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Start With One Street

An emerging framework for regenerating small and medium-sized Ukrainian cities

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Municipal officials working to rebuild and regenerate small and medium-sized Ukrainian cities often struggle to decide where to begin. Fundamentally changing a city's urban form requires large budgets, time, and political consensus, which are rarely available. To address this challenge, city planners in several small municipalities, including Bucha, Lutsk, and Makariv, are testing and developing regeneration strategies focused on streets to enable them to reach their full potential. Such projects can serve as models and inspiration for similar efforts elsewhere.

In densely populated cities, utilitarian, vehicle-dominated corridors may be necessary, but streets with a single function in smaller localities often retard regeneration. The empty spaces that characterize primarily Soviet-era streets can become their greatest source of vitality, especially in central or strategically important areas.

Soviet planners built streets to project state power, not to support daily life and social interaction. They were wide, straight, and oversized, suitable for mass rallies. Yet these underused streets that urbanist Charles Montgomery called "sensory deserts" can be turned into opportunities for development and new use.[1] A thoroughfare can be turned into a destination. Through an inclusive planning process, city officials can identify the optimal mix of uses that yields the greatest gains in social capital.

This article advises small Ukrainian cities to adopt a street-centered regeneration strategy. It offers guidance on selecting the street, diagnosing its strengths and weaknesses, and identifying the regeneration strategies—from low-budget tactical interventions to systemic redesign—that can best unlock potential.

Identifying the Ideal Street

Before choosing a street, two simple questions need to be answered: Which streets are clearly not reaching their potential, and how can this potential be measured? Without a diagnostic framework, regeneration approaches become directionless, which is especially harmful under resource-scarce conditions.

The "Link and Place" framework, developed by urban planners Peter Jones and Stephen Marshall, offers one potential objective method.[2] It views each street through a "Link" function, which refers to a street's role in allowing people, vehicles, or goods to move efficiently between locations, and a "Place" function, which refers to a street's ability to serve as a destination where people stop, meet, shop, or spend time. Both functions are important, but one often overwhelms the other. In most Ukrainian cities, the balance strongly favors the Link function (transit corridors). The Place function, which makes streets economically and socially active, is often weak or missing.

The framework offers a simple diagnostic matrix with Link and Place axes. Each street can be mapped by its performance on each function and its intended function. A street in the historic center of a mid-sized city, for example, should score high on both. But if it scores low on the Place axis, the performance gap between reality and potential is evident, a sign of underutilization. This can also be seen when pedestrians avoid or quickly transit a street.

The Link and Place framework, however, is insufficient to determine the starting point for regeneration. A suitable street should have four qualities:

- **Existing social capital:** A lack of street life and active frontages can signal unmet demand for regeneration, particularly for streets with historic cultural significance. Rather than creating wholly new demand, regeneration should focus on removing the obstacles that suppress existing demand for street use.

- **Connectivity:** A street that connects key destinations, such as a transit hub and a pedestrian district, or a residential neighborhood and a historic center, benefits from established pedestrian flows. In such cases, regeneration does not need to attract visitors from elsewhere. It should instead encourage existing users to engage with activities and destinations along the street.
- **Space for experimentation:** In most cases, the ideal street will not be the city's most critical arterial, as competition for space is too great. A secondary street in or near the historic center, one with spare capacity but lacking in infrastructure, offers a better opportunity to test, adjust, and learn without excessive risk.
- **Community readiness:** A street already criticized by residents or local businesses for its poor state or for being a location with a dearth of social activity is one whose regeneration will find support. Regeneration that responds to an existing demand will face less resistance.

Case Study: Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street, Lutsk

A key axis of Lutsk's historic center, Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street plays a central role in the city's urban structure. The Urban Vision Lutsk study identifies the street as a potential tourist route and as a boundary between the established urban fabric and areas with significant development potential.

The street serves as a transit zone between the city's medieval core and its current center, and spans architectural eras from early 20th-century brick construction to Soviet-era panel buildings. That makes the thoroughfare well-suited to test different regeneration scenarios.

The street also illustrates the tension common to similar corridors, a functional conflict between its role in movement and its potential for social and economic activity. The street functions today as a utilitarian transit corridor, leaving much potential unrealized.

Bohdan Kmelnytsky Street, Lutsk. Credit: Algorytm NGO

To assess the street's current challenges, an analysis from Kyiv School of Economics[3] used an:

- **inclusion and physical accessibility audit.** Physical barriers to accessibility for vulnerable groups is a key reason for the street's underutilization. The lack of flat curb stones at intersections and at courtyard entrances is one problem. The uneven pavement that makes movement uncomfortable and potentially dangerous in bad weather is another. These issues segment the street into isolated areas, breaking pedestrian flow.
- **street frontage analysis.** More than 56% of the buildings along the street have inactive frontages, with few entrances, stores, or other features that engage people walking by. Only 22% of frontages are partly active, and 22% are fully active. As a result, the street functions primarily as a route for getting from one place to another rather than a site where people want to spend time. This limits its attractiveness as a destination despite its central location and architectural significance.
- **cross-section analysis.** The street's profile shows dominance of motor transport infrastructure over pedestrian areas. Despite varying widths, the carriageway often occupies most of the available space, ranging from 45.92% to 61.48%. Soviet-era planning regularly prioritized road infrastructure over areas for social activities.
- **analysis of greenery.** The ecological inventory shows a decline in street-side green infrastructure, highlighting a deficit in pedestrian comfort. The cross-section analysis shows that the segment of the street where the road is wide and the sidewalk is narrow is the least green.

Resident survey: A 2026 survey conducted at Kyiv School of Economics (N=367) confirms the street's transit character. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents attributed their presence on the street to transiting it. Slightly more than half (51%) said that they do not stop for rest due to a lack of seating, traffic noise, and narrow sidewalks. Fully 72% of respondents said they want a pedestrian-oriented and green street.

Regeneration Strategies

Street regeneration consists of numerous approaches that depend on a city's budget, political will, community readiness, and physical constraints.

The following four regeneration strategies address a spectrum of issues, from limited funding to systemic redesign.

- Urban Acupuncture: A Quick Start

  This lowest-cost entry point is also the most underestimated. The concept of urban acupuncture, developed by Brazilian urbanist Jaime Lerner argues that tactical interventions, if implemented where most needed, can shift usage of space and have positive spillover effects.[4] A parklet in front of a café or a mural on a blank wall can change behavior. Pedestrians may slow down to look and perhaps stop or return.

  In Milan's NoLo district, a single redesigned intersection near a school—one with redirected traffic and added street furniture—received the highest social impact score in a city assessment of public space interventions.[5]

  For Ukrainian cities with limited reconstruction funding, urban acupuncture can deliver quick and notable results.

Piazza Aperta in via Spoleto and via Venini, Milan. Credit: Comune di Milano

- Complete Streets: Effective Street Use

  The complete streets approach redistributes existing space through a "road diet", which rebalances a street's cross-section depending on its needs and potential. Car lanes are narrowed to optimal widths (considering transport needs), and the newly available space is dedicated to wider sidewalks, protected bike lanes, and greenery.

The results in Vilnius, where Naugarduko Street underwent such a transformation, were positive. Average vehicle speeds dropped, road accidents with injuries decreased by 20%, and local businesses—initially opposed to losing parking—ultimately reported no loss of customers.[6] Reallocating space previously dedicated to cars created a more dynamic pattern of use.

In Ukrainian mid-sized cities, where over 60% of the space on Soviet-era streets is dedicated to private transport, a road diet allows reallocation of public space for social use.

- Shared Space: Removing Inequality

  The most counterintuitive strategy may also be one of the most effective in historic cores. Shared space removes street curbs and signs and, therefore, the physical separation among pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers. As a result, those using a street rely on eye contact and mutual negotiation. A less regulated street can make drivers more careful.

  In Brighton, England, the transformation of New Road, guided by shared-space principles, completely revitalized the historic street. Motorized traffic dropped by 93%, and pedestrian flow increased by 162%.[7]

  Shared space works best in areas with relatively low traffic volumes and high pedestrian potential. In Ukrainian cities, that typically means historic centers, connecting streets, and areas adjacent to pedestrian zones, where there are places for spillover from neighboring activities. But the most important tenet for shared space is the design of a barrier-free street. That is especially important in a country in which many residents have physical limitations as a consequence of conflict.

- Co-design: Regenerating Alongside the Community

  The most durable regeneration is the kind that residents feel they led themselves. Co-design shifts the planning process from experts to communities. Residents identify problems, propose solutions, and have the option to participate in implementation. Here, the planner's role becomes one of facilitation rather than creating solutions.

  Tirana's "School Block" street-safety project gave parents, teachers, and children authority to redesign roads near a school. Many more residents felt safer as a result of the project, which had a strictly limited budget of $25,000.[8] Community ownership, not money, was the key to success.

  For post-war Ukrainian communities, co-design has additional value. It can rebuild fragile, yet essential, trust in public institutions.

Tirana's "School Block" Project. Credit: Simon Battisti

Adapting to a Post-Socialist Context

Each of the four regeneration strategies approaches post-socialist planning in its own way. Each also carries context-specific limitations that shape its proper application.

The shared space approach directly addresses one of the most damaging legacies of Soviet planning, the strict hierarchical separation of user groups, by removing curbs, signs, and barriers to encourage negotiated use of shared street space. Its ability to ensure safety depends on cooperation between drivers and pedestrians, mediated by eye contact and mutual awareness. In contexts where decades of Soviet-era public life eroded precisely this kind of interaction, the approach, if not implemented carefully, may generate conflict rather than cohesion.

The complete streets framework offers a more structural response by redistributing excess road space to pedestrians, cyclists, and green infrastructure. It is, however, fundamentally technocratic. Applied without meaningful community engagement, it risks reproducing the top-down planning dynamic that it nominally seeks to reverse despite its better intentions. Planning processes that include the participation of locals and are embedded from the effort's outset are essential to legitimacy and effectiveness.

Urban acupuncture is arguably the most contextually appropriate approach for post-socialist settings. Soviet planning hollowed out not only the physical fabric of public space but also the social norms and expectations that animate it. By intervening at a small scale and generating immediate, tangible changes, urban acupuncture allows residents to witness transformation in their immediate environment. The strategy's limitation is its dependence on existing social capital to amplify and sustain its effects. Having sufficient social capital cannot be assumed.

Co-design is the most ideologically direct response to the Soviet legacy. It empowers residents to become urban planning designers, reconstituting the relationship between citizens and public space. It is also the most fragile strategy. Post-Soviet societies frequently exhibit low institutional trust and a learned disengagement from public decision-making processes, both of which can undermine participation.

No single strategy fully resolves the post-socialist legacy. This suggests that the optimal regeneration approach for Ukrainian cities is a hybrid, sequenced one calibrated to rebuild the social and institutional preconditions on which each strategy depends. But the underlying objective—regenerating social trust as the foundation for sustainable urban recovery— is the same in all cases.

Wartime Viability

The full-scale Russian invasion has introduced conditions that require a fundamental reassessment of how regeneration strategies are evaluated. Any work undertaken must account for the possibility that it may be damaged, defunded, or deprioritized. Resilience to disruption—whether financial, physical, or institutional—is a core planning criterion.

The shared space approach carries the highest wartime risk. Its value is entirely front-loaded into capital construction that must be completed if it is to function. An interrupted project may well leave a street in worse condition. This approach is also the hardest to justify when emergency infrastructure competes for the same municipal funds.

The complete streets framework is more adaptable, as its phased structure allows independently completed segments to deliver benefits. Nevertheless, a full corridor transformation is sensitive to funding interruptions, which can result in fragmented outcomes that undermine the approach's coherence and public credibility.

Urban acupuncture is the most wartime-compatible of the four strategies. Each discrete intervention retains independent value and does not depend on the completion of a larger scheme to function. Capital exposure per intervention is limited, meaning that damage or abandonment does not result in significant sunk costs. This is particularly important when municipal spending is subject to intense public scrutiny and communities require visible evidence of efficient spending.

The wartime utility of co-design lies less in spatial transformation than in social infrastructure. But the needed, sustained stakeholder engagement and consensus-building requires time and energy when citizens and institutions are already operating under acute pressure. The approach's primary contribution during a conflict, therefore, is to establish the relational and institutional foundation that will be essential for more ambitious regeneration once conditions allow.

Recommendations

Rebuild trust: Social trust is the foundation on which any regeneration, strategy, tactic, or intervention ultimately rests. Regeneration happens for and with people. In Ukraine, where decades of Soviet planning and four years of war have eroded the relationship between citizens and public institutions, rebuilding social trust is a prerequisite for physical transformation.

Get an early start: By creating a street profile and morphological audit, planners can begin with a pilot plan that offers measurable results and can be used to bring in further funding. An evidence-based regeneration plan is far more likely to attract financing than a needs assessment alone. Urban acupuncture and co-design require coordination, not capital. Starting small builds the political and community case for larger investment.

Ask open-ended questions: Public surveys with open-ended questions are essential for determining the mix of attributes most likely to generate a virtuous cycle of investment and for identifying political pitfalls that could doom an otherwise promising process. Interactive data sharing can be used for morphological audits and scenario development. Additionally, in Ukraine, city officials with a reputation for listening to residents can matter as much as data.

Enact policies to improve ground-floor activity: Physical street interventions are more effective when accompanied by policies such as fast-track processes for granting permits for outdoor use or incentives for businesses that facilitate human interaction. Such measures are especially important in Ukraine and other countries with Soviet-era buildings that were not designed to encourage ground-floor activity. Elevated entrances and inactive frontages in these countries isolate ground floors from street activity.

Revise success metrics: Street performance should not be equated with vehicle counts. Observations of pedestrians' interactions with street features, and surveys to solicit pedestrians' views on successful and unsuccessful measures, provide a more comprehensive picture of a street's current and future social function.

The views expressed herein are those solely of the author(s). GMF as an institution does not take positions.

Endnotes

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