

# Participatory Public Space Design for Inclusive Urban Transformation in Tunis Metropolitan Area, Tunisia

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**Collaborative Project**

**Timeframe: 2023-2025**



**Tunisia**  
Université de Carthage, ISTEUB  
The municipality of Soukra, Tunis

**Germany**  
Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg), Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Urban Planning

With academic and non-academic partners from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan.

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**Urban Challenges Tackled**  
Inclusive public-realm design  
Durable Community infrastructures  
Participatory culture-focused processes

Volunteer students active in the project's participatory construction site. Photo O.Ben Medien.

Students supporting local livelihoods by purchasing supplies from neighborhood shopkeepers. Photo O.Ben Medien.

**The project seeks fostering collaboration between academic institutions, local authorities, civil society, and residents to co-create public spaces that reflect the needs and aspirations of their users; engaging local community in the planning and design process; applying participatory design methods to co-create the garden building local capacity in participatory urban planning and design; promoting social cohesion through collaborative decision-making and implementation.**

The participatory public space project in the Borj Louzir neighborhood of Soukra, in Tunis Metropolitan Area, directly involves local communities in the planning and implementation.

Since 2011, Tunisia has experienced a process of decentralization, which has strengthened the capacity of municipalities through training on participatory

**Restoring trust between the community and local authorities was essential to implement the project successfully, ensuring meaningful participation and collective ownership of the public space.**

approaches, sustainability, and inclusive urban development. Internationally funded projects further encouraged adherence to global standards for sustainability, accessibility, and participatory processes. The democratization of the political scene has also fostered a dynamic civil society, particularly in the fields of urban planning, citizenship, and local governance. The proximity and collaboration between universities, civil society, and the Soukra Municipality created a supportive environment for coordination among local stakeholders and, subsequently, international partners. However,

longstanding tensions between residents and municipalities posed challenges. Citizens have often been dissatisfied with urban services, and municipalities face budgetary constraints, exacerbated by political crises.

The Soukra workshop and project as a whole aim to produce the following results: design and construction of furniture, benches, and children's play equipment using recycled materials, respecting sustainability principles; landscaping with locally adapted plant species suited to the Tunisian climate; implementation of universal accessibility standards to ensure the garden is inclusive and usable by people of all ages and abilities; strengthened local capacities in participatory urban planning and governance; creation of a tangible, inclusive public space that reflects community needs and fosters social cohesion; enhanced networks and knowledge exchange between academic institutions and local stakeholders, supporting long-term collaboration for urban development initiatives.

The workshop is part of a collaborative project titled: PR-GPS, Power Relations in Local Urban Governance: Participation in Arab Public space.



## The Trans-Disciplinary Dimension

### The process

The project followed a structured, participatory approach combining co-design, co-production, and implementation phases:

- Pre-workshop phase: Initiated through online preparatory meetings, co-designed by ISTEUB, the Soukra Municipality, and the civil society initiative Bin Idina. Tunisian academics and government officials provided key feedback.
- Participatory diagnosis: Tunisian and international students conducted field surveys, interviews with residents, schoolchildren, parents, shopkeepers, and condominium representatives, and meetings with municipal officials. Lectures on local governance, public spaces, and climatic conditions contextualized the site. This phase identified user needs, regulatory constraints, and

**Collaboration with municipal staff and NGOs strengthened governance, project management, and participatory planning skills, enhancing the capacity of local actors to implement and maintain community-led initiatives.**

Students and youth planting locally adapted species during the co-production phase. Photo O.Ben Medien.

the social and urban environment of the site.

- Co-design phase: A 3D model facilitated workshops with diverse user groups (students, schoolchildren, parents, shopkeepers), resulting in a design proposal validated by the municipality.
- Participatory implementation: Students, local artisans, residents, civil society, and municipal representatives collaborated on construction. The garden was inaugurated with a volunteer concert.
- Continuation and outcomes: A report documented the process, evaluated methods, highlighted challenges and lessons, and informed subsequent PR-GPS project phases.

### Competences and Skills

Leadership was jointly ensured by university representatives, civil society coordinators, and ISTEUB faculty, who balanced directive and facilitative roles to coordinate diverse stakeholders. The process integrated technical and disciplinary competences across diagnosis, co-design, and implementation phases, combining architectural, urban, landscape, social, and practical skills of facilitators, acting as 'change agents' to foster democratic, context-sensitive solutions.

## The Open Science Dimension

### Inclusivity

Inclusivity was ensured through active engagement of diverse user groups, including schoolchildren, mothers accompanying their children, shopkeepers, and local residents. Indigenous and local knowledge informed plant selection and sustainable landscaping,

while participatory workshops allowed citizens to co-design furniture, play areas, and greenery. Civil society associations facilitated the involvement of marginalized voices. Mixed groups of Tunisian and international students promoted cross-cultural collaboration, ensuring that multiple perspectives shaped the project. The process also considered accessibility norms, enabling the space to be inclusive for people with reduced mobility.

### Equity

Equity was promoted through deliberate inclusion of youth, women, and people with disabilities in all phases of the project. Schoolchildren actively con-

tributed to the co-design workshops, while mothers accompanying their children provided feedback on usability and safety. Accessibility standards ensured participation and access for people with reduced mobility.

### Sustainability

Sustainability was integrated across social, environmental, economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Socially, the project engaged local residents, youth, and civil society in co-design and implementation. Environmentally, landscaping used local, climate-adapted plants and recycled materials for benches and play structures. Economically, local artisans were employed, supporting community livelihoods. Culturally, the design respected local practices and urban heritage. Institutionally, collaboration between ISTEUB, the Soukra Municipality, and NGOs, strengthened local governance capacity and promoted participatory planning approaches, ensuring the project's long-term impact and replicability.

**Local artisans were employed for construction and landscaping, supporting livelihoods and promoting craftsmanship, while the project demonstrated a replicable model for sustainable urban interventions that could inspire future initiatives with economic impact.**



# The Knowledge Valorisation Dimension

- **Social Value:** Active participation of residents, schoolchildren, mothers, shopkeepers, and civil society fostered social cohesion and a sense of ownership of the public garden, while cross-cultural collaboration between Tunisian and international students and tutors enhanced knowledge sharing and transdisciplinary learning.
- **Educational Value:** The project provided hands-on learning in participatory design, urban planning, and sustainable construction techniques, serving as a practical platform for both local and international students to engage in inclusive urban interventions.
- **Economic Value:** Local artisans were employed for construction and landscaping, supporting livelihoods and promoting craftsmanship.

# Outputs & Impacts

### Outputs

A key output is the publication of the Participation Guidelines as a book in both English and Arabic, providing practical guidance for participatory local urban governance. A symposium and a one-month exhibition was held in Egypt, and a comprehensive report synthesised project activities, including workshop documentation, stakeholder engagement, and comparative analyses. The project also supported the realisation of a participatory urban interventions in Tunis. [Website link.](#)

### Impacts

A fully realized public garden with distinct functional zones (playground, garden, resting area), durable benches, shade structures, and selected murals was realised.

Children drawing their perception of the garden in a participatory workshop. Photo O.Ben Medien.



**The inter-and transdisciplinary integration of knowledge is facilitated by “change agents,” academics who help foster democratic and inclusive processes by incorporating local expertise and mediating between actors.**

**A 3D model facilitated workshops with diverse user groups (students, schoolchildren, parents, shopkeepers), resulting in a co-designed proposal of public garden validated by the municipality and finally realized.**



Local youth using paint to embellish the garden during the participatory construction. Photo O.Ben Medien.