

**BMW Foundation**

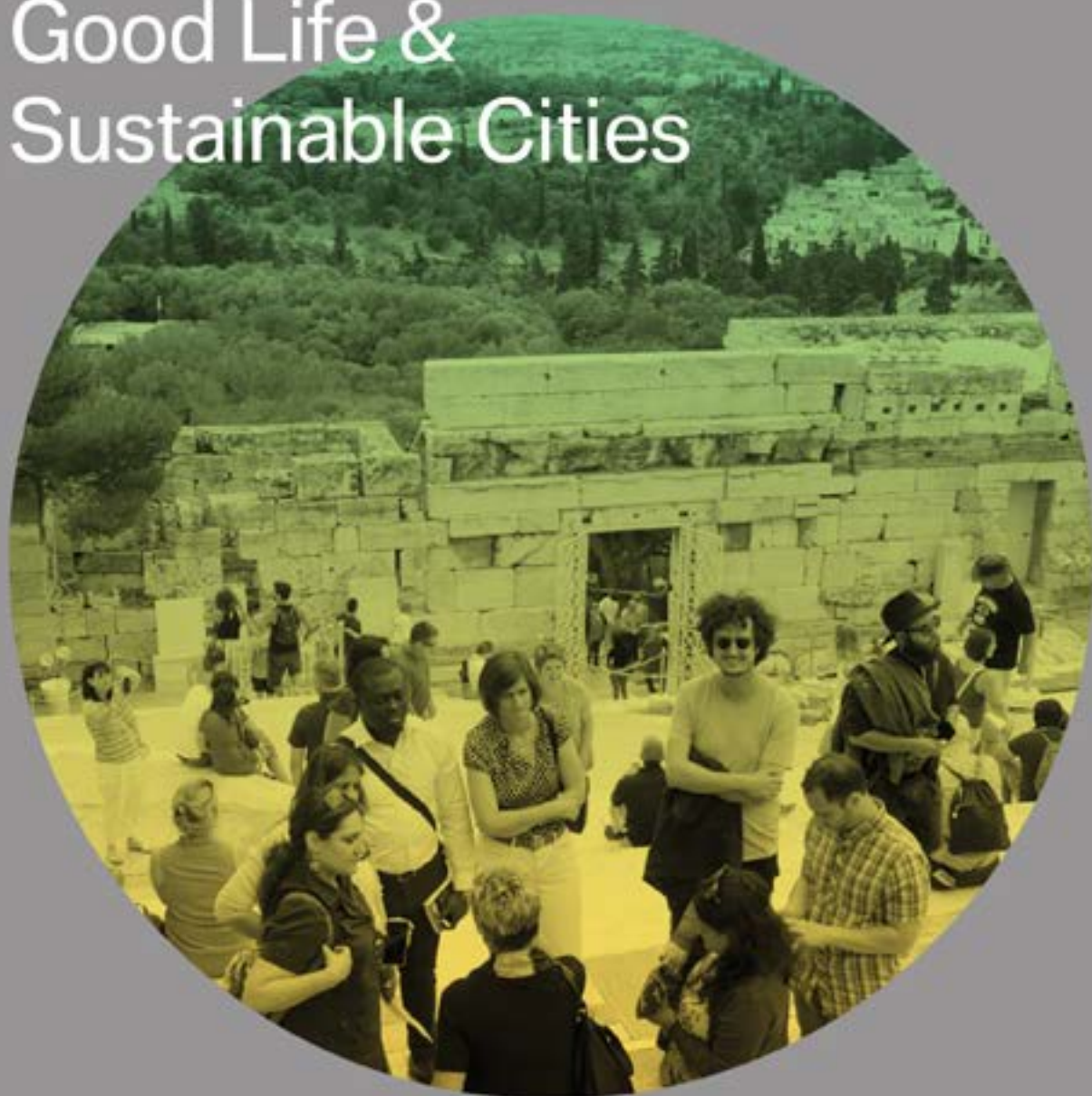
Herbert Quandt



**Athens**

# Denkraum Athens

## Good Life & Sustainable Cities



## Denkraum Athens

Denkraum is a series of events organized by the BMW Herbert Quandt Foundation that first happened in 2016 in Munich. It strives to be a forum where influential local leaders are not only called to reflect upon modern challenges but also to propose realistic solutions and finally have an impact in creating a sustainable future for their communities. The Foundation cooperates with Impact Hub in several places in Brazil, Africa and Europe. The 2020 series, titled “Good Life & Sustainable Cities”, includes hybrid (virtual and live) events in Munich, Amsterdam, Athens and Madrid. The Athens-based event took place during the first week of October.

### Introduction

Athens, capital city of Greece, is a bustling metropolis sprawling for kilometres around the ancient rock of Acropolis. Though solidly anchored in the past, signs of which abound around the city, Athens and its local leaders have set their sights firmly towards the future.

Initiatives about the future of the cities are multiplying around the world, striving to provide good life and conditions to their citizens. This is to be expected as cities are becoming ever more important to people of the world: a majority of the earth’s population already lives in them. The problems of humanity are amplified and intensified in the city-space.

The Athens Impact Hub has had a major role in the incubation, discussion and development of new ideas for resilience in cities. The Hub is a forge of ideas about change and evolution where innovators from civic, scientific, entrepreneurial and other spheres meet to interact and interrelate, experimenting and creating their own history. The aim of all these bright people is to create resilience, not by blind attachment to the past, but by adaptation and evolution.



## Athens: A city passing through successive crises

The city has lived through a tumultuous decade. Starting with the financial crisis, continuing with the arrival of war refugees, the city suburbs also saw a devastating and deadly forest fire, as well as a historic flood in the past few years. The continuing COVID-19 pandemic also took a heavy toll in the city’s activity and economic life, forcing it into a months-long lockdown.

The pandemic and resulting crisis are global problems, of course. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) look a bit fanciful at the moment, with the world’s turning to a more insular, isolationist mindset, poverty rising all over, and a temporary suspension of freedoms, justified by pandemic containment measures.

On the other hand, people are already talking about the next day: New, green infrastructure that will create jobs and wealth; new mobility means; new ways to develop and monetize on the special cultural characteristics of the city and its heritage; new ways to create resilient supply chains; and innovative schemes to finance all the above.

### Denkraum Athens: The Opening

Situated at the shadow of the Acropolis, the Athens Impact Hub hosted, from October 6 to 9, the Denkraum Athens, part of the Denkraum 2020. This series of events is organized by the BMW Herbert Quandt Foundation, and provides a space where influential people from the private, public and civic sectors can explore how cities can become more resilient, intelligent, sustainable and equitable.

The collaboration of the BMW Foundation with Impact Hub, an entrepreneur facilitator and event space, already measures many years, and aids in selecting local influential leaders. Due to the coronavirus containment measures and new restrictions applied since mid-September, all participants were invited to connect to the event online both during the opening and closing presentations. Online collaboration was the norm also during the “deep dive” sessions on six challenges selected for their particular relevance for Athens.

Sophie Lambrou from Impact Hub Athens welcomed all participants and then called on Dr. Frank Niederländer, member of the board of the BMW Foundation Herbert Quandt to explain the mission of the foundation, the work on Sustainable Cities and the aims of the Denkraum series. Dr Niederländer stressed that the series aims to contribute to finding resilient, intelligent, sustainable and equitable solutions for cities, and converting the citizens into responsible stakeholders for a better urban future.

Dr. Niederländer also mentioned that the BMW foundation is looking to interact with local leaders and create networks between them that will help them arrive at solutions of the specific problems of their communities.

“Cities are environments where all challenges are intensified, and they contain all elements of life”, said Dr. Niederländer, while also quoting the ex-Secretary General of the UN, saying that the sustainability challenge will be won or lost in the cities.

Hence, the Denkraum series tries to connect leaders and address solutions, but also illuminate local role models, that will found coalitions and networks, and drive forward and implement the discussed solutions.



## Local solutions, globally shared: A keynote by Lenio Myrivili

Lenio Myrivili, an expert in urban resilience and city climate adaptation, delivering the first of the keynote talks at the opening session, started by trying to define sustainability and resilience.

“Sustainability refers to smart management of resources that leads to equitable use diachronically, between generations,” she said. “Resilience, on the other hand, measures the capability of a system to withstand a shock, adapt, and keep functioning”.

Ms Myrivili used her experience as a local leader – deputy mayor of Athens – to talk about a nascent worldwide network of like-minded people from different cities caring about sustainable development and resilience increase in their cities.

Well known examples include the new green, pedestrian-friendly spaces created in Seoul, Copenhagen’s new zoning and building regulations that anticipate big floods and torrential rains of a changed climate; but also lesser known ones, like Sydney’s government agreement with power companies to divert power away from industry and into residential neighbourhoods during heatwaves, as well as artistic initiatives that changed the character of Vienna and Ghent.

Sustainable change can only proceed through the co-designing of city spaces, in consultation with the major stakeholders which are the locals. Ms Myrivili referred to the plans for beautifying and flood-proofing Athens’ highest hill, Lycabettus, which proceeded after talking with all interested parties.

Cooperation between politicians, academics and private companies led to yet another project, in the form of a smartphone app that can alert Athens residents in real time and with excellent geographic localization about the danger of extreme temperatures.

Ms Myrivili closed her presentation by urging more local leaders to rise to the occasion and become part of networks that will pool solutions and resources all over the world, and praising the BMW Foundation for its crucial work in this aspect.

## Re-examining the “Good Life”: A keynote by Alexandra Mitsotaki

Alexandra Mitsotaki, the World Human Forum founder, started her keynote speech by taking a more holistic view of the problems discussed in the Athens Denkraum. As Ms Mitsotaki stressed, “the UN SDG ‘number 11’, which refers to City Sustainability, cannot be achieved in vacuum, without also advancing the rest of the SDGs, like gender equality, justice, climate change” and others.

Ms Mitsotaki stated her belief that the overall goal encompassing all of them should be to build a new ecologic civilization together: this will give inspiration and show the path towards the specific SDGs.

The first question that naturally arises from the Denkraum’s charge, is, “what is a good life?”. Ms Mitsotaki noted that the covid-related crisis, by stopping all economic activity, obliged a slowing down of life and a rethinking of what is important. Many people cheered the resurgence of wildlife in the city centres during the lockdowns, but these happy sightings came at a terrible economic price. In fact, the calamity has proved that ecology and economy are two sides of the same coin, and cannot be separated.

However, it is obvious that the current linear model of growth, while extremely successful, is not sustainable: we have to move towards a different, regenerative circular economy. One also needs a sense of happiness and well-being, which cannot be fulfilled by material possessions and consumption only. These concepts are not only recently introduced by the discipline of ‘happiness economics’ but also taught through the ages by spiritual leaders and philosophers.

Moving on to the question of “how to arrive at a good life?”, Ms Mitsotaki recognized the enormity of the task: essentially, she said, “we have to rebuild the ‘ship’ of our economy, while sailing in it”. We can do that by adapting our economic activity to nature, respecting nature, and integrating it in the economy. After all, we need to remember that ecology is not about protecting the planet, but about protecting our communities and our children’s future.

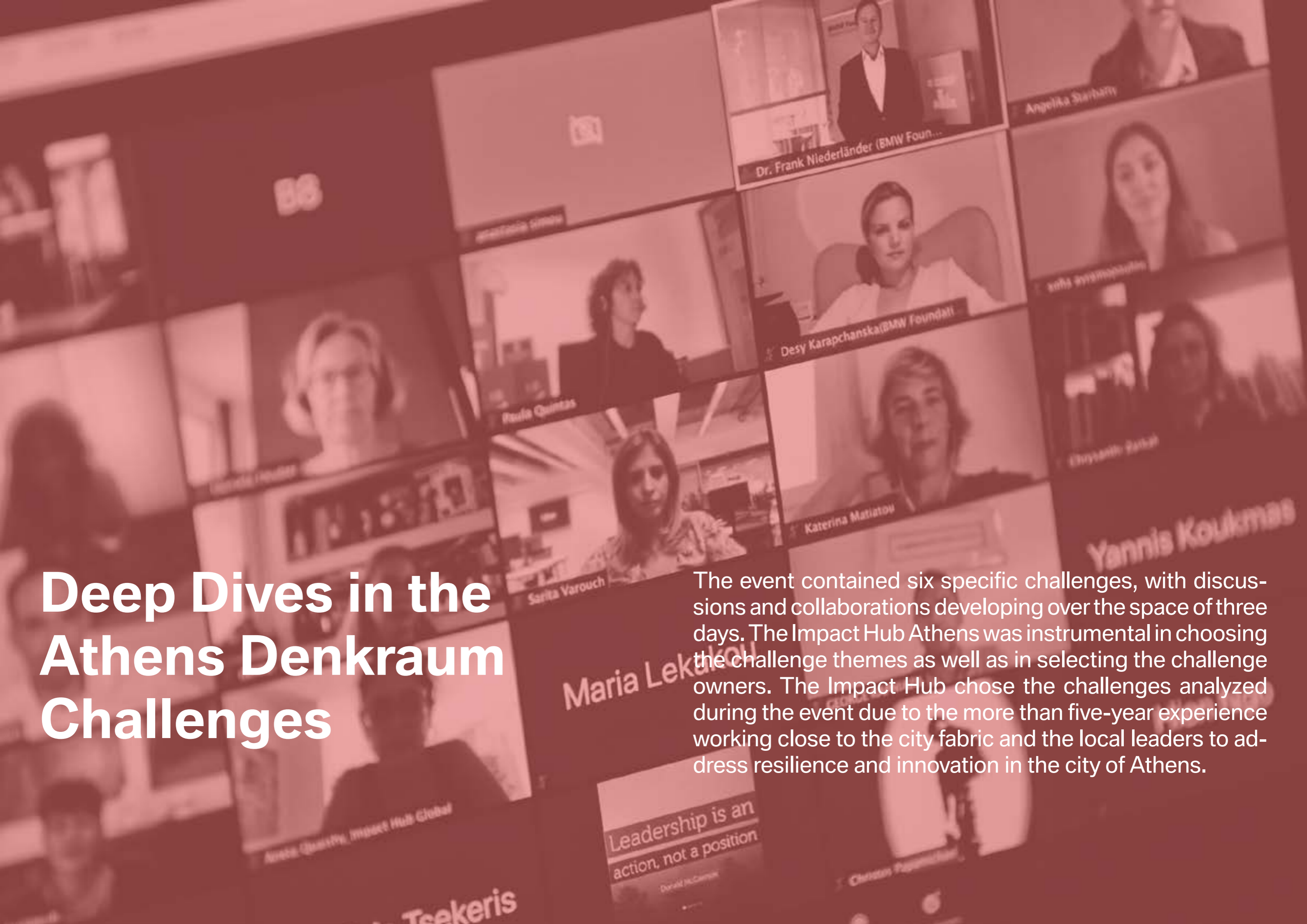
“We have to be humble”, stressed Ms Mitsotaki, “recognizing solutions coming from the bottom up”. Everyone needs to be involved as an active agent of change, and the silos between the different disciplines need to be broken down. All aspects of the SDGs need to be developed in parallel: sustainability needs democracy, which needs education of the citizens, which in turn leads to personal development, technology and art.

An interesting perspective developed during the Q&A session that followed, when participants commented that the bottom-up solutions recommended by both keynote speakers are more often than not resisted by the political leaders, due to inertia, bureaucracy and their need for control. Both speakers acknowledged this phenomenon, but urged the participants to aim for more completeness and realism in their proposals to counter it.



# Deep Dives in the Athens Denkraum Challenges

The event contained six specific challenges, with discussions and collaborations developing over the space of three days. The Impact Hub Athens was instrumental in choosing the challenge themes as well as in selecting the challenge owners. The Impact Hub chose the challenges analyzed during the event due to the more than five-year experience working close to the city fabric and the local leaders to address resilience and innovation in the city of Athens.





# Electric Mobility

How can we amplify  
infrastructure & use  
of electric cars?

## Green Mobility from Schneider Electric

The empty streets, quiet nights and fresh air that Athenians enjoyed during the spring lockdown soon gave way to bottlenecks, horns and exhaust fumes as the city regained its normal rhythms. How alternative to organize **green and more user-friendly mobility networks** in the city of Athens was one of the challenges addressed during the Denkraum Athens. Schneider Electric AEBE, the challenge owner, and Mr Spyros Raptis, its CEO and discussion facilitator, explained that the problem needs a conceptual leap.

“With electric vehicles, we charge when we stop, we do not stop to charge,” he said. Resolving this would in principle need the creation of a big network of charging sites. However, most of the tools needed are already invented and are there waiting to be adapted and incorporated in a local platform that will serve the local needs. **All buildings are already connected** to the electric grid: the grid operators and administrators need to change their thinking and **start integrating them into a city-wide charging network.**



A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a light-colored sleeveless top and a necklace, is speaking into a microphone. She is standing at a podium in front of a stone wall. There are plants and a window with a view of a city in the background. The entire image has a purple tint.

# Waste Management from Coca-Cola

As the hotels, tavernas and restaurants of Athens slowly start filling again, the challenge of waste management, in particular waste coming from the Hotel, Restaurant and Catering industry (HoReCa) will raise its – dirty – head once more. The challenge, as analyzed by its “owner”, Coca-Cola, and Betty Tsakarestou, the corresponding facilitator, is to move towards a **robust network for zero waste in the HoReCa industry.**

Many solutions were discussed during the session, including plans to involve more stakeholders from multiple spaces like academics, customers, citizens and owners of the HoReCa industry, give them **information** about zero-waste techniques and **economic incentives** to participate, as well as develop specific **measures of success**. The most specific plan refers to Shedia (Σχεδία), a spin-off that will act as a combination of restaurant, media platform and recycling initiative which will give the ability to test in small scale any proposed specific scheme for a zero-waste HoReCa industry.

# Financing Sustainability from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

The ideas and solutions discussed and discovered during all challenge deep dives would be moot without proper financing: therefore, ideas for **financing breakthroughs appropriate to innovation and sustainability** constituted a final challenge of the Athens Denkraum.

Maya Hennerkes, from the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, the challenge owner summarized the session by admitting that unfortunately, the finance industry is not famous for its innovative and experimental thinking.

However, Maya sees that a **transition from a shareholder culture to a stakeholder one** is the most important step in the industry, if it is going to support and finance sustainable, innovative solutions for the city.





A woman is seated at a desk in a modern office space, working on a laptop. The room features stone walls and a potted plant on a table. The overall atmosphere is professional and creative.

# Spaces of the City Fabric from the Heritage Management Organization

Athens City centre, especially after the multiple crises of the past few decades contains many derelict buildings, representing an architectural style that is unique in Greece. The Heritage Management Organization, owner of this challenge, represented by Evangelos Kyriakidis and Ioannis Trohopoulos, the discussion facilitators, directed thinking towards awareness of the issue and solutions for the **use and financial development of derelict cultural heritage buildings** in Athens.

The deep dive and discussion proposed the **creation of a registry of buildings** and their potential uses, **dissemination of information** about them at the local level, and **working together with local agents** in the decision-making process for the buildings' restoration and development.



A photograph of a woman and a man sitting at a table in a cafe, both working on laptops. The woman is on the left, smiling at her screen. The man is on the right, also looking at his laptop. The background shows a stone wall and a window with curtains. The entire image has a reddish-brown tint.

# Resilient Culture from co- Museum (Benaki Museum, British Council and the American Embassy)

Directly connected to the previous challenge, but taking a more general view of culture is the challenge of ensuring the **right to culture for everyone**, using the ecosystem of museums and cultural organizations in order to **bring citizens together** again after the pandemic or even during it. The coMuseum, a collaborative cultural effort between the Benaki Museum, the American Embassy and the British Council was the challenge owner, and Sophia Chandaka, Eleni Alexaki and Maria Papaioannou the facilitators.

Solutions proposed during the deep dive focused on **co-working with citizens** and creating, together with them, a **new sense of culture** with which everyone will be able to identify and stand by.

Specific groups that should be tapped without being targeted include **islanders**, living away from the main cultural centres and happenings, and the **senior citizens**, who can be utilized to create artistic/historic events, performances and artefacts based on their experience, merging with existing cultural institutions. **Digital access** to cultural experience will help, especially during the pandemic, but is not a panacea.

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# Greening the Piraeus Port from Piraeus Port Authority S.A.

Piraeus and its port were closely connected to Athens already during Classical Antiquity, constituting the main gate of entrance for merchandise, people and ideas. The modern shipping industry and port facilities are a lively and dynamic part of city life also today, but also generate pollution and congestion issues.

The challenge concerning the port of Piraeus, as presented by the challenge owner, Piraeus Port Authority SA, and Dimitris Spyrou, Strategic Planning and Marketing consultant of the company, is to discover **zero-emission solutions for the port area**.

The discussion pointed towards a **multi-stakeholder** solution, incorporating ideas from **local citizens, academics and market agents** of the area. A **collaboration tool** needs to be developed to reinforce and continue this cooperation, while particular solutions like **alternative fuels** for the ships, **green mobility** in the port area and bigger **efficiency of the port operations** and more are developed.



## Thinkers into Makers: The conclusions from Denkraum Athens

Kerstin von Aretin from the BMW Herbert Quandt Foundation closed the session by a short reference to the Denkraum series' and its predecessors' history: "what started as a day-long event, moved to week-long format with detailed discussions and better organized collaboration", she said.

Even the mobility and congregation disruptions worked in some ways towards better productivity allowing more disparate networks to form and more distant persons to integrate into the discussion, according to Ms von Aretin. The most important thing going forward will be to keep these discussions alive, and try to make the "Thinkers-room" into a "Makers-room", implementing the solutions discovered at the local level, and sharing the experience with all other future participants in the Denkraum series.

And as a closing wish from Sophie Lamprou from the Impact Hub Athens, where she shared "We are very excited to have been working the last months tirelessly to bring Denkraum to Athens. It is a format that contributes directly to the core parameters of our strategy and work: to bring together unlikely allies and to contribute with solutions in topics around urbanism, circular economy, tech- 4- good, activism and finally, systemic change working with handpicked leaders in these sectors. We all make up a community of doers. And especially at a time when the system we, personally and collectively, live and operate in, is being tested, it's critical to join forces and amplify positive impact to bring change. The challenge of organizing and facilitating this event, under these unusual circumstances, filled us with confidence regarding the change we all want to see.

We want to thank the BMW foundation, all of the participants and challenge owners for the trust, the courage & the collaboration to join forces in this step forward. After three days of deep diving in these critical topics of our city, we have seen how complex and broad these issues are, something that only proves that impact cannot happen in isolation. Making an impact needs collective and coordinated action by people who stay committed, compassionate and courageous to go against odds, to move out of their comfort zones and make noise.

Let's co-create a more resilient, equitable, sustainable and inclusive cities!"



## LinkedIn Group

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8979696/>

Denkraum Athens Good Life  
and Sustainable cities

## Social Media

@BMWFoundation @impacthubathens



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