Planning for Real

Planning for Real is a participatory method in which residents collaboratively develop ideas and proposals for improving a specific place. At the heart of the process is a three-dimensional model of a neighbourhood, public square, or district, which participants use to identify challenges, express ideas, and visualise possible changes.
Over an extended period, participants work together to develop ideas for their neighbourhood or public space. The physical model makes planning proposals more tangible and easier to understand, even for people without planning expertise. The method is particularly effective for capturing local knowledge and jointly prioritising concrete actions.

Participation Depth	Have a say
Project Phase	Project Planning
Goals	Developing Ideas
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 Day - 1 Week, Several Weeks
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Hard-to-Reach Groups
Group Size	Small Group up to 15, Medium Group up to 30, Large Group from 30
Characteristics	Activating, Creative

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of Planning for Real is to collaboratively develop practical ideas and solutions for improving a place or neighbourhood. Working with an accessible three-dimensional model helps make local needs, challenges, and aspirations visible and provides a shared basis for discussion. The method enables people without professional planning knowledge to participate actively in urban development processes and contribute concrete proposals for change.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the area and objectives
Begin by considering:

- Which place or neighbourhood will be explored?
- Which questions or challenges should be addressed?
- Which types of change are realistically possible?

Important:

The scope for participation and influence should be communicated transparently from the outset.

2. Prepare the 3D model
Create a clear and easy-to-understand model of the area.

The model should:

- show key streets and buildings
- be easy to read and interpret
- provide sufficient space for participants to add ideas and annotations

Important:

The model does not need to be highly detailed or perfectly to scale. Its primary purpose is to serve as a shared working tool.

3. Collect background information
Before the process begins, it may be helpful to conduct:

- conversations with local residents
- neighbourhood surveys
- site visits
- initial idea-gathering activities

Neighbourhood skills surveys can also be used to identify:

- residents' skills
- interests
- local knowledge
- willingness to contribute to community projects

4. Plan the participation process
Decide:

- how many meetings will be held
- which target groups should participate

- where the events will take place

Important:

The venues should be easily accessible and welcoming.

5. Promote participation
Use a variety of communication channels, such as:

- neighbourhood networks
- community organisations and associations
- social media
- public notices
- local institutions

Most importantly:

People should understand that their ideas can genuinely influence future planning.

Execution

1. Introduction and orientation
At the beginning of the process, the facilitation team explains:

- the purpose of the method
- the overall process
- how to work with the 3D model
- the available opportunities for participation

Participants are then introduced to the model, the planning area, and the key questions together.

2. Collect ideas and identify challenges
Participants contribute:

- wishes and aspirations
- challenges and concerns
- suggestions for improvement
-

existing conflicts

- ideas for change

Helpful guiding questions include:

- "Which places work well?"
- "Where do you see problems?"
- "What is missing in the neighbourhood?"
- "What changes would you like to see?"

Ideas are recorded directly on or around the model.

3. Visualise proposals on the model
Participants add:

- new ideas
- markers
- cards
- small model components
- symbols

This makes it easy to identify:

- where change is desired
- which places are particularly important
- where opportunities or conflicts exist

4. Public presentation and discussion
The model is presented during public meetings or community events.

Participants and visitors can:

- contribute additional ideas
- provide feedback
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discuss proposals

- introduce new perspectives

The method benefits greatly from involving as many people as possible.

5. Set priorities
Working in small groups or in plenary, participants discuss:

- Which proposals are most important?
- Which actions should be implemented first?
- Which ideas are realistic?

Possible prioritisation methods include:

- dot voting
- group discussions
- simple voting exercises

6. Develop an action plan
The highest-priority ideas are then:

- organised
- refined
- prioritised

and brought together in a shared action plan.

Evaluation

1. Document the results
Document:

- the completed model
- discussion outcomes
- priorities
- proposals
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action plans

Useful documentation methods include:

- photographs
- written reports
- maps
- digital documentation

2. Prepare the action plan
Bring the results together in a clear and accessible action plan.

It should show:

- which ideas were prioritised
- the planned next steps
- who is responsible for implementation

3. Share the results
The completed action plan should be shared with:

- the public administration
- policymakers
- planning professionals
- all participants

Important:

Communicate transparently how the results will be taken forward after the participation process.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- addressing concrete spatial planning issues
- redesigning a neighbourhood, public square, or public space
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incorporating local knowledge and everyday experiences

- creating an accessible and highly visual participation process
- jointly identifying priorities and developing action plans

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- there is no real scope for implementing change
- the topic is purely abstract and has no spatial context
- there is insufficient time for a longer participatory process
- working with very small or difficult-to-reach target groups

TIPS

- Use a model that is simple, clear, and easy to understand.
- People often participate more actively when they can physically add ideas or make visible changes to the model.
- Allow sufficient time for discussion and collaborative exchange.
- The method works particularly well for concrete spatial planning questions.
- Whenever possible, display the model in a publicly accessible location so that additional people can spontaneously contribute to the discussion.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- abstract or purely theoretical topics
- very short-term participation processes
- projects without genuine opportunities for change
- groups that cannot participate over a longer period of time

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/planning-for-real