

CAHORS. “No, this can't be done” Civic participation in Cahors

The revitalization of the Château-du-Roi Street

A Street Lab pilot project in Cahors

AN EXPERIMENTAL PARTICIPATORY APPROACH FOR THE REVITALIZATION OF CHÂTEAU DU ROI STREET IN CAHORS.

The City of Cahors is a historical city located on a meander of the river Lot. Its importance comes from its strategic position next to the crossing of the river Lot that integrated a larger route already operating in Roman times. Today, the city area is one of the largest historical preservation districts in France but in recent years it has fallen in decline as young families moved out to the new quarters of the city.



The city is engaged in a vast plan aiming to reconcile historic preservation/heritage management with the needs of current living standards in order to attract new residents and investors into the old town. The long list of heritage buildings desperately needing repair means that it is a long-run programme. The strong governance framework put in place by the regional authorities assures the necessary funds and regulates the rehabilitation of these historical and protected buildings.



The idea is to create affordable family housing in these buildings and commercial spaces at the ground floor. To do this, the city Cahors has put in place a support scheme for investors where works are founded up until 60% by public money and the rest is supported by the building owner or investor. This approach makes these investments much more attractive and raises the prospects of possibility for investors.

The projects currently being implemented will revitalize the city centre through rehabilitation of buildings and creating a set of services that will try to recover the old spirit of the streets, once one of busiest areas of the city, and bring people here again.

However, as the project advances and lessons are extracted, it became clear that another process was necessary to run in parallel, a process capable of involving residents, owners, investors and the general population in order to create impact in the city.



"We realize one thing: we need to involve local citizens. If they are not actors of change, it won't work. So we gave them a chance to speak out without immediately jumping to them saying: no, this can't be done. The expertise that we receive from them it's the expertise of common sense and daily use, and this is unreplaceable."

Ms. Laure Courget, Heritage Chief Curator and a member of the ULG clearly

Château-du-Roi Street - a Rehabilitation Street Lab

The City of Cahors and its agglomeration set up very proactive policies to support the restoration of built heritage in priority neighbourhoods, including Château-du-Roi Street. The street acts as a laboratory for the urban development public project: 'Cahors, the Heart of the Agglomeration Strategy'. Here are tested all the policies implemented in this framework, before being used in other City neighbourhoods or in the smaller towns of the Grand Cahors Agglomeration.

The Château-du-Roi street was once a lively old axis of the city but today in difficulty, with a problem of significant commercial desertification, buildings needing to be rehabilitated and reconfigured, etc. The inhabitants and actors of the street were mobilized, through an experimental participative approach, carried out thanks to the European program URBACT.



The rue du Château-du-Roi as an experimental ground was set up during the first edition of the European Heritage Biennale organized in November 2016 in Cahors. The event had brought out the first

steps of a participatory approach through workshops conducted with citizens who proposed that more streets should be pedestrian only. The project is expected to be finished in the second half of 2019.

In the framework of INT-HERIT the city created an ULG based on this initial group to work on the following challenges:

- Create a life-style concept capable of combining conservation, quality of life and social development;
- Support rehabilitation of buildings to attract new inhabitants;
- Put housing back on the market;
- Bring back families and working-age adults;
- Promote business through the creation shops and proximity services as well as local brands;
- Create a socially diverse city centre;
- Use experimental projects (energy retrofits, bio-sourced materials) to develop new sectors and expertise.



"I held the first meeting of conservation with citizens three years ago. It was a success right away. The method that we have promoted in Cahors also gives value to of the community while increasing the professional competences of their agents. We based our process on other cities experiences and apply them to the characteristics of our town and make it a driving force. We realise that residents were not ahead of us but anyway were coming with ideas of their own"

Michel Simon, 1st Deputy Mayor

There already a few buildings rehabilitated, some shops open on the base floors but there's still no critical mass to induce a radical change in the life of the old town. It is therefore important to keep the communication with citizens to explain the project attract new residents and find temporary uses for the new spaces (even id works still go on). The mains goal is to engage Cahors citizens on the process. This will brought attention internally and externally to the work done so far and will promote future investments in the area. The municipality is developing a specific animation programme to involve the owners of buildings and shops to create a lively atmosphere and leverage the investments in the area.



The nr. 72 Building in Château-du-Roi Street

The INT-HERIT project focused on a specific building, located on the 72 on Château-du-Roi Street. This is a very old building in a medieval neighbourhood. Till now, it was divided into eight very small apartments, many of them vacant, other in uncomfortable and unsanitary conditions, even dangerous.



The model used for the rehabilitation of building on number 72, where the city promoted a partnership with the owner, can act as a model for future rehabilitations. In this case, several small apartments were merged to create bigger apartments. This model will create affordable housing for middle class families to return to this area of the town.

As a result, the building was bought by the city and then sold to a private investor. On the other hand, the investors have to comply with some obligations in order to get funded. First of all, a quality criteria defined by the city council in order to assure that works are conduct in respect for the cultural heritage of the buildings.

Secondly, the new created apartments have to be rented for 9 years at a moderated cost, i.e., the rent is must be affordable for low to middle class families that want to live here. This means that public subvention here is creating social housing for the people of Cahors while rehabilitating the city old centre and i a way fight gentrification of the place.



"What interest me most at the first ULG meetings was to hear what other citizens had to say.. These are the people I saw every day passing by but I didn't know them."

Patrice Bosc, ULG Member, resident



"Discussing and pooling our ideas, sharing our views about the building I wanted to rehabilitate helped to move in a good direction. In one meeting we were talking about installing small fountains and water points in the street, so I thought: why not to put one in my courtyard? That would be nice and would create a relation with the street. Yes, little things like that came out directly of the ULG meetings and ultimately change my initial project"

Alexia Vandomme, ULG Member, Owner and investor in the 72 building

What's next?

Transparency / Greening - The owner of the building on 72 Château-du-Roi Street proposed the city to open the visibility of the courtyard from the street. This creates an interesting way to expand the street and avoid the sense of closure created by this narrow road. Peers recommend keeping it accessible to public fruition where possible and promote its temporary use, such as fairs, pop up events or gastronomic events, to enhance visiting experience. These initiatives will be complemented by greening the street, i.e., promoting the installation of 'vertical gardens' across the street and create a cosy feeling of 'peaceful freshness' that invites pedestrians for a longer stop.



Build anchor points - Reopen the former jail: The former jail of Cahors is a huge building in the Château-du-Roi Street listed in the “Mérimée” database of the Ministry of Culture of protected buildings. It is also known as “Palais de Via” as it was initially constructed in the XIV century as a residence palace until it became a prison in 1790 until it finally close doors on 2012, and since them is waiting for a rehabilitation solution.

The former jail in “Palais de Via” will be an anchor to attract new activities in the area. Its vantage position with great location and magnificent views to the city and the river Lot recommends a multi-functional use of the space. The East wall will serve as a canvas to promote the old centre (ex.: video mapping) as this will be visible from the river. The dialog with the Château-du-Roi Street will explore the concept of ‘freedom’ in contrast with the close environment of the former jail. People came from a narrow street but entering the building will gain access to the open areas of the courtyards on its back. They will be able to climb the tower and appreciate the magnificent views over the river Lot, creating an ‘escape route’ from the narrow medieval streets with almost no sun.



Measure - Setup a monitoring system: a simple monitoring system will be implemented to assess the impact of measures taken. Some data should be collected, namely about the economic activity (nr. of shops, nr. of clients, nr. of visitors, etc) and use the Urbact ULG to monitor people opinion, receive suggestions and asses their engagement in the project.

City promotion based on wine and wellbeing: The map of the city of Cahors is in the shape of a bottle surrounded by water: this could be the concept for logo and promotional material, connecting wine and water to create a concept of wellbeing. The old centre will therefore act as a focal point from where visitors can grab some knowledge not only about the old centre but also about the wineries and gastro attractions that surround the urban area.

The revitalization of the Château-du-Roi Street is testing different approaches to increase civic participation in the rehabilitation of the Cahors that are already making a difference in the traditional way cities look at the valorisation of cultural heritage. The feedback from stakeholders on the ULG is very positive and some changes were already introduced on the initial implementation plan. This process is still in the beginning and it takes time to build trust and transparency between the population and the local authorities but the results so far were very promising. Let's hope that the city keeps following this path and that by the time of your next visit we'll be able to see a completely new city more proud of its patrimony with a lively and attractive atmosphere.

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Videos

Cahors Video Case: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwdqCJDWzDg>

Cahors Vox pop video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UI7-hBG09zA>

Cahors Transnational Meeting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjN78GkCUYA>

About the INT-HERIT Project

The INT-HERIT project is an Implementation Network under the Urbact Programme that identifies, collects and exchanges knowledge across nine small to medium-size cities sharing similar challenges when tackling cultural heritage protection, conservation or valorisation. Implementation has all sorts of constraints and variables that may influence the final results. New smart, low cost initiatives are being implemented to overcome these constraints by adopting an integrative and participative approach towards stakeholders aiming to increase the value created for the community through heritage conservation projects. This article provides an overview of some of the initiatives currently taking place in the city in order to contribute for a knowledge base of solutions that will be hopefully useful for other cities across Europe while managing their cultural heritage.

