

Iași Civic Quest: A participatory board game for convergent urbanism and architectural pedagogy

Alexandru Sescioreanu^{1*}

¹Order of Architects of Romania, Bucharest, Romania.*sescioreanu@gmail.com

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Abstract

Iași Civic Quest presents a board-game methodology that translates contemporary urban dilemmas into an accessible, face-to-face simulation. Rooted in the spatial culture of Iași, Romania, the game invites players—students, residents, professionals, and officials—to negotiate real planning scenarios across four domains (Nature, Housing, Academia, and Industry). Drawing on participatory design, tactical urbanism, and architectural pedagogy, the paper argues that analog games can scaffold trust, empathy, and systems literacy. The methodological section details the game’s design-based research framework, modular components, and five gameplay phases (Challenge, Positioning, Intervention, Impact, Reflection). Following informal play tests conducted with architecture students, initial observations suggest substantial pedagogical value: role play fosters empathy; iterative mapping develops critical judgment; and structured reflection nurtures metacognition. The discussion reframes architecture as civic mediation, positioning Iași Civic Quest as a transferable platform for convergent practice in both academic and community settings.

Keywords: Architecture; Collaboration; Trust; Convergence; Participatory urbanism; Board games; Iași

Introduction

This paper introduces *Iași Civic Quest*, a participatory board game designed as a tool for spatial negotiation, civic imagination, and architectural education in the context of Iași, Romania. Developed in relation to the activities and discourse within Iași school of architecture, the project explores how analog games can serve as instruments for interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusive urban development, and pedagogical innovation.

While gamification is increasingly present in planning and education, few tools translate complex urban tensions into accessible, socially engaging formats. *Iași Civic Quest* emerges from this gap, drawing inspiration from participatory design, tactical urbanism, and spatial-justice theories. It is grounded in real urban challenges identified through local studies, including the struggle to meet the national standard of 26 m² of green space per resident, mistrust between residents and authorities, and the seasonal outflow of student populations.

The paper reflects on the broader implications of using analog games in architectural pedagogy and practice while positioning *Iași Civic Quest* as a design-research framework for fostering intergenerational and interdisciplinary dialogue. It argues that board games, when carefully designed and contextually embedded, can scaffold trust-building processes across communities, institutions, and urban systems.

Crucially, Iași hosts an active constellation of non-governmental organizations—such as CIVICA, Asociația Mai Bine, and Artipic—that routinely convene residents around urban and environmental issues. Their presence creates a civic *infrastructure of trust* that the board game can plug into, ensuring that gameplay is not an isolated academic exercise but part of an existing participatory culture.

Literature Review

Architecture today is increasingly situated at the confluence of disciplines—urban studies, environmental ethics, digital media, and participatory governance. Within this expanded field, new frameworks are needed to negotiate the relational and ethical dimensions of space-making. This paper responds to the need for architecture to become a trustworthy platform—one that connects rather than isolates; that mediates rather than dictates.

In Iași, the stakes of participatory urbanism are particularly high. Recent research (MKOR, 2023) highlights citizens' concerns about underused public areas, lack of transparency in urban policies, and minimal youth involvement in civic processes. The Bahlui Riverbanks, for example, represent a space of both ecological neglect and social opportunity. Similar tensions exist across housing, green infrastructure, and post-industrial sites. These areas of contestation demand tools that not only visualise possibilities but also activate participation.

Reports produced by local NGOs (e.g., CIVICA, 2025) complement academic studies by mapping procedural bottlenecks and proposing low-threshold engagement tools. These grassroots insights reinforce the need for formats—such as *Iași Civic Quest*—that translate abstract planning language into citizen-friendly negotiations.

Iași Civic Quest reimagines the board game as an urban laboratory for negotiating spatial justice and sustainability. While it draws inspiration from precedents such as UN-Habitat's Block by Block initiative — where Minecraft is used to help residents co-design public spaces, from informal settlements in Nairobi to waterfronts in Stockholm— and the educational uses of sandbox games in Sweden and Nepal, it departs from purely digital models by foregrounding in-person negotiation, tactile mapping, and collaborative role-play. These qualities make it particularly effective for architecture students and local stakeholders, enabling them not only to visualize alternative futures but also to reflect on the ethical, environmental, and civic dimensions of design practice.

Methodology

The methodology behind *Iași Civic Quest* emerges from a fusion of design thinking, participatory planning practices, and board-game development principles. Conceived not merely as entertainment or pedagogical aid, the game functions as a structured framework for civic rehearsal, role negotiation, and collaborative scenario planning. This section details the methodological architecture of the game—its structure, mechanics, theoretical underpinnings, and envisioned modes of application.

Urban systems are inherently complex. They involve interdependent variables: environmental constraints, stakeholder agendas, institutional logics, financial pressures, cultural narratives, and lived experiences. Designing an educational or participatory tool that addresses this complexity without oversimplifying it requires careful abstraction.

Iași Civic Quest responds by adopting the logic of “serious games,” a category of gameplay designed not only for amusement but for reflection, training, and decision-making. Like other analog civic games (e.g., the *Participatory Budgeting Game*, *Urban Strategy Game*, *Common Ground*), this board game translates the messiness of city-making into a sequenced, rule-bound, and collaborative process. However, it retains an open-endedness that mirrors real-world ambiguity: outcomes are negotiated, not prescribed; trade-offs are made visible, not masked.

The game leverages design-based research principles, where prototyping itself becomes a form of inquiry. In this case, the development of the game is understood as both a product and a process: an intervention that seeks to make architectural education more participatory and reflective, and a tool to explore how trust is negotiated in civic spaces.

Game Structure: Components and Rounds

The game board is a stylized map of Iași, divided into four thematic quadrants—Nature, Housing, Academia, and Industry. These zones

correspond to key urban domains frequently cited in local research as being under pressure or in transformation. Each quadrant can be played independently or in interaction with others, enabling flexible session design.

Core components include:

- The board: a simplified territorial representation of the city that provides the ground for developing different scenarios.
- Scenario cards (Challenge Cards): based on real-world situations in Iași (e.g., reactivation of underutilized sites, post-industrial reuse, student or tourist behavior), each card frames a dilemma.
- Resource tokens: representing budgets, influence points, ecological footprint, or social capital.
- Feedback mechanics: dice, facilitator reactions, or “public-opinion” tokens that capture support or backlash to proposed actions.

A typical session unfolds across five phases:

1. Challenge Briefing – A scenario is introduced by the facilitator, presenting background data, conflicting interests, and urgency level.
2. Positioning Round – Each team consults its role card, discusses internal strategy, and prepares a position. For example, the “Residents” team may oppose densification, while “Investors” prioritize return on investment. Players must role-play according to the constraints and values of their civic identity.
3. Strategic Intervention – Teams use intervention tiles and resource tokens to propose spatial or programmatic solutions. Proposals are placed on the board and explained to others; negotiation occurs where interests overlap or conflict.

4. Impact Simulation – Through dice rolls or facilitator judgement, teams receive simulated outcomes—e.g., public backlash, institutional blockage, or environmental gain. These simulate political risk, implementation barriers, or unforeseen effects.
5. Debriefing and Reflection – After each scenario, players reflect on their experience, strategies, and emotional responses. Prompts such as “*What trade-offs did you make?*” or “*What did you learn about collaboration?*” guide this dialogue.

An informal play test was conducted with a small group of architecture students in Iași. Their interaction revealed that while the core mechanics were easy to grasp, the sequencing of the ‘Impact Simulation’ phase required clearer facilitation. Students suggested a simplified visual guide that links challenge cards to possible event outcomes, making the decision-feedback loop more intuitive.

To better reflect sustainability goals, the board game integrates an ecological scoring system. Each intervention—whether planting trees, repurposing vacant land, or expanding student housing—carries embedded indicators of carbon impact, water resilience, and biodiversity value. Players are thus encouraged to prioritize low-carbon solutions and restorative strategies, making sustainability not an abstract ideal but a tangible, competitive mechanic within the gameplay.

The game supports multiple modes of play—competitive, collaborative, time-based, etc.—allowing facilitators to tailor complexity and duration.

Methodological Integration in Education

The game is envisioned as a core tool for studio-based learning in schools of architecture. In contrast to conventional design studios focused on formal and compositional skills, *Iași Civic Quest* enables students to navigate systems, stakeholders, and socio-spatial ethics.

Targeted learning outcomes include:

- Systems literacy – understanding how multiple variables shape spatial outcomes (budget constraints, political resistance, environmental feedback).
- Empathy through role-play – by defending a role they may not naturally identify with, students gain perspective on the values and concerns of others.
- Negotiation skills – justifying decisions and compromising cultivates dialogical reasoning—a vital competence in professional practice.
- Reflection and metacognition – the built-in debrief prompts participants to analyze not only *what* they proposed but *how* they arrived there and *why*.

The analog format is deliberately chosen to foster face-to-face negotiation, physical interaction, and slower thinking—qualities often neglected in tech-driven urban tools. The tactile experience—arranging tokens, pointing on maps, gesturing over cards—enhances cognitive and emotional engagement.

Accessibility and Scalability

The methodology includes a long-term vision for scaling the game beyond academic settings. Community centers, planning departments, NGOs, and youth organizations could adapt the game using open-source templates. NGOs, for instance, can:

1. Recruit diverse participant groups;
2. Mediate post-game follow-up workshops that transform insights into micro-projects;
3. Channel the resulting proposals into ongoing advocacy, creating a feedback loop between play and real-world action.

Visual documentation (board, cards, sample tiles) and facilitation guides are being developed to support these uses. Localized editions—such as *Civic Quest: Cluj* or *Civic Quest: Chișinău*—are also in prototype, employing the same methodology.

Fig. 1 Iași Civic Quest game board creation process.



Fig. 2 Iași Civic Quest game cards



Fig. 3 Iași Civic Quest board game setup in a game simulator



Results

The informal play test conducted also surfaced unexpected outcomes. Students emphasized that embodying non-architect roles—such as residents or local NGOs—provoked stronger empathy than anticipated. They noted that stepping outside their disciplinary identity encouraged them to rethink professional blind spots, an effect not originally hypothesized in the design of the game.

The potential outcomes of *Iași Civic Quest* are manifold. First, it may foster civic empathy by compelling players to advocate for perspectives different from their own. Second, the iterative structure encourages systems thinking and negotiation—skills often underdeveloped in traditional architectural education. Third, it may

reveal site-specific imaginaries, such as new uses for the Bahlui riverfront or cooperative housing typologies rooted in youth engagement.

For architecture students, the game provides an opportunity to prototype not just spaces but governance strategies. It becomes a pedagogical platform for understanding the built environment as a contested terrain shaped by values, narratives, and constraints. Such engagements reflect a broader turn in architectural education toward reflexivity, collaboration, and situated design.

Discussion

The contribution of *Iași Civic Quest* lies in its capacity to reposition architecture as a practice of civic mediation. It demonstrates how the tools of design can be retooled not only for building but for convening; not only for planning but for listening.

Through gameplay, participants explore trade-offs, develop shared vocabularies, and confront the complexities of collective spatial production. These are foundational steps in rebuilding civic trust—particularly in contexts where institutional transparency and participation are perceived as limited.

By translating abstract dynamics of power and infrastructure into tangible acts of play, the game allows new forms of engagement to surface. The board becomes a proxy for the city, the players for its publics, and the dialogue for its futures.

Feedback from informal play sessions suggested that players quickly recognized sustainability trade-offs when outcomes were tied to environmental indicators. For example, proposals for short-term budget savings at the expense of green infrastructure were judged less favorably in later rounds, demonstrating how the game can cultivate lateral trust around shared ecological priorities. This confirms the potential of *Iași Civic Quest* to embed climate neutrality and resilience targets into civic dialogue through experiential learning.

Conclusion

Iași Civic Quest proposes a shift in how architectural education and civic dialogue intersect. Designed within the pedagogical and spatial culture present in schools of architecture—and embedded within the NGO ecosystem of the city—it offers a method for engaging with the city not only as a formal object but as a living system of voices, tensions, and aspirations.

Future iterations will be tailored for classroom use, public exhibition, and interdisciplinary urban labs. Visual materials, role cards, and facilitation guides will be disseminated to support replication across contexts. The game is intended to evolve through feedback, remaining an open-source and adaptive tool.

Ultimately, *Iași Civic Quest* reflects an ethos of convergence—not only of players around a table but of practices, disciplines, and narratives in pursuit of a more participatory and trusted built environment.

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Iași Civic Quest: un joc de societate participativ pentru urbanism convergent și pedagogie arhitecturală

(rezumat)

Iași Civic Quest propune o metodologie de joc de societate care traduce dilemele urbane contemporane într-o simulare accesibilă, față în față. Înrădăcinat în cultura spațială a Iașului, România, jocul invită jucătorii – studenți, rezidenți, profesioniști și oficiali – să negocieze scenarii reale de planificare în patru domenii (Natură, Locuințe, Mediul Academic și Industrie). Bazându-se pe design participativ, urbanism tactic și pedagogie arhitecturală, lucrarea susține că jocurile analogice pot facilita încrederea, empatia și alfabetizarea sistemică. Secțiunea metodologică detaliază cadrul de cercetare bazat pe design al jocului, componentele modulare și cele cinci faze de joc (Provocare, Poziționare, Intervenție, Impact, Reflecție). În urma testelor informale de joc realizate cu studenți la arhitectură, observațiile inițiale sugerează o valoare pedagogică substanțială: jocul de rol promovează empatia; cartografierea iterativă dezvoltă judecata critică; iar reflecția structurată încurajează metacogniția. Discuția reîncadrează arhitectura ca mediere civică, poziționând Iași Civic Quest ca o platformă transferabilă pentru practici convergente atât în medii academice, cât și comunitare.