

Exploring the Role of Design in Municipal Sustainability Transitions

A Comparative Study Across European Mission Cities

1. Research context

The EU Cities Mission and NetZeroCities



To accelerate urban climate action, the European Commission launched the EU Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030. The mission is implemented through the NetZeroCities (NZC) project, which aim to support **112 municipalities across Europe** to develop systemic approaches and overcome institutional, and cultural barriers **to achieve climate neutrality by 2030**.

2. Research statement

This study investigates **the role of design practice in municipal sustainability transitions within the EU Cities Mission**. Adopting a comparative and exploratory approach, it examines how design is characterised, positioned, and enacted across ten European municipalities. By developing a typology of design configurations, the research explores how governance contexts, organisational conditions, and transition trajectories shape the enactment and role of design within municipal transition processes.

3. Research Questions

Main RQ

What role does design play in municipal sustainability transition processes within the EU Cities Mission?

RQ1. How are design practices characterised in municipal sustainability transition processes in terms of their tools, processes, and principles?

What design is and does (characterisation)

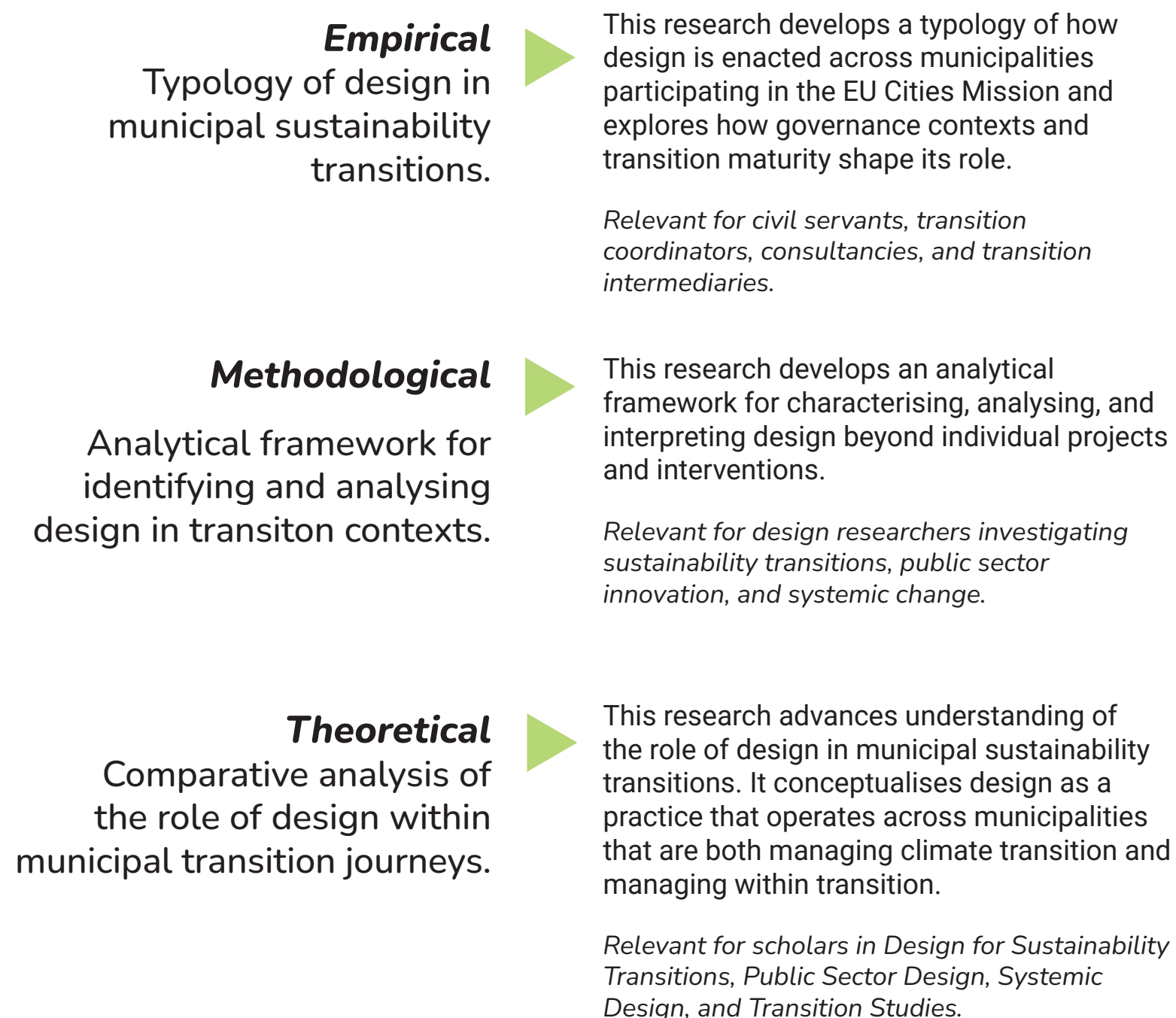
RQ2. How are design practices positioned within municipal sustainability transition processes in terms of their placement, level of intervention, and design capacity?

Where and how design sits (positioning)

RQ3. How do design practices, if at all, influence how municipalities coordinate and act within sustainability transition processes?

What difference design makes (role)

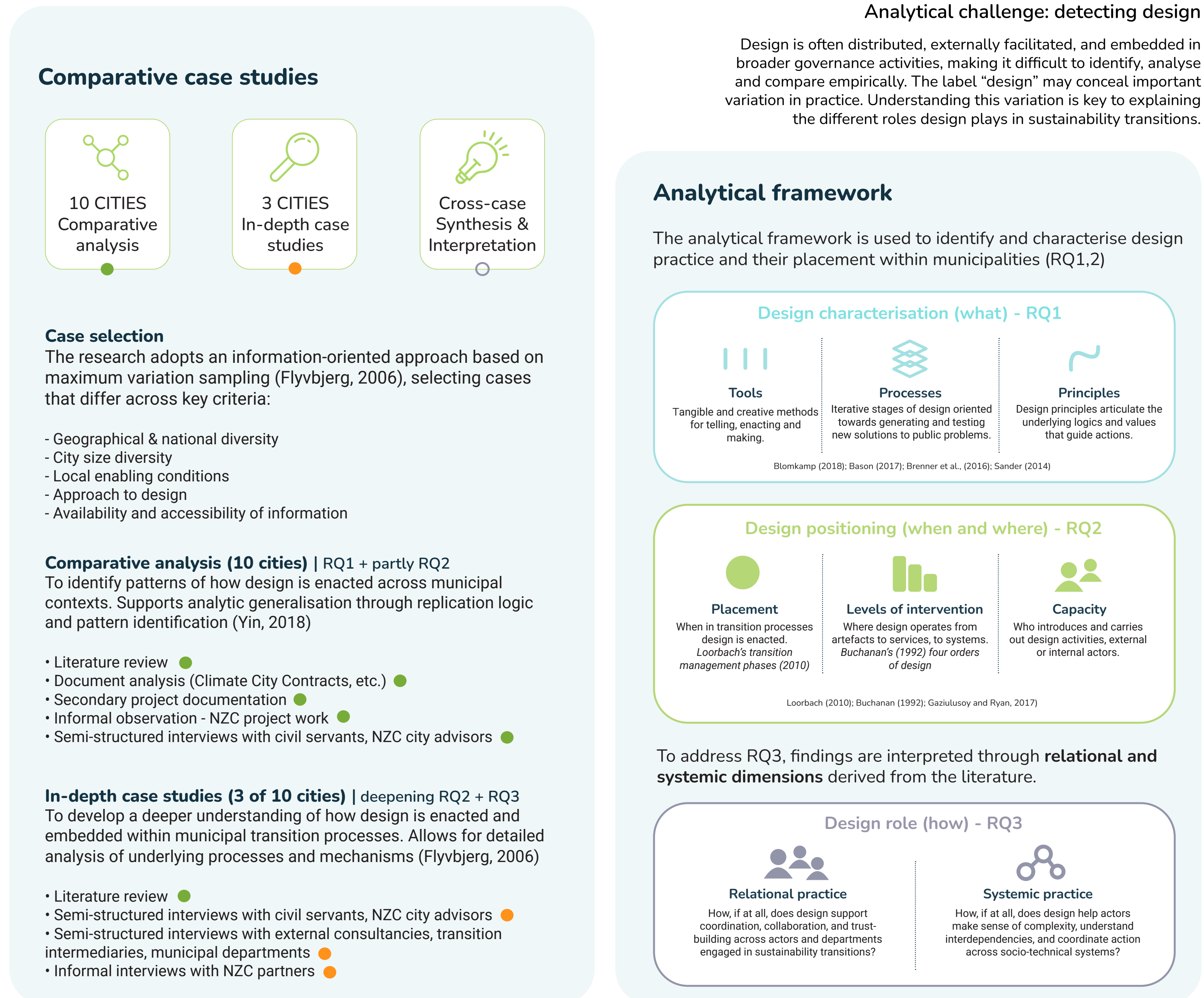
6. Expected Outcomes & Contribution



4. Knowledge gap & literature review



5. Methodology



7. Current status



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**Sustainable
Transitions through
Democratic Design**

Expert peer-sharing Symposium
Milan, June 15-16th, 2026