

# Three recommendations for translating Living Streets to your city

A blog by Isa Laurent

*What if citizens, civil servants, and entrepreneurs in your city would temporarily transform their street into the social and sustainable street of their dreams? What if their Living Street would contribute to sustainable mobility, energy or livability? The Living Street experiments originated from the city of Ghent, but have been translated into various cities across Europe. This blog aims at providing further insight into what Living Streets are, and at sharing three recommendations on how to successfully translate them to your urban context.*



Living Streets in Ghent, Brussels and Rotterdam (adapted from Energy Cities, 2018)

## Introduction

Cities face some of the most pressing social and sustainability challenges, but they are also hotspots for social and environmental innovation and experimentation. Good practices, like the Living Streets, are worthy to spread across cities. This blog aims to further ease that spreading by providing insights and recommendations on the (translation of) Living Streets. The blog is mainly based on Isa Laurent's master thesis in which she investigated translation and transfer literature and [Energy Cities' Living Street project](#) in which several cities translated and implemented their own Living Streets.

## What are Living Streets?

The Living Streets were founded in Ghent (Belgium) and took place between 2012-2017. The Ghent Living Streets ([Leefstraten](#)) were "living laboratories in which desirable streets of the future can be envisioned with a threefold objective: 1. Experimenting with the sustainable mobility of the future, 2. Creating a new approach to urban space, and 3. Reinforcing social links by multiplying interactions among citizens" (Meneer de Leeuw et al., 2016, p.16). The Ghent Living Streets tapped into the creative social potential of citizens, civil servants, entrepreneurs and other innovators, and put co-creation into practice (Gysels, 2020). They were considered a transition experiment. The latter refers to an innovation project which has a societal challenge as a starting point and aims to create lessons for and contribute to a transition (Van den Bosch and Rotmans, 2010). The Living

Streets contributed to Ghent’s sustainable mobility transition by building support for it, helping to find new parking solutions and encouraging collaboration between actors (Gysels, 2020).

By now, Living Streets have sprouted across Europe and can rather be seen as an umbrella term. These Living Streets have all been translated to their own local contexts, have different names and are thus not an imitation of the Ghent Living Streets. Rotterdam, for example, adapted their Living Streets (Droomstraten) to their livability policy and focused on co-creating green and human-centred street designs. Brussels had Living Streets (Rue à Vivre) concentrated on lessening the nuisance of drugs and street prostitution, and Antwerp is piloting with Living Streets ([Tuinstraten](#)) focused on co-creatively maximizing green and blue infrastructure. Also, several non-context dependent forms of the Living Streets have come into existence (Williams, 2017). These abstractions can help to translate the Living Streets to your context. Figure 1 includes several principles for municipalities wishing to initiate Living Streets, and Figure 2 contains principles focused on creating Living Streets with a transition experiment character.

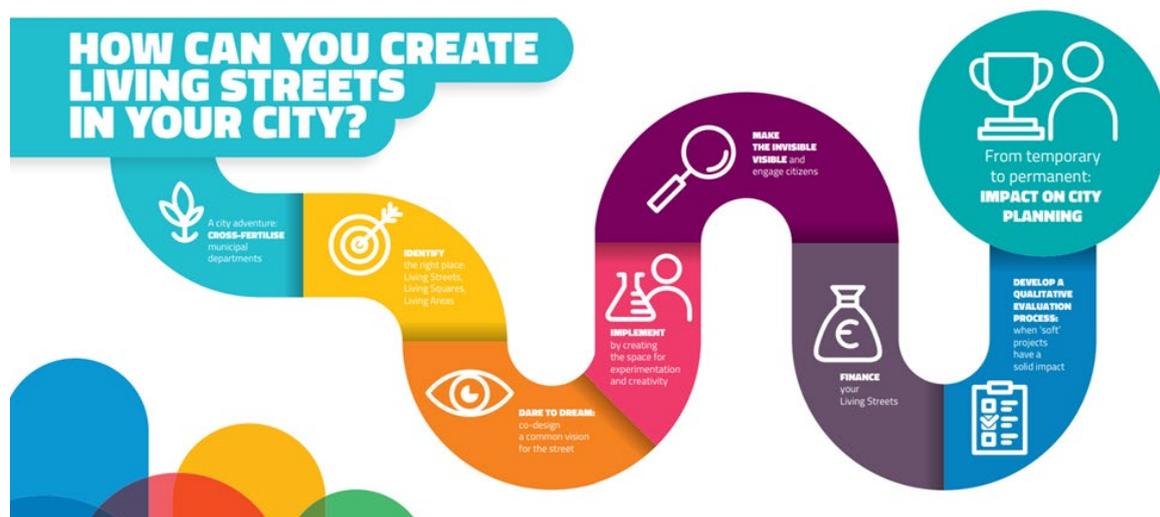


Figure 1. Translatable form for municipalities in guidebook (Energy Cities et al., 2018, p. 18).

- Find frontrunners from various backgrounds, understand what drives them, and form a network.
- Put on ‘transition glasses’ to understand change, familiarize with transition thinking.
- Zoom in on the street level: map wishes, barriers and needs, and find out why Living Streets would be relevant.
- Envision from the concrete reality in the street what can be established, and realize something with frontrunners and citizens.
- Celebrate achievements, establish more space for innovation, and give security for those who innovate.
- Keep on making new space for ideas and communicate which innovation is happening with stories and research.

Figure 2. Translatable form of the Living Streets with a transition experiment character (Adapted from Meneer de Leeuw, 2016).

## Three recommendations for successfully translating Living Streets to your urban context

This blog provides three recommendations for practitioners who aim to translate Living Streets into their urban contexts. It defines translation (based on literature on transfer and translation) as a process in which actors gain knowledge about Living Streets within a specific context and time, and bring and modify (aspects of these) Living Streets to their context (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Minkman, 2021). The three recommendations are visualised in Figure 3 and discussed subsequently.



Figure 3. Three recommendations for translating Living Streets to your city (Own construct).

### *1) Define what successful translation outcomes mean to you*

There are different perceptions on what successful translation would and can include (Dolowitz & Marge, 2000; Minkman, 2021). This blog perceives success based upon whether the key actors involved consider it a success. It thus stimulates defining what successful translation outcomes means to you. This refers to both deciding what aspects from the Living Streets you want to have translated, and setting priorities between possible successfulness dimensions. The following dimensions are distinguished:

**Completeness.** A first aspect worthy to reflect upon is which aspects from the Living Streets you want to have translated. Desirable pathways include adapting Living Streets from one or multiple cities but staying true to the core, or being loosely inspired by Living Streets and picking out a specific aspect (Minkman et al., 2018).

In the perspective of the co-founder of the Ghent Living Streets, the translation would be a success when the transition experiment character of Living Streets is embraced. The latter often gets lost and captured in translation, while it can provide lessons and build support for a necessary transition.

**Adequateness.** Adequate translation refers to a translation that is locally relevant and fitting (Minkman, 2021). (Aspects of) Living Streets need to be adjusted to the local context

to prevent inappropriateness. If you care about the transition experiment character, you might want to consider by and to whom you adequately translate it since the character might be captured by vested interests (Avelino et al., 2016).

**Adoption and Implementation.** The previous two dimensions described what and how something is translated. A major successfulness dimension, however, also includes whether (aspects of) the Living Streets are adopted or legitimized in its new context, and implemented or put into reality (Minkman et al., 2018).

**Negative lessons.** Alternatively, translations can also be considered successful when they are rejected, but negative lessons are gained about which pathways do not work. Milton Keynes, for example, gained the negative lessons that the conditions were not there yet to co-create Living Streets with most communities since their priorities were situated differently.

## *2) Design a fitting and stimulating translation process*

To stimulate the translation outcomes that you want to achieve, both factors in your urban context and the design of the translation and knowledge exchange process could have an enabling effect. Factors that can have an enabling effect regarding the process design include:

**Choosing encouraging types of knowledge exchange.** Although reading about already existing Living Streets is a good starting point, further real-life in-depth knowledge exchange with actors working on existing Living Streets will likely be more encouraging. It might help to gather sufficient information about the Living Streets, and learn more about the original contexts in which it operated and how your context differs from those (Minkman et al., 2018).

**Providing enough time.** Translation and knowledge exchange happen in stages. Having enough time available to execute multiple iterations of translation and knowledge exchange throughout the process might improve the successfulness (Minkman, 2021).

**Engaging all your key actors.** Another aspect that might benefit the successfulness is to include all key actors in the translation and knowledge exchange process (incl. citizens, civil servants, entrepreneurs, or NGOs in your context) (Minkman et al., 2018). It is recommended to early engage them in the knowledge exchange since it might increase support and limit more loss in the translation.

**Joining a network.** Participating in a unified network might stimulate translation outcomes, as was the case in the Living Streets Energy Cities network. Cities reported that it increased commitment and provided shared resources and additional learning from other cities on the same journey.

Especially, when you aim for an adequate translation and implementation of a Living Streets transition experiment, a more intense knowledge exchange process is necessary. You should not only be informed about the Living Streets but also develop a transition mindset yourself.

### ***3) Encourage and look for enabling resources, structures, and actors in your urban context***

There are also several factors in your urban context which can enable successful translation outcomes. A selection of three enabling recommendations include:

**Looking for actors and contexts which fit the Living Streets.** For a successful translation, it is essential that the aspects you want to translate fit with your city's actors and other contextual factors. Also, structures in which these actors situate themselves, including the built environment, policy, socio-economic, cultural or administrative structures, need to be considered (Canitez, 2020; Minkman et al., 2018). A too stark difference might lead to inadequateness, non-implementation or might force you to scale down what you aimed to translate. In Milton Keynes, for example, reasons limiting implementation and translation included a lack of support of citizens and the city's car-centric culture and built environment. On the other hand, a motivated group of actors in Brussels were a major stimulus for the first successful translation and implementation in the city.

**Enabling good local context knowledge and reflexive learning of actors.** A good local context knowledge is required from all actors involved in order to adequately translate (aspects of) the Living Streets to the new context. Reflexively learning from feedback also further enables adequateness. In this way, the involved actors in Brussels realised, for example, that involving an NGO as a leading actor per Living Street was necessary for their socio-economic conditions.

**Providing fitting resources.** Finally, sufficient and fitting financial and time resources need to be present for the translation, adoption and implementation. A lack of resources is often mentioned as the major cause of failure (Minkman et al., 2018).

Especially, when you aim for an adequate translation and implementation of a Living Streets transition experiment, you want to provide sufficient resources and look for transformative actors which deviate from the dominant way of thinking and which can create an enabling environment for change and action (Van den Bosch and Rotmans, 2010).

## Growing your own well-rooted Living Street tree

If you would want to grow a unique tree in a specific urban context, you would need to look for the right seeds, understand how this tree needs to be taken care of, and create the right contextual conditions. The same counts for translating and growing well-rooted Living Streets to and in your context. This blog provided insights into existing Living Streets which look and taste differently and recommended : (1) to reflect on what successful translation outcomes mean to you, (2) to create an enabling translation and knowledge exchange process, and (3) to look for fitting resources, structures and actors in your urban context. Hopefully, these insights have planted a seed and have stimulated you to work towards growing well-rooted Living Streets in your urban context.



Figure 4. Different urban contexts, different care procedures, different trees (Adapted from Closer Cities, 2020).

### About the author

Isa Laurent works as an academic tutor at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS) and is an alumnus of the MSc in Urban Governance, coordinated by DPAS and the Institute for Housing and Urban Development (IHS). She has been involved and has investigated projects and policies on the intersection of urban sustainability, innovation and justice.

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