OASIS, Paris, France

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CASE STUDY

REPORT

Democratic Transitions for All

PROJECT

OASIS - School yards: Openness, Adaptation, Sensitisation, Innovation and Social ties: Design and transformation of local urban areas adapted to climate change, working jointly with users

◉ Paris, France

TOPIC

Climate adaptation

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1. What has the project been about?

The project's context

Météo-France is predicting an average annual temperature increase and a significant prolongation of the duration of heatwaves in Paris in the coming decades. In parallel, the city's densely built urban fabric, with a lack of green spaces in every neighbourhood, amplifies the Urban Heat Island effect. Moreover, the latest demographic trends for Paris, such as inward migration and the ageing population, call for immediate action on strengthening social cohesion at the neighbourhood scale and creating safe and accessible public spaces for vulnerable populations during extreme weather events.

The project's goals and vision

The OASIS concept was initially about re-naturalising existing urban spaces to become more adaptive to climate change impacts. However, it was developed to become an innovative project responding to pressing social and environmental challenges. The project's overall vision was to create green, accessible, and inclusive schoolyards that function as 'cool islands' in the heart of densely built neighbourhoods. The children's wellbeing, the neighbourhood's social cohesion, and the community's active participation throughout the project's entire cycle lay at the heart of the OASIS Schoolyards project. In a nutshell, the acronym 'O.A.S.I.S.' stands for Openness, Adaptation, Sensitisation, Innovation, and Social ties.

The project's main activities included participatory processes involving the school community, engagement activities with residents, and awareness-raising workshops on the theme of climate change.

Project development relied heavily on (1) co-designing processes with school children who re-design their school space and (2) engagement and participatory activities with the broader school community with a view to sharing the responsibility of using and managing the schoolyard. Additionally, the project organised multiple meetings with a range of experts to ensure the appropriateness of the final designs from environmental, social, and educational perspectives.

With the project GBG_AS2C, the city of Barcelona took a similar initiative to the Paris OASIS project by transforming schools into 'Climate Shelters' in every neighbourhood for vulnerable populations. GBG_AS2C expanded the scope of climate adaptive schoolyards by also including improvements to buildings' energy performance. GBG_AS2C also included a significant participative component with the school community.

Links to Just Transitions

The OASIS project is included in the ParisClimate Plan (2018) and is one of the priority action plans of the city's Resilient Strategy (2017). In 2021, Paris joined the EU Mission for Climate Adaptation and was selected as one of the 100 Net Zero Cities within the EU Mission for Climate Neutral and Smart Cities. As a project that has already been rolled out across the city, it is anticipated that OASIS will contribute significantly to the goals of both EU Missions. The commitment of the city's Mayor, Anne Hidalgo, to improving the quality of life in the city by prioritising radical interventions toward mitigating pressing environmental challenges, is reflected in the complementary action plans for climate and urban resilience. These strategic plans created an enabling environment for innovative projects, such as OASIS Schoolyards, to use the city as a testbed, learn by doing, and replicate best practices at a fast pace. More than 100 schoolyards have been transformed across the City of Paris to date.

Moreover, 8 other cities in France have already replicated the OASIS approach using the OASIS handbooks and guidelines developed as part of the UIA project.

In parallel with the actions for climate change, the City of Paris already had an established culture of participatory processes in the form of 'co-decision' with residents (e.g., participatory budgeting scheme). However, the OASIS project pioneered the process of co-designing a project and ultimately of co-managing communal areas: the schoolyards.

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2. What solutions for Democratic Transitions have been found?

Speaking the language of your audience

One of the main OASIS objectives was to transform schoolyards to truly resonate with the children's aspirations and needs. Time and resources were invested in developing appropriate participatory tools to meaningfully engage children. From the project's logo and illustrations to the language and methods (collage, models, drawings) used during the workshops, the messages, instructions, and outcomes were tailored to the level of understanding and the needs of the children. The OASIS team documented every process step, from the co-design stage to the final technical plans. The children's ideas were truly transferred from the initial conceptual stage to the final construction, making them the real designers and owners of their everyday space with the guidance of adult experts.

In parallel, a method that effectively engaged the broader community was the real-time sketching of the participants' ideas. More specifically, in the second community meeting round, the discussion topic was activities that could be coordinated by the residents in the schoolyard. Illustrators were invited to join each discussion table and sketch the ideas shared by the residents. The illustrations were then used to re-engage the local communities after the pandemic. At that moment, the residents showed increased engagement when they realised that the ideas for their neighbourhood's school were shared by their community (bottom-up) and not imposed by the project coordinator (top-down).

Building a sense of ownership

The main construction works took place in the summertime when the schools were closed. However, certain structures were left 'incomplete' on purpose, providing an opportunity for the school community to contribute to the final touches. Several 'co-making' workshops were coordinated at each school during weekends, to which parents and children were invited to participate in the construction, planting beds, benches, tepee tents, play equipment structures, and more. These activities aimed to build a sense of ownership and responsibility for the communal space by sharing a common experience and creating a bond between the school community and the schoolyard.

Aiming for Inclusiveness

Like many participatory projects, achieving inclusiveness proved challenging for the OASIS project. Although the 10 pilot schools were selected from different districts with different demographics and financial characteristics, this alone doesn't necessarily ensure inclusiveness. Further actions need to be taken to broaden the project's reach. The school directors played a key role in bringing school families into the process.

Reaching out to a broader public was the most challenging task. Local residents' limited availabilities and their different characteristics (age, educational attainment, priorities, and needs) made the engagement process a complex and demanding one. For each school, the OASIS project collaborated with the local NGOs, organisations, and other stakeholders, who in turn activated their networks. Like the role of the school directors, the local NGOs' level of commitment helped the participatory processes to succeed. Identifying the common priorities and shared visions between the project and the local stakeholders' missions is therefore a key task for achieving a satisfactory level of inclusiveness.

Securing commitment to participation by creating a shared experience

The OASIS project proposed an innovative way of designing, using, and maintaining schoolyards relying on a common understanding of the project's benefits and the active participation of multiple actors. Achieving this required a mindset shift on the parts of all the participating stakeholders, including the city's staff, the school directors, teachers, and parents. A key moment that made the OASIS project a success was the study trip to similar projects in Belgium. A team of 50 stakeholders from Paris visited examples of natural schoolyards in Brussels and Antwerp and had the opportunity to experience the project themselves and to discuss issues with their counterparts. This shared experience was a reassuring moment regarding the feasibility and the benefits of developing the OASIS project in Paris. Moreover, it laid the foundation for building an alliance of different stakeholders whose advocacy for the project's benefits to the community helped the project to progress.

Trust and collaborative decision making

One of OASIS's ambitions was to develop an innovative governance scheme based on the principles of participatory democracy. The formation of 'OASIS Collectives' or community stewardship committees had been envisioned as an important mechanism for operating and managing the schoolyards after school hours. However, this goal is yet to be achieved due to the impact of the pandemic and a lack of meaningful engagement and trust.

The complexity of public engagement processes derives from the difficulty of bringing everyone to the table and the lack of understanding and readiness for collaborative procedures among the target publics.

Communicating with residents faced several challenges, not only with disseminating invitations to meetings but also with explaining the purpose of those meetings; 'what are we asking people to contribute?'. The drawback of this engagement process was the synchronisation with the pupil's co-design activities. The coordinator of the resident engagement process was obliged by the project schedule to proceed with the community meetings before the finalisation of the transformation plans. Therefore, the participants were confused about the topic of discussion. Furthermore, the idea of bringing in performers to lead the discussion of the first community meetings was considered 'too artistic' for this process stage. These two factors eventually led to low turnout in the meetings with residents and weak engagement in the project from the wider community. Ultimately, the project partners realised the need to (1) reschedule the community meetings as a subsequent activity of the co-design workshops and (2) communicate a simple message to the participants with clear and short-term steps for building the sense of the community's co-ownership of the space.

The co-management of the schoolyards was achieved at the scale of the school community. Today, the opening of the schoolyards to the broader public is currently only on Saturdays in a certain number of schools and this is coordinated by the City's Education Department, which is responsible for the security and cleaning of schools.

Encountering the challenges posed by the pandemic and leveraging emerging opportunities

Understandably, the unforeseen challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic hampered the participatory processes, particularly outreach to the schools' wider local communities. The community events scheduled with residents were postponed until social distancing restrictions had been lifted. These delays halted the neighbourhood's engagement in the project. However, the 'pause' in the intensive activity schedule with the schools provided (1) valuable time to draw up detailed documentation of the tested participatory methods and develop manuals & guidelines to allow their replication (2) time for reflection on the selected methods and time to re-design engagement approaches that had proved to be of low impact (e.g., participatory activities with the residents).

Additionally, the pandemic impacted the evaluation of behavioural change. The initial research protocol included surveys with the pupils before and after transforming the schoolyards. However, the social distancing restrictions during the pandemic made conducting surveys with children impossible. Consequently, the 'after transformation' surveys were substituted by interviews with teachers instead of with pupils. This change limited the conclusions to the observation of children's reactions when using the new schoolyards and completely excluded the change, if any, to children's climate awareness.

3. What can cities learn from the governance of the OASIS project?

Keys to success

- The co-design workshops with pupils unlocked opportunities in the schoolyard design that wouldn't have been

considered without the children's active participation
- Organising co-making workshops with parents built their sense of ownership as well, leading to their desire to become schoolyard stewards (watering plants during vacation periods, coordinating activities in the schoolyards after school hours, etc.)
- The active involvement of the school community throughout the project's life cycle (design – construction – maintenance) secured the project's sustainability
- Creating shared experiences among the participants helped with building trusting and long-term relationships between the participants and the project
- Identifying local stakeholders and understanding the common goals for collaboration helped to increase the level of inclusiveness of the participating audience.

4. Scaling up and replication potential

Two key characteristics make the OASIS processes replicable and applicable to different urban contexts. First, the project uses schoolyards, which exist in every city across the world, as its core space. Second, the school community is an already established community with a specific schedule and shared priorities, a crucial prerequisite for participatory processes. Moreover, as part of the UIA project, OASIS developed handbooks and tools that provide a reliable resource for planning, coordinating, and implementing co-design and co-management processes with school communities.

Paris has already replicated the approach in more than 100 schoolyards. Although not every school community has embraced the project with the same eagerness, institutionalising it within the city procedures has created hype around it. More and more school directors, parents, and teachers are expressing interest in adapting the OASIS approach to their schools. The excitement of the beneficiaries is a key factor in the success of participatory projects, as their sustainability relies on the dedicated commitment of the participants.

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