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The Urban Lab of Europe !

# The 5Bridges Project Journal N°1

*Project led by the City of Nantes*



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# 1 Executive Summary – The 5Bridges project

Homelessness is one of the most extreme manifestation of social exclusion in the European Union. It is estimated that about 4 million people experience homelessness every year. In most Member States of the European Union the homeless numbers are increasing. The problem of homelessness is most visible and acute in urban areas. Most cities address homelessness by offering emergency services such as hostel accommodation and free meals. In Nantes about 1000 homeless people ask for help with finding a place to stay for the night every month.

There is a growing body of evidence that effective policies to address homelessness must move away from emergency support and support the reconnection of the homeless with the local community. Too often urban policies and services do not take adequate account of the complexity of the needs of homeless people. The existing job integration schemes are not sufficiently adapted to the capacities and aspiration of homeless people. The lack of coordination between the welfare, housing, and health sectors leads too often to inadequate and unsustainable solutions for the homeless. Also in Nantes there is room for change and that is why the city authorities decided to sustain the 5Bridges project. The project wants to reach out to the most excluded among the homeless and offer services that facilitate their social integration and connection with the neighbourhood.

The project wants to address five interrelated causes that underpin most pathways into homelessness – unemployment, inadequate and unaffordable housing, segregation and isolation, bad health and limited access to health care, and disempowerment. Therefore, the project is designed as a one-stop-shop where homeless people can get all services they need and will be fully integrated in the local neighbourhood. The project will bring together on the same site a hostel, social housing, a neighbourhood restaurant, an urban farm, a solidarity shop, and low-threshold-care. The multifunctional site will offer homeless people the opportunity to get training and acquire job skills, to access temporary and permanent housing, and to use a comprehensive set of tailor-made health care services. The operation of the site and the services will be based on a well-developed participatory approach which involves homeless people in decision-making. Before the actual construction of the buildings, homeless people are participating in small-scale on-site laboratories allowing them to co-design, test, and improve the different services. They also connect the local inhabitants to prepare community for the arrival of homeless people and change the public attitude about homelessness.

The project aims to both reduce homelessness and reduce the social and spatial segregation and polarisation in the city of Nantes. It wants to make the individual tailored support for the

homeless people successful and sustainable by enshrining it in a collective dynamic with the local community and by making it happen in a shared physical space.

The journal looks at some key challenges all UIA funded projects are facing and how they impact on the development of the 5Bridges project. We try to answer in some depth whether the project can overcome the following challenges: is there sufficient local leadership to make the project a success? ; are public procurement rules obstructing or facilitating the project leaders to achieve the quality envisaged? ; are the organizational arrangements in place to allow all stakeholders to effectively take up their role?; does the participatory approach allow the homeless as *end-consumers* to influence the design and operation of the project?; is there a solid communications strategy underpinning the project?; is there a permanent evaluation and assessment process that informs the development of the project?; what are the elements of the project that could inspire other cities in France and Europe and bring the approach to scale?

#### **Partnership:**

- Ville de Nantes
- Nantes Métropole - Organised agglomeration
- Association Les Eaux Vives – NGO
- Société Anonyme des Marches de l'Ouest - Public/Private Company
- Société d'Aménagement de la Métropole Ouest Atlantique (SAMOA) - Public/Private Company
- Association Emmaus 44 - NGO

## 2 Further context

Homelessness is an increasing in most member states of the European Union including France. Several factors explain the increase. The flaws in migration policies and the recent influx of asylum seekers have pushed up the numbers. But also austerity and the ongoing housing market crisis impacted on the scope and nature of homelessness.

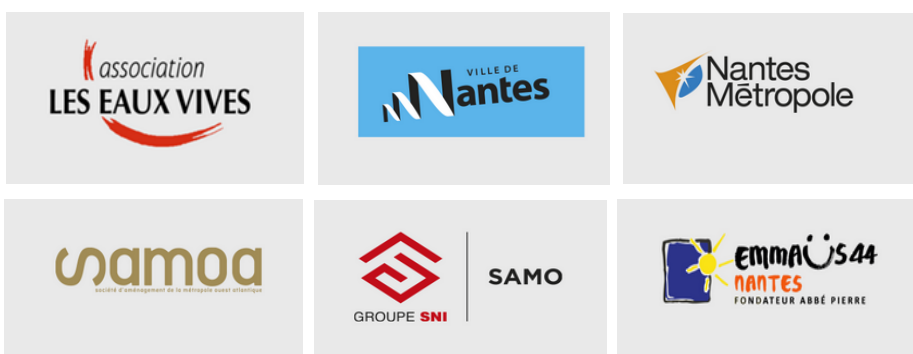
In a growing number of member states more strategic approaches to homelessness are being developed. The reference framework for homeless policies in France is the *Loi Dalo* (right to housing law) which regulates access to shelter and to permanent housing for homeless people. The unconditional right to shelter regulated by the law on social action is another primary element of the French approach to homelessness. Recently the French government decided gradually to move away from shelter as the primary solution for homeless people and to offer supported housing immediately. The decision to bring Housing First to scale as the most effective way to tackle chronic homelessness are an illustration of this ambition.

Nantes tries to address homelessness combining the many different national laws and funding streams with local opportunities. As in many French cities, rough sleeping is a particular issue of concern. This led to a wide variety of services for homeless people, but a lack of cooperation

between them and a dynamic focused on *managing* rather than *solving* homelessness.

Nantes decided to discontinue the night-only shelter and replace it by 24/7 shelter with wrap-around support. This is courageous and innovative decisions in the French context where the SamuSocial, the best-known provider of emergency night-only accommodation, is an institution. The ambition is to use the 5Bridges project to reenergise the homeless sector, other relevant stakeholders, and the wider community to address homelessness more effectively.

The construction of the shelter and supporting services (social restaurant, urban farm, social economy spaces, social housing...) is the core of the project and will soon start. The mobilisation and preparation of all relevant stakeholders, including homeless people, proceeds as planned and raised the motivation and expectations. The site will be located close to the centre of the city and is part of a much wider urban redevelopment project. The ambition of the project is to connect the local community with homeless people and social housing residents through social economy projects such as the social restaurant. Homeless people will not be pushed into their traditional role of users of care services, but will be empowered to be consumers and workers on the site. This should facilitate the interaction with the wider community.



### 3 Leadership

An initiative with the ambition of the 5Bridges project requires strong local leadership to be successful. That is why we zoom in on who leads and how in the 5Bridges project.

There is strong political backing for the 5Bridges project. Both the city and the metropolitan area, which are key players in the fight against homelessness, are partners in the project.

Nantes developed a dynamic homelessness policy and disposes of a wide range of services for homeless people thanks to the political leadership of the current mayor and her administration. The 5Bridges project is aimed at filling the gaps in the existing offer of services.

The initial idea for the project was developed by the Association les Eaux Vives – one of the most influential local NGOs in the area of homelessness. Nantes has a long tradition of close cooperation with the NGO sector to prevent and tackle homelessness. The NGOs do not only provide most of the services, they also play a key role in the design of policies. It is therefore not unusual for an NGO to initiate and co-lead new projects such as the 5Bridges project in cooperation with the city authorities.

The strong role of NGOs in policy making and service provision in Nantes should be welcomed. But there might be a risk, however small, that policy makers take too much account of the organisational interests of the different NGOs, which do not always coincide with the needs and concerns of homeless people themselves. In Nantes, a dozen NGOs are involved in the fight against homelessness, and they all receive public funds to provide services. The space for a radical rethink of local homelessness policies might be

limited because of the corporate reflex of certain NGOs who might want to defend the existing status quo in order not to lose their funding.

In Nantes, it seems easier to add new services rather than to revise or redesign existing services for the homeless. But overall, there seems to be a strong appetite to use the 5Bridges project as a lever of change with most stakeholders involved in the fight against homelessness in Nantes.

The 5Bridges project has the potential to *disrupt* the homeless sector and to stimulate creativity and innovation.

But the wider impact on the local homeless policies will depend on how the other NGOs providing services for the homeless will react and will be involved. The leadership role of the Association Les Eaux Vives will be crucial in this regard. Les Eaux Vives works in a transparent and participatory way on the 5Bridges project and their intention is to gradually increase the awareness amongst the partners and interested parties about the *disruptive* potential of the project and its likely impact on the way homelessness is addressed in Nantes at the moment.

It is important to stress that also the State is an important partner in the project. In France social policy is still largely centralised at national level, especially the financial aspects. For the longer-term sustainability of the project the support of the State is crucial. Even if the overall financial support for homeless services is unlikely to increase beyond the legal obligations of the State, it is important to involve the State from the early onset of the project which is likely to produce a new dynamic and new way of

addressing homelessness. The fact that 5 partners have a leading role in the project's governance structure might slow down the decision making. But the success of the project

depends largely on the consensus established between the partners and is it therefore essential to take sufficient time to make sure everybody is on the same wave length.



## 4 Public procurement

*Public procurement is unavoidable for an initiative the size of the 5Bridges project. It can be a lever to increase the quality or delay and complicate the delivery of the different elements of project. We look here in more detail how public procurement impacts on the 5Bridges project.*

The 5Bridges project, especially in the early phases, is essentially a large construction project. Construction works in urban areas are always complicated and take time. That is why the project has already accumulated some delay.

There seems to be little concern amongst the leaders of the project about the impact of public procurement rules on the spirit of the project and the objectives pursued. The partners involved, especially the public authorities, have ample experience with public procurement processes. It is mainly a question of time, and there might be a risk that the project will not be entirely

completed within the time frame imposed by UIA. The delays already accumulated however have little to do with public procurement but with the fact that the building land is more polluted than expected and the detoxification will therefore take more time than planned for. The leaders of the project have developed very detailed plans on how they want the site to look like, which limits the creative role public procurement can and will play in the final result.

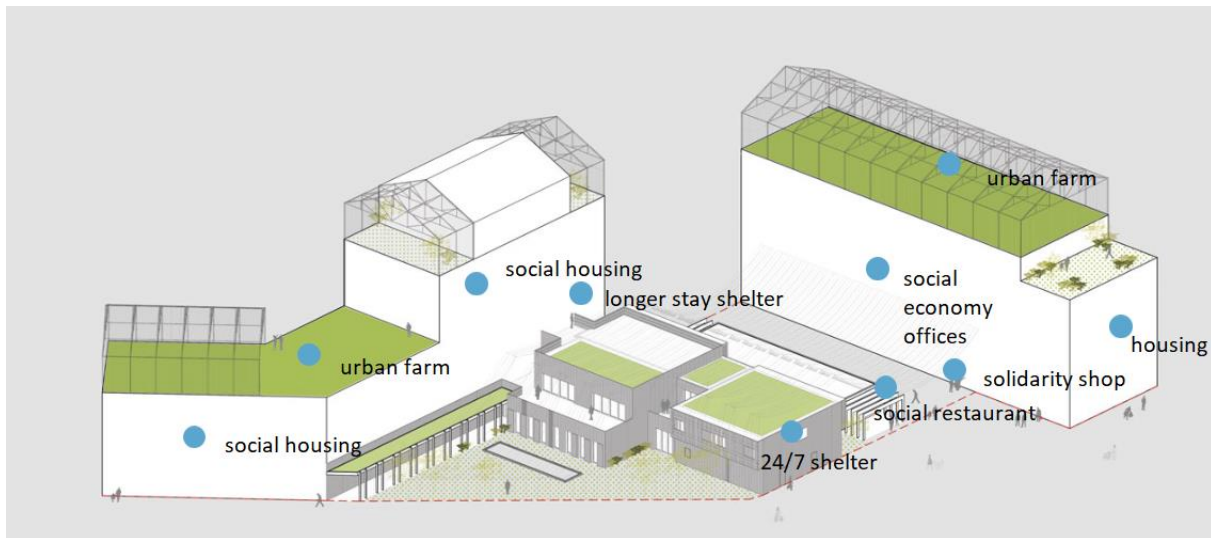
For the 5Bridges project public procurement is therefore rather an administrative process than a lever for change and innovation.

This is somewhat different for the *software* of the project. The elements of the project that concern the communications, the participatory research, the events to inform the neighbourhood are all tendered out. That will allow some external expertise and creativity to insert in the project dynamics. This is probably



most important for the urban farm. There is little experience related to urban farming among the partners involved in the 5 Bridges project. The procurement of design of the urban farm on of the shelter will be needed to access external

expertise. The same external expertise and creativity might become available through tendering for the design of the social restaurant, and the social economy activities.



## 5 Organisational arrangements

*An initiative of the complexity of the 5Bridges project needs solid organizational arrangements to ensure every partner can take up its role effectively. Here we look in more detail into the governance structure and how it operates in practice.*

The organizational arrangements seem to be in place to make the 5Bridges project a success. The project is led by the service responsible for shelter and social emergencies under the Directorate Social Inclusion of the Directorate General of Social Cohesion. This Directorate General is a very large administration which covers a wide variety of themes such as public health, sports, ageing, community work, housing, etc. It covers a large part of the services which might be involved in the design, delivery, financing and promotion of the project. The challenge for the 5Bridges project will probably be to organise and sustain smooth cooperation

with relevant actors within the Directorate General rather than with other services of the city.

There are a few other Directorates General which need to be involved in the delivery of the 5Bridges such as the DGs responsible for urban planning and public order. The leading administration makes sure they are informed about and involved in relevant activities. Both services were part of a series of project visits to Utrecht in the Netherlands which helped to make them feel part of the 5Bridges project's dynamic.

The only minor difficulty the leading administration experiences is with the DG responsible for communications. The partnership approach which is built in to the project sometimes clashes with the usual way of doing communications by the city administration. It is certain that the service responsible for shelter



and social emergencies is the best placed service in city administration to run the 5Bridges project. It is a sign of the importance the city attaches to the project that the lead service established a formal focal point with dedicated staff to deal specifically with everything that concerns the project. Even if the different sections of the city administration support the project, the person responsible for the project has to invest a substantial amount of time to keep all relevant civil servants in the loop.

In France, the role of the State in the design and financing of homeless policies is still very important – even after the recent wave of decentralization of competences to the local level. That is why the partners in the project will have to hook on to national legal frameworks and funding regimes. This will probably be more of a challenge for the operation of the project rather than for the construction of the site. But local administrations in France are usually very skilled and experienced to manage local policies that take account of the constraints imposed and opportunities offered by the State.

As stated before the public administration has an effective way of working with the NGO sector. It is unclear however whether the administration will be able to secure the support and to engage the wider NGO community involved in homelessness work in a project that benefits only one major NGO directly. It will require diplomatic and leadership skills to overcome the skepticism about the cost and added value of the 5Bridges project amongst some of the other NGOs. Les Eaux Vives obviously has an important role to support the city administration. The leading partners, and especially les eaux Vives, are expected to reach out to all relevant partners in their activities in the framework of the project. The project foresees an important role for the social housing sector and for urban planners.

These are atypical actors in the fight against homelessness, certainly in the design and development stages of a project. An important challenge will be to make sure that the social housing that will be constructed as part of the project will also be accessible for the homeless clients of the 24/7 shelter which might require the social housing providers to adapt its allocation policies.

An issue of concern at this stage of the project is that the housing actors and the other partners operate in different time frames. The preparation of the construction land takes longer than foreseen, and this might impact on the how the *hardware* and the *software* of the project fit together. Expectations raised with partners and the end users of the project might not be fulfilled as planned and create some frustration. Maybe the weakest part in terms of partnership and organizational arrangements concerns the urban farm. Les Eaux Vives has some experience with social farming, but the ambition of the project is to organise urban farming on the roof of the shelter which will be constructed as a glass house. The project partners might want to buy in some expertise from elsewhere in France or abroad. Public procurement might be the right instrument for this.

The actual governance of the project is well designed with a Steering Committee that is responsible for the supervision and political steering of the project, a Technical Committee that involves all relevant partners and meets on a monthly basis to secure the implementation of the project, and thematic groups on key aspects of the projects (such as the social restaurant and the urban farm) that meet occasionally and reach out to a much wider group of stakeholders. There is no reason to believe that flaws in the organizational arrangements will delay or jeopardise the success of the project.



## 6 Participative approach

*Many partners are involved in the 5 Bridges project. We zoom here into how the project wants to involve homeless people themselves.*

The project proposal has been developed by the NGO Les Eaux Vives. The city authorities seem keen to share the steering of the project with this NGO. Both leading parties are committed to involve all relevant stakeholders in the project, and organise regular project meetings for this purpose.

The project partners agreed to allow a very hands-on approach to project development. Important decisions related to the kind of support that should be made available to the homeless clients, the organization and marketing of the social restaurant and the second-hand

shop, the management of the shelters, and other key elements of the project still need to be taken. Les Eaux Vives has the intention to use particular participatory processes to prepare these decisions and wants to allow much room for creativity and innovation.

The participation of homeless people is an important feature of the project design and implementation. A professional has been recruited to involve homeless people in the different phases of the project. Four small study visits to relevant projects abroad have already taken place in which homeless people took part. The project will be informed about a participatory research project (*recherche action*) in which homeless people will be actively involved.

## 7 Communicating

*The 5Bridges project is an important project for the city authorities and involves many partners and impacts on the wider community. That is why effective communication is essential. We look here in more detail in how the*

*communication is organised and what obstacles need to be overcome.*

The 5Bridges project is a community project. Its success depends on how well the new site with

services for homeless people integrates into the local neighbourhood. That is why the project partners invest a lot in informing and communicating with the local inhabitants. The neighbourhood has already been informed about and consulted on the aims and objectives of the 5Bridges project. The project leaders make sure the communication is as practical as possible and promotes genuine participation of a wide variety of stakeholders. The communication is not limited to publicity about the project.

The project partners also inform and communicate on a regular basis with homeless people who will be the end consumers of the project. Les Eaux Vives is part of the Emmaus movement which has extensive expertise with participatory processes involving very vulnerable groups such as homeless people. It is important to note that the site will include a 24/7 shelter which replaces existing night-only shelters which do not possess the infrastructure to allow for modern social support work. Hence, the importance of involving homeless service users.

For the city authorities the 5Bridges project is a landmark project. The city wants to show that solutions to homelessness can be of high quality,

be delivered in the heart of the city, and involve the local community.

The city actively promotes the project as a social innovation which they claim is unique in France and in Europe. It is interesting to see that the city authorities engage in a visible communication campaign before construction has started and before the project has proven to be effective.

A press conference took place in the autumn to officially launch the project and inform the general public. The city already organized project visits for interested parties and hopes to extend these visits soon.

It shows how committed the city is to make the 5Bridges project work. It creates a context in which the city is likely to mobilise political capital and extra resources when necessary. But there might be a risk that the impact of the project gets overstated.

A very informative website of the project has been developed [www.5ponts-nantes.eu](http://www.5ponts-nantes.eu) depending on the interest in the project from abroad, the city might make the website also available in English.



## 8 Monitoring and evaluation

*The 5Bridges project includes several streams of action which relate to each other for their effectiveness. That is why proper evaluation of the different actions is needed to avoid mismatches between the different streams. Below we provide some detail on how monitoring and evaluation is integrated in the 5Bridges project.*

The 5Bridges project is likely to make an important difference for homeless people in Nantes and will probably substantially change the way they get help in the future. The idea emerged from some shared frustration among grassroots actors (both from public and NGO sectors) about the gaps in and geographic dispersion of the available offer of services for homeless people. The 5Bridges project is not the result of an in-depth scientific analysis of the strengths and shortcomings of the local homelessness policies. Some of the recent know-how and evidence from international research could probably have been taken into account in the project design in a more consistent way.

The potential of the Housing First approach which can be an alternative to investment in (emergency) shelter has not been fully integrated in the project. Housing First is a relatively new approach to solve chronic homelessness created in the USA. It provides immediate access to supported housing for homeless people with complex needs and does not make the housing conditional upon accepting social support. Robust evidence shows the approach works and homeless people are able to retain the housing offered.

It is not entirely clear yet how the success of the project will be evaluated, but there is an explicit commitment among the project partners to give the homeless clients and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood an important say. The participatory research underpinning the project development (*recherche action*) will be an important part of the evaluation and monitoring work. It is important that the evaluation is not limited to how well homelessness is *managed* in the project, but also looks at how the project contributed to ending homelessness. The infrastructure and the services are likely to be of high quality. But it is not entirely certain whether these input measures will facilitate homeless people to move on to permanent housing solutions.

There are some indications that the financial resources for the project as initially budgeted might not be sufficient to complete the project as planned. But there is sufficient room to make cost-saving measures which will not impact on the strength and added value of the project. The partners are of the opinion that it is not easy to find the right indicators to evaluate the impact of the project.

The project will hopefully lead to a change of paradigm in the way homelessness is addressed but that is difficult to measure. The project leaders are aware that some of the impact will only materialize sometime after the site is constructed, and are therefore committed to continue to measure the impact after the formal end of the UIA project.



## 9 Upscaling

One of the aims of the UIA is to promote the take up of successful projects across Europe. We look here in some detail how the 5 Bridges project includes actions that facilitate scaling.

Nantes struggles to cater for the needs of a relatively small but visible group of homeless people who are living on the streets. This is a relatively common problem in urban areas across Europe. As in Nantes, the most common answer to this problem in European cities is to offer accommodation in night-only shelters.

There exists a wide-spread belief that homeless people living on the streets have such complex needs that they can only be *captured* by (very) low-threshold services. It is commonly believed that such services which are usually less intrusive are a perfect start for a successful reintegration process. The reality however is that an important part of the street homeless circulate between the street and shelter accommodation and don't progress to sustainable (housing) solutions.

The fact that they are forced to access other services during the day-time and/or stay part of the day on the streets complicates the provision of the necessary social and health support, and can provoke annoyance with inhabitants and tourists visiting the city.

Nantes wants to discontinue night-only shelters and replace them by a new modern 24/7 shelter. It would be great progress if the number of beds in night-only shelters would be reduced to the

absolute minimum – also in winter time. It makes no sense to force people to leave the shelter every morning and take all their belongings with them, if most of them are likely to stay in the shelter again the next day. It is also a very ineffective and inefficient way to organise support services in several different places.

What makes the project in Nantes an interesting example to follow is that the new 24/7 shelter will be a very modern building with high-quality rooms, located on a site in the centre of the city that will be entirely redeveloped, with wrap-around services available on-site, a social restaurant and shop which provide training and job opportunities for the homeless clients but which target the local inhabitants as the main customers. The 24/7 shelter will be part of a much wider social experiment which wants to effectively reintegrate homeless people by providing support and reconnecting them with the local community. There are still lots of unknowns and the experiment will be concretised while the construction progresses. But if it is successful, it will certainly be worth promoting it European-wide.

There is a clear commitment of the leaders of the project to publicize the project European-wide. The city of Nantes will use its European links with Eurocities, FEANTSA, and other European networks to make the promotion of the 5Bridges project concrete. There are some European events scheduled where the project will be presented.

# 10 Conclusion

The 5Bridges project is an ambitious project with lots of potential. There are some challenges ahead, but the project has a strong political leadership, effective organisational arrangements, and committed partners which will help to overcome these. The key indicator of success will be the extent to which homeless people will move quicker through the homeless system to permanent housing solutions. It is early days to anticipate the success of the project, but at this stage there is no reason to doubt it will have a substantial impact on the well-being of the homeless people targeted.

In the second edition of the Journal we will look into more detail into the different services that are being developed as part of the 5Bridges project and present and analyse the views of the different stakeholders, including homeless people and the wider local community. We will also zoom in into the costs and the cost-effectiveness of the project, which are key elements in view of its future scaling in France and other countries.



Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.



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