its own time and space, governed by rules yet marked by an uncertain outcome. It is economically unproductive and guided by imagination and fantasy, as well as joy and fun. In this context, play is understood as a situated and experiential practice, rather than as a formally designed game or a gamified planning instrument.

Play has the potential to generate new insights (Brotchie & Gooding, 1991) allowing participants to explore the city in ways that reveal new dimensions and forms of producing urban

space. While this approach resonates with discussions on games in urban planning, its analytical focus lies in the act of playing itself, not on game mechanics or design processes (Ampatzidou et al., 2018; Devisch et al., 2016). This understanding of play also aligns with conceptual work that frames play as an open-ended, exploratory, and relational practice within spatial decision-making, rather than as a rule-bound or outcome-oriented game (Tóth, 2025). By shifting familiar structures, for example, toward unusual locations or new rules, alternative opportunities for action and negotiation are created within the city. Here, play is seen not only as a voluntary activity but also as a practice that allows differences to surface and exposes participants to the unexpected, enabling personal and collective transformation (Kushner, 2009). Importantly, artistic strategies in the form of play can offer a new set of rules through which participants – regardless of background – can engage on more equal footing, a prerequisite for the emergence of trust.

### *Placemaking*

According to Kelkar and Spinelli (2016), placemaking means working together on the ideas of the community and turning them into a physical realization. The inherently participatory nature of placemaking practice in combination with the hands-on physical act of ‘doing’ make it a logical choice as an approach for enhancing participatory engagement. Unlike artistic strategies where the outcome remains intentionally open, placemaking aims to achieve certain goals such as inclusive urban development (Slingerland et al., 2020). Youth participation through placemaking provides an opportunity to accomplish meaningful tasks and develop new skills. There is little literature that looks specifically at the relationship between placemaking and trust-building in youth. Some of the literature that does exist, proposes that youth tend to have less trust in participatory mechanisms because there is a lack of documentation of youths’ participation in public space and a lack of feedback on how youths’ input is used (Hagen & Anderson, 2021). Conversely, it can be inferred that relationships of trust can be promoted through documentation and acknowledgement of youths’ participatory involvement, and clear feedback with youth on how their ideas were used. Other authors highlight how creating public spaces with and for youth can shift the negative perception of city administration on youth from troublemakers to legitimate users of an area (Bishop & Corkery, 2017).

The existing literature which examined the relationship between placemaking and trust in adults suggest different findings. Some argue that there can be a positive loop between placemaking and trust, as the act of designing and ‘making’ public spaces builds relationships of trust, and these relationships of trust make individuals more likely to participate in the future, creating more trust (Kelkar & Spinelli, 2016). Others suggest that participation in placemaking itself does not naturally lead to an increase in trust among participants, but that contributing factors such as measuring the level of participation need to be taken into account when designing the placemaking practice. One way to do this is by using Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of participation, a framework with eight rungs from low to high participation (Arnstein, 1969). While achieving higher rungs on the ladder is not universally desirable or appropriate, some argue that placemaking strategies that are designed to be higher up on the ladder increase the likelihood of ownership in the planning and design process and thus trust (Ellery & Ellery, 2019). Other authors suggest that trust emerges between individuals participating (not groups, with representatives that can act as gatekeepers) when we break down barriers to participation in placemaking such as relevant skills, time, and social barriers (Sokolaj, 2022).

## Capability Development

Lastly, existing literature highlights the relationship between participation and capabilities of stakeholders. From a human development perspective (see Sen, 2009), capabilities include both internal abilities (e.g., skills, knowledge, resources) and external conditions that influence their effective use (Kimhur & Janssen, 2025). Having adequate capabilities is crucial as a high level of participation requires not only the willingness to contribute but also the abilities and supportive conditions to do so. A lack of capabilities can leave participants feeling powerless, potentially leading to disengagement (Gugerell et al., 2023), with traditionally underrepresented groups being particularly affected and existing spatial inequalities reinforced. Consequently, intentionally developing capabilities is an important strategy for fostering inclusive participation (Rosen & Painter, 2019). In order to enable a higher level up on Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation, professionals also need to develop capabilities (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012) and adopt pluralistic perspectives. The question becomes what capabilities are especially relevant for both citizens and professionals to engage in equal partnerships as departing from a minor participation input through consultation and working towards developing a higher participation level. From a solution-oriented perspective, this also means to inquire of how to provide appropriate support in these processes.

Existing literature suggests that one of the most important skills is communication (Lee et al., 2025). It is necessary for citizens including youth as they go through planning processes and are expected to share thoughts, feelings, and needs as well as listen to others. Communication skills are regarded crucial for professionals as well given the high degree of complexity and uncertainty in urban planning and development (Wickenberg, 2024). Professionals are required to translate key concepts and vocabularies and inform citizens about processes. Depending on the level of collaboration and the number and heterogeneity of actors involved, a high level of communication skills is required to facilitate and manage the process (Schauppenlehner-Kloyber & Penker, 2015) which would have an impact on trust. A sense of understanding, connection, and trust which is created over time may lead to even more open communication between citizens and professionals. Open communication, especially about decision making, is important as it otherwise would lead to frustration, decreasing trust (Knickel et al., 2023) and eventually hinder active citizen participation (Chen et al., 2024).

## Methodology

This study draws on data and insights from a European research project carried out by a consortium of partners located in four cities across Europe. In Vienna, the project team comprises researchers from the University of Applied Arts Vienna; in Panevėžys, from The Critical (a research and design agency) and Kaunas University of Technology, in Oslo, from Natural State (strategy agency); and in Rotterdam, from Delft University of Technology. Throughout this article we refer to the project team as "we."

As will be illustrated in the finding sections, each location is characterised by specific social, institutional, and spatial conditions that require adaptable research methods rather than standardised approaches. Thus, we carried out our research in an ULL setting, defined as a local, participatory experimental project located in a specific urban context where stakeholders and residents co-create, test, and refine innovations in real-life city settings (Steen & van Bueren, 2017). Apart from creating spaces for close collaboration between youth and professionals, ULLs enabled methodological diversity that was responsive to local contexts. Rather than indicating

a lack of coherence, variation across ULLs is an inherent strength, demonstrating the value of adapting research activities to specific contextual conditions. Rigour was ensured through a shared research question and the application of systematic research procedures across all cases. A detailed account of the activities undertaken in each ULL is provided in the finding sections.

In Vienna, we identified needs and prerequisites for youth engagement through a series of co-research activities and surveys with young participants of the ULL. Participating youth contributed blog posts, reflecting on and sharing their experiences via social media and the project's and youth organisation's website. In the case of Panevėžys, we conducted direct observations to capture behavioural indicators of trust-building, including documenting shifts in body language, the frequency of spontaneous interactions between youth and stakeholders, and the evolution of collaborative language during ULL activities. We triangulated these observations with structured feedback sessions to collect participants' reflections and identify qualitative changes in the relational dynamics.

The Oslo ULL conducted surveys with the core youth team at the beginning of the project period and after the placemaking activities were concluded. In the surveys, we asked the seven youth to provide self-assessments that reflected their levels of trust (on a Likert scale) towards authorities before and after the placemaking activities, as well as short-answer responses about what activities they enjoyed during the project period, to understand youths' own views on the participatory processes. All core youth responded to both the pre- and post-research surveys (100% response rate). Youth also provided feedback throughout the project work. In Rotterdam, we conducted two to three rounds of semi-structured interviews with four youth and six professionals between ULL activities to monitor whether and how the ULL activities influenced trust-building between the two groups.

It is important to mention that youth participation can take place both in *invited* spaces of participation, i.e., the formal channels provided by the government, and *invented* spaces, i.e., outside formal platforms (Miraftab, 2009). Achieving meaningful participation requires that professionals are willing and able to engage with invented spaces and transform them into sanctioned spaces (Schramm, 2024). Accordingly, rather than bringing youth to invited spaces of participation, we created invented spaces and brought youth and professionals together. The ULL activities involved a diverse range of youth from different age groups and backgrounds, depending on the youth partners involved (high schools, vocational schools, university students, youth clubs, youth job training program, youth association, library etc.). All ULLs included planning professionals with direct influence on city planning, including policymakers and planning practitioners.

In the following sections, we present our research findings in a structured manner. First, we describe the city and neighbourhood where the ULLs are located (*context*). Next, we explain the problems the ULLs aim to address (*problem description and aim*). We then provide details on the sites and stakeholders involved (*the ULL site and stakeholders*), as well as the activities carried out (*ULL activities*). Finally, we discuss how the ULL activities contributed to trust-building between youth and professionals (*Trust-related findings*).

## Vienna: Artistic Strategies as a Way to Develop Pluralistic Perspectives

### Context

Vienna, the capital of Austria, has made citizen engagement a key priority in urban planning processes. However, despite an impressive record of participatory processes characterised by

cross-departmental collaboration, such as the Vienna Children and Youth Strategy 2020-2025, participatory processes often reduce the role of children and youth in shaping urban spaces to that of mere users. The planned large-scale urban development process in Rothneusiedl, in which the Vienna ULL operated, offers an opportunity to explore and potentially redefine the role of residents in general, and youth in particular, in participatory processes. The area lies at the fringe of Vienna's 10th district, surrounded by fields and meadows, and currently houses around 700 inhabitants. Over the next 25 years, the city expects this area to evolve into a densely built-up urban neighbourhood to meet the housing needs of a growing population. This development allows the city administration to gain deeper insights into the needs of youth and their everyday practices, which is essential for facilitating their engagement as future residents of the area.

### *Problem Description and Aim*

One of the challenges Vienna faces is fostering mutual understanding – and, consequently, trust – among different social groups as the city becomes increasingly heterogeneous. To create a contact zone where individuals from different social and generational groups can come together and collaborate, the ULL focused on engaging local youth through youth centres and schools, as well as professionals, including city administration staff. This contact zone served as a space for engagement that transcends traditional power dynamics and generates joy, fostering an environment where trust can emerge. Rather than attempting to design a trust-building mechanism aimed solely at the city administration, we designed intentionally open-ended artistic strategies.

### *The ULL Site and Stakeholders*

The ULL activities including workshops and events, took place at Zukunftshof (Future Farm) in Rothneusiedl, a former farming estate comprising various buildings and open spaces currently used temporarily by different socio-ecological initiatives and local small businesses. Although the site is still surrounded by fields and meadows, the city expects Zukunftshof to become a key site for urban food production by local initiatives and for educational programmes on urban farming in the near future. We designed the ULL to leverage this ongoing transformation and make the site's potential visible to youth. Therefore, we collaborated with two small enterprises focused on nature-based solutions and the circular economy, as well as various youth partners – from youth centres to job training programmes and schools – to foster youth participation. While serving as a contact zone to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders who would not usually meet (project partners, youth, and city administration), the ULL developed and explored a range of artistic strategies, including a co-created outdoor dinner, a future scenario video workshop, a collective bike ride, clay workshops, and an anti-competition field hockey game.

### *ULL Activity*

Unlike conventional participatory processes, where participants are invited into a predetermined framework, we designed artistic strategies to explore spaces of engagement that might only

become visible – or even emerge – through the act of play. We employed play as a valuable tool for perceiving, appropriating, and shaping the city, by shifting familiar structures – for example, by moving play into unusual locations or introducing new rules – and by enabling alternative forms of action and negotiation.

The hockey game “Turning (Hockey-)Fields Upside Down” serves as one illustrative example, where youth reimagined the currently empty fields of Rothneusiedl as a site for future play. We co-created a hockey tournament with youth, featuring fluid teams, alternative rules, and a customised field. They prepared the space by designing goals, levelling the field, and adapting to natural obstacles. Together, they developed the rules to encourage collaboration beyond traditional team dynamics. The activity did not aim to evaluate a game as a planning method, but instead used play as a shared, open-ended practice that temporarily suspends formal roles and institutional hierarchies. Participants took on various roles – players, referees, spectators, announcers – generating continuous interaction and negotiation. Through this playful activity, youth and city officials engaged in a shared space and demonstrated the site’s potential within future urban development plans. Through this process, they explored how to creatively use and reclaim green spaces beyond conventional participation formats. Across these iterations, approximately 12–25 young people (from a social organisation and university) participated in each game, alongside social workers, university lecturers, artists, and city administration personnel whom we deliberately invited to join the activities.

### *Pluralistic Perspectives That Allow for Trust to Emerge*

In the Vienna ULL, trust did not emerge as a direct or predefined outcome but developed through shared encounters that allowed participants to engage with pluralistic perspectives on more equal footing. Our ULL activities show that artistic strategies, especially those generating joy and surprise, create shared experiences and place participants on an equal footing, serving as a key starting point for trust-building. Indeed, joy – understood not merely as an individual emotion but as a collective experience encompassing both positive and challenging aspects of daily life (McKoy et al., 2021) – functioned as a foundational element enabling participants to interact meaningfully. Analytically, this aspect is significant because it supports engagement, openness, and trust-building. Through the careful development of artistic strategies that incorporate open-ended and unexpected elements, participants were more likely to engage fully, bridging and acknowledging differences and creating shared memories that strengthened relationships. Surprise and creativity played a particularly important role, as they helped transcend conventional power dynamics. Our findings suggest that co-developed artistic strategies involving play as a novel approach can disrupt existing hierarchies, allowing participants to engage on more equal footing. In addition to establishing contacts, artistic strategies centred on play promoted trust in one’s own agency, particularly for youth, as they gained confidence in appropriating both the space and processes on their own terms.

### **Panevėžys: Placemaking as a Way to Empower Youth**

#### **Context**

Panevėžys, located in the northern part of the country, is the fifth largest city in Lithuania. The city is known for its industrial past and vibrant cultural life, while also facing lingering negative

stereotypes, particularly those related to organised criminal activity. The city has experienced population decline over the last few decades. Youth in Panevėžys, as in other parts of Lithuania, increasingly move abroad or to larger cities such as Vilnius and Kaunas in search of educational and employment opportunities. Despite the declining youth population, several active youth groups and organisations remain. The municipality works to make the city more attractive to both current residents and newcomers. The city has implemented multiple youth-focused programmes through municipal initiatives and in collaboration with the private sector. Consequently, the city's unique identity, cultural vitality, and ambition to adapt to contemporary social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts make a fertile ground for youth to experiment with and engage in urban planning issues.

### ***Problem Description and Aim***

While several municipal initiatives exist, including participatory budgeting programmes and schemes dedicated to funding youth projects, the potential of youth involvement in urban planning remains underused. This may partly be because these programmes are formal and less appealing to youth. Another contributing factor is the lack of youth-oriented communication campaigns and channels. Indeed, youth reported that they were not well informed about such initiatives. To address the alienation caused by abstract, formal planning procedures, the ULL adopted a placemaking approach. It provided a tangible, hands-on medium for co-creation, enabling youth to see immediate physical results of their engagement, which is essential for sustaining their interest.

### ***The ULL Site and Stakeholders***

To facilitate continuous youth participation through placemaking, we considered an easily accessible physical meeting points essential. Accordingly, we chose Pragiedruliai, a recently opened culture and creativity centre, as the primary location for the city's ULL. It is a community-oriented creative hub hosting numerous workshops, performances, and exhibitions. Close collaboration with Pragiedruliai enabled the development of interdisciplinary ULL activities and helped attract participants. We also conducted several ULL activities outside the centre to better reach youth. From the initial discussion and events, it became evident that both youth and city administration were willing to explore opportunities for collaboration but lacked prior initiative and appropriate formats for doing so. Therefore, we acted as instigators. The ULL included stakeholders such as the city municipality, the culture hub Pragiedruliai, the union of youth organisations Apskritasis stalias, the Panevėžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitės library, and its youth club. Additional collaborators included professional architects, actors, and urban gardeners.

### ***ULL Activity***

One of the placemaking activities was a workshop called "Create your Spot near Laisvės Square". The aim was to co-create a piece of urban furniture that meets the needs of youth and other residents. We selected a square near the Panevėžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Library, as the library occasionally hosts pop-up events but lacks the infrastructure for guests to stay

and spend time. The two-day workshop engaged actors including a representative of city administration, a professional architect, an educator, 15 youths from the Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Library Youth Club. The workshop combined informal and playful settings, including team building activities, picnics, music, and creative tools, to encourage engagement. On the first day, participants explored the square's unique characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, brainstormed ideas using the brainwriting method, and selected a multifunctional urban furniture concept: a bench-bed-scene. The second day focused on constructing the furniture under the professional guidance, with participants actively cutting, assembling, and painting wood.

### *Trust-Related Findings*

Reflections and observations suggest a mutually reinforcing dynamic between placemaking and trust. By witnessing the tangible realisation of their abstract ideas in the form of physical interventions – in this case, the furniture – youth gained concrete evidence of the municipal authorities' attentiveness to their ideas. By working together physically through the co-creation process, the youth experienced a sense of equality that abstract consultations often fail to provide. The resulting artifact became a shared reference point in their relationship, reinforcing the youth's sense of agency.

## **Oslo: Placemaking as a Path Towards Youth Participation and Trust**

### *Context*

Oslo, the capital city of Norway, blends a rich historical heritage with modern urban development. Known for its accessibility to nature, Oslo has become a multicultural hub with a municipal focus on sustainability and public participation. The Oslo ULL was situated in the district of 'Bydel Gamle Oslo', or the Oslo Old City district. The district holds historical importance as the original medieval heart of Oslo, but in the 1980s and 90s, much of the Oslo Old City was considered a slum area, followed by revitalization efforts beginning in the 2000s. The neighbourhoods in the Oslo Old City district have since developed into diverse, heterogeneous communities, with a high percentage of long-term residents with immigrant backgrounds – prominently from Somalia, Poland, and Pakistan. However, the area faces social challenges in terms of a high level of low-income families with children, high percentages of renters compared to homeowners, and higher percentages of unemployment compared to Oslo as a whole.

### *Problem Description and Aim*

The Municipality of Oslo has a mandate to enable citizen participation and work together with residents on building the world's best city together. Despite some successful programs, Bykuben (the centre for urban ecology) and other municipal actors in Oslo continue to face challenges of how to get Oslo residents to participate in city-making and urban transformation processes. Particularly with youth, the municipality faces several challenges. First, there is a lack of active participation by youth to engage in the neighbourhood. This lack of active citizenship is particularly visible in Bykuben's programs where they want to facilitate citizens' own ideas but are struggling with a lack of participation and/or interest. Second, fragmented participation

processes create confusion for youth. There are many youth projects in Oslo but it is not usually visible to youth how these projects are connected to municipal departments such as the Planning and Building Department (PBE). Lastly, youth involved in participatory processes have distrust as authorities do not implement their suggestions or do not provide any input on how their suggestions inform decision-making processes. In order to tackle these challenges of youth involvement, the ULL adopted a placemaking approach.

### *The ULL Site and Stakeholders*

We created a series of placemaking activities at Herslebs secondary school (H20). H20 is an inner-city high school which has transformed itself from an undesirable to an innovative school offering unique programs such as the KDA (In Norwegian kunst, design, and arkitektur) course which introduces students to photography, graphic design, art, and architecture. The students have diverse cultural backgrounds. Many of the youth come from low-income families and face both social and economic challenges that can make actively participating in society demanding. The school emphasizes learning in settings beyond the classroom and has therefore established numerous external partnerships that contribute to educational efforts in the city and local community. Through partnerships with organizations like Natural State, the school aims to empower students as active citizens by increasing their knowledge of democratic processes and how individuals can make their voices heard in the community. In addition to H20, the ULL also involved a section of the municipal planning and building department of Oslo (Bykuben as a part of Plan- og bygningsetaten-PBE).

### *ULL Activity and Trust-Related Findings*

Based on these aims, we conducted placemaking activities in the schoolyard and inside the school on a newly created Makerspace. The schoolyard activity allowed us to understand how youth perceive the schoolyard and envision its use. Together with the seven members of the core youth team, we sought to capture a broader perspective on needs and aspirations for this shared space. We walked around the schoolyard, stopped at different zones and reflected on its use. In another similarly-themed workshop, we focused on the indoor school environment in the new Makerspace room and explored youths' ideas for illustrating their role in public space development. We used creative tools such as moodboards and brainstorming sessions to stimulate discussion. The youth were unfamiliar with past participatory projects initiated by high school students, which led to the suggestion of a "generations wall" in the makerspace. This wall would allow former students to pass on tips and advice to future generations, fostering a sense of continuity and shared purpose. The important finding from this activity is that participation increases when youth gain influence over public space through placemaking, where their input is translated into tangible outcomes. Making such contributions visible to future users can help restore trust in participatory processes and planning procedures over time.

While the physical act of 'making' in placemaking practice is crucial for participation, equally important is building critical reflection skills. In fact, placemaking includes analysing and mapping exercises to reflect on public spaces before the design and intervention stages of physically 'making' a change in public space. As a part of this process, we created an activity where we presented youth with the municipality's definition of what makes a good 'Byrom' (publicly accessible urban spaces or private urban spaces made available for public use), and then

together with the youth we explored different places in the neighbourhood and analysed them to see if they aligned with these criteria. In this way, we worked to build the youths' skills for reflection and analysis of public spaces, building the youths' competence for participation in urban space development. In contrast to Ellery and Ellery (2019) argument that placemaking strategies designed for higher levels of Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation increase the likelihood of ownership in the planning and design process and thus trust, we argue that the act of reflection on participation itself is valuable for building critical reflection skills, even when participation occurs at a lower levels of the ladder. Building these skills, through open and transparent communication in conjunction with the physical act of making, is a path towards more trusting relationships and ongoing youth participation.

## **Rotterdam: Developing Capabilities as a Path Towards Youth Participation and Trust**

### ***Context***

Rotterdam is the second largest city in the Netherlands after Amsterdam. The city is well known for its modern architecture and its harbour. The ULL was located near the old harbour areas in a neighbourhood called Feijnoord. Despite its relatively central location, the harbour, railway tracks and river isolate the neighbourhood. Feijnoord is a socio-economically vulnerable neighbourhood with a high proportion of social housing and residents from immigrant backgrounds. Approximately 85% of residents have a non-Dutch background. Furthermore, the level of education and resident's income lags behind the Rotterdam average. The neighbourhood has been undergoing significant changes due to new development, including partially luxurious housing and an influx of higher-income residents. The number of housing units as well as their market value have increased; for example, the average housing value rose 2.5 times between 2015 and 2022.

### ***Problem Description and Aim***

Challenges in the neighbourhood can be identified as follows. First, residents, and particularly youth, lack sufficient information about the new development plans and their implementation. This lack of knowledge, combined with fears of gentrification, has created distrust among residents and youth toward the city administration. Second, stakeholders widely perceive public participation in planning in the Netherlands as a mere formality. Professionals, one of the stakeholder groups in our ULL, confirmed the general lack of active participation, particularly among youth. Indeed, the youth we interviewed had no prior experience with public participation. Against this background, our ULL aimed first to establish relationships between youth and professionals and second to enhance youth participation in planning processes. We adopted a capability approach to achieve these goals, focusing in particular on communication skills, as these are crucial for both effective collaboration between youth and professionals.

### ***The ULL Site and Stakeholders***

The ULL was set up in Hefhouse, a hub for learning and youth engagement. We joined the Hefhouse community, an existing collaboration among higher education institutions in Rotterdam (i.e., Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Albeda College),

the City of Rotterdam, and a local foundation run by youth and residents in the neighbourhood (i.e., Stichting L.E.S.). By organising various activities, we further engaged individual youth living in the neighbourhood and professionals. The professionals involved are early-career practitioners working in the municipality or in architectural firms, while also studying part-time at the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture and Urban Design, which is part of Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. They participated in the ULL activities as part of their studio project.

### **ULL Activity**

We organised various activities to bring local youth and professionals together. To explore how capability building can foster relationships between youth and professionals, we offered five training sessions. Since both groups identified communication skills as important for working with one another, the first three training sessions focused on developing general communication skills, including active listening and storytelling. Both local youth and professionals attended these sessions. In addition to learning skills, participants gained a better understanding of one another by listening to each other's stories. The two remaining training sessions focused on creating a film scenario, allowing youth, together with us, to produce a documentary film. The film addressed the disappearance of a beloved square in the neighbourhood due to a new housing development. Many youth and residents experienced this change as traumatic, and they shared this perspective at the 2024 Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam, followed by a public discussion. During the discussion, it became evident that greater representation and involvement of youth and local residents in decision-making processes is essential to ensure their perspectives are considered in shaping the neighbourhood.

### **Trust-Related Findings**

The findings suggest that the first three training sessions, in which both youth and professionals participated, had a positive impact on institutional, interpersonal, and self-trust. In the first training session, participants learned and discussed how first impressions can generate assumptions that may affect communication. Since youth and professionals come from relatively different backgrounds in terms of education level, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, participants became aware of their own potential biases toward one another. The session was followed by two additional sessions focusing on listening and storytelling skills. In these sessions, participants had opportunities to overcome biases as they got to know one another better through listening and interaction. Interviews with participating youth and professionals revealed that observing the other group communicate effectively, for instance through active listening, increased levels of trust. Others mentioned that shared interaction and experience during the training sessions also increased interpersonal trust. Positive experiences of youth with professionals contributed to increased institutional trust, as the latter often act as the public face of institutions. Furthermore, both groups confirmed increased self-trust as they developed stronger communication skills.

### **Reflection on the Role of Project Team as an Intermediary**

In this study, the research project team, composed of members from research institutions and agencies, functioned as the intermediary, supporting stakeholder participation and facilitating

interactions within the ULL. This section reflects on the team's experiences in engaging youth and professionals, the challenges they encountered, and their role in building and maintaining trust within the process, followed by recommendations.

First, at the start of the ULL, trusting relationships between both youth and professionals had not yet been established, presenting a key challenge that required the project team to first build trust with both groups in order to effectively facilitate their interactions. The Oslo project team, for instance, focused on building trust through reciprocity by helping youth with their own schoolwork. One of the team members, a trained architect, used his expertise to assist art, design, and architecture students at the high school with their individual projects. This activity was a way of acknowledging the value of the youths' own time and work. The Oslo team also applied for additional funding to offer the core youth team paid project employment and to acknowledge their engagement and expertise within the project. In other ULLs, youth and professionals were compensated indirectly. The Rotterdam ULL, for example, offered training sessions led by professional trainers. Recognising contributions in these ways is important for building and maintaining trust between the project team and youth and professionals.

Second, the project team and its ULL in each location served as a contact zone for different actors engaged in the ULL. Across our ULLs, partnerships changed over time, as some actors disengaged while new ones joined. These changes also affected trust relations within the ULL. When partners left or new actors entered, established relationships and levels of familiarity were disrupted and had to be rebuilt. As a result, trust did not develop linearly but shifted alongside changes in the partnership structure, requiring continuous renegotiation among stakeholders. In this context, the role of the project team is important as a stabilising actor that helps sustain trust relations within the ULL. It is, however, important that local actors gradually take over the organisation, as research projects are time-limited and eventually come to an end. One of the important lessons learned from the Vienna ULL is to identify motivated individuals and organisations early on so that they can continue after the end of the research project. Similarly, Oslo ULL suggests long-term integration of responsibilities into municipal systems through, for example, an employed position with the time and express purpose of maintaining and initiating relationships between youth and professionals.

Third, the ULLs involve a significant amount of care work, which may remain invisible but is crucial, as it creates protected environments where new actors, particularly youth, feel comfortable exploring and experimenting. This work includes, but is not limited to, inviting local actors, preparing spaces and food, and responding to participants' emotional and physical needs. We acknowledge that bringing together diverse actors was challenging due to differences in schedules, routines, and backgrounds. These challenges, however, also have direct implications for trust-building, as inclusive and accessible participation conditions influence whether actors feel welcomed and valued within the ULL. The Vienna ULL recommends that when working with youth organisations, the project team should adapt to their schedules. Similarly, the Rotterdam ULL highlights the importance of finding a middle ground in the timing, date, and location of activities to better accommodate both youth and professionals. Moreover, the Panevėžys ULL emphasises the importance of identifying overlapping interests between actors to support meaningful participation and the gradual development of trust and longer-term collaboration.

## Conclusion

While youth participation is increasingly emphasised in urban planning, significant gaps remain in ensuring not only participation but also meaningful engagement. Previous studies have pointed out a lack of trust between youth and professionals as a contributing factor. Across diverse local contexts, our research identifies a consistent pattern: low levels of youth participation in planning processes and a pervasive lack of trust. Despite growing interest in participatory planning, the planning literature has paid limited attention to the intersection of youth participation and trust.

This study advances planning theory and practice by foregrounding trust as an emergent, relational, and processual outcome that is actively produced through everyday participatory practices rather than a pre-given condition. Drawing on empirical evidence from multiple ULLs, we demonstrate how different forms of engagement – artistic strategies, placemaking, and capability development, each generate distinct but interconnected trust-building mechanisms. We also show that ULLs can function as critical entry points for trust-building between youth and professionals, and that intermediary actors, such as ULL project teams, play an important role in facilitating and sustaining these processes. Ultimately, the trust cultivated through these processes lays the foundation for more inclusive and meaningful participation.

## Declaration Regarding Use of Generative AI Tools

The author(s) used ChatGPT for language editing and clarity improvements in this manuscript. All intellectual contributions, research design, and conclusions are the work of the authors.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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