

# Cagliari canal a wellspring for community

A wide, serene canal swoops through the nascent Cagliari Metropolitan Area, a long link between many of its municipalities. Now, that canal is serving as a testbed to unite the peoples of the area, not just geographically but also by allowing a shared vision to flow along its banks. The vision is one of a metropolitan area that is green, liveable, thriving and, above all, one that listens to its residents.

“We decided to have this kind of project because all the people asked us to,” explains **Isabella Ligia, Head of the Strategic Planning at the Metropolitan Authority of Cagliari**. Disused and partially covered, the once pulsing vein of industry had become a forgotten vestige of bygone days.

Now, the city is working with locals to uncover and regenerate the waterway, making it into a pathway for smart and environmental mobility, a place to gather and meet, a safe haven for biodiversity and an integrated experiential narrative to boot.

The rejuvenated canal will serve as a green link between two municipalities, Cagliari and Monserrato, for those traveling on foot, by bike or by boat. On the way, it will also traverse a large school and sports area, where there are related plans to generate sustainable energy for local use.

It will continue around the Molentargius lake, famous for its flocks of flamboyant flamingos, to an extensive cycling path that runs to idyllic beaches. At the end of the line, the metropolitan and port authorities have built a large urban plaza, a vibrant example of the area’s revitalisation.

Revitalisation of green and blue infrastructure can have multifold benefits for communities, including on connectivity, health and wellbeing. Such interventions are also key to adapting to climate change and important nexuses for cooperation with industry and local people, all topics that will be key to the [Eurocities Environment Forum](#) 2023, ‘Powering our Cities,’ to be held in Ghent from 26-28 April. You can join the livestream of the event’s keynotes [here](#).

This new network of parks, schools, energy systems and public transportation will become a multi-functional public space, one that will incorporate both green and blue infrastructure. Ultimately, the metropolitan authority hopes that this project will help to foster a more connected, liveable and green Cagliari. “It’s an open area to live, especially after covid,” says Ligia. “We want to give the locals this link to each other, and to the city.”

## Canal as narrative

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The canal is also being used to pilot innovative sustainable transport, part of the efforts to reduce carbon emissions. To this end, electric boats have been chosen to provide scenic, eco-friendly mobility via the canal.

Travelling along the canal, people will enjoy more than just the scenery. Cagliari is working to create a narrative along the journey, with artist exhibitions and site-specific soundscapes to experience along the way. The metropolitan area is also planning to commission augmented reality mobile apps that will allow users to do things like collect coins along their journey that can be spent with sustainable local businesses.



Parco Nervi, green and sport infrastructure

It's not only the journey along the canal that is noteworthy, but also the journey that has been taken towards its rejuvenation. The Cagliari Metropolitan Area used the canal to trial innovative participative approaches to empower residents to contribute to the overall vision of the city, as well as the practical measures.

## A laboratory for participation

Through the Metropolitan Laboratory for Innovation, '[LabMet](#)' for short, local people, businesses, academic institutions and other players have been able to contribute their ideas about everything from the future of the city to where the boats should stop along the canal.

The goal of LabMet is to create a laboratory to gather open data for a community of participation, a priority within the strategic plan of the 17 municipalities of metropolitan area. "There has been a real implementation of the will of local people for the canal project in Cagliari," says **Claudia Piredda**, an **Architect for the Metropolitan Area of Cagliari** who has been working on the LabMet process.



Giornata di laboratorio participatory processes in Cagliari

During the canal project, the first test of the LabMet approach, Cagliari used an online platform, open to everyone, to publicly summarise all the project's objectives, maps and even technical documents.

Local people and organisations were able to give their feedback through questionnaires, for example on the location of stops on the canal or on their function and accessibility. In order to avoid predefining to too great an extent the kinds of input people could provide, the platform also had an open form for ideas or anything else that the public wanted to contribute.

LabMet is not exclusively online. It also uses in-person engagement, like focus groups and workshops. In the case of the canal, Cagliari decided to augment its insights with an outside eye. "We had an in-person participatory day with students from [Erasmus+](#)," Piredda recalls, "it was really enjoyable and important to get the perspective of people who were not familiar with the city."

A one-day workshop with these students, who hailed from other European countries like Germany, gathered feedback on a broad range of topics related to urban regeneration. The students drew on their own experiences of urban canals in their home cities to provide feedback and inspiration, all of which has been integrated into the overall LabMet consultation.

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## Process to practice

Now that the initial participatory phase has closed, the leaders and engineers of the canal project are going through all the responses in order to ensure that the broad ideas of the public, as well as any particular insights that could be useful are integrated into the final designs. However, while complete for this project, LabMet and its participatory processes are just getting started.

“The ultimate goal of LabMet,” Piredda explains, “is to make local people a part of the monitoring of all the other activities of the city’s strategic plan.” This means that the process will be extended to deal with a wider range of topics, and also that the phases of participation will be more far reaching. Participation will not be limited to the initial conception of projects, but also encompass their processes, delivery and evaluation.



View of the beach Poetto in Cagliari, Sardinia

To facilitate greater embeddedness of this process, Cagliari is creating an official agency for LabMet. This agency will deal with public participation, urban innovation and the redevelopment of neighbourhoods. Once it has a permanent place on the metropolitan website and a physical location, LabMet will have the opportunity to run far more laboratories, consultations and participatory projects.

An exemplary case of multi-level cooperation, the LabMet was able to come into being thanks to training and seminars in public participation given by the Italian Department of Public Administration. Use cases were considered at national level before being adapted and implemented locally, with the results being fed back to the national level again.

“When we talk about our canal being sustainable,” Ligia explains, “we mean it in every sense of the word, not just relating to environmental sustainability, which is clearly an important pillar of the project, but also sustainability in terms of governance, which is what LabMet is all about.”

The project is also economically sustainable, blending local and EU money from the National Resilience and Recovery funds. It is socially sustainable too, as it aims to positively impact vulnerable neighbourhoods through which the canal passes.

## not familiar with the city

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The Metropolitan Area of Cagliari has forged big plans for the future of its municipalities, but, like the flamingos that gather around Molentargius Lake, it knows that future resilience must always be the product of cooperation through community.