

New interdisciplinary study

Activating Values in Urban Transitions

*A novel approach to urban
innovation in Romania*

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As cities grow in size and importance, negotiating just urban transitions is critical for our shared future. In 2019, a collective of urban innovators in Cluj-Napoca, Romania began asking what if a different set of values were guiding urban innovation. *What if goals of well-being were prioritized over economic growth? What if care for others was prioritized over novel products? What if the cultivation of trust was more important than Getting things done quickly?*

The study documents the co-creation of OurCluj, a multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary living laboratory focused on well-being of the city's young residents. Such a novel arrangement is called a "Values-Based Urban Living Laboratory" or VBULL. The research finds that the explicit articulation of values of care and trust is essential for creating and sustaining local innovation ecosystems in the Eastern European context. It details how the foregrounding of these values is accomplished by three primary activities that drive values-forward innovation: *imagining futures, reconciling the past, and sharing power.*

The research provides 10 design recommendations for urban practitioners interested in reproducing the model in the pursuit of well-being and just transitions. It is complemented with a reflective activity with full-colored artistic posters to imagine alternative frames for urban innovation and communities.

About the Authors

The research was led by Prof. Eric Gordon, Emerson College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in collaboration with Barbara Bulc, primary steward of OurCluj and founder of SDG CoLab. Visual art by ArtiViStory Collective plays a central role in the study, not just as visualization, but as a part of the methodology. The research supports the Fondation Botnar's OurCity initiative in several intermediary cities in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia.