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Report

From Québec City to Cordoba: Together towards the OWHC's New Urban
Project (2022-2024)





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BACKGROUND

In Québec City (16th World Congress, September 6-9, 2022), the member cities made a lucid and implacable observation: the combination of crises and societal transformations, exacerbated by climate change, is creating complex situations that require a renewal of ways of managing cities in general and world heritage cities in particular.

The member cities therefore set themselves the goal of endowing the OWHC with a *New Urban Project*, a future instrument to help them implement new strategies and practices reconciling "the human, the urban, and the natural," structured around the following convictions:

- As a living entity, the historic city must adapt in order to inspire development of the entire urban zone to which this city confers an identity.
- Responses in historic sectors must help preserve and revitalize all the functions that coexist therein, making these sectors attractive living environments.
- The modern evolution of these sectors must respect the idea that cities are made to be habitable and that their heritage is an irreplaceable resource for ensuring a good quality of life.
- Local governments must create and maintain a permanent dialogue with all the players involved in city planning.

Since 2023, the *Québec Roadmap* process has enabled member cities to learn from each other and to reflect collectively on the direction in which their historic centers should evolve.

This document brings together the essential elements acquired throughout the process and endorsed at the *Symposium on Habitability in Historic Centers (Cordoba Symposium, 17th World Congress, Cordoba, Spain, September 24-27, 2024)*. This *Symposium Report* is the foundation on which the 2025-2026 activities dedicated to the *New Urban Project* will be developed. The General Secretariat gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the Advisory Board¹ and the elected officials and city coordinators piloting the *Collaborative Networks*² to the drafting of this report.

1. INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the *Cordoba Symposium* were to

1. Broaden the consensus among member cities regarding the *political vision* of their mayors and the added value of the approach to the evolution of historic centers.
2. Draw up a provisional assessment of the *Québec Roadmap* in terms of the commitment of member cities; of the transformation of modes of cooperation and reflection; of the sharing of intellectual and technical advances; and lastly of proposals for concrete actions that can be implemented at the grassroots level.
3. Adopt the form and content of the work still to be done in order to lead the OWHC towards the adoption of its *New Urban Project* and motivate even more member cities to take part in the activities.

¹ Yves Gendron, Deputy Managing Director, Strasbourg Rhin Supérieur Urban Planning Agency (ADEUS); Luc Gagnon, Consulting and Strategy Services - Urban Planning and Mobility.

² Bordeaux, Brugge, Brussels, Colonia del Sacramento, Krakow, Cuenca, Dubrovnik, Évora, Marrakech, Morelia, Puebla, Québec City.

The collective approach developed within the framework of the *Québec Roadmap* has triggered an unprecedented dynamic at the heart of the OWHC. Supervised by the *Mayors' Panel*, made up of the mayors of the cities officially involved, the approach has drawn upon the political will expressed in the *Manifiesto* to set in motion the search for answers to the four main *Issues* identified by the mayors:

- Adapting cities to climate change and reducing its impact
- Capitalizing on the ability of historic districts to reinvent themselves
- Enhancing the features that underpin the habitability of the heritage city
- Promoting heritage as an irreplaceable resource for sustainable development

The participants at the *Cordoba Symposium* agreed to continue with and develop the approach by adding new activities in 2025-2026, with the goal of adopting and implementing the *New Urban Project* at the 18th World Congress of the OWHC to be held in autumn 2026 in Marrakech (Morocco).

Together towards the New Urban Project



2. SYMPOSIUM: BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO PLAN AHEAD

The *Cordoba Symposium* was designed to take the process a step further, by offering participants a "path" structured around four working sessions. The main intention was to inform and convince participants of the importance of the approach and the value of the work carried out as part of the *Québec Roadmap*, in order to enrich the continuation of the collective endeavor:

The logical sequence of the four sessions began with the affirmation of the political order and led to operational conclusions, via workshops designed to foster consensus around concrete results.

SESSION 1: TAKING POLITICAL STOCK OF THE QUEBEC ROADMAP

The mayors reaffirmed their expectations, which guide the approach by highlighting the main *Issues* that member cities must address as a priority and the four *Strategic Axes*³ that determine the nature of the solutions expected and the concrete actions to be taken concerning the urban environment and the residents' quality of

³ Requalify the habitat; Refresh the city; Transform mobility; Regenerate the urban environment



life. These axes outline the original and bold contribution promoted by the OWHC while incorporating the concept of *Habitability* into the approach, which foregrounds housing, the social role of public spaces, and the fundamental responsibility for ensuring that urban development is part of the city's historical continuity.

SESSION 2: SHARING THE COMPONENTS OF HABITABILITY

The four parallel workshops organized around the *Strategic Axes* drew on the technical know-how and practical experience of officials and specialists from the cities taking part in the *Symposium*. Of the 92 *Courses of Action* listed in the *Collaborative Network Progress Reports*, 38 were discussed at 19 working tables. They selected the avenues that best exemplify *Habitability* and help strengthen the operational dimension of the approach. The fields of response to be addressed in the next stage of the process were identified and will determine the design of strategies and projects that can be costed and implemented as part of the *New Urban Project*.

SESSION 3: STRUCTURING THE NEW URBAN PROJECT

The results of the workshops in session 2 were put into perspective by the elected officials in the light of the realities on the ground and the immediate challenges, confirming the essential contribution that *Habitability* will make to the continuation of the approach and identifying the elements that will make up the *New Urban Project*. The discussions yielded a list of the conditions that need to be created in order to enable an operational approach to be implemented and the *New Urban Project* to take root in the cities. These concern the working method, the tools that cities need, and the success factors that will ensure a favorable outcome of urban strategies based on *Habitability*.

SESSION 4: BUILDING CONSENSUS

At the final session, focusing on conclusions, the proposals for structuring the work in 2025 and 2026 were endorsed by the *Panel of Mayors* and shared by all participants. The *Cordoba Symposium* served to link the political, technical, and operational dimensions required to move the *New Urban Project* forward.

A new impetus to the ongoing approach has highlighted the specificities of world heritage cities in terms of constraints and responsibilities, but above all opportunities. The initiatives already undertaken by some member cities show the way towards concretizing the *Strategic Axes*. The examples cited during the *Cordoba Symposium* underline the capacity of cities to mobilize their cultural heritage and harness it as a lever for positive, sustainable transformation.

3. RESULTS: FROM QUÉBEC CITY TO CORDOBA

By bringing together a significant number of member cities and enabling them to validate together the results of the work carried out since 2022, the *Cordoba Symposium* was an important moment for the Organization. It rallied the participating cities around an objective and mobilized them to pursue an approach that is essential for the OWHC and its members:

56 of the OWHC's 110 member cities took part in the Symposium, along with over 220 mayors, elected officials, and specialists. They gave legitimacy to the consensus reached, marking a further step in the process and providing an invitation to move forward.



A. *DEFINING THE NEW URBAN PROJECT*

The *New Urban Project* is a set of proposals to member cities for designing and implementing local programs to "Regenerate the habitability of historic city centers." It will provide a method, tools, and a set of resources from the OWHC network, contributing in particular to

- A cultural shift towards understanding heritage as a resource.
- A structural transformation, making the OWHC network more efficient and responsive in a context of profound urban change.
- Broadening the scope for action in the city and decompartmentalizing approaches in order to unleash potential.
- Creating synergies that offer cities greater guarantees of success in realizing their vision of the future.

B. *HABITABILITY CONFIRMED AS THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE*

The *Habitability* of historic city centers has become the basis of the *New Urban Project*, integrating the conservation and development of housing, the enhancement of public spaces, the diversification of local services, and the incorporation of urban development into historical continuity. The project sees tangible and intangible heritage as an essential marker of identity for the city's residents and users, making it the main and irreplaceable resource for transforming the city in response to climate and societal challenges. The holistic approach that it involves facilitates the convergence of long-term political visions with citizen mobilizations.

Habitability puts people at the heart of urban concerns.

Habitability is a fundamental benchmark to ensure that urban dynamics create the conditions to reinforce the vitality and quality of life of historic centers, notably by giving value to the diversity of viewpoints and interpretations of the city by its various users, who are the driving force behind collective innovation.

C. *AFFIRMING THE METHOD*

Participatory engineering, developed since the Québec City Congress, involves inventing new forms of cooperation that emphasize learning by doing, collaboration, and the pooling of expertise by member cities. It is based on the principles of communities of practice and enables member cities to exchange knowledge, ideas, and best practices, with the recognition and importance of involving all stakeholders – including different cities and different players within the cities – in the design and implementation of the approach.

D. *OPERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES SHARED BY ELECTED OFFICIALS AND TECHNICIANS*

The 12 *Thematics* discussed in the *Collaborative Networks* take up most of the concerns raised in the *Manifesto*, giving the OWHC's approach its full relevance and legitimizing its ambitions for world heritage cities. The *Courses of Action* prioritized by all participants for each of the four *Strategic Axes* outline more precise objectives to be developed, while integrating the social, environmental, and cultural dimensions:

The results of the work carried out since 2022 have mobilized over 150 elected officials and specialists from 51 cities in 40 webinars and 5 international workshops. They establish a list of topics to be developed during the 2025–2026 activities that will lead to the design, endorsement, and implementation of the OWHC's New Urban Project.



- *Requalify the Habitat* consists in maintaining the local population, attracting new residents through stricter regulation of tourist accommodation, providing the public services required for a permanent population, and adapting the housing supply to meet the changing needs of the population through programs to rehabilitate old buildings.
- *Refresh the City* involves combatting heat islands and promoting urban planning dedicated to creating a better quality of life. This type of urban planning must involve interdepartmental coordination and citizen involvement and encourage the reclamation of public spaces to enable various forms of urban renaturation.
- *Transform Mobility* means proposing accessible, safe, and comfortable shared transit alternatives designed on the basis of a thorough understanding of the behaviors, habits, and needs of city users.
- *Regenerate the Urban Environment* requires a reinterpretation of the values and characteristics that make up the identity of each city, so as to consider historic centers as laboratories for urban innovation, where tangible and intangible heritage inspires responses capable of developing the city, including its uses and its services; ensuring historical continuity; and responding to contemporary challenges.

E. *KEY FACTORS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW URBAN PROJECT*

The identification and implementation of *Success Factors* in member cities is necessary so as to guarantee the feasibility and sustainability of the progress expected from the *New Urban Project*. These factors will create the necessary conditions for the emergence of a comprehensive, holistic, shared strategic approach, implemented through projects designed according to the specificities of each city.

These factors include the need for additional financial and human resources; the assertion of a strong political will over the medium and long term; coordination between elected officials and between municipal departments; ways of involving citizens from the earliest stages of reflection and in the management of projects; the regular re-evaluation of actions and the establishment of precise monitoring indicators; a stable legal framework; and other relevant measures.

4. *PROSPECTS: FROM CORDOBA TO MARRAKECH*

The aim for 2025–2026 is to design the *New Urban Project* in order to help cities implement strategies to regenerate the *Habitability* of historic city centers. OWHC member cities will be encouraged to participate in greater numbers, including cities from regions of the world where the OWHC is not sufficiently involved, such as Africa, in order to bring to the process all the richness of their specificities.

The 18th Congress of the OWHC to be held in Marrakech in 2026 will assess the results of this major transformation, adopt the *New Urban Project*, and outline the prospects for action over the next decade.

The urgency to act and the need to proceed differently are elements of the *Narrative* added since the Québec City Congress, and reinforced in Cordoba, aspects which will have to be enriched by the awareness of a common heritage, indispensable to the affirmation of communities capable of choosing the path of their development, and completing it. Taking into account the evolving nature of the heritage that will be affirmed through the approach will ensure that it is always considered as a precious and irreplaceable resource in the service of innovative urban political visions.

Collaborative work will assist in developing a common frame of reference so as to align the political vision expressed in the *Manifesto* with concrete issues related to *Habitability*. The frame of reference to be put in place to ensure the



future implementation of the *New Urban Project* will have to specify how to create interdisciplinary governance, “permanent democracy,” and/ or urban dynamics, based on political leadership driving a long-term vision. Activities in 2025–2026 will shape the form and content of *Comprehensive Urban Strategies*, crafted to be both flexible and adapted, within which a “new generation of projects” can be designed, made possible by innovative public-private financing models and tailored to the holistic approach of the *New Urban Project*.

The programs designated for the collective drafting of the *New Urban Project* will be organized with an increasingly operational perspective. They will build on the results of the *Collaborative Networks*, to be maintained and strengthened as “communities of practice,” enabling the co-construction of innovative solutions and the promotion of “best practices” to serve as exemplary experiences and demonstrations for local communities, which in turn will find it easier to embrace and participate in the proposed heritage approach.

The *New Urban Project* will develop the OWHC's operational capacities to implement joint, coordinated, mobilizing actions capable of generating large-scale dynamics to address widely shared climate and societal challenges. The OWHC will

adapt accordingly. By referencing the OWHC, participating cities will be able to provide a credible guarantee of the relevance of the efforts undertaken and make it easier for initiatives to take root at the local level.

The OWHC offers its members the opportunity to become “learning cities,” engaged in constructive experience sharing, ready to replicate proven solutions, and determined to choose the trajectories of change best suited to their realities, while instilling the momentum needed to meet the challenges of tomorrow.