

MANUAL FOR DESIGNING A TRANSFORMATION PATH

Creating a strategic and most of all realistic transformation path is a bit like turning your future vision into a cartoon, showing how it can be realised and adjusted if needed throughout the years. It is a blend of backcasting from the envisioned future – in all its integrality – and forecasting from the current situation – in all its messy complexity. After all, urban transformation is a long process where the area gradually goes from one state of being to the next, it is not an instant result. This is also why you need to incorporate so much flexibility in content and direction and in scale and speed (as discussed in the checklist adaptive future visions).

Fully utilise the existing layout

Of course, how big the steps are that you can take and how fast you can go, depends on the area, the ownership and stakeholder situation and the number of concrete initiatives. In some cases, you may be able to take very big steps immediately while also fundamentally changing the layout and street pattern of the area. In other cases however the transformation may take shape in smaller steps. Then you may decide to work with the existing layout as much as possible and prevent dependency on major infrastructural changes and investments.

Stay aware of the existing context

A very practical tip is to first use satellite or air photos as a basis for your vision and transformation path rather than a line drawing. This strengthens your awareness that you are working with an existing context and that every line you change or move has a very real consequence for the support base and the investments you need to make it a reality. It simply makes your design work less abstract.

Sketch the envisioned future image

This is the result of your co-design process and of course your own field and desk research and data analysis. At first this image does not have to be very detailed but it does need to be highly integral in all the different goals, challenges and big transitions it needs to achieve. Also don't be afraid to be very ambitious here, this is the aspiration that will mobilise stakeholders today.

Sketch the existing situation

This is the result of your local analysis, conversations and co-design process. Map all big and small existing initiatives to work with and to build on. Also, you map the urgent topics to solve on the short term, both your own and the ones brought in by the different stakeholders. This gives comfort to stakeholders that the aspirational future is reachable and it removes the practical threshold to get mobilised.

Roughly sketch key stepping stones

Take one or two points in time between the current and envisioned situation and sketch the topics you need to solve on the middle term. These can be projects on themselves or critical success factors and conditions you need for bigger future projects to get realised.

Back- and forecast

Put all sketches next to each other and try to define a strategic and smooth trajectory between them. Where can you start now and how can you use these first actions to not only tackle short term issues but to also grow support and lay conditions for your next steps. This requires some creative and lateral thinking, it is a bit of a spatial chess game.

Be tactical along the way

Make sure that the area provides enough spatial quality and liveability at any given point in time, also if some big future projects get delayed or cancelled. Do a stress-test for every year. Where are the vulnerabilities and risks (think about the example of the first housing project in a transforming office district in case the other housing projects get delayed)? How can you mitigate these, for example by using temporary or placemaking interventions? The concept of tactical urbanism and prototyping can help to build up big change with small steps over the years. A transformation path is per definition not only designed spatially but also temporally.