

**ENSUT**

Expertise Network  
Sustainable Urban Tourism

# Urban Tourism: A call to action







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# Urban Tourism: A call to action

**A**s one of the fastest growing types of tourism worldwide, urban tourism can be a driving force to improve the quality of cities, be it economically (e.g. jobs, businesses, income through taxes), socio-culturally (e.g. creating a buzz, increasing diversity, sustaining public facilities) or the living environment (e.g. more green spaces, increased rubbish collection). At the same time, cities such as Amsterdam, Barcelona or Venice struggle to cope with rising visitor numbers. Negative aspects of tourism have become more apparent, and the term overtourism is now commonly used to describe challenges related to tourism (e.g. tourist numbers, pressure on public spaces, depletion of natural resources and residential facilities, touristification, tourist behaviour, and an unequal distribution of benefits and costs). In addition, the sudden lack of tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the danger of excessively relying on tourism as a main source of income.

Increasingly therefore, it is argued that there is a need to rethink urban tourism and set in motion a transition towards a more resilient tourism that revitalises and regenerates city destinations and enhances the quality of place and quality of life of all city users. Such thinking can for example be observed in newly developing discourses such as regenerative tourism, circular tourism, tourism for well-being and/or broad prosperity, doughnut economy tourism, conviviality in tourism, or city hospitality for all. These conceptualisations all suggest that to unlock and foster the potential for tourism to enhance cities, a systemic and holistic perspective is required, in which tourism, leisure and hospitality<sup>1</sup> are considered integral parts of society and enhance their contribution to a better urban environment and the quality of life of its residents and its other users.



<sup>1</sup> Within this research agenda we view urban tourism, leisure and hospitality as integral and interrelated parts of the visitor economy. For simplicity we use the term 'urban tourism', but this incorporates all other parts of leisure and hospitality, be it for relaxation or business purposes.

# Urban Tourism: A call to action

While this perspective on tourism is gaining traction, it is crucial to recognize the formidable challenge of implementing this different perspective on tourism in practice. It requires a paradigm shift throughout the entire tourism ecosystem and its interactions with other (eco)systems. Whereas, historically, the emphasis in tourism development has been on branding, marketing and managing destinations, the new paradigm emphasises that leisure, tourism, events and hospitality need to create purpose and to enhance the sense of place, place identity and wellbeing of all users. This requires a collaborative effort by a wide range of city stakeholders and is thus explicitly not limited to visitors or the tourism ecosystem. Instead, the idea is to work towards welcoming communities for all.

The challenge of achieving this, is particularly evident in an urban context. While there are many opportunities and possibilities to enhance social, cultural, ecological and economic value through tourism, the complexity and multifaceted nature of urban systems requires the involvement of many different stakeholders, to overcome barriers that keep the current system(s) in place and implement new ways of working. This prompts questions like: What might a transformed urban tourism entail? How do different conceptualisations of transformative tourism differ and how can they be implemented to support resilient cities? How to involve a diversity of city users? What would this mean for governance and policymaking? What social and technological innovations are required? And how do we know when it is successful? These questions form the core of this research agenda, including our ambition, aims and goals.





# Ambition, Aim and Goals



**T**his research agenda is developed as part of the ‘Lectorenplatform and Expertise Network Sustainable Urban Tourism’ (ENSUT), which has to aim to help foster a transition of urban tourism towards a sustainable ecosystem that benefits all city users and stakeholders. The overarching aim of the agenda is to develop knowledge, insights, (conceptual) frameworks and practical guidelines to assist cities in developing tourism more effectively and turn it into societal force that benefits all city users and enhances (or regenerates) cities.

To achieve our aim, we will build upon insights that stem from recent publications at international, national, regional and local levels that work towards this premise. This includes, among others, the EU Tourism Transition Pathway, the Travel Foundation’s Envisioning Tourism 2030 report, CELTH<sup>2</sup>’s Agenda Conscious Destinations, NBTC<sup>3</sup>’s Perspective 2030, The RLI<sup>4</sup> Report “Waardevol Toerisme”, the ANVR<sup>5</sup> sustainability vision, the Amsterdam Vision 2025 and the Rotterdam International Advisory Board Report from 2019.

We intend to achieve our ambition aim with three interrelated goals. To start with we intend to stimulate collaborations between professors and researchers both in the Netherlands and internationally (e.g. by aligning research lines, setting up (funded) research projects) and to deepen and strengthen relations through, of among others the Expertise Network Sustainable Urban Tourism (ENSUT) and the Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism & Hospitality (CELTH).



- 2 Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism, Hospitality
- 3 Netherlands Board of Tourism & Conventions
- 4 Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur
- 5 Algemene Nederlandse Vereniging van Reisondernemingen (Netherlands Travel Trade Association)

A second goal is to foster cooperation with societal partners and other stakeholders that operate in the urban (tourism) ecosystem. This includes municipalities, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), organisations within the tourism and hospitality ecosystem, such as museums, hotels, meeting and incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism stakeholders, as well as (international) partners like NBTC, Kennisnetwerk Destinatie NL, Platform Binnenstadmanagement, European Cities Destination Network, the European Tour Operator Association, Regenerative Tourism movement, and Fairbnb. However, we also will reach out to stakeholders that do not operate in the urban tourism domain, for example, policymakers (e.g. culture department, urban planning, mobility social affairs), businesses that can strongly impact on the urban environment (e.g. real estate companies), NGOs that represent resident interests and organisations engaging with societal transformation on a higher level or in other sectors.

The third goal encompasses initiating discussions, collaborative efforts, pilot projects, interventions, and experiments to harness the knowledge and resources of all stakeholders in leveraging urban tourism as a means to enhance places and improve lives. Through this collective endeavour, we seek to facilitate the essential paradigm shift towards transformative tourism. Our efforts will focus on generating new ideas, narratives, tools, methodological approaches, and business models to expedite innovations that lead to transformative urban tourism. However, we will also critically engage with existing discourses and narratives, debunking myths and falsehoods that hinder progress toward transformative tourism, while actively fostering new perspectives that promote such progress.





# Underlying premises





## 1. Integrating Theory and Practice

We aim to leverage theory to innovate practice and utilize practice to develop new theories.

We explore methodologies such as design-based and participatory research to strengthen the collaboration with stakeholders from the quadruple helix: Professorships, societal parties, governments, and the business sector. Our objective is not only observation but also knowledge sharing and active participation in society, to promote a transition to sustainable urban tourism. We work transdisciplinary and emphasize continuous iterations.

## 2. Taking a Holistic and Systemic Perspective

We adopt a holistic perspective, and view leisure, events, tourism, and hospitality as integral and interrelated parts of society. We do recognize that these domains offer different perspectives, all contributing to a better understanding of how leisure and/or business travel activities intersect with the city. We problematize the distinction between tourist, business travellers and residents, and consider the diversity among various groups and types of tourists and residents both as a source of potential as well as conflict. As such, we focus on the impact urban tourism can have on quality of life and quality of place for all users of the city (not only tourists). Our focus lies on conceptualisations and innovations that relate to transformative perspectives in tourism such as regenerative tourism, sense of belonging and city hospitality (experience), within a the broader framework of cities as hierarchically nested urban systems.



## 3. Going Beyond Solutionism and over-participation

Acknowledging the dynamism and complexity of cities and communities, we pursue interventions that are not quick fixes or 'off the shelf' (technical) solutions. We don't believe in 'one size fits all' solutions and are conscious of the circumstances in which interventions occur, focusing on the contextualization of interventions and their outcomes. Identifying pressing issues and understanding processes and underlying patterns are crucial. We find both best practices and worst practices equally interesting. We seek collaboration with all city stakeholders, while being mindful of the dangers over-participation (e.g. participation for its own sake, participation as depoliticization) and the need for realistic expectations.

## 4. Collaborating from a Transparent Academic Basis

Grounded in academic principles, we prioritize collaboration and co-creation over traditional client-contractor dynamics to uphold quality. Transparency, openness, and ethical behavior are key values that are essential to all our research endeavors. We maintain honesty regarding our capabilities and limitations, openly communicating when certain tasks are beyond our capacity or when results fall short of expectations. While we may undertake commissioned projects, our research outcomes remain independent and our results are not for sale.



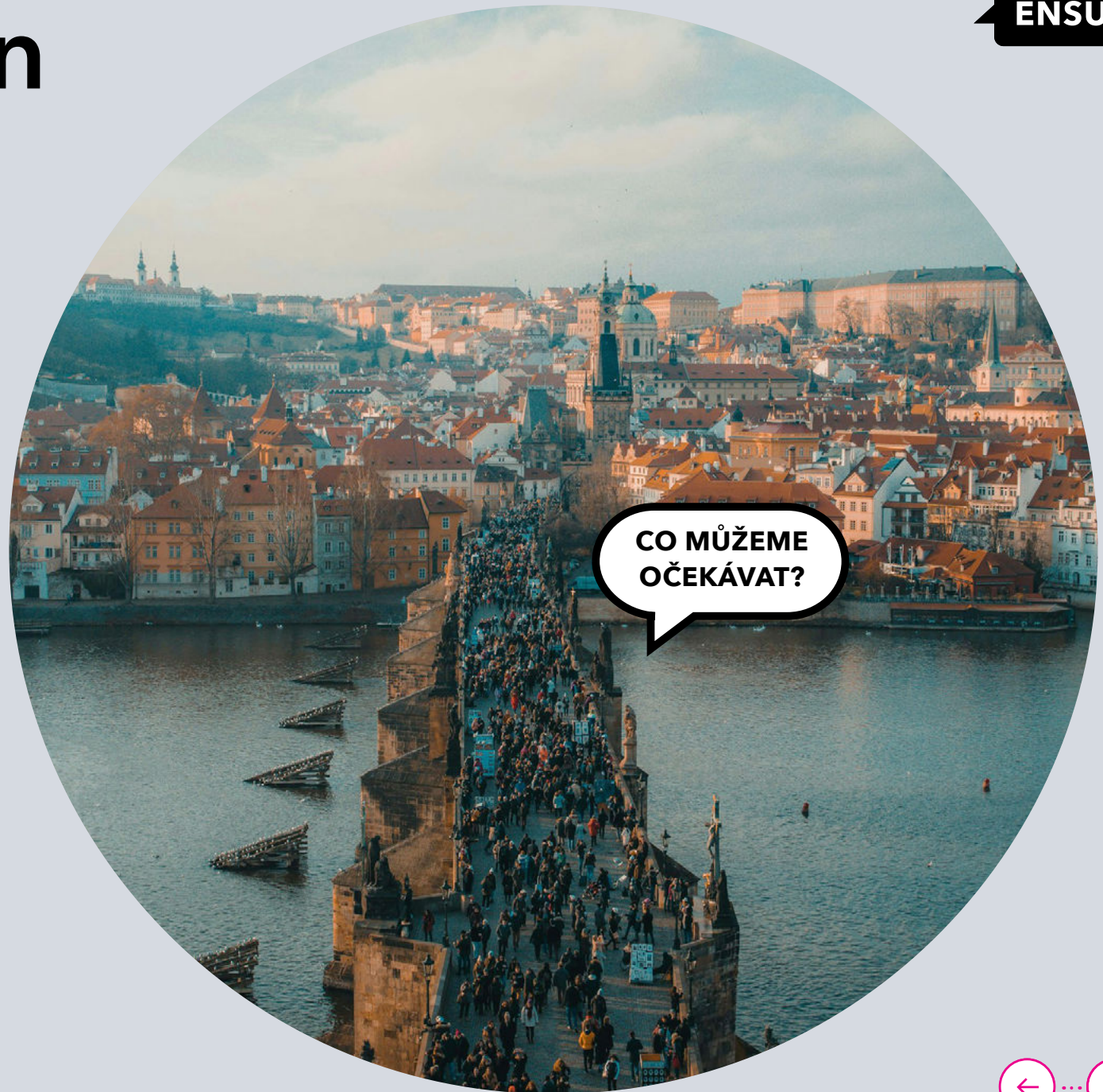


## 5. Contributing to education on transformative urban tourism

We are committed to ensuring that our research findings serve as valuable educational tools, equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the opportunities and challenges accompanying a paradigm shift in tourism. Viewing tourism as an integral part of the broader urban fabric can offer students new opportunities and ways to overcome urban challenges. By actively involving students in projects and research endeavours, we provide them with practical experience, empowering them to contribute meaningfully to maximize the potential of transformative urban tourism.



# Three main research lines



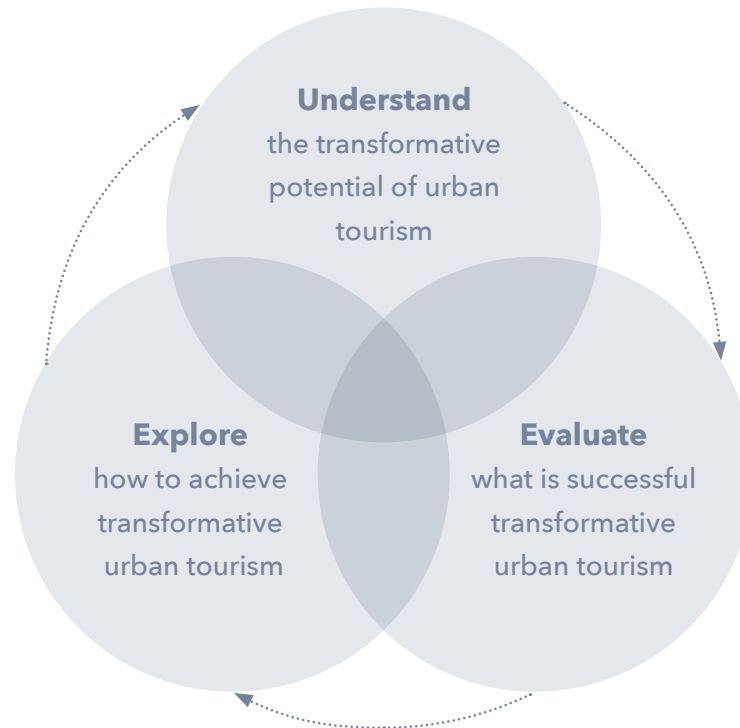


# Three main research lines

In order to effectively pursue the aim of the lectorenplatform and Expertise Network Sustainable Urban Tourism (ENSUT), a deeper understanding of urban tourism is essential. Our research agenda is structured around three core research lines that collectively help to establish a knowledge foundation for transformative urban tourism (figure 1). The three lines feed into each other and need to be performed simultaneously, in order to come to new perspectives and iterative designs for sustainable urban tourism.



Figure 1



## 1. Understand the transformative potential of urban tourism

While different conceptualisations and discourses exist to transform the tourism ecosystem to create better places and a higher level of wellbeing, it remains largely unclear what these would entail in an urban setting. The majority of work on regenerative tourism, for example, has been performed in rural areas and emphasises building on the ancestral essence of a place, also using indigenous knowledge. However, this is problematic for urban tourism, where it is often unclear what is the 'essence' of a place and who are the 'indigenous residents'. Similarly, current circular tourism conceptualisations struggle to relate to social issues and conflicts of interests between different groups of city users, while the boundaries of a doughnut economy model may not suit tourism practices on a city level. It does not help that key concepts (e.g. quality of place, well-being, broadprosperity) remain difficult to define and can be interpreted in different ways.

We also lack knowledge on how different kinds of tourism development fit within a certain local city or neighbourhood context (e.g. less visited places may welcome growth, while others may not), or how to create and maintain hospitable places and welcoming communities, and how this interconnects with sustainable urban development. Examples like these highlight the limitations in our understanding of transformative tourism and how the concept is undertheorized, particularly, in an urban context. In addition, we need to learn more about how innovations and new technologies can contribute to transformative urban tourism.

To stimulate further theorization of transformative tourism, it may be useful to look at other fields of research, where principles of transformation have been further outlined. Of particular relevance may be concepts like





# Three main research lines

'regenerative placemaking' and 'sense of place'. These are place-based approaches that focus on improving the quality of place to make them more hospitable to all users (tourists and residents alike). However, insights from fields such as (degrowth) economics, urban sociology, geography, anthropology, psychology, and urban design for well-being can also be highly valuable.

In this research line we will therefore explore and develop new definitions and attributes of different conceptualisations of transformative urban tourism; how they fit with cities with different tourism pressures and different kinds of urban tourism ecosystems; how they can contribute to making cities flourish and all city users thrive, and what the processes are that underlie their development.

## Key research questions

1. What are the key attributes or building blocks of transformative urban tourism and to what extent can different stages in the evolution of these attributes be discerned (e.g. via a maturity model)?
2. How do different conceptualisations of transformative urban tourism relate to each other and (other forms of) sustainable urban tourism, and how can insights from these different perspectives be used to strengthen and deepen our knowledge on achieving transformative urban tourism?
3. How do different conceptualizations of transformative urban tourism relate to each other and to other forms of sustainable urban tourism, and how can insights from these perspectives enhance and deepen our understanding of achieving transformative urban tourism? What changes are needed in the tourism and urban ecosystem to make this possible, and how can innovations and technologies contribute to these changes?
4. What are best practices and what are common pitfalls that have hindered the development of transformative urban tourism?



## 2. Evaluate what is (un)successful (transformative) urban tourism

Whilst it is crucial to learn more about what transformative urban tourism is, it is equally important in practice to be able to evaluate when we are successful in achieving that, as well as when and why we are unsuccessful and what success actually entails. Conventional tourism conceptualisations commonly favour quantitative indicators for success, but this may not work for a transformative urban tourism perspective as it risks overlooking the multifaceted impacts of leisure, tourism and hospitality practice and the complexity and hyperconnectivity of ecological systems. Also, many initiatives that align with transformative urban tourism, emphasise the importance of community engagement, cultural preservation, and knowledge sharing, which cannot easily be quantified.

As a result regenerative approaches, for example, prioritise more qualitatively process-oriented outcomes that encompass diverse ecological, social, and economic factors, or completely different forms of evaluation (e.g. art-based methods of appreciation). However, such measures may not fit with current governance structures and perspectives of stakeholders that need to be engaged to set in motion a paradigm change. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on qualitative measures risks missing out on valuable (quantitative) information as well.

Therefore, embracing a more inclusive approach that combines qualitative insights with quantitative data is likely to be more effective for evaluating and advancing regenerative practices. As such this research line seeks to establish how we can best identify and measure the building blocks that underlie different



conceptualisations of transformative tourism practices , what means and/or measures can be used and how outcomes of different ways of evaluation can be related to each other.

## Key research questions

1. What different elements could an evaluation of (transformative) tourism entail if we consider it an integral part of urban societies and based on well-being and a good quality of life for all (e.g. environmental health, resilience, socio-cultural vitality, inclusiveness, equity, safety, empowerment, well-being, prosperity, experiences of hospitality)?
2. What are means to evaluate different aspects of (transformative) urban tourism (e.g. measuring or other means of evaluation) and what is considered success? Is it possible to develop a framework that incorporates different perspectives?
3. How can the impacts of urban tourism and the broader visitor economy be evaluated across various scales, whether spatial (e.g. street, neighborhood, city, bioregional), relational (e.g. touchpoints, routes, visitor and local flows), virtual (e.g. online or in media) or other dimensions?
4. How to combine different means of evaluation to help gain a systemic and holistic understanding of the impacts of tourism for different types of city stakeholders or activities ?





## 3. Explore ways to achieve transformative urban tourism

Cities act as a host to a dynamic range of different communities, of which tourists are one. To deal with the complexity this entails, transformative tourism proponents often advocate a multi-actor governance approach that involves all stakeholders in collectively shaping the city. Whilst this may be tempting in theory, it assumes that stakeholders are able, and willing to engage with such discussions. This is not necessarily the case. Even in a country like the Netherlands the success of participatory planning initiatives has been inconsistent. Residents complain about a lack of ownership of processes and limited, sometimes even noting participation is used to depoliticize difficult decision making processes. Indeed, participation fatigue is increasingly observed in and in Amsterdam even a few participation strikes have taken place. At the same time, visitors are rarely involved in participatory processes, despite their significant impact on urban spaces. Understanding their perspectives and use of cities could also lead to better outcomes.

We acknowledge here that interventions do not automatically lead to transformative tourism practices. Instead, transformative tourism practices result from a complex weaving of the actions and notions of a wide variety of stakeholders at different levels of the tourism and urban ecosystem. Bottom-up interventions may provide new possibilities (e.g. regarding physical infrastructure, atmosphere and hospitality behaviour), but it is equally important to overcome rigidities of the existing system that inhibit adaptation and innovation.



# Three main research lines

Through a constructively critical engagement with this topic, we seek to increase understanding on opportunities and pitfalls with regards to (collaborative) governance. This includes questions like: what kinds of governance suits the context of different cities, or parts thereof? How to stimulate meaningful participation and ownership among stakeholders? How to transform dominant governance narratives to stimulate tourism that benefits all city users all? How can new conceptualisations of tourism governance (e.g. touch-points and visitor flows) support new means of policymaking?

## Key research questions

1. Which stakeholders are involved in the 'urban tourism governance' ecosystem and how does this system relate to other ecosystems, and what are the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders for cities in different levels of tourism development.
2. Which tourism and non-tourism stakeholders should be engaged with and aligned to help overcome differences? How can they be persuaded to engage to create a fertile ground for regenerative urban tourism development?
3. How can collaborative governance practices stimulate inclusive and equitable development and local innovations (e.g. design of touchpoints, visitor flows, technological innovations, business models)?
4. How can cities effectively select the most suitable interventions for advancing regenerative urban tourism, considering the specific contextual factors of the city and its stage of maturity?



# Let's go!

ENSUT





This strategic agenda is part of the Lectorenplatform and Expertise Network Sustainable Urban Tourism. The intention of the agenda is to support a better understanding of (transformative) urban tourism, come up with new ideas and concept, develop methodologies, communicate our outcomes and undertake more activities that can help practitioners and academics to better deal with the opportunities and challenges that the future of urban tourism may hold.

Our goal is to help forge dynamic partnerships between academics as well as local, national and international stakeholders. Together, we can go on an inspiring journey of exploration and innovation, harnessing the transformative power of tourism to elevate communities, enriching lives fostering vibrant destinations and nurturing thriving livelihoods.

We are thrilled to ignite a movement that encompasses a diverse community of stakeholders, uniting to inspire, learn from one another, motivate, share best practices and productive failures, and get valuable insights from our collective experiences, including our missteps and challenges. We intend to celebrate both success and failure as essential steps towards success. Collectively, we celebrate the power of collaboration and the boundless potential that arises when we join forces to drive positive change and innovation. Let us embark on this exciting journey with passion, enthusiasm, and a shared commitment to fostering the broad field of regenerative urban tourism and its various dimensions in different cities in the Netherlands and beyond.

You're cordially welcome to join!



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