



## 0.13 Good Practice Story: Urban Space Experiment in Paide, Järva county, Estonia

*Category: Culture & communities / Sustainable cities & communities (SDG)*

**By carrying out an urban space experiment over the period of 3 years, the town of Paide was able to revive its historical main square into a meeting place for the people and to devise a better informed planning task for the architectural competition in order to permanently renew the square.**

### Issues faced

Historical main squares of small towns are unique examples of public space. They are often the most representative feature of the given town, as well as a tourist attraction, yet not necessarily full of life nor a focal point for the local community. Redesigning such places is a demanding task – one that the town of Paide, the capital of Järva county in Estonia, chose to approach in a creative and engaging manner.

The historical market place of Paide has retained its proportions throughout the centuries, along with the surrounding street network that has remained largely unchanged since the Middle Ages. However, the function of a market place is long lost and instead the square has become a traffic circle and parking area, being fully in use only on some few days per year during special events.

Today, Paide has just over 8,000 inhabitants. Since 2013, Paide is home of the Opinion Festival, an open and inspiring democratic meeting place which draws approximately 10,000 participants during one weekend in August. With the aim to prolong the festival atmosphere and bring more life to the centre of the town during the generally quiet summertime, the team of volunteers in cooperation with the town council started an urban space experiment in 2017 to revive Paide's main square.

### Methods / steps / tools used

The idea was to take the square back from cars and return it to the people, making it once again the heart of the community as it once was. For the first time in 2017, the square was closed to traffic for one month and, in cooperation with architects, the team of Opinion Festival built a volleyball court and seating areas while local societies and members of the community organised various cultural events – and the people came. By 2019, the numbers had grown such that the 70+ events of the cultural program gathered 4100 participants and the experiment lasted for almost two months.

The urban space experiment was an opportunity to try out possibilities how the car-dominated public space could be turned into an engaging place for the people. Anonymous and underexploited space was redesigned into a principal meeting point with clear identity, attracting locals and visitors alike. One of the goals was also to involve locals on grassroot level in the process of urban planning, from envisioning up to actually constructing it. Thus it was also an educational civic society project, intended to empower the community and to prove that in cooperation it is possible to create something new to be enjoyed by all.

While creating a new environment, the experiment also provided content – cultural events and various activities for the children and youth. In other words, it encompassed both physical and psychological space, aiming to engage local community in all age groups and fostering participation on all levels.

### Lessons learned

Indeed, as with any change, there was also some opposition, especially among small business owners located around the square who claimed that with cars being blocked from the square, their number of customers has been reduced and their businesses have suffered a loss. To address their needs, the traffic scheme was altered in the next summer, allowing cars to pass through on one side of the square.



On the practical level, the lessons learned also resulted in new and more durable outdoor furniture being commissioned. While the first set of seating furniture were in fact repurposed wooden pallets, these proved to be impractical in the long run and thus a better looking and multipurpose solution was built in 2019. Also, shaded areas – for example the open-air library and co-working space – turned out to be somewhat problematic and were altered the next year in order to avoid their misuse in the nighttime.

On the organizational level, in the first two years the whole project was based solely on volunteer work and basically all necessary equipment was donated by local businesses. When preparing for the third summer, the organisers decided to establish a dedicated NGO, bringing together the initial team of enthusiastic individuals and Paide Municipality.

### Specific/measurable results, benefits and recognitions (e.g. awards)

In 2019 the experiment lasted for 54 days and its 70+ events of the cultural program gathered 4100 participants. In the words of Deputy Mayor of Paide, Ms Siret Pihelgas: “People’s reaction to the new means for enjoying summer in Paide was highly positive – central square that usually functions as a roundabout was quickly filled with people who enjoyed outdoor cafes, concerts, sports facilities and safe play areas for children. The experiment helped us to understand that locals need such a place. Our plan now is to reconstruct the city square and make a part of the area permanently available for pedestrians.”

Consequently, the municipality of Paide used the results of the experiment when devising the planning task for the architectural competition that was arranged to permanently renew the central square. The competition winner was announced in March 2020, the winning project by b210 architects turns the square into a meeting place, creating additional opportunities for cafés and other small business owners.

The whole idea – an urban space experiment – is not exactly new in the world but in Estonia it was truly revolutionary on such scale (both time and space), earning Paide nationwide media attention and recognition for community involvement as well as for the actual architectural/planning solution:

- Annual architecture awards 2019: Cooperation Award of the Estonian Landscape Architects’ Union <https://arhitektuuripreemiad.ee/en/object/the-spatial-experiment-in-the-central-square-in-paide/>
- Heritage Ambassador Award 2019 by the National Heritage Board <https://www.facebook.com/muinsuskaitseamet/photos/a.2568404233197691/2568444503193664/?type=3&theater>
- the experiment was also a part of the mobility project that in 2019 earned Paide the sustainable mobility award nomination by the European Commission among smaller municipalities (less than 50 000 inhabitants): <https://mobilityweek.eu/emw-awards/>

Based on the successful 3-year period of Paide’s experiment, there was hope that similar approach would be adopted elsewhere in Estonia. The first one to copy the idea was Põltsamaa, the closest neighbouring town of Paide, who organized a similar spatial experiment for 2 weeks in July 2019. For the summer of 2020, also Kuressaare and Tartu have announced initiatives to limit traffic in city centre during test periods and convert streets into event space instead.

### Specific/additional (web)references

Video overview of Paide’s urban space experiment

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXyA\\_mNVolk&list=PLJFwW6YKfz0s7EmVB4sxI0U1JlepnbpQa&index=8&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXyA_mNVolk&list=PLJFwW6YKfz0s7EmVB4sxI0U1JlepnbpQa&index=8&t=0s)

Photo gallery by the Municipality of Paide

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/Paide-linn-426888194029062/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=2446225468761981](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Paide-linn-426888194029062/photos/?tab=album&album_id=2446225468761981)