Project

The Antananarivo Urban Fabric Initiative: Designing local developments with residents

Clémentine Laratte Warde

Rina Soafara

Olivier Bedu



Antananarivo, the capital and main economic hub of Madagascar, is experiencing rapid and poorly managed urbanization. This trend puts significant pressure on infrastructures and deepens socio-spatial imbalances. Informal expansion and the densification of peripheral neighborhoods result in precarious housing, reduced communal spaces, and worsening inequalities. The few open spaces available play a crucial social role but are hotly contested among social groups and activities, undermining their inclusive function, often to the detriment of vulnerable populations. At the same time, chronic road congestion and the deterioration of pedestrian infrastructure severely limit mobility, even though more than 70% of residents rely on walking for their daily journeys. Faced with these challenges, the "Antananarivo Urban Fabric Initiative" embarks on an experimental approach to participatory development in public spaces and soft mobility facilities. Implemented by Gret and Cabanon Vertical, in partnership with the Urban Commune and funded by the French Development Agency, it constitutes a pilot project aiming to experiment with micro-developments designed alongside residents. The project adopts an approach based on co-construction with users and the inclusion of vulnerable social groups, in order to promote social cohesion and innovative practices for managing urban commons. By closely involving local authorities, the AUN aims to ensure the sustainability of interventions and to become a replicable model for future urban initiatives.

A city facing many challenges, but demonstrating a desire to build the city differently

The agglomeration of Antananarivo absorbs the majority of new urban residents and is home to nearly half of Madagascar's urban population. The capital is experiencing rapid demographic growth, with an annual rate of +4.9%. The urban area now has more than 3.5 million inhabitants, compared to 175,000 in 1950.

This trend, linked to the capital's central economic role—where about 40% of the national GDP is concentrated—puts increasing pressure on infrastructures and urban networks. Road congestion, already significant, worsens each year and represents a major challenge for the city's future development. Antananarivo's urban growth is reflected in a largely informal and poorly planned expansion of outlying neighborhoods.

The strong pressure on land fosters the rise of precarious housing at the expense of collective spaces, restricting areas for gathering, rest, and pedestrian movement. The absence of land regulation and suitable planning heightens spatial inequalities. The low-income neighborhoods of the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th districts, where a large part of the city's low-income population is concentrated, especially embody this spontaneous densification and the disappearance of urban "breathing spaces."

In Antananarivo, as in many African cities, formal public spaces (parks, stadiums, markets) coexist with vacant lots, often overgrown or used as dumping grounds, but sometimes spontaneously appropriated by various groups for sports, cultural, social, or commercial activities.

Antananarivo a dense city, by LARATTE, 2025





Open space where young people practice football, by BEDU, 2024



Mobility in the city of Antananarivo, by BEDU, 2025

The complex land tenure situation of these areas limits their development but makes them strategic meeting places, particularly in densely populated working-class neighborhoods. Given that homes are often limited to a single room per household, most leisure time is spent in public spaces.

Their scarcity leads to intense competition between social groups and activities, creating inequalities in access to and enjoyment of these spaces, often to the detriment of vulnerable populations (women, the elderly, children, cultural or ethnic minorities). Nevertheless, these places play a major role in social cohesion, foster collective dynamics, and serve as levers for social integration.

The effects of uncontrolled urbanization are directly reflected in the conditions of transportation, characterized by chronic traffic jams and inadequate public transit. Daily mobility is difficult and dangerous, especially for non-motorized users. While over 70% of Antananarivo residents rely on walking for their daily commutes, pedestrian infrastructure is often degraded or occupied by vendors and parked vehicles.

The Urban Municipality of Antananarivo (CUA), responsible for urban planning, aims to experiment with different approaches for implementing urban projects and developing public spaces. Aware of the limits of traditional awareness-raising methods, it seeks to evolve its practices by more closely involving residents in both the design and management phases.

Highlight the importance of user expertise and the inclusion of diverse users, and encourage co-management between users and local authorities

The approach of Urban Fabric Initiatives places residents at the center of reflection and action by using methods sensitive to their uses and experiences, known as "user participation." This pragmatic, bottom-up approach enables innovation compared to traditional interventions, where solutions emerge from analyses conducted by technicians. More broadly, it helps to engage communities and encourage them to take greater ownership in the proper use and maintenance of facilities.

In Antananarivo, a gender strategy has been developed, with particular attention paid to the inclusion of different user groups. During the assessment phase, consultations were organized to identify the specific needs of women and young people and to translate these into development proposals. A support fund was established to facilitate the organization of activities encouraging diversity of use and public, especially those led by youth, sports associations, and women's collectives. Training in entrepreneurship and workshops on female leadership and gender equality were conducted to foster self-confidence and deconstruct stereotypes.

Alongside construction work, management committees are set up at each site, involving representatives of users and public authorities. The roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in the upkeep and maintenance of the sites are defined in joint management agreements. Committee members receive training and support to help them fulfill their responsibilities over time and to secure dedicated funding for site management. Municipal officers are involved in all activities to encourage CUA's ownership of this approach and its dissemination to other urban interventions.

Consultation activities with youth groups, by GRET 2024







Improved and strengthened infrastructure, more attractive sites for women, children, and the elderly, as well as more responsible users









Before (2022) and after (2025) the transformation of the PUANT-ANDRAISORO, by BEDU

In the first two developed sites (Andraisoro and Mandroseza), public spaces were traditionally frequented mostly by men, around the basketball and pétanque courts. This situation limited access for women, children, and other groups, who saw these places as unwelcoming or unsuitable for their needs. The intervention by the Urban Incubator aimed to transform these sites into true communal spaces, promoting social and generational diversity through inclusive facilities, diversified uses, and shared governance. The improvements made to both sites turned them into safer, more accessible, and more comfortable spaces for a wide range of users. The needs of women, children, and other groups were addressed through the addition of appropriate infrastructure: shaded bleachers, ball barriers, secure children's play areas, and decorative murals. These developments paved the way for new spontaneous uses—resting, taking selfies, video shoots, board games, reading, dancing—and reinforced the sites' inclusive character.

This transformation was further enhanced by supporting about twenty local associations through the support fund, enabling Andraisoro to host around ten special events and recurring activities such as chess tournaments, Zumba classes, crochet fairs, pastry and eco-charcoal workshops. This broader range of offerings attracts more diverse visitors: female attendance increased from 20% before the project to 35–45%, depending on the days and activities. Children account for up to 50% of users

during events, and seniors now use the shaded resting areas. Women are more involved in organizing activities and spearheading initiatives. This dynamic encourages new social interactions: solidarity between parents, intergenerational exchanges, and collective events. Sharing of space takes place through negotiation and understanding, reducing tensions and conflicts of use, notably between athletes and vendors.

Participatory governance at these sites has also established forms of co-responsibility among users, associations, and the municipality. In Andraisoro, the management committee includes female representation—still a minority but real (2 women out of 6)—and gender diversity is included in the rules of procedure. Committee members ensure maintenance and regulation of uses, and local initiatives for cleaning and awareness-raising have multiplied. 100% of surveyed users say they want to take care of the facilities. These dynamics reflect a gradual change in perceptions and appropriation of public spaces. The CUA notes that young people are increasingly interested in being involved in managing public spaces, paving the way for this approach to be spread to other neighborhoods.

The two sites confirm the central role of public spaces in fostering social cohesion. The comparison between Andraisoro—where support fund activities have been implemented—and Mandroseza—where activities are still being prepared—highlights the importance of integrating design, activities, and inclusive governance to sustainably transform public space into a urban common.



The transformation of the PUANT-ANDRAISORO, by BEDU, 2025

The Urban Fabric Initiative demonstrates that participatory and experimental approaches can sustainably transform the making of African cities

The experience of the PUA illustrates the potential of participatory and experimental approaches in the African context, characterized by rapid and often uncontrolled urbanization. By placing residents back at the center, this project contributes to the revitalization of public spaces as levers for social cohesion, inclusion, and urban innovation.

The emergence of forms of co-management between residents, associations, and the municipality also highlights a shift in the perception and appropriation of urban commons. However, the dynamics set in motion remain fragile and deserve to be supported so they can become firmly rooted in local perceptions and practices. Challenges persist, particularly regarding land tenure security within a complex legal framework.

Indeed, the PUA had initially planned to work on state-owned land, but mediation efforts with landowners to establish occupancy agreements were unsuccessful, and the sites had to be abandoned in favor of those belonging to the CUA. These obstacles reveal the importance of strengthened dialogue between public and private stakeholders to integrate this type of initiative into local practices.

The current challenge is to consolidate these achievements and turn the Urban Fabric Initiative into a reproducible model, not only for Antananarivo but also for other Malagasy and African cities. One key question remains: how can these approaches be institutionalized and funded while preserving their inclusive and experimental nature?