

# Spaces for All: A Historical Assessment of Placemaking and Participatory Practices in the V4 Nations

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## 1 Introduction

As urban areas experience rapid growth, climate change, and increasing socio-economic inequality, innovative urban planning strategies are essential to address these challenges. In the early 21st century, placemaking and participatory practices emerged to enhance the connection between people and their shared spaces, fostering the creation of welcoming and friendly public areas. The 2000s also mark a significant period of transformation: the European Union has experienced the most significant enlargement in its history. At the same time, the global emphasis on sustainable development has been amplified with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on this transformative period, this research explores how placemaking practices in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) have evolved in the two decades since their accession to the European Union. Furthermore, it analyzed how different age groups participated in these processes and how they could be linked to the SDG sub-targets, underlining sustainable urbanisation, participatory structures, and public spaces that are inclusive and accessible for people of all ages.

While the Visegrad countries share a common historical and cultural background, including the transition from socialist states to democracy and market economy, each country has unique socio-political and economic dynamics for comparison. The research analyzed case studies of major urban centers, focusing on participatory planning processes. The study also considers the concept of planning for all ages, looking at how different age groups (children, adults, and the older generation) experience and influence placemaking processes, while taking into account the goals of sustainable urban growth. This approach provides a more nuanced picture of socio-spatial dynamics and highlights the importance of tailored strategies that take into account the needs of all age groups.

## **2 Methods**

For this research, a comprehensive historical literature review was conducted, which allowed for exploring the evolution of participatory planning in the Visegrad countries, with the primary research focus on understanding the main drivers of these changes and the impacts, obstacles, and opportunities for contemporary urban planning. The second focus of this study was how different age groups shaped and influenced these processes in urban spaces. To ensure clarity, this study adopted a three-cohort schema that aligns with the majority of literature: from children and youth, aged 5 to 24, the young participants engaged; to adults, aged 25 to 64, the prime working-age group who led the adoption of participatory models; to seniors, aged 65 and above, who also play an crucial role in planning. Lastly, the research investigates how these participatory practices could be aligned with SDG targets 11.3.2 and 11.7.1, which support participatory structures and inclusive public spaces for all ages.

The study was carried out by using the five-step literature review technique: creation of a text database and research panorama, building on the primary authors' findings and conclusions, location of origins and conceptual framework, and defining the research subject. First, the necessary keywords were identified ("participatory planning", "placemaking", "public space" with variations of "Visegrad Group" and its member states for geographical narrowing). For this research, the keywords were searched for both individually and combined in the Scopus, EBSCO, and Web of Science databases. Several filters were used to narrow down the results, such as scientific, peer-reviewed journals, years of publishing (2000–2024), type of content (academic journals, books, and e-books), and English-language.

The text database is composed of 77 sources. All of the sources are scientific, peer-reviewed works, ranging from conference papers to book chapters. The

years of publishing range from 2004 to 2024, with a remarkable increase from the late 2010s, which highlights the gradual spread of participatory practices in the region, and the peak number of studies published in 2024 supports the actuality of the topic. The disciplines of the sources vary, with most being related fields of planning, while works from civil engineering, geography, and sustainable development are also relevant. This underscores the interdisciplinary nature of the topic and the need for a comprehensive approach.

### 3 Results

Early post-accession studies document the initial state of Visegrad cities, identifying inflexible, top-down planning frameworks and pronounced environmental decline in public areas across Poland and the Czech Republic. In contrast, grassroots visioning workshops in Budapest and mapping exercises in Bratislava showed how stronger civil society infrastructures enabled local actors to reclaim mass-housing estates and historic squares. Analyses of communication processes demonstrated how these early dialogues laid the groundwork for later redevelopment projects. The contrast suggests that early participatory practices depended on non-governmental capacity and supportive legal contexts, while audit-driven studies left community perceptions unexplored, signalling a need for mixed-methods approaches that capture everyday experiences.

The EU structural and cohesion funds have played a critical role in shaping participatory and placemaking practices across the V4. Post-2004, regeneration schemes financed by these funds often carried grant requirements for public consultation. Based on such conditions, cities in the V4 integrated citizen involvement methods into municipal redevelopment plans. Other EU-supported research on digital participatory tools accelerated city halls' adoption of online tools. Therefore, these funding streams not only provided essential resources but also created institutional incentives for stakeholder engagement, speeding the region's shift from top-down practices to collaborative placemaking.

During the mid-2010s "bottom-up turn," participatory methods moved from marginal experiments into more mainstream regeneration projects, with notable variations by country. Poland led in scaling participatory budgeting and creating cultural-institution partnerships. The Czech Republic pioneered tactical urbanism and urban mentoring schemes to create pop-up plazas and pocket parks, while Bratislava experimented with youth involvement and digital workshops. Hungary's green space and public safety design experiments were locally impactful, yet remained fragmented and complex to scale. Poland's ability to institutionalize budgeting at scale reveals how fiscal autonomy and governance

frameworks can transform pilot tactics into system-wide practices. In contrast, Czech and Slovak experiments mostly remained episodic and vulnerable to tokenism. Scholars warned that these efforts risked reproducing existing inequalities without skilled facilitation and sustainable funding. This era exposed a persistent tension between ambitious participatory ideals and the pragmatic limits imposed by municipal expertise and funding cycles.

From the late 2010s onward, online and digital tools marked a new hybrid phase in the V4. The Czech Republic led early adoption by enabling real-time data collection, Poland expanded these methods to capture citizens' emotional responses, while Hungary's Smart City initiatives integrated ICT to support universal design of spaces. At the same time, Slovakia's smaller municipalities highlighted the need for analogue outreach to bridge digital divides. Overreliance on digital tools risks excluding low-tech or low-literacy participants. Technological innovation amplifies participation only when paired with inclusive outreach models; otherwise, digital tools risk deepening the social divide.

A closer examination of age-group dynamics reveals distinct contributions and challenges across the V4. Adults were inducing reform in all states to integrate citizen knowledge into planning. Children from the late 2010s gradually transitioned from passive users to co-designers in the V4 with targeted workshops and digital engagement. Seniors played an important role in prototyping inclusive and accessible urban design in Wrocław and Prague. However, smaller-town initiatives in Slovakia and Hungary often struggled to recruit different demographic cohorts without expert facilitation. Differential methods for children, adults, and seniors reveal that participatory design must be calibrated to each group's cognitive, social, and technical capacities, as the one-size-fits-all approach risks superficial outcomes. Persistent difficulties sustaining balanced cohorts indicate the need for institutionalized support structures rather than ad hoc efforts.

In terms of alignment SDG 11.3.2., Poland and the Czech Republic have the most institutionalized multi-stakeholder governance, for example, through transparent participatory budget planning, joint creative workshops, and mentoring programs, while in Slovakia and Hungary, participatory methods are still in the early stages of development. Formal alignment with SDG targets often overlooks how fleeting political support can be, so sustainability indicators must also consider long-term financing and capacity-building prospects. Short political cycles, limited budgets, and volunteer fatigue often cut participatory processes short before they can lead to lasting improvements. Concerning SDG 11.7.1, innovative experimental approaches have enriched urban placemaking by combining temporary interventions with long-term spatial transformation. Poland's and the Czech

Republic's creative placemaking festivals and interactive media-arts interventions have animated underused squares, while Hungary has codified disability-inclusive design standards for accessibility. Slovakia's green-corridor initiatives in Bratislava and Košice offered nature-based solutions for inclusive recreation. However, persistent safety concerns, such as poor lighting and harassment, continue to deter women, children, and seniors from using public spaces entirely. Nevertheless, short political cycles, limited budgets, and volunteer fatigue frequently cut short participatory processes before yielding lasting improvements.

## **4 Discussion and Conclusion**

According to the analysis, the participatory practices of the Visegrad countries have shifted from top-down, state-led planning to more collaborative approaches involving residents. The research indicates that technological advances, community engagement initiatives, and creative design practices have continuously reshaped urban public spaces in the Visegrad region. Rigid top-down planning has given way to bottom-up, EU-funding-supported participatory and placemaking practices, but the progress is uneven. Poland is the clear leader in progress, while in the other three countries, the sporadic nature of interventions is slowing down the transition for the time being. The case studies prove that children, adults, and seniors have each played a role in shaping public spaces, yet volunteer burnout, tight budgets, and digital divides limit lasting inclusion. While these shifts tick the boxes of SDG 11.3 and 11.7, true equality in governance and public-space access still demands deeper facilitation and reliable political and financial support for participatory processes.

The study concludes that integrating inclusive participatory and placemaking practices could significantly improve the development of public spaces in the Visegrad Group countries. By taking into account the different needs of different age groups, policy makers and urban planners can create a more resilient, equitable, environmentally and socially sustainable urban environment. Therefore, the key implications of this research include institutionalizing facilitation, pairing high-tech tools with low-tech outreach, and the adoption of mixed-method evaluation while also designing funding and governance models that reflect local capacity.

The limitations of this study include the language barriers and the less-accessible documentation, as relevant sources may be scattered or unavailable in English translation. In addition, defining clear milestones in placemaking and participatory urban planning is always a complex issue, because transformations

often occur gradually rather than through distinct events. Nevertheless, the research results so far can provide a foundation for further study to investigate the current opportunities, difficulties, and good examples of participation in urban planning projects in the region.

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