World Design Capital
Frankfurt RheinMain 2026

Let’s design Frankfurt RheinMain together

Recommendations from the WDC Project Office for a *Design Action Plan* for the Frankfurt RheinMain Region

November 2026

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Recommendations by the WDC Project Office for a *Design Action Plan Frankfurt RheinMain*, addressed to decision-makers at municipal, regional and state level, networks, associations and civil society organisations.

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Development: This paper brings together the experiences gained during the WDC year 2026 and the discussions surrounding its legacy: from the design policy workshop with PDR (Cardiff Metropolitan University) in June 2025, through roundtables on Design Week and Design Hub (April 2026) and on Chief Design Officers and a Design Policy Unit (August 2026), to consultations with the Advisory Board and Board of Trustees. These were supplemented by an online survey of associations (71 responses to date) and numerous individual discussions. We regard the recommendations set out here as a preliminary step towards a *Design Action Plan Frankfurt RheinMain*, which will need to be formally adopted at the respective levels of responsibility.

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Introduction

Frankfurt RheinMain possesses exceptional design expertise – and a willingness to use it collectively to shape the region's future.

Under the guiding theme *Design for Democracy. Atmospheres for a better life*, around 450 project and cooperation partners from culture, academia, business, politics and civil society have taken part. Around 2,000 events have reached people, generated new partnerships and structures, connected existing networks and strengthened the region's sense of identity, highlighting its creative and innovative potential for democratic participation, sustainable transformation processes and economic value creation.

At the same time, the year has revealed what causes good ideas to fail: decisions that were not communicated transparently, political procedures that perpetuate themselves and departmental boundaries that have prevented even promising WDC projects from progressing. This is precisely where design expertise comes into play: it makes processes visible, tests alternatives on a small scale and ensures that participation leads to tangible outcomes.

The mandate of the WDC Project Office ends with 2026. To ensure that the momentum generated towards shaping a democratically successful and economically viable future for the region does not end with the WDC year, decisions are needed at municipal, regional and state levels, alongside the continued commitment of the various civil society communities. This paper sets out recommendations for how the experiences of WDC 2026, together with the findings of the impact study (March 2027), can form the basis of a *Design Action Plan Frankfurt RheinMain (DAP)*.

We are all united by the desire to design a future for Frankfurt RheinMain that people can experience and enjoy. The foundation for this lies in our shared values of freedom, fairness, intergenerational justice and democracy. The proposed structures bring people together and provide access to knowledge, spaces and support.

This is how shared ideas become lasting improvements to everyday life.

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At a Glance

Three Legacy Goals:

- **State: Embed design expertise in politics and public administration**, so that good ideas do not fail because of departmental boundaries and entrenched procedures.
- **Region: Strengthen the design region as an active force with interdisciplinary** networks so that the knowledge gained during the WDC year is retained and municipalities, universities, civil society and businesses can work together on issues such as climate adaptation, vacant properties, participation and mobility.
- **Municipalities: Make good design more quickly visible in everyday life** – in public squares, on streets and at public service counters, in other words, wherever people across the region want to see change.

Five Recommendations:

The WDC year has demonstrated what design can achieve in concrete terms: *CARLO* provides natural shade and improves the quality of public spaces, *WerkRaum Wiesbaden* transforms vacant premises into a shared community space and *Neue Frankfurter Stadtteilküche* combines food and nutrition with solidarity in action. Our five recommendations build on these examples. They aim to create the conditions for such approaches to become more than isolated cases, enabling them to be developed further, transferred to other locations and have a lasting impact. This requires not only the sharing of design expertise, but also reliable structures, resources and concrete implementation on the ground.

1. **From an exceptional year to an ongoing task: a central design unit for Hesse**
2. **From individual cases to widespread implementation: an expert team to advise municipalities**
3. **From festival to regular event: Design Week, Campus and *Design Value made in Hessen* every two years**
4. **From network to physical space: a Design Hub for meeting and learning**
5. **From prototype to public space: urban space task forces with concrete pilot projects**

Why Now?

- **Mandate:** The WDC Project Office will operate only until mid-2027. This paper forms part of the handover and documentation process. It provides the basis for a seamless and swift continuation of WDC themes under new responsibilities.
- **Budget:** The budgets for 2028 onwards will determine whether these initiatives can continue.
- **Commitment:** Civil society, associations and institutions are ready to remain involved. After a year of considerable commitment, what is needed now are structures, additional resources and long-term prospects.
- **Evidence:** The impact study will provide the evidence base at the end of March 2027. Responsibilities must be clarified by then.

The WDC year has demonstrated that design can be a decisive element of democratic processes. We therefore propose a *Design Action Plan* to establish a lasting structure based on this experience.

Open – Design Week Frankfurt RheinMain © Ben Kuhlmann



Highlights from the WDC Campus Opening © Ben Kuhlmann





CARLO – Shady planted elements for Bockenheim © OMCC



Trad is a Trap – for a new neighbourhood kitchen in Frankfurt © Admassu M. Kombolcha



WDC Hub Opening at the Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt © Ben Kuhlmann



WerkRaum Wiesbaden as part of the Focus Day in Wiesbaden, Open – Design Week © Ben Kuhlmann



Highlights from the WDC Campus Opening © Ben Kuhlmann

1. Who This Paper Is Addressed To

The WDC Project Office holds the mandate granted during the application and implementation phases for a limited period ending in mid-2027 (the programme itself ends in 2026). It therefore does not determine a successor structure. Instead, through this paper, it returns the mandate to the levels of government responsible for deciding whether and how the work should continue.

WDC 2026 has demonstrated the wealth of design expertise already present in the region. The central task now is to establish lasting connections between these areas of expertise and integrate them into political and administrative processes.

A future *Design Action Plan* should therefore pursue the three legacy goals through structures at the corresponding levels:

- **State:** Permanently embed design expertise in politics and public administration, as well as in economic development policy, where it can serve as both a component and a driver of the region's attractiveness and economic development.
- **Regional:** Pool expertise, establish interdisciplinary networks on a structural basis and support municipalities in addressing complex challenges for the future.
- **Municipal:** Integrate design as a process into urban development and translate it quickly into concrete action.

Each recommendation in this paper identifies the level to which the mandate is being returned. However, politics alone cannot generate the necessary momentum. Civil society, design communities, associations, universities and businesses must agree on a shared commitment for the period beyond 2026.

The roles are clearly defined: the state coordinates activities within its areas of responsibility, the region shares both the funding and the benefits and municipalities implement concrete projects.

2. What the WDC Year Has Demonstrated and What Follows From It

What Worked Well

From the outset, the aim was about more than individual exhibitions or events. It was to create a collaborative network, bringing together different areas of expertise, social groups, institutions and businesses. WDC has achieved this goal. The central question bringing everyone together was: How do we want to live together – and what role can design play in this? In doing so, the WDC year built on a distinctive regional tradition: the movement surrounding St Paul's Church, the pioneering spirit of the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt at the beginning of the last century and, not least, the social vision of *New Frankfurt* – to name just three key examples.

Design shapes objects, products, media and communication as well as spaces, services, processes and social interaction. The WDC year has demonstrated that design also plays an essential role in shaping relationships: between citizens and politics, academia and business, public administration and civil society.

Projects and prototypes illustrate what is possible:

- *CARLO* in Frankfurt-Bockenheim: providing natural shade, cooling and more pleasant public spaces through planted shading elements
- *WerkRaum Wiesbaden:* repurposing vacant premises as a third place
- *Neue Frankfurter Stadtteilküche*: promoting solidarity-based food provision and collective care, all three examples under the thematic focus *Shaping Living Environments together*
- *DemokratieKioske:* providing accessible opportunities for democratic education and participation
- *MARA* mobility concept: a WDC Campus project exploring the design of needs-based mobility and better transport connections in rural areas, both examples under the thematic focus *Rethinking Learning*, *Exploring Design*
- *Open Design Week Frankfurt RheinMain:* promoting resource-efficient business practices and cross-sector collaboration
- *Ausgezeichnet: Design Value made in Hessen:* showcasing outstanding design achievements by Hessian companies and design as a driver of innovation, excellence and value creation, helping to position Frankfurt RheinMain and the state of Hesse as an attractive, forward-looking business location, both examples under the thematic focus *Future Cycles – Design, Crafts, and Industry*

- *Mishpocha, The Art of Collaboration* at the Jewish Museum Frankfurt: demonstrating the unifying power of making and experiencing music together and fostering a sense of community across differences in background and family ties, under the thematic focus *Engaging All the Senses*
- *Geschichtsabdrucke / Antifaschistische Orte in Offenbach*: using design to engage with remembrance culture and democratic responsibility under the thematic focus *Design in Dialogue: in Politics and Society*

Feedback from the public underlines the importance of urban spaces: 70% of citizens' responses collected through the *Demokratiedeckel* surveys relate to public urban space. In their survey responses, the design associations likewise point to the holistic impact of design, which becomes particularly visible in public urban spaces.

What Did Not Work Well

Since the application phase, the situation has deteriorated further. Democracies are under pressure, society is polarised and wars and economic uncertainty are holding back engagement and investment. The WDC year has felt the effects of these developments too. They have made our guiding idea more urgent, not less.

At the same time, we must acknowledge our own shortcomings. With around 2,000 events and 450 partnerships, we prioritised breadth. This enabled us to reach many people, but it also spread our resources thinly and made individual projects less visible. We did not communicate all our decisions with sufficient transparency. Where participation raised expectations that a time-limited mandate could not fulfil, we risked losing trust rather than strengthening it.

Moreover, promising initiatives were delayed or stalled by departmental boundaries and lengthy approval procedures. Two patterns lie behind this: the path dependency of political processes, in which established procedures perpetuate themselves because any deviation is more costly than repetition, and the institutional inertia of public administrations structured around clearly separated departments. Too often, we accepted the interfaces between them as obstacles rather than recognising them early on as design challenges in their own right.

Two conclusions follow from this. Design cannot solve these problems on its own, but it can help address them earlier and across departmental boundaries. And a lasting legacy, particularly after a festival year with such a broad programme, requires fewer, larger-scale initiatives that remain visible for longer and have clearly defined responsibilities. This is where the following recommendations come in.

Our Goal

WDC 2026 asked how we want to live together. The objectives of WDC 2026 are set out in the application documents, the Mission Statement and the *Design Action Plan* (June 2026 version) and remain unchanged. This paper describes the structures through which they can be pursued beyond 2026. Through concrete projects in specific locations, our region has demonstrated what a future worth experiencing could look like. We must now build on this: successful approaches need opportunities for further development, while collaborative design requires reliable frameworks and better thought-out processes. The foundations for this are freedom, fairness, intergenerational justice and democracy.

Design is not an end in itself. It connects people and empowers them to envision, test and shape their future together. When participation leads to visible change, people can experience that their contribution matters.

Three Legacy Goals, from the Broadest to the Most Local

Embed design expertise in politics and public administration at state level. Public innovation, progress, excellence and value creation must be recognised and supported effectively and efficiently. This requires pooled expertise, determined action and close links to political decision-making.

To ensure that ideas from the region reach those who make decisions about funding, services and regulatory frameworks, Hesse needs a cross-departmental point of contact for design. This will turn the WDC year into a lasting competitive advantage for the region beyond 2026.

Strengthen the design region as a lasting resource. The region brings together an exceptional concentration of universities, businesses, creative industries and cultural institutions. Their interdisciplinary collaboration requires reliable spaces and formats, as well as a shared narrative that defines the region – in creative, innovative and sustainable ways.

The aim is to turn around 450 partnerships into a lasting network connecting municipalities, universities, businesses and civil society beyond the Project Office's mandate. This will ensure that the knowledge gained during the WDC year remains in the region and can be applied to shared challenges such as climate adaptation, vacant properties and mobility.

Make good design at municipal level visible in everyday life – quickly. The focus is on specific places and tangible improvements: climate-resilient public squares and streets, better public spaces, user-friendly services and new forms of participation. The next step is therefore to make full use of the flexibility offered by existing regulations (experimental clauses, KommFlexG, reversal of the

burden of proof, deemed approval and Building Type E) and accelerate progress through prototypes, mock-ups and beta versions.

For citizens to experience that their participation makes a difference, improvements must quickly become visible where they want to see change: in public squares, on streets and at public service counters. This builds trust that symbolic participation alone cannot create.

3. Our Impact Theory

Our recommendations are based on a systematic assessment. For each successful project from the WDC year, we ask why it should be continued and what social, economic, ecological or cognitive impact it has had. From this, we determine the level at which it needs to be embedded (municipal, regional or state), which recommendation follows and to whom responsibility for implementation should be transferred.

Two approaches must work together: structures established 'from above' enable impact and reliability, while participation and local practice 'from below' create acceptance, knowledge and tangible change.

The key point here is that everyone benefits collectively from the knowledge generated: what an expert team learns in one project, what an urban space task force discovers in a public square and what becomes visible through the Design Week and the Design Hub must be made available as shared regional knowledge through the central design unit. This also provides the basis for measuring impact and adjusting the *Design Action Plan*.

Five Principles Guide Our Recommendations

1. **Build on what already exists. Avoid parallel structures and involve existing institutions.**
2. **Start with a limited timeframe. Launch new projects as experiments with clearly defined measures of success.**
3. **Focus on a few priorities. Do not continue everything, but concentrate on what promises lasting impact.**
4. **Bring people together early. Civil society, public administration, the design community and policymakers develop initiatives together.**
5. **Demonstrate impact. Focus not only on indicators, but also on visible change.**

4. Five Structural Recommendations

If the region is to achieve the three legacy goals, we believe it needs the corresponding structure described below. Each recommendation identifies the responsible level, structure, mode of operation, tasks, budget and necessary first steps. The aim of all five recommendations is not to create new positions for designers, but to make existing procedures faster, more collaborative across departments and more open to participation.

Recommendation 1
From an Exceptional Year to an Ongoing Task: A Central design unit for Hesse

The state and municipalities establish clear, permanent responsibilities for design in politics and public administration. If design expertise is to become an integral part of government and administrative practice, and the legacy of WDC 2026 is to be coordinated and sustained, a unit is needed at state level to bring together knowledge, develop the strategy further, assess impact and connect the other recommendations.

- **Structure:** A five-year pilot, linked to the state government across departmental boundaries and integrated into exchanges with subordinate authorities, regional bodies and municipalities. Connection to existing instruments in Hesse (see Recommendation 5: bureaucracy reduction, experimental clauses and model municipalities).
- **Mode of operation:** Projects undertaken by the central design unit (technical term: Design Policy Unit) are either initiated by the unit itself or launched in response to concrete input from the region, with feedback loops involving the expert team (Recommendation 2) and the Design Hub (Recommendation 4).
- **Tasks:**
  - **Strategy:** Take the lead in developing this paper into a formally adopted *Design Action Plan* for the Frankfurt RheinMain region and the state of Hesse.
  - **Knowledge transfer:** Facilitate knowledge exchange between recommendations, levels of government and projects.
  - **Impact assessment:** Use the impact study (March 2027) as the basis for three to five indicators, with the next evaluation after three years.
  - **Develop solutions in a protected environment:** Work with public administration on solutions such as service design for funding applications, support for bureaucracy reduction and

model municipalities, and design support for digitalisation and AI, with an emphasis on transparency and participation.
    - **Secure formats:** Organise and safeguard the delivery, organisational responsibility and financing of Design Week, Campus and *Design Value made in Hessen* (Recommendation 3).
    - **Maintain and strengthen the design ecosystem:** Bring together all stakeholders from industry and business with design communities, the cultural and creative industries, associations and universities in a joint initiative rather than supporting competing individual structures.
    - **Budget:** Approximately €0.3–0.6 million per year. Programme budgets for Design Week, Campus, *Design Value made in Hessen* and the Design Fund are not included.
    - **Commitment:** Bring design communities, associations and universities together in a joint initiative rather than supporting competing individual structures.
- **Budget:** Approximately €0.3–0.6 million per year. Programme budgets for Design Week, Campus, *Design Value made in Hessen* and the Design Fund are not included.
- **First step in 2027:** Commission a feasibility review and clarify lead responsibility before budget deliberations for 2028 begin.

Recommendation 2
From Individual Cases to Widespread Implementation: An Expert Team to Advise Municipalities

Dedicated Chief Design Officer positions are unrealistic for most municipalities. Instead of individual posts, we recommend a regional expert team (FRM Design Board) that municipalities can call on for advice. Its task is to deploy design as a strategic competence in urban development, public administration, citizen participation and innovation policy.

- **Structure:** No new organisational unit. The pool of experts will be assembled through existing structures. Projects will be managed along the lines of the state's existing design advisory service. Senior Design Officers from design, architecture, urban and transport planning and universities will be appointed for periods of three to six months, depending on the project.
- **Mode of operation:** Working with municipalities, the team will select transferable cases, develop solutions on site and disseminate the findings across the region. The appointment of experts and the presentation of their work at Design Week, Campus and *Design Value made in Hessen* will lend the initiative symbolic weight. The findings

from each case will be passed on to the Design Policy Unit (Recommendation 1).

- **Tasks:** Expertise in process management and design; cross departmental collaboration; user-friendly public administration (service design and UX); bureaucracy reduction; cross-sector innovation (cross-innovation) involving public administration, business and citizens; participation and the common good.
- **Financing:** Establish a Design Fund to which businesses and the state of Hesse contribute. The fund could potentially also support design-driven cross-innovation projects approaching market readiness.
- **Budget:** Approximately €200,000 per year for the appointments. An additional fund of approximately €0.5–1 million for projects.
- **First step in 2027:** Clarify the administrative body responsible and the cost-sharing model, develop two to three model packages, identify pilot municipalities and make the first appointments.

Recommendation 3
From Festival to Regular Event: Design Week, Campus and *Design Value made in Hessen* Every Two Years

Design Week will take place every two years, with the *Design Value made in Hessen* exhibition becoming a permanent feature. The Design Campus at the Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt will form the central nucleus, potentially with alternating biennial formats. Regional hubs will showcase the region's diverse areas of expertise. The aim is to establish a format that connects innovation, academia, business and design and becomes a permanent fixture on the international design calendar. A central hub in Frankfurt (Recommendation 4) will be complemented by regional satellites, for example with a focus on Offenbach, Darmstadt and Wiesbaden.

- **Structure:** A central exhibition organised in cooperation with (design) associations and communities (satellites). Potential integration of existing formats such as the *see-Conference, Hessen Design Competition, State Award for Universal Design* and *Creative Week Frankfurt*. The Design Policy Unit will safeguard commissioning, organisational responsibility and financing.
- **Mode of operation:** 'Allow it to grow slowly': establish relevance through the choice of themes and depth rather than scale. The format will serve two audiences: as a platform for the design community and as a means of raising design's profile among policymakers and businesses. At the same time, it will make the diversity and strength of design in Frankfurt RheinMain tangible and accessible to people across the region and the entire state.

- **Tasks**: Curate the programme around an overarching theme; facilitate knowledge transfer between academia, applied design and business; involve businesses from the outset.
- **Budget**: Approximately €1.6–1.9 million per edition. A funding mix comprising contributions from the state, municipalities, trade fair organisations, foundations and businesses, alongside participation fees and ticket revenues (approximately €0.1–0.3 million). Explore EU funding opportunities.
- **Option**: Apply for UNESCO City of Design status (municipally led, approximately 0.5 FTE).
- **First step in 2027**: Prepare a budget and an agreement on the organising body for the 2028 edition.

Recommendation 4
From Network to Physical Space: a Design Hub for Meeting and Learning

A regional Design Hub will bring together networks, knowledge and projects. It will serve as an incubator for ideas, an advisory and competence centre, a venue for events and learning, and a link between design, business, academia, professional communities, public administration, politics and citizens. This will give the region a permanent physical and institutional home for innovation by design.

- **Structure**: No new building, but a hybrid model: links to existing institutions, flexible pop-up formats and digital infrastructure. A permanent WDC Hub (in Frankfurt, Offenbach or Darmstadt) could serve as an anchor, with universities as key partners.
- **Mode of operation**: Conceived as a learning environment and a place for exchange and skills development, rather than (merely) a showcase venue.
- **Tasks**: Establish lasting connections between the various design communities; incubate ideas; provide certified continuing education (micro-credentials) in service design, social design and participation; create a publicly accessible, physical knowledge archive documenting WDC projects and their impact.
- **Budget**: Approximately €0.5–1 million per year, excluding the costs of the premises themselves.
- **First step in 2027**: Identify possible locations for continuing the existing WDC Hub at the Museum Angewandte Kunst and establish a permanent location. Consider the continuation of the Hub alongside the longer-term development of a dedicated space or building in order to exploit synergies.

Recommendation 5
From Prototype to Public Space: Urban Space Task Forces with Concrete Pilot Projects

Transforming public spaces requires not only advice and participation, but also the capacity to implement projects. The Urban Space Task Force combines interdisciplinary expertise with a clear mandate and, jointly with civil society, rapidly brings projects from concept to implementation.

- **Structure:** Initially established as a temporary task force, later becoming a permanent delivery unit (for example, a dedicated staff unit, a municipally owned company or an intermunicipal special-purpose association). At its core will be an interdisciplinary team of specialists from design, urban planning, architecture and landscape architecture, mobility, sociology and climate research. Municipalities will be responsible for assessing the model. Existing planning bodies and design advisory boards will be involved. Priority will be given to ensuring the unit's ability to act.
- **Mode of operation:** Bridging the familiar gaps between participation and actual implementation. The unit will organise co-design processes with local stakeholders, work with rapid prototypes, coordinate responsibilities across administrative departments and ensure ongoing operation and maintenance.
- **Tasks:** Implement selected pilot location projects; evaluate and transfer proven prototypes; establish neighbourhood participation as a permanent component; work with public administration to simplify approval procedures.
- **Budget:** Organisational costs of approximately €0.25–0.4 million per year; implementation costs to be co-financed through state and federal funding programmes.
- **First step in 2027:** Secure political agreement on pilot locations and establish the task forces. One pilot project will be implemented as the first regionally visible model project.

5. Roadmap 2026–2030

- **November 2026:** Publication of this position paper. The *Design Assembly* on 14 November 2026 marks not the end of WDC 2026, but the beginning of the next phase.
- **December 2026:** Publication of a comprehensive review of the WDC year.

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- **January to June 2027:** Impact study (March). Clarification of lead responsibilities and submission of concrete proposals for budget decisions for 2028 onwards. Pilot locations and task forces. Commissioning of a feasibility review for the Design Policy Unit. Model packages for the expert team. WDC Hub at the Museum Angewandte Kunst as the first Hub location. Formal adoption of a *Design Action Plan*.
- **Mid-2027:** End of the WDC Project Office's mandate.
- **2028:** First biennial edition of Design Week and Campus, including the *Design Value made in Hessen* exhibition. First pilot projects undertaken by the Design Policy Unit and first assignments for the expert team.
- **2029/2030:** Evaluation and decision on establishing permanent structures. Further development of the *Design Action Plan*.

6. The Decision Point in 2026

Through the WDC year, Frankfurt RheinMain has demonstrated what can emerge when participatory, democratic design processes are enabled, a region pools its creative expertise and develops a mindset of collaborative design.

World Design Capital 2026 asked how we want to live together. The answer is not an event, but an ongoing task: collectively shaping and taking responsibility for a future worth experiencing. This requires permanently embedded design expertise that connects people and enables collective action – in our cities, across the region and throughout the state.

By taking these steps, Frankfurt RheinMain can build on its tradition of democratic design while opening a new chapter on the international stage.

This paper puts forward a proposal for achieving this. It is up to the state, the region and the municipalities to formally adopt it.

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