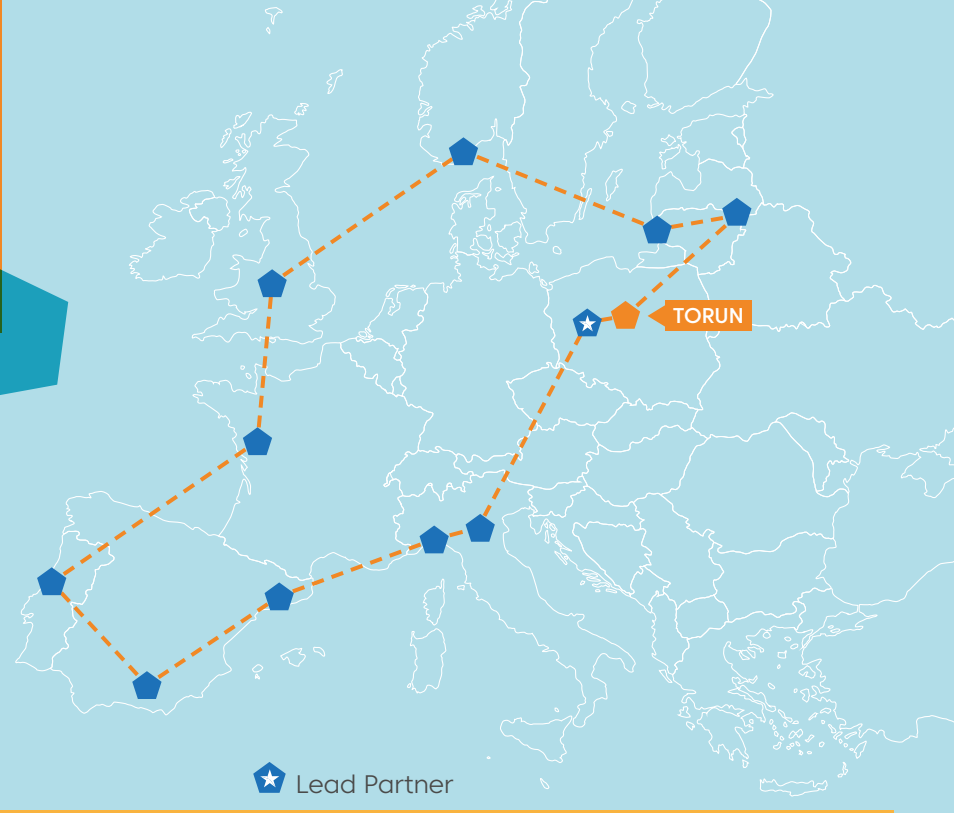


A SOCIAL ECONOMY, DESIGNED BY MILLENNIALS

Key information

- Location: **Toruń (Poland)**
- Population: **200 000**
- Involved in URBACT network:
GEN-Y City
- More information:
<http://urbact.eu/gen-y-city>



Toruń is struggling with an aging population and declining city centre. Thanks to the URBACT GEN-Y City network, a social movement was born that is building a new cultural infrastructure for young professionals.

Toruń is a historic city, famous for its UNESCO World Heritage listed old town and the prestigious Nicolaus Copernicus University, which hosts an annual population of around 30 000 students. Like most of the city's youth, the majority tend to move away after graduating. Their main motivations are economic. Salaries in Toruń are relatively low in comparison to bigger cities and there are few large-scale or renowned employers. In addition, there are not enough future-oriented spaces in the city centre, where naturally young people gather and when there are young, creative entrepreneurs work alone and don't cooperate or exchange ideas amongst them.

Living up the medieval centre

As part of the GEN-Y City network, Toruń's Municipality reached out directly to millennials to develop a solution. The city set up an URBACT Local Group made up of young business people, alongside representatives from NGOs and the university. Several of the participants were below 30. All agreed on the urgent need to reanimate the city's old town, which they saw as expensive and lacking in energy. Using URBACT methods, the group proposed various small-scale initiatives, including volunteer walking tours and regular street food festivals, to bring some new life to the area. They also identified an urgent need for co-working spaces and other physical incubators, to encourage cooperation across sectors.



The URBACT Local Group supported designers and tattoo artists to spread their message

In order to extend the reach of the group's discussions, the municipality produced a document in collaboration with the university called the 'Lexicon of a Contemporary City'. This was a guide for people unfamiliar with new urban concepts like sustainable architecture or ride-sharing schemes. It was distributed at book festivals, local libraries and other meetings as a way of educating the public about innovations in other EU cities that might usefully be imported to Toruń.

A major turning point came in 2016 at the URBACT Summer University in Rotterdam (NL) when representatives from the local group discovered other models of collaborative



Music has been an important part of unlocking the city's youth culture

work. Toruń were particularly struck by Gdańsk's (PL) example of neighbourhood houses – community centres funded by the municipality but run by citizens. "We saw how open and balanced the network was," recalls Ewelina Rejs, a project manager at the municipality, and URBACT Local Group Coordinator. "We met a lot of inspiring people and the manual was great too. I've used it since to design other projects." Małgorzata Ptaszek, a municipal officer, was similarly animated by the wealth of practical tools they encountered, like problem trees and techniques for mapping stakeholder interests: "It was like a trampoline for our team. Thanks to new methods like these we were able to dig out ideas that we had in our minds."

After the Summer University, the URBACT Local Group developed a more dynamic vision of the project. If at first they had been concerned with physical locations and existing institutions, they subsequently came to see GEN-Y City as an entirely new movement. The local group put an increasing emphasis on interventions, events and activities. They built a viral campaign around vintage clothing and vinyl records, tattoos and video games. The project was transformed into a kind of meme, manifesting itself in a number of forms – from street art and poetry initiatives to night markets and community activism. The success of

this approach was acknowledged formally in June 2017 when Krzysztof Wachowiak, manager of a nightclub called NRD, was given an award by the city's mayor in celebration of a series of educational meetings he had organised between young people and musicians.

"Thanks to new methods, we were able to dig out ideas that we had in our minds."

Małgorzata Ptaszek

An institutional legacy

As the GEN-Y City project came to an end, some of the city's urban practitioners returned to the idea of a specific building from which they could continue the collaborations developed during the local group's activities. Seven of the most active members created The Studio M6 Foundation, a formal offshoot of that previous group. Thanks to regional funding, the foundation was able to renovate an apartment in an old tenement building within the medieval town. Inside they opened a social cafe called PERS, which has become an archetype of the kind of incubator identified as so urgently lacking by the original URBACT Local Group.

"It reflects the ideas behind GEN-Y City 100%," explains Małgorzata Janas-Lawniczuk, Chair of the Board of the Studio M6 Foundation. "We are a social economy business. We give work to young people and students, but also to people with disabilities and others that can't find jobs." Aside from co-working, PERS hosts cultural events, art exhibitions and pop-up markets. "We promote everything that makes our town special and different," says Ms Janas-Lawniczuk, "we support local business people, promote local cuisine and art and have monthly lectures on local history." PERS is not just a cool venue, but an institution, and, as the physical hub for a broader network, a blueprint that might be exported to other cities.



A pop-up market, organised by PERS