

URBAN CENTERS

# MEMORANDUM



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## ➤ **Executive Summary**

This Memorandum is a policy-oriented research document conducted by the ICS-ULisboa team of the Horizon 2020 project ROCK. It seeks to organise some of the most up-to-date knowledge around Urban Centers and highlight important discussion topics, requiring further attention. In addition to academic literature review, the Memorandum relies on contributions from the international conference “Urban Centers: Acting upon or with cities?” organised by the ICS-ULisboa on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 2018 (<https://rockproject.eu/event-details/41>). The Conference took place in the Centre for Urban Information of Lisbon with the participation of representatives from the following Urban Centers: Centro de Informação Urbana de Lisboa (Lisbon); Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (Bologna); Urban Center of Torino; Pavillon de L’Arsenal (Paris); Centro de Cultura Contemporània Barcelona; and casa della Città / Case del Municipio (Rome). The participating Urban Centers were selected from the list provided by the international laboratory on Urban Centers (<http://www.urban-center.org/en/>), on the basis of their different working contexts, management models and activity. Representatives were invited to share knowledge and experience about the role, the challenges and potential of Urban Centers today and the different forms of action and participation they may have in the development of their cities.

Against this backdrop, the Memorandum aims to contribute to the international debate on Urban Centers in rapidly changing urban contexts. Despite some relevance that Urban Centers have had in urban governance systems, there is limited analysis of the characteristics and impacts of the existing models. Even when sharing the same denomination and/or social recognition as ‘Urban Centers’, these structures often present extremely different forms and features, depending on the nature and scope of the initiative. Therefore, for a comprehensive analysis of the role that Urban Centers might play in cities, it is important to shed light on their significant differences, the underlying rationale and its concrete implications. Towards this aim, this Memorandum highlights four key aspects: (i) public, private, and mixed statutory frameworks; (ii) forms of interaction with the city and local communities that reveal different ethos regarding the provision of urban information, the reception of societal inputs, and the opening of new arenas of deliberation; (iii) the definition and engagement of target publics; (iv) and the Urban Centers’ scales of action in the city, with particular emphasis on the relation between city centres and suburban and peri-urban areas. Each of these aspects is described by analysing their specific characteristics. Although the nature and form of UCs can be much more contentious in reality, differences here are intentionally enhanced, in order to highlight some essential points for future reflection.

➤ **An overview: The Urban Centers today**

Over the last five decades, with the establishment of new governance arrangements, local authorities have increasingly supported the public dissemination of urban measures, policies, plans and project, especially in the field of urban planning and regeneration. Alongside, citizens have been claiming for wider access to information and participation on urban governance and grassroots initiatives are organized by public and private actors in order to create new spaces for discussion and deliberation. At occasion, the convergence of goals and interests between governors and governed has led to the creation of new urban agencies, often labelled as Urban Centers. While the first Urban Centers (hereafter UCs) emerged in the United States during the 1970s, its wide diffusion in Europe occurred mainly throughout the 1990s. Nowadays, UCs can be generally seen as urban agencies that may have different official statutes, management models and goals and who develop their work through diverse approaches to city issues and the citizens and at different scales of intervention. In general, UCs aim to connect multiple urban agents, such as local authorities, and private organisations with associated and non-associated citizens, with the aim to inform, design, implement, and/or monitor urban measures, policies, plans, technologies and other urban initiatives.

The recent phenomena of accelerating urbanization, together with the widespread of new governance principles, posit complex challenges to UCs and similar urban agencies. In the context of a global and interconnected world, their local scale of intervention is, for instance, necessarily dependent on the sociodemographic (e.g. sprawling cities, the migration fluxes and the establishment of refugees in cities); socioeconomic (e.g. the impacts of the macro-finance and the establishment of big corporations in the cities); and socio-political (e.g. the imposition of contested policies from national governments and the rise of citizen mobilisations) dynamics of the supra-local scale. Hence, UCs are increasingly required to act as strategic mediators within the scenario of new national and international governance networks. Such tendency is most visible through the massive growth of initiatives promoted by cities and UCs via international and transnational projects and funding schemes.

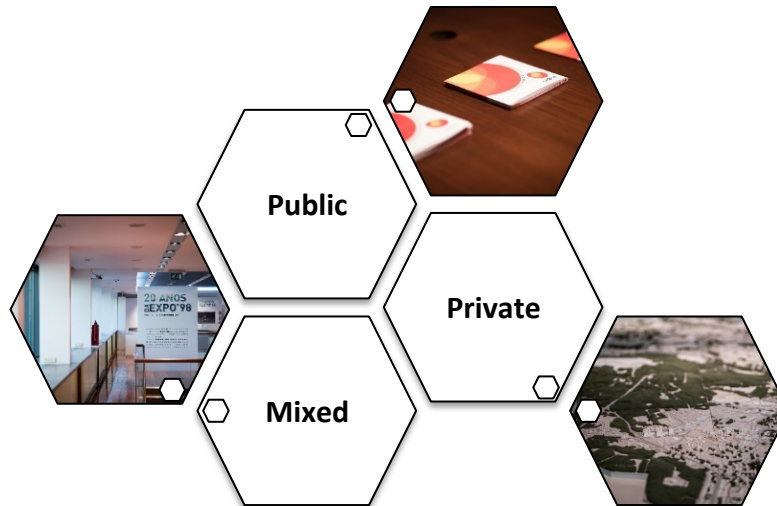
By considering cities as the global spots where new political, economic, and societal experiences are produced, this Memorandum seeks to clarify the emerging role of UCs within the new entanglements of urban governance. The analysis will start by distinguishing between UCs that depend on local authorities; that are established through the commitment of private agents; and/or that rely on a mixed model of management between public and private agents. Secondly, focus will be placed on the ethos of the UCs and, drawing on Monardo's analogy (2007)<sup>1</sup>, on UCs that work in one or a combination of the following forms: as megaphones that broadcast certain urban agendas and messages to those inside and outside the city; as antennas that capture desires and needs from urban communities; and as arenas of discussion amongst citizens and other urban agents. Thirdly, we will consider the UCs target publics and the particularities regarding those who seek to reach diverse audiences and those who essentially promote initiatives for selected groups and cohorts. Finally, this Memorandum will consider the scales of intervention of UCs, underlining the impact of the overall trend to settle the UCs' headquarters in city centres, and the potential of these structures in suburban and peri-urban areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Monardo Bruno (2007), "Urban center: una casa di vetro per le politiche urbane". Rome: Officina Edizioni.

➤ **Statutory framework**

The common challenge for UCs is to gain public recognition and legitimisation as relevant entities for dealing with urban issues. The nature and extent of such attributes are much dependent on the UCs' particular statutes, which entails different management structures and variable degrees of autonomy in their agenda-setting. Under this framework, three statutory frameworks are identified: the public model; the private model; and the mixed model.



In some cases, UCs strictly depend on local authorities, given that they are integrated into the administrative apparatus. This model requires attentive analysis of the way in which UCs are connected with political priorities and whether the formulation and implementation of local initiatives relies on the articulation of several administrative units or under the management of one single department. The public statute allows UCs not to depend on external resources but their agenda shall be consistent with the human and financial resources that are made available by the local government.

In other cases, UCs can be entirely independent from public entities and thus have higher degrees of autonomy in setting up their agenda. While political and bureaucratic restrictions might be lower for these UCs, such model entails irregular degrees of recognition and legitimacy of their work by local authorities and communities. These UCs' positioning can be more or less responsive to societal needs, and its performance can be more or less aligned with local government directives. Therefore, this model calls for special attention to the identification of the private agents that are behind these initiatives, along with their interests and resources, in order to understand which and whose agenda is being processed and how.

A third typology of UCs can be identified as the mixed model, since it relies on a combination of public and private resources. At present, the involvement of banks, bank foundations and private enterprises in the management of UCs, tends to be common practice and is expected to provide mutual benefits to private and public agents. The character of this model seeks to ensure broader inputs in the UCs agenda, and a wider public recognition of the UCs capacity. Yet, there needs to be a deeper understanding of the motivations of the different parts involved in this model and the articulation of their different visions and priorities.

➤ **Ethos**

A second aspect that helps explaining the current dynamics around UCs is the ethos of their agendas and their capacity to take forward local initiatives. UCs can have different forms of interaction with the city and civil society: they can inform citizens about urban measures, policies, and plans; they can promote initiatives aimed to foster active citizenship; and they can provide new spaces and tools for deliberation to associated and non-associated citizens. Despite the possible overlapping of such functions in the same UC, the underlying ethos will establish the specific ways through which the UC interacts with local communities and vice versa. The choice and/or prevalence of a particular ethos depends on the social and political priorities established within the UCs' agenda and on the societal demands emerging from local contexts. Monardo's conceptualisation of the UCs acting as "megaphones", as "antennas" and as "arenas" (2007) helps to elucidate the different ethos that drive UCs' activity. The author suggests that UCs can perform their role as "megaphones" of specific urban agendas; "antennas" of urban issues and social claims; and "arenas" where urban agents and local communities can meet, discuss, and deliberate over public issues.



UCs that aim to disseminate their working agenda to other urban agents and to local communities at large tend to focus on acting as "megaphones", that is, as major broadcasters of urban information. Depending on their statutes, the type of issues and initiatives addressed can be more or less aligned with local political discourses. More specifically, these UCs can facilitate the access to urban-related documents (e.g. urban measures, policies and plans, issued by the local council or other urban agents) and to different platforms for open access to big data. Furthermore, national and international audiences including local communities and the wide array of professionals and researchers interested in the information made available by UCs are enticed by public events, exhibitions, lectures, debates, site visits, etc.

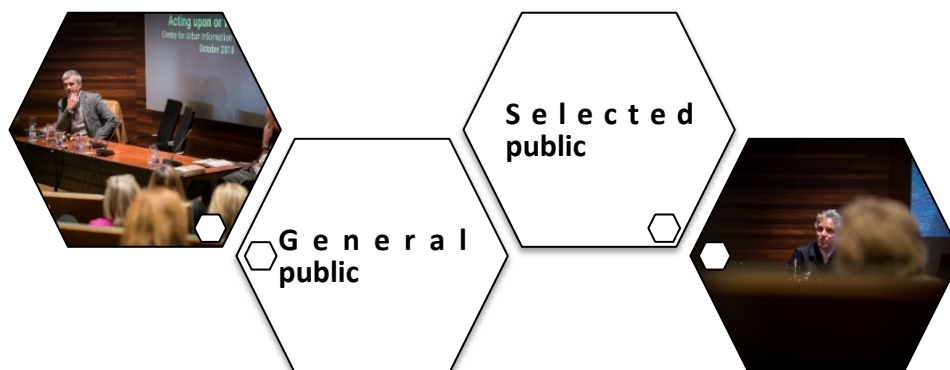
On the other hand, when UCs are focused on the reception and collection of information from local communities, their ethos is centred on the "antenna" function. In this case, UCs are expected to provide substantive feedback to urban governance, such as the identification and/or re-definition of urban issues, as well as to provide relevant information about the ways in which different communities are heard (i.e. the sampling procedures and the representativeness of the people involved in governance processes). Inputs about

challenges, desires and needs of citizens may be collected through a wide array of initiatives, such as public consultations – e.g. via public surveys, workshops, focus-groups, debates and other participatory initiatives that aim to capture citizens’ opinions and aspirations – and/or through the auditing of specific groups, like researchers, students, or experts’ delegations that are requested to share their viewpoints and expertise on a particular issue. In some cases, local communities can take the initiative to autonomously collect specific information, which is provided to the UC in order to make pressure or influence existing public measures, plans, strategies or policies.

Finally, the “arena” function, corresponds to an UC ethos that is centred on organising new forms and spaces for public deliberation. Depending on their statutory frameworks, UCs are able to provide stakeholders and citizens with relevant information and tools to allow them to engage and contribute to urban decision making. Moreover, and regardless of their statutes, UCs may also act as hosts or collaborators in the organisation of external urban initiatives by public or private actors.

➤ **Target public**

The interaction between the UCs and their publics is also much dependent on UCs statutory frameworks, which will define the way in which relationships can unfold, from unidirectional efforts to participatory collaborations. The development of place-based initiatives that focus on specific issues concerning certain localities tend to be more attractive and participated by local communities, while initiatives around the discussion of urban measures, policies, and plans are more likely to attract a more specialized public.



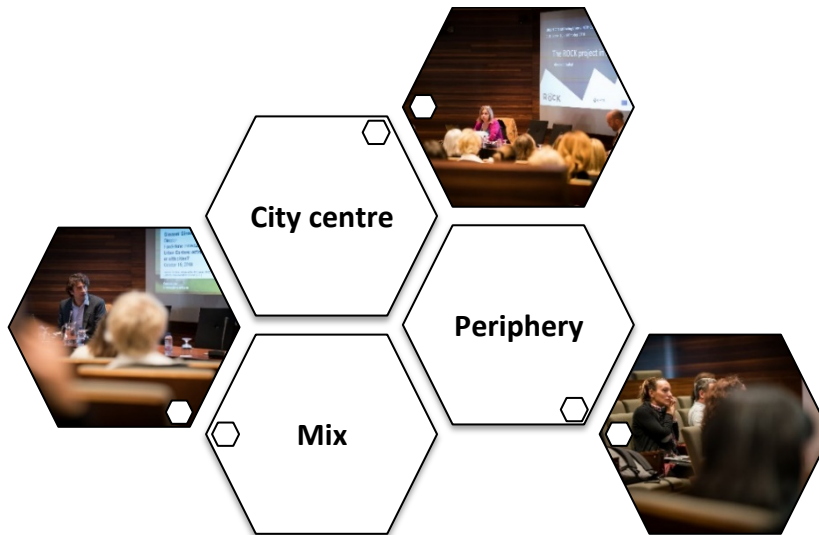
UCs that aim to engage wider audiences are generally committed to promote participatory initiatives and to interact with diverse audiences through events or place-based interventions. When UCs rely on public authorities, they are formally required to put forward the municipal agenda in order to foster channels of information and/or participation with local communities. At certain moments and to some extent, citizens can be invited to access information about urban measures and policies, as well as to assist on the co-creation and co-production of urban initiatives. If UCs intend to enlarge their scope of action by building wider networks with local, national, and international agents, emphasis can be placed on the sharing of knowledge, expertise, resources and goals through synergetic exchanges and collaborations.

Alternatively, when UCs seek to reach specific publics, their positioning, work scope and communication is filtered for determined segments. Both indoors and outdoors initiatives

are directed to specific agents and are hardly going to reach and attract ‘outsiders’. Hence, initiatives are promoted in accordance to the typology of participants envisioned. These can range from conferences, master classes, workshops and training sessions for professionals, researchers and students, to participatory events directed to urban activists or local communities to deliberate over specific issues. UCs with a private statute will often have more autonomy in developing innovative kind of initiatives since they do not directly respond to government bodies and, consequently, do not have a formal obligation to pursue goals of public interest. Therefore, they get to be more creative in the conception of initiatives and in the selection of their tools. The collaboration with artists and the creative industry at large, as well as the connection with professionals and activists is common practice and can be a good leverage for catalysing both audiences and sponsors’ attention. Nevertheless, even if the identification and targeting of specific publics can be paramount to increase the relevance and recognition of the UCs work, the engagement of traditionally excluded citizens should also be assumed as a strategic priority. If the mission of UCs involves contributing to real and inclusive development, the lay public, especially younger and older generations, as well as communities that live at the margins of socioeconomic life should become crucial target publics accordingly.

➤ **Scale of action**

International thinkers and practitioners point out the necessity to establish UCs within adequate structures that can be easily recognised by the wider public. As the location is expected to influence their visibility, the UCs headquarters have been most frequently positioned in the city centres. However, the complex and often contradictory dynamics of urban ecosystems put forward strong arguments for reflecting and reconsidering such decision today. Most contemporary cities show high rates of inequality concerning the distribution of economic, social, and cultural and political resources. Thus, local governments have often addressed suburban and peri-urban areas, especially affected by deprived conditions, as the new “centres” for public and private intervention. Following global models of urban expansion and sprawling, high income societal groups are largely investing in previously unattractive areas of the city and historical centres are experiencing growing waves of desertification and/or *touristification*. These fast changing urban dynamics present notable impacts on city life and new requirements for urban governance as evidenced by the wide dissemination of projects for social and urban regeneration in cities. As the relation between city centres, suburban and peri-urban areas is far away from being linear and equivalent in all cities, socio-territorial cohesion should be a key discussion topic for UCs. At present, two scales of action are identified in the UCs work: one that is essentially focused on the city centre (namely in the location of the headquarters, the kind of issues discussed and the publics addressed) and other that is mostly concerned with the periphery (suburban and peri-urban areas, its challenges and audiences). A combination of the abovementioned options could, for instance, be envisaged as a mixed scale of intervention that would articulate city-center and suburban contexts and issues in the UC activity.



Although geographical centrality in the city is broadly considered by UCs as a key asset for ensuring great access from the general public, that poses a challenge for the audience reach of the UCs' initiatives. When all activities take place in central headquarters and/or in locations throughout the city centre, the interaction with local communities is probably partial or biased as citizens living in suburban and peri-urban areas will be less prone to interact with UCs. Therefore, access would be expanded if UCs initiatives could spread around the city and rely on new forms of collaboration with local agents in order to cross spatial and symbolic boundaries.

When local authorities and/or public and private entities take the initiative to establish urban agencies in the peripheral city, different models of UCs are likely to emerge. The ethos and the agenda is likely to be more focussed on issues related with the specific challenges of those territories, contributing for a renewed attention and action to address them. However, when these UCs result from an initiative by grassroots groups, its statutory framework poses specific challenges in order to make its work and commitments recognized by local authorities and other stakeholders.

Trends of decentralisation in urban governance and the aspired move towards increased proximity between local authorities and communities are relevant arguments for the pertinence of UCs in contemporary cities. The increased awareness about the necessity to promote sustainable urban solutions that can benefit the city as a whole is raising attention to problems that were limitedly taken into account in the public debate. Thereby, UCs working on a mixed scale of intervention, based on local partnerships between local authorities and public/private agents – e.g. local associations, NGOs, organisations, as well as informal groups of citizens – can well represent a concrete strategic option to help shaping the future of UCs.



➤ **Opportunities and challenges for the Urban Centers today**

The wide array of models adopted by UCs suggests that more evidence and up-to-date knowledge are needed to think on a comprehensive theory. Information needs to be collected and systematised about the role of UCs today, their different geographical, social, cultural and economic characteristics, and about their contribution to urban governance and the lines of continuity and rupture with experiences from the past. A clearer understanding on the current and potential impact of UCs should provide important answers about the concrete relevance of such structures and about the elements needed for an effective and inclusive design of their models. Listed below are the opportunities and challenges for each one of the four aspects discussed above.

**. Statutory frameworks**

**Opportunities:** the establishment of the mixed model is likely to permit higher degrees of autonomy in the UCs agenda-setting while keeping a strong connection with local authorities and with the principles of pursuit of the public interest. While the UCs headquarters should be open spaces where publics can get informed and discuss about current and future urban challenges, local and supra-local networks should be constituted in order to expand the UCs reach and resources and contribute for socio-territorial cohesion.

**Challenges:** a higher degree of autonomy implies an attentive allocation of budget from public and private agents. Additional and/or complementary resources could come from international funding schemes, as UCs are increasingly called to integrate international networks for the deployment of specific urban initiatives. The main challenge posed by the multiplicity of interests concentrated in one UC, is about the clarity and consistency of its agenda and of the process of agenda-setting itself. The multiple agents involved (i.e. staff, board, sponsors and publics) who follow different or even opposite interests, possess key complementary roles that must be coordinated by the UC team, which should be composed by an adequate number of full-time dedicated people.

**. Ethos**

**Opportunities:** the opening of new arenas of deliberation should correspond to adequate investment on participatory tools, which need to be accessible to ensure the engagement of citizens. While information on public measures, policies and plans can follow standard rules of dissemination, the co-design and co-production of innovative urban thinking should be supported by adequate tools and indoors and outdoors outreach initiatives. These actions should empower citizens to act upon urban issues by providing them with the relevant knowledge and technical capacity. Towards this aim, local and supra-local networks could help providing the necessary tools to articulate complex matters with different forms of knowledge and expertise. As such, the inclusion of informal groups of citizens in those networks can facilitate the awareness and integration of both expert and lay contributions in the UCs' agenda.

**Challenges:** the enlargement of the spectrum of participants, and the inclusion of multiple voices from the margins may prevent hurdles connected to spreading social conflicts in the cities. Towards this aim, UCs may promote innovative initiatives through local partnerships with associated and non-associated citizens in order to invite citizens to co-design and co-produce innovative urban solutions. However, some challenges may emerge, on the one hand, from the pre-selection of citizens that want – or have the resources – to participate,

what necessarily represents a bias in terms of representativeness. On the other hand, while urban agencies may co-opt those groups of easier access in local communities, these same groups may well end up hijacking the UCs' initiatives due to forms of informal patronage.

### **. Target Public**

**Opportunities:** the identification of target groups and cohorts for the UCs should be consistent with wider goals of socio-territorial cohesion. The inclusion of marginalised communities and non-engaged citizens could be tackled through partnerships with other agents (being those local, national, or international entities) who share similar or complementary goals. Furthermore, UCs could look at their publics not only as recipients of information but as active agents in the design, the monitoring and the evaluation of new urban initiatives, if adequate space and tools are provided for this purpose.

**Challenges:** As previous studies confirm, socially integrated, fulfilled and active citizens are more likely to have an interest and engage in the kind of issues addressed by UCs. This factor can easily lead UCs to concentrate solely on this audience and compromise the access and visibility of other agents and issues in the city. To resist such a tendency, UCs need to work in attracting those publics that, for different reasons, are less prone to engage in their work. This may be done by developing strategic local partnerships, by improving communication formats and platforms, as well as by promoting specific place-based initiatives in cooperation with urban facilitators and key local agents.

### **. Scale of action**

**Opportunities:** the possibility to establish or extend the UCs intervention to suburban and peri-urban areas is likely to reinforce its relevance in the city and their leading role in the management of emerging urban challenges and conflicts. In practical terms, UCs should most likely own a physical space in both city centres and peripheries, since these spaces would allow the proximity with key issues and actors and the adequate deployment of indoors and outdoors initiatives. Such framework at the local scale should be supported by the integration of UCs in international networks that could provide additional key resources via international knowledge channels and funding schemes.

**Challenges:** the effort to bridge and/or reconnect the city centre with suburban and peri-urban areas requires a strategic plan that guarantees its consistency through time. The shift from short-term experimentation to sustainable action would allow UCs to establish themselves as decisive players in the co-design of urban futures. The main challenge lies in the effective provision of recourses to keep initiatives going with the active engagement of citizens, especially those traditionally marginalised in processes of urban decision-making.