

Involving urban actors in the  
Reactivation of vacant buildings

THEMATIC  
PAPER  
#3



2ND  
CHANCE

WAKING UP THE  
SLEEPING GIANTS



## City of Naples

Urban Planning Department

### **Carmine Piscopo**

Councilor and responsible for the coordination of the project within the City Council of Naples

### **Daniela Buonanno, Renata Ciannella**

Project staff for the Urban planning Department

## Lead Partner Team

URBACT Projects and Networks on Integrated Urban Development Policies - Central Direction  
Urban Planning and Management - UNESCO Site

### **Nicola Masella**

Project coordinator

### **Roberta Nicchia**

URBACT Local Group coordinator

### **Anna Arena**

Finance officer

### **Maria Luna Nobile**

Communication officer

### **Contacts:**

Phone +39 081 7958932 - 34 - 17

E-mail [urbactnapoli@comune.napoli.it](mailto:urbactnapoli@comune.napoli.it)

### Lead Expert

### **Nils Sheffler**

Project Lead Expert

### **Contacts:**

Phone +49-30-4738 6041

E-mail [scheffler@urbanexpert.net](mailto:scheffler@urbanexpert.net)

[www.urbact.eu](http://www.urbact.eu)

[www.urbact.eu/2nd-Chance](http://www.urbact.eu/2nd-Chance)

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# Involving Urban Actors in the Reactivation of Vacant Buildings

Guideline Document for local authorities and stakeholders

The aim of the document is to provide useful tools and tips for alternative way of involving urban actors in the reactivation process of vacant buildings and areas in the framework of the 2<sup>ND</sup> CHANCE URBACT network. Reflections and examples on how to involve stakeholders in the reactivation of the sleeping giants are described in this document, focusing on tools, case studies and other URBACT Networks dealing with the same topic.

Contribution of:

Maarteen Van Tujil  
URBACT Expert

Luca Lanzoni  
URBACT Expert

Nils Scheffler  
Lead Expert 2nd Chance

Iván Tosics  
URBACT Programme Expert

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## REACTIVATING VACANT BUILDINGS LESSONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

*Maarten van Tuijl, URBACT Lead Expert sub>urban re-inventing the fringe*



## INTRODUCTION

Over a period of two and a half years the eleven cities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance network have worked on strategies for reactivating large vacant buildings and have been involving related local stakeholders in the Urbact framework. Many tools were tested and researched. Different methods for engaging stakeholders were used. With the end of the network it is a good moment to reflect on all of these lessons and recommendations that the city partners in network have to share. Activating large vacant buildings is not common practice for most cities, but it is increasingly becoming an important challenge. Therefore this reflection is of value both for the partner cities of 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance themselves as well as for cities who were not in the lucky position to join this network. So what are the lessons learned?

First of all it is important to point out that the main network based key activities for the reactivation of sleeping giants are presented in the [2nd Chance guidebook](#). The lessons and recommendations presented here are based on the individual experiences and recommendations of the city partners from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance network. Besides this the Urbact Local Group (ULG) consultant for Naples, Ascolto Attivo has also shared their recommendations based on their experience of supporting the ULG. All of these lessons learned and recommendations, were presented at the final meeting of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance network in Naples and this report is based on that.



## DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR REACTIVATING LARGE VACANT BUILDINGS

The lessons and recommendations shared by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance City Partners on developing a strategy for reactivating large and vacant buildings turned out to be focused on three main topics. The first centring around the organization of the initial phase. The second on how to base strategies on the existing building. And the third on flexible planning, acknowledging the fact that this is an unpredictable and non-linear process.



1. Manage the project's preparation phase carefully

As the city of Caen has pointed out the careful management of the project's preparation phase starts with asking the right questions. What is the problem? What is the context? What are our objectives? How can we ensure the project meets a real need and is technically and financially viable? Asking, thinking about and trying to answer questions like these from the start helps to create a realistic project. Ensure the project meets a real need and is technically and financially viable from the start. Besides this it is crucial to involve and engage politicians from the start. They should be informed about the objectives of activities and they should be convinced that the targeted building is of real value for the city and its inhabitants.

2. Base the strategy on the quality and identity of the building

The strategy should show the importance of Historical buildings and their reuse, recovering the tangible and intangible value of urban heritage. An instrument

recommended by the city of Gijon is an inventory of disused goods, also showing their potential reuse. Liverpool recommends to identify what is important about the building and identify potentially viable options at an early stage. This is important to manage expectations and identify the likely costs. To have some funding for this purpose can be very helpful from an early stage.

Also the city of Lublin pointed out that education, making people, starting with children in schools, aware of the value of historical buildings is an important aspect. Changing attitudes towards vacant buildings and their preservation starts with educating young people.

3. *Make a flexible plan*

Both Lublin and Ascolto Attivo have stated that it is impossible to predict the outcome of a reactivation process from the start. Therefore it is important to be flexible and creative all the time. There are no readymade answers fit for every occasion. The strategy has to be developed step by step by trial and error. For this reason it is also important to incorporate learning moments in the process and to work in a transparent public arena.



## INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS

The lessons and recommendations shared by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance City Partners on involving stakeholders turned out to be focused on five important steps in the reactivation process. Set up a well balanced group with diverse stakeholders. Hold frequent and on site meetings during the entire process. Try to smartly combine momentum for instance linking meetings to a popular already existing events. Regenerate by doing, dare to experiment and do not wait for an ideal plan that will never materialise. And finally ensure the legacy of the empowerment process.



### 1. Set up a well balanced group with diverse stakeholders

All city partners have pointed out how important it is to carefully select the members of the Urbact Local Group (ULG) to ensure the ULG is balanced and has diverse interests. Especially the combination between professionals (such as owners, developers and investors) and citizens has proven to be especially challenging, but crucial for the success of the reactivation at the same time. In Naples the process was opened up to everyone using an open call. This was very successful in involving the civil society, but as Genoa has experienced an active and pressing participation of citizens and neighbourhood can unbalance the composition of the group and discourage the involvement of stakeholders belonging to other categories to the

process. The administration should also promote roundtable and one-to one meetings with possible investors and key public/private institutions. Porto Vivo had a positive experience combining the two different groups. For them the association of public and private stakeholders helped to solve urban issues/problems, sharing responsibilities, competences and visions, adding in the same time, public and private interests and funding, with the same goals. The promotion and acceptance of shared protocols between the public manager entity and private investors and financiers was fundamental for the succes of the Porto Vivo ULG. Finally according to Genoa participation takes a long time but is effective in the long run. Therefore it is important to secure funding to be able to finance a well structured participation process, which is time and cost intensive. Digital platforms are useful to efficiently enhance involvement.

2. *Hold frequent on site meetings*

All city partners also agreed that is crucial to hold frequent on site meetings to be able to successfully involve the ULG. Caen recommends to host pleasant meetings (friendly atmosphere, provide beverages and appetizers ...) to encourage consistent attendance for the ULG and to have the right teambuilding effect. Use participative reflection tools (OPERA, Problem Tree) and select a good moderator, who can mediate between different interests. Naples adds to this the recommendation to stimulate a constant collaboration, cooperation, sharing, cross-fertilization through participatory design techniques (i.e. OST, brainstorming, co-design workshops, etc...) in order to make the plan really shared and internally consistent. To achieve this Naples has opened a physical space within the building complex, that became an open laboratory for the inclusion and participation of the local community. Developing the participatory process within the complex and stay within its spaces as much as possible are fundamental elements of the reactivation process.

3. *Combine momentum for crucial moments*

Naples recommends to combine the “visioning” step with a relevant public event with large resonance in the city. This is important to make the vision as known and shared as possible. Linking the “visioning” phase to a well-known city event provides a broader advertisement and participation to it. The “visioning” phase took place within the manifestation “Maggio dei Monumenti 2017” and consisted in training and visioning activities. The combination of important ULG moments with transnational events in the network, where all international partners are present, is also a very effective way to create and use momentum for local purposes.

4. Regenerate by doing

Regenerating a space also means that the community must have the opportunity to test what effectively works in this place, as well as what doesn't: inhabitants should have a chance to conduct real civic experimentation inside these spaces. This requires some support by the municipality however. Therefore Naples has organized a technical table within the administration that helps in removing the administrative and technical obstacles that are always present when dealing with temporary uses in abandoned spaces. Experimenting temporary uses within the target building is a way to prefigure possible uses of the complex to the city in a concrete way. A wide range of different temporary uses of the building complex was experimented and since October 2017 the civic uses in the "Building A" started. Activating temporary use of places such as this one is the only truly effective strategy for achieving another goal: concrete, positive, significant, creative and long-lasting engagement of the local inhabitants of these neighborhoods; as well as engaging all stakeholders involved.

5. Ensure the legacy of the empowerment process

The aim of involving a diverse group of stakeholders and stimulating participation is to include within the plan/program of reuse the real needs of the people, based on the analysis of the local context and on the active listening of its inhabitants. After taking the effort to create a shared vision of the project it is crucial to ensure the implementation of the outcome of the process. For this it is necessary to have a strong political will followed by administrative acts that officially adopt the reactivation strategy, make it a priority in the political agenda and establish one governance model for the whole complex.

## CONCLUSION

Reactivating large vacant buildings is not only about developing the right tools and strategies, but its success is especially dependant on the people who use them or are affected by them. The basis for the success of a flexible process oriented approach to the reactivation of vacant buildings is the competence and energy of the people working in municipalities and their ability to engage the local community. Without them new tools and approaches are useless. That is why URBACT invests mainly in capacity building of people working in city administrations. The eight recommendations collected here are based on the two and a half years experience of people working in city administrations in eleven cities across Europe. Hopefully you have found them to be informative and inspiring.



## THE REACTIVATION OF THE VACANT BUILDINGS AND AREAS AS A “CITY HUB” FOR THE URBAN INVOLVEMENT

Luca Lanzoni, *URBACT Lead Expert MAPS*

When we have faced, for the first time, the problem related to the involvement of the “urban actors” or stakeholders, in the second life of the former military heritage, we have immediately think to the necessity to rebuild first, an intangible narration of this places, able to support the tangible reuse of this particular type of heritage. In fact, for many years these sectors of the cities, have been isolated from the rest of the urban fabric, creating a “void” in the collective memory, and for this reason the MAPS project has been not only interested in the development of a series of Integrated Action Plans, for the reuse of the former military assets, but also in the development of real and innovative solutions (made on the field) able to explore new mechanism for the involvement of a large audience, in the design and in the implementation of the IAPs: Open days; sport events (for professionals and amateurs); “makerspaces” events; workshops organized and lead by the local education system, are just some of the examples that has realized by the network partners.

When we have start to work, in the June 2016, on the development of the activities, useful for the development of the IAPs, we have realized that if we did not organize public events on the field, to involve the inhabitants or stakeholders in the urban actions for the reuse of the former military areas, all the efforts for the development of the IAPs would been useless. For that reason we have start to think in this direction: design public events that attract people (audiences), in the former military camps, able to gather indications and suggestions, and at the same time strength the ongoing activities that exist in the city (plans or projects). Realizing these public events was also important to test in full scale (real scale or on the field) how some actions of the future IAPs would be implemented.

The first, and simple question has been the following: “how can we do to attract the inhabitants or stakeholders inside the military areas, and in the second stage, participating in the IAPs development?”.

The first solution has concerned the organization of a series of Open Days<sup>1</sup>. After several years the former military camps open the doors and invite the citizens to discover what was behind the wall. The cities of Piacenza, Varaždin, and Szombathely has decide to follow this approach, organizing in the same moment one Open day with this activities: site visits (explaining the history of the place), small workshops to explain the seed idea of the IAPs and collect suggestions, involvement of cultural associations to create collateral events, construction of 3D models (big scale) of the place, to better explain the potentiality of the area to a “non technical” large audience. The outcomes of these activities have been useful in order to create a good harmony within the ULG members (was the first public event for the local partners), test a possible the useful solutions for the implementation of the IAPs, and involve citizens and stakeholders in the challenges for the reuse of the former military camps, touching with their own hands what was the problem, directly on the field!

With the same approach, even if in a different way, the city of Espinho mixed together sports and social cohesion to give inputs about the project and collect information from the inhabitants of the city toward the challenge of the reuse of the former military assets: a foot race (non competitive) that has touched all the military installations (former or still in use) present in the project area. The organization of the event was supported by the Municipality with the cooperation of the members of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mapsnetwork.wordpress.com/maps-best-practices/>

ULG. The purpose of the event was to create interest in the idea of the IAP: development of the “Atlantic park”, in which the former military installations, represent the opportunity to support and share the idea of the value expressed by the “well-being” between the city users. “Involve the participants in a dynamic survey”, this was the message from the city of Espinho: the participants at the race has been invited, when approached to the military installations, to interact with an exposition (large panels), vote for the proposals elaborated by the ULG, and move to another places.

Beside this specific activities, designed by the partners, however, there were already other existing events (whit a consolidate story), that could be used as a “stage” to start the regeneration of the former military camps. In particular the city of Cartagena has decide to insert Los Moros castle, as a place to reach, in the *Ruta de las Fortalezas* (fortress trail)<sup>2</sup>, a sport event that are able to attract more than 4.000 people, from all Europe, to run and visit the system of fortifications that in the past defended Cartagena. Also in 2018 the castle of Los Moros will be one of the places of this sport event, and thanks to these the memory of the castle, and the Los Mateos neighbourhood, will returns within the “collective imagination” of the inhabitants of Cartagena, foreigners, and people from other parts of Spain.

These temporary events are very important to reactivate the attention of the public opinion (stakeholders, urban actors, etc.) on these forgotten places, but how is possible guarantee a continuous attention over the time on this places, before the IAPs is fully implemented? Is it possible design a midterm events, not only “in one shot” to involve the audience for more time? A suggestion still comes from the city of Cartagena, thanks to the development of a botanic garden<sup>3</sup>, on one of the slope of the hill of the Los Moros castle, and from the city of

Piacenza whit the involvement of the local high schools<sup>4</sup> in the assessment of the former Pontieri workshop, and in the development of a video reportage of the place.

In the city of Cartagena the project it was made possible by the collaboration between the Municipality, the Repsol Foundation, the local NGO CREET, and the members of the ULG. The project has planted more than 1,200 trees, involving on the field, more or less 400 participants (families, local inhabitants from Los Mateos district, students, and the citizens from Cartagena). Now the next step, and challenge, is about the maintenance. The idea is that the Municipality have in charge the irrigation of the garden, but the maintenance of the trees will be made by the inhabitants of the Los Mateos district. To support this action, the local ULG, has provided the design of activities to give to the inhabitants the useful information to guarantee the maintenance of the trees and at the same time increase the urban quality of the area (castle and district).

Different, but complementary, approach for the municipality of Piacenza that have decided to involve some high schools of the city in one of the first action of the future IAP: the evaluation of the state of repair of the former Pontieri workshop and the increase of the urban awareness. Two classes of Technical Institute for Surveyors and the College of Arts will be engaged in the mapping of each building and open space in the former military area, that now is property of the City Council, and in the development of videos about the history of the former Pontieri workshop, introducing visions and inspiring ideas for the future use of the area. The outcomes of this action will be the baseline, in terms of information, to drive the implementation of the IAP; the first, from the technical point of view, the second for the dissemination of the cultural and contemporary values expressed by the area.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rutadelasfortalezas.es/>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://mapsnetwork.wordpress.com/2017/12/03/work-in-progress-in-cartagena/>

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<sup>4</sup>

<https://mapsnetwork.wordpress.com/2017/12/27/studying-urban-regeneration-in-piacenza/>

Obviously, to be able to realize these “small public projects”, involve a large audiences, and transmit a “consistent message”, about the future reuse of the former military heritage, it means having a strong integration, within the public administrations, between the departments and the people, that work to achieve the final result, a consistent IAP. With respect to this topic all the partners have been active in the sense of strengthen of the ongoing plans or projects, developed by the local administrations, integrating into these (or vice versa) the suggestions that emerging from the IAPs. Since that the former military areas, are an important sector of the urban fabric, for all the cities partners, it was impossible to exclude them from the local context (ongoing plans or

projects) and designing an a new independent vision, not connected to the constellation of the existing tools.

For that reason the “small public projects”, previously presented, are to consider like a first step to start a “snow ball effect” in the city, and drive the implementation of the future IAPs, in respect to the integration with the others “urban tools” (Masterplan, Strategic plans, etc.), and probably, if repeated over the time, will function as “urban acupunctures”, useful for remembering to the citizens and stakeholders, that a part of the city is changing, and needs the help of fresh ideas from new “urban actors”, to support the co-design and the implementation of the activities.

## ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS IN THE REACTIVATION PROCESS

*Nils Sheffler, URBACT Lead Expert 2nd Chance*



### What is it about

As the rehabilitation of larger, degraded buildings is cost-intensive and public financial resources are rather limited, a rehabilitation in one big step and by just one 'investor' is rather unlikely to happen. It rather requires the wider support of a variety of stakeholders to be able to reactivate such larger, vacant buildings in a step-by-step process. These stakeholders are to bring in their enthusiasm, energy, ideas, labour and financial resources.

To make use of this they have to be engaged from the very beginning, in particular in the development of the reactivation strategy. So more they feel the strategy as theirs so more likely they will commit and engage in the implementation of the reactivation process. Thus, design a co-development process for the stakeholders involved in the re-activation process and ensure the communication and coordination between them.

The potential of neighbourhood groups and initiatives has so far been underestimated and ignored in this. Cooperatives, builders' groups, associations or foundations invest capital not for the purpose of short-term profit expectations. Self-organised and with a great willingness to shape, they implement ideas of new living and housing models. Some of the projects have set themselves sustainable social and ecological tasks that hold out the promise of long-term benefit for the city also in economic terms. These local groups are to be activated and involved in particular for the revitalisation of these "sleeping giants".

### What can be done

To engage stakeholders in the process there are three key activities:

1. Defining whom to involve and how;
2. Activating the stakeholders to participate;



3. Organising participation possibilities and coordinating the participatory process.

**1. Defining whom to involve and how**

Answering the following questions proved to be helpful to the 2nd Chance partners to get an idea whom to involve and how:

1. Who might be interested in or affected by the reactivation of the building?  
 What might be needed for the reactivation and who could contribute it?  
 Who might be needed for the implementation of the reactivation strategy?
2. How can these stakeholders benefit from taking part in the reactivation process?  
 What can make them participate?
3. What are their needs and interests?

**Tool**  
**Stakeholder analysis**

To be able to answer question 1 one helpful tool is the stakeholder analysis (for further reference check [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM\\_07.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_07.htm)).

Alone or with other people you brainstorm the stakeholders that come to your mind when answering question 1. These stakeholders you map on a “power/interest grid” concerning their influence/power and interest in the reactivation of the building.

The stakeholders mapped in the upper right corner, highly concerned (interest) and in a strong position (power, influence) to support (or to block) the reactivation of the building. should be engaged very strongly in the development of the reactivation strategy and the reactivation process.

**2. Activating the stakeholders to participate**

To activate stakeholders to take part in the reactivation process and the development of the reactivation strategy the 2nd Chance partners applied different techniques. Some partners *directly addressed relevant stakeholders*, others like Naples and Genoa organised a *public call* to join the ‘Local Support Group’ for the reactivation of the target building.

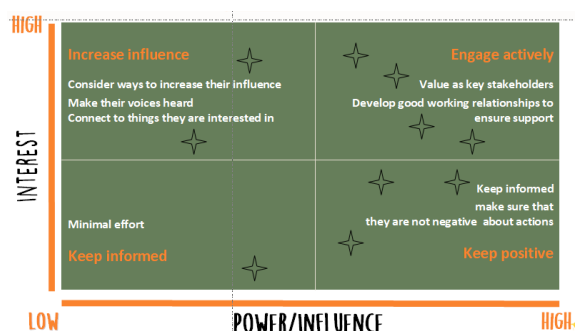
Naples published an open call on their project website about the reactivation of the target site (within the municipal webpage) for the expression of interest to join the Local Support Group to develop the vision for the reuse of the building complex and to elaborate a Local Action Plan and to experiment temporary uses within the building. Interested people and organisations had to express their interest by presenting an idea for the reuse of the building complex, referring to one or more fields proposed by the municipality (culture, art, sport, social activities for the neighbourhood, temporary uses). 43 associations, enterprises, institutions and informal groups or networks expressed their interest by presenting a project, an idea or a temporary use related. This also helped in getting preliminary ideas for potential uses.

For further activities to activate stakeholders and know about their ideas for the reuse of vacant building cf. 3.1.2.

**3. Organising participation possibilities**

The 2nd Chance partners organised different forms of participation possibilities. The most applied and recommended forms are

1. Local Support Groups,
2. Bi-lateral meetings with key stakeholders,
3. Workshops,
4. Interdepartmental working group



Very useful was also the provision of a physical space where the involved stakeholders could meet to discuss and present ideas. Also crucial was to appoint a 'professional' person in charge of the involvement process, coordinating the activities and stakeholders and ensuring the communication and flow of information.

### 1. Local Support Groups

In the Local Support Group the key stakeholders for the reactivation of the vacant buildings are gathered to jointly develop the reactivation strategy (cf. 3.1.5) and prepare the reuse of the building. For selecting the participants of the LSG cf. 'Tool: Stakeholder analysis' and '2. Activating the stakeholders to participate'.



Members of the Local Support Groups (LSG) have been:

1. Property owners / investors (private, institutional, public);
2. Municipality: mayor, city council members, (urban planning, economic, social, cultural) departments, service provider of municipality / experts, (neutral) moderator of LSG;
3. Users & Supporters: citizens, neighbours/inhabitants movements, (potential/temporary) users, civic associations/movements, NGOs, creative/cultural sector, university, public media.

The Local Support Group helps to initiate a constant dialogue between the involved public and private stakeholders and directly involve them in the development of the reactivation strategy. Through the joint work their

commitment for the joint reactivation process is strengthened. Further the involved stakeholders have been a link to reach out to their local networks for further support.

For effective LSGs several 2nd Chance partners have set up a core LSG in which the key stakeholders are actively and continuously involved. Around the core LSG, to involve and consult also a wider group of stakeholders, thematic working groups have been organised to discuss thematic issues. The core LSG had the task to coordinate and bring the results of the thematic working groups together.

*Brussels* divided the ULG into two groups: Stakeholders and potential users interested in short-term and temporary uses of the building, and stakeholders interested in the long-term development of the building. Both groups develop objectives and potential uses for the target building. In the end these two groups were merged again.

### Recommendation for Local Support Groups

Involve not only stakeholders to develop ideas for the reuse of the building; rather attract and involve people / institutions that might want to use the building space and bring in own resources (financial, voluntary work, time, services, etc.).

The stakeholders have to benefit from participating in the LSG. Think about and propose a set of issues that might interest them.

Involve LSG from the very beginning

Do not raise infeasible expectations: Clarify at the beginning the responsibilities and roles of the LSG; process should be open and transparent (LSG road map);

Build up trust between the involved stakeholders; think about team-building;

For many partners it turned out to be beneficial to bring public, private and third sector stakeholders with different opinions, skills and (professional) backgrounds together to fertilise each other with good ideas.

Raise the awareness of the stakeholders about the significance/ opportunity of the building for the city / neighbourhood development.

Have a friendly and cooperative working atmosphere.

Each LSG meeting should have a clear goal, should meet the interests of the participants and produce a result/output that helps to define the content of the strategy. Avoid mere discussions rounds without results and agreements. Document the results of each meeting and send it to all partners.

Take opinions and feedback of the LSG members seriously and try to integrate them into the reactivation strategy. Make sure that their work is valued.

A successful LSG requires time and a thorough preparation! Plan sufficient time for the involvement. Have an experienced “neutral” moderator in charge of the LSG.

Do Public Relation: have a ‘project champion’ who represents and stands for the reactivation of the building in public.

### Further information

The URBACT Local Support Group Toolkit (in 16 different European languages): <http://urbact.eu/urbact-local-groups>

#### 2. Bi-lateral meetings with key stakeholders

Not always stakeholders have the time or motivation to join the Local Support Group, in particular private investors. In this case, Porto for example, organised bi-lateral meetings with relevant stakeholders/ institutions to discuss and coordinate the reactivation strategy and process as well as their future involvement and activities.

#### Recommendation

Organise target-group specific meetings for important stakeholders that are not interested in joining the LSG or thematic working group. Invite them personally.

### 3. Workshops

Workshops were used by most of the partners to develop and discuss the reactivation strategy (cf. 3.1.5) together with the Local Support Group (LSG) members. But workshops were also used to involve people and institutions beyond the LSG members. Different kind of workshops and ‘Living Labs’ were organised i.e. with students, inhabitants and the cultural and creative sector to develop a vision and concrete ideas and actions for the reuse of the building.



Further information and practice examples

For further information about such workshops take a look at chapter 3 of the 2nd Chance publication “Policies, Programmes and Actions for the Reactivation and reuse of (large) vacant buildings”:

<http://urbact.eu/file/19883/download?token=bSQ1eEEa>.

#### 4. Interdepartmental working group

To coordinate the different municipal departments for the reactivation of the building, Naples for example, organised round tables with the city councillors, technical departments and services. During the round tables the framework for the reactivation was defined as i.e. administrative and technical limits, possible use and development options.

Download the 2nd Chance Guidebook:

[http://urbact.eu/file/20697/download?token=cwovox\\_F](http://urbact.eu/file/20697/download?token=cwovox_F)

## LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

*Iván Tosics, URBACT Programme Expert*

In the following short paper my aim is to raise some issues which emerged in connection with the economic crisis and might be important regarding the involvement of actors in the reactivation of vacant urban premises.

The challenge how to deal with empty or underused urban real estate became especially important since the end of the 2000s when the financial crisis brought an abrupt end to the traditional development model, based on economic growth, new investments and the use of greenfield areas.

The importance of the crisis is not only in bringing the old paradigm to an end but also in the fact that under the changing conditions many new ideas emerged, partly from the side of new actors, which became active only under the new circumstances.

It is high time to give an overview about the new, innovative ideas as there is a growing threat that these will disappear soon. With the return of economic growth there are already examples to be seen that also the old practices return, wiping out the promising innovations of the last decade.

Below first examples are shown on innovative approaches to deal with vacant or underused properties. Then the new actors of bottom-up innovation are analysed, followed by an overview, what should be the role of the public sector. After some considerations on the inclusion/social aspect of participation models the final section deals with the connection between the different actors (residents, experts, activists, politicians) to handle the issue.

### 1. INNOVATIVE IDEAS TO DEAL WITH VACANT OR UNDERUSED PROPERTIES

*Example 1. Iterative co-development process towards new use of existing buildings*

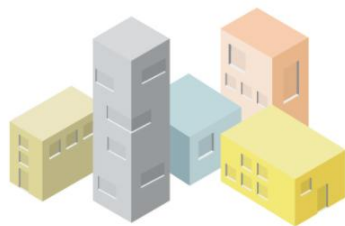
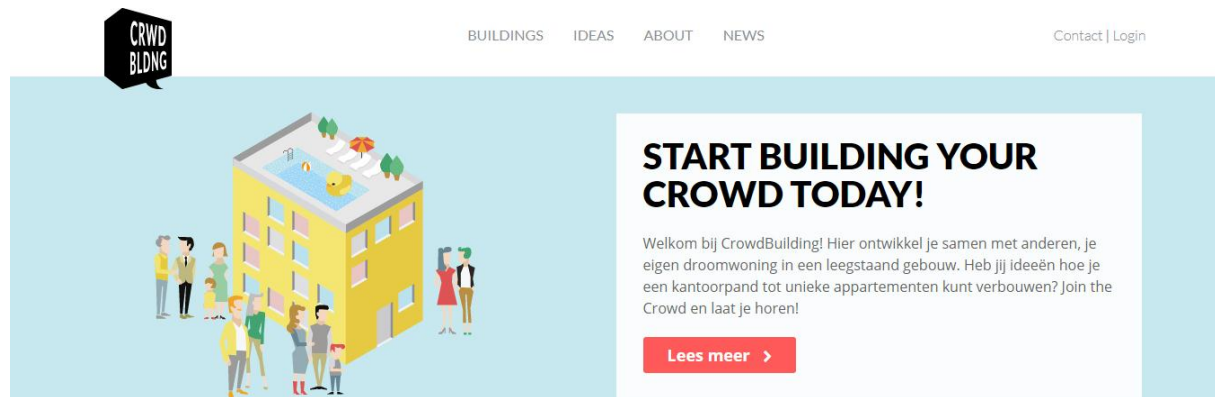
In the early 2000s the Dutch office building market developed very dynamically: a lot of capital was invested into the erection of new office buildings as these seemed to be safe long-term investments. Soon after all such investments stopped around 2009, it became obvious that the calculations for demand were far too optimistic. In Amsterdam, for example, 17% of the office stock stood empty, while the rate of emptiness reached 60-70% in the peripheral areas with no hope that these buildings will ever be occupied. (Vacant City, p.98)

In that way a rather a strange situation emerged in the Netherlands by the end of the 2000s: some 8 million square meters of office buildings stood empty while many people were looking, quite hopelessly, for housing. Thus office space surplus and housing shortage existed at the same time and in the same local real estate markets.

As a reaction on this situation a private architectural office developed the idea of „crowdbuilding“. The novelty was to establish an online platform aiming to connect vacant office spaces with potential demand for housing use. After setting up some initial design options, people could vote online which design they would prefer for the empty buildings. In that way effective demand could be raised from the side of a group of people which was big enough to fit to the large size of the empty office buildings. After finalizing the physical adjustment plans and setting up the institutional form of the group of families in a way suitable for bank financing, the legal issues were handled (buying the building from the owner and asking the local government for rezoning the area for residential use). At the end of the whole procedure the architectural firm, the initiator of the whole



idea, was reimbursed for their work. The model was first applied to office buildings in public ownership but later also private owners were approached with success.



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### ***Example 2. Legalization and improvement of informal housing with the residents***

There are several areas in Lisbon, which were self-constructed in the course of the 1970s by people who migrated to the city. These areas were built-up within short time on the land of the city by the people themselves, working on the houses only at the weekends. At that time legal issues were not considered as priority and many of these areas were never legalized.

A few decades later these areas were considered as informal/illegal housing and there were ideas raised to clear these areas. On the push of a private architectural firm, which contacted some of these neighbourhood associations and helped them to ask for building permits of their houses, a legalization process started in 2011. During this process the architects discovered that these poor families need further assistance to improve and extend their houses for those family members who come back to the neighbourhood, having lost their job and house elsewhere. Besides improving the buildings also some interventions were needed in the public space. All these activities were organized as participatory process, leading to the establishment of a Dwellers Working Unit, that put the discussed changes into practice, using the building know-how of local residents and allowing them earning an extra income.

### ***Example 3. Exploring temporary use solutions***

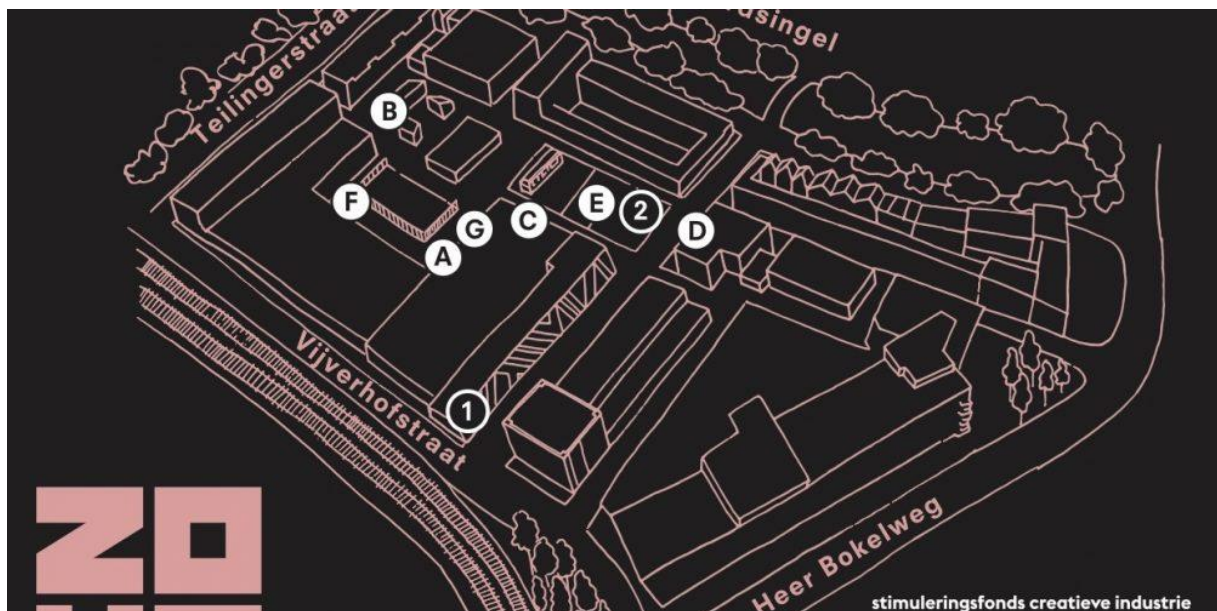
The crowdbuilding idea aimed to find final solution to the problem of empty office buildings, connecting this successfully to the existing demand for housing. Another approach was looking for temporary solutions, in the lack of a final vision, how to solve the crisis induced issue. A famous example for that can be found in Rotterdam: the Zomerhofkwartier (ZOHO) project in a former

business area in a central location of Rotterdam. This 1948-60 built business area became gradually empty, and the neighbourhood with 12 th sqm unused buildings was considered as unsafe.

In the 2000s one of the Rotterdam housing associations bought the area with the plan to build 450 flats after the demolition of the industrial buildings. The financial crisis made this plan unrealistic, and the housing association realized that no development is feasible for at least 10 years.

In that situation a group of young urbanists came up with a suggestion for slow urbanization – step-by-step development. An agreement was reached and the housing association handed over the area to the organization for 10 years for free. The urbanists developed a strategy how to attract tenants to the area. They decided for a makers' area: for creative economy, but not only have people who think, but also people who work with their hands, create objects. They invented a system of pitches: people had to come in front of a jury, pitch their idea and explain why they wanted to rent here. Half of the candidates were rejected but in that way a community has been created.

Within 1,5 years the 12 th sqm became full – in fact this proved to be not slow but fast urbanism. The success convinced the housing association to re-invest 25% of the rental revenue to the upgrading of the area.



<http://zohorotterdam.nl/>

#### ***Example 4: Organizing refurbished cultural places with temporary users***

After basically all alternative cultural institutions have been shut down in Budapest, a cultural NGO was looking for a place which is totally independent from the authorities. (Vacant City:p.70) They reached an agreement with the owner of a vacant socialist-style department store, regarding to rent out the third floor. This was the birth of MŰSZI (Művelődési Szint: Cultural Floor). To be able to pay the rent for the whole (2800 sqm) floor, the NGO issued a call for applications. There was a huge demand and specific criteria had to be developed for selection of tenants. This was based on the type of the candidates' activity, their willingness to contribute to the community, and their capacity to pay rent. In such way a lively and fashionable place has been established in the otherwise largely empty building.

MŰSZI functioned in that place between 2012-2017 and had by now to leave the building as development works started. The story, however, continues: after the successful temporary use project the collective of MŰSZI has found another (smaller) place and this might probably be the beginning of another temporary use project, giving new life to an empty space.

## 2. NEW ACTORS CREATING BOTTOM-UP URBAN INNOVATION

### *The role of private actors*

The listed examples show a series of innovations regarding the participation aspect of urban regeneration: with the use of architectural imagination, networks, exploration of databases and the use of social media a new model of urban redevelopment has been developed.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis not the property owners or the banks but architects, urban planners, cultural organizations became the main sources of innovation. At first sight they were also victims of the crisis, losing from one moment to the other most of their clients and tasks to do. Many of them however, reacted quickly on the change of the circumstances, developing a new model for their work: instead of waiting for new contracts, they started to generate commissions themselves.

**Example 1.** refers to the Dutch firm space&matter which successfully used its community networks and with the innovative use of social media they created new spatial situations, buildings, and entire neighborhoods. In the Crowdbuilding project (Vacant City:p.50) neither the supply side (the owner of the empty office building) nor the demand side (the future inhabitants of the refurbished buildings) were known in before, their relationship developed in an iterative, co-development process.

**Example 2.** is the story of Atelier Mob, a group of young Portuguese architects. (The story was presented by Tiago Mota Saraiva at the 2015 Lisbon conference of the European Network for Housing Research under the title „Working with the 99%“.) Their freshly established office got into trouble in 2008 when new contracts vanished. They understood very soon that not the housing problems have vanished but the traditional work of architects – so they started to work with the „99%“, i.e. with those who are unable to contract an architect but would need help to get out from their hopeless situation. The work of the architects was acknowledged and reimbursed some years later as the area became part of the BIP/ZIP (Local Development Strategy for Neighborhoods or Areas of Priority Intervention) program of Lisbon. This programme supports since 2007 local projects and municipal partnerships, improving the social and territorial cohesion in the selected deprived neighborhoods.

Based on these experiences AtelierMob phrased ideas on the role of architecture in processes of social organisation, speculating on architecture's ability to initiate movements to improve the life of poor citizens (<http://www.ateliermob.com/>).

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**In Example 3.** the private urban planning firm STIPO (Vacant City:p.60; Funding the Cooperative city:192) played practically the role of a public developer, working with the district and the housing association (top-down), bringing them successfully together with creative start-up companies (bottom-up).

**Example 4.** shows a different case, in which the innovative actors are coming from the cultural and artistic scene. Such organizations face in many countries serious difficulties to find physical space for their activities. For many of them the financial crisis brought new opportunities – provided that they could find the way to reach agreement on temporary use with the owners of empty standing buildings.

An unusual element of the new, innovative approach by the private organizations and NGOs was that at the beginning of the process they worked for free and got reimbursed only at the end – provided that their idea met the expectations of other actors which did not know about the project originally.

### 3. THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The financial crisis created new circumstances also for the public sector. As the public resources for urban regeneration practically disappeared, the public sector became more interested to open up towards the private initiatives – simply because no other ways remained to deal with vacancies and improve deprived areas.

In the last decade, since the financial crisis, many different examples could be discovered illustrating the more open, more flexible approach of the public sector. The following examples show huge variety, linked partly to the institutional-political-cultural background (path-dependency) of the actors, and partly to the deepness of the economic crisis in the given country.

#### 3.1 *Awakening and supporting the commitment of citizens*

There are many examples on cities actively looking for ideas from below. Examples might range from simple websites (to where citizens can submit their ideas) till very sophisticated participatory budgeting schemes.

In 2015, the municipality of **Ghent** developed a crowdfunding platform where citizens can submit their ideas of new facilities in their neighbourhood or in the city, seeking finance for them, from a few hundred to several thousand euros. The city of Ghent co-finances non-profit projects with 75% of the costs, up to 5.000 €. The platform is not only technological support to help collect money, but it also provides assistance in project management and communication. Citizens can give their support in terms of skills and time, in order to help with accounting, creating a marketing plan, raising funds or executing the projects. One of the winners collected more than 6.000 € to ensure welcoming to refugees; another one raised 7.000 € to buy furniture, seeds, and plants for the rehabilitation of small stretches of streets as liveable places. (Funding the Cooperative city: 200.)

In 2014 the city of **Gdansk** prepared a similar idea for the Bloomberg Mayors Challenge competition. In order to spark cooperation between citizens and local administration, the idea of a Democracy Accelerator was proposed. Accelerator is based upon three principles: open-source web platform, internal systematized procedures inside of the city hall and a team of coaches (city's staff) cooperating with the citizens who submit their ideas. In the first step an initiative group submits their idea via an internet platform. The initiative is described and justified, its budget and an impact characterized. Influence on number of people that will benefit from the idea defined. The next step is to build a circle of supporters for the idea, a certain amount of supporting votes have to be collected. If the idea gets enough support, the initiative group will commence cooperating with the coach. The submitted idea will be refined by the community in a democratic process.



Since 2009 **Lisbon** developed a whole system, called BIP/ZIP Local Development Strategy, for co-construction of policies and strategies, concerning social and territorial cohesion and sustainable urban living, based on a strong participative framework. The first tool, BIP/ZIP Mapping, identifies the Priority Intervention Territories of the city, according to the overlapping of Social, Economic, Urban and Environmental deprivation indexes that express the fracture of the city. The second tool, BIP/ZIP Program, funds and ignites local community projects aimed to respond to local needs, promoting local organisations partnerships and empowering population to a sustainable urban development. The third tool, GABIP local offices, develops a co-governance framework involving Municipality, Local Boroughs and all relevant stakeholders and citizens organisations. They promote an articulated response among the political, administrative and technical dimensions with local organisations and community. The fourth tool, a Collaborative Platform for Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), is a bottom-up co-governance network that develops a global strategy to BIP/ZIP territories and promotes experience, sharing to enhance local partners' skills. (URBACT Good Practice. <http://urbact.eu/integrated-toolbox-deprived-neighbourhoods>)

### ***3.2 Offering public buildings for common use***

Another way to foster the development of communities and help them in idea-creating to improve their surroundings is to offer abandoned, vacant buildings to the community for refurbishment, after which these places can be used by the community.

There are many URBACT Good Practice examples on this tool.

The City of **Vaslui** (RO) started a comprehensive process of rehabilitation of six of the former neighbourhood power plants, that were heating local housing estate buildings. The aim was to address social challenges, like increasing number of elderly, disabled people, and children whose parents work abroad. The rehabilitation of these abandoned buildings and the activities performed within these were the result of the multiple discussions the municipality had with the targeted beneficiaries. The scope was to assure a maximum level of satisfaction of the vulnerable/marginalised groups and integrate them into decision-making processes. The former power plant buildings were transformed into six day care centres right in the heart of the biggest neighbourhoods of the city, serving directly a total of 300 elderly people, 15 young students and their families, and also offering a properly equipped auditorium open for any of the 14 000 students, NGOs or other cultural associations. (<http://urbact.eu/when-unused-and-empty-spaces-become-centres-social-inclusion>)

In **Bari** (IT) a former disused school has been converted into a creative hub. It is a community experience of social innovation and reuse of a decommissioned public building, having triggered the involvement of residents and stakeholders in the transformation process affecting the neighbourhood. The starting point was the will of the city to convert the former school in the target neighbourhood of its regeneration strategy. A local group was selected after a national tender. Governance involves the municipality of Bari, neighbourhoods, civil society, local economy representatives, university and residents – an extensive network of 15 youth associations. The start of the conversion has been marked by two important experiences: a photo contest opened to all residents to attest to the school's identity before the change with a hashtag on Instagram and a media partner, an experience of collective self-building to adapt the spaces at the new functions. Besides, the space was furnished through an open call to residents to donate disused furniture and fittings in exchange for participation in the courses. The priorities and activities of the re-created place were discussed and decided in neighbourhood focus group meetings. (<http://urbact.eu/spazio-13-creative-hub-urban-regeneration>)

### ***3.3. Introducing new regulations to dynamize underused buildings and spaces***

There are also more systematic ways possible to deal with the problems (and opportunities) of underused real estate property. Probably the simplest, but not at all the easiest to implement, is the taxation approach. An example for that can be found in the UK where a nationwide regulation enforces owners who keep spaces empty to pay a tax which amounts to double of the potential rent. Otherwise, or in addition, also local regulations might push property owners to pro-actively think about the use of their empty standing private properties.

**Amsterdam**, the city which faces an enormous challenge by empty-standing office buildings, relatively quickly recognized that this is not only the problem of the real estate owners and the banks, the public sector also has tasks in reacting on this challenge. First, they started to rewrite their policies and manuals, which faced exclusively on new development, for redevelopment. Since 2007 the city became much more flexible, and started to help investors who wanted to redevelop vacant buildings. In 2009, the municipality decided to have one civil servant who could completely focus on transforming offices into residential uses or hotels, or anything else that is needed. This transformation has been going on since 2009-2010, when this policy started. Since 2012, the city approved a vacancy by-law that prompts office property owners to notify municipalities about their vacant property. (Vacant city, p.101)

A brand new example on public sector efforts to mobilize the underused properties is the new Regional Law of **Emilia-Romagna** about urban planning approved in December 2017. Article 15 of this law foresees that every Municipality prepares and updates a "Register of properties made available for urban regeneration". This register should include all underused publicly owned real estates. Besides, the register should include private buildings and properties which are offered voluntarily by the owners, possibly on the basis of a public call/tender. In such cases owners commit themselves to sell the building/property at a fixed price which should, in principle, be somehow lower than the market price. After five years, if nothing happens, the owners are no more obliged to this commitment. The advantage for owners is that the inclusion of their vacant properties into the register should attract more easily interested investors. Moreover the bureaucratic procedures for regenerating the building should be quicker because some procedures have already been prepared when the building is included in the register. For the moment there are no real experiences yet of the application of this law. (Information gathered from Giovanni Fini, Municipality of Bologna.)

Probably the most overarching example is that of **Naples**, accepting a regulation aiming for the democratic use of public assets. With the "Urban Civic Use Regulation" Naples has recognised the common goods in the city itself. If a property is approved to be subject of this regulation, the public administration assumes the burden of ensuring the usability of the place, while the right to make use of it is free and guaranteed to all on the basis of a participatory model that is founded on open assemblies and thematic roundtable talks. An ad-hoc municipal department, the "social enhancement of municipally owned spaces and common goods" has been created. This department (technical level), with a political coordination in charge of the Urban Planning councillor (political level) are in charge of promoting the collaboration with other departments and councillors of the municipality, or other institutions. The results of this open and inclusive management model can be proved by data registered since March 2012. In the first building in the last years more than 250 projects came to life, breaking down the production costs by using free and shared spaces, resources, knowledge and skills. (<http://urbact.eu/lost-found>)

### ***3.4 Establishing new institutional structures***

Regarding institutional structures there is a link with the regulatory approach: for each new regulation some agency/institution has to take the responsibility. There are also options, however, to create responsible institutions to organize temporary use if there is no overarching regulation in place in the city about vacant/underused buildings.

In **Chemnitz** (DE) one of the most pressing issues the city is facing is the large number of decaying historic apartment buildings abandoned after the 90s. To handle this issue the Agentur StadtWohnen has been established, as a public project carried out by a private company, that offers a flexible and proactive approach. By acting as a networking hub, the Agency connects owners, potential investors or users and public authorities for the revitalisation of the historic housing stock of the city. The scope of the project is to activate owners, private and public stakeholders to save, restore and reanimate buildings. It can be described as a networking hub between persons, groups and authorities that have an interest in this goal. Starting and keeping communication going around the objects is the core of the project's activities. So far, more than 140 buildings were monitored, for 50 a change of ownership was organised and 40 are currently available for investment projects. <http://urbact.eu/housing-agency-shrinking-cities>

The **Dutch** Anna Real Estate & Culture is basically an anti-squat company, but instead of minimizing the use in a building, it aims maximizing it, in a legal way. In Holland many real estate owners recognized that instead of leaving a building empty, or paying a security company, it is a better approach to call an anti-squat company. In the beginning, there were only corporate businesses doing this work, that didn't help social initiatives to find space. Anna was one of the few parties who do it differently, trying to communicate with the owners, find out what the developments are, and also try to help organizations that are more vulnerable and maybe more hassle to have as tenants but who really add value to a building and a neighborhood. Anna, working with 1-month notice, unburdens the owners: they make sure that the maintenance is done, the heating system works, the doors are open, clean up, and the owner doesn't have to come to the building anymore. To be occupied is cheap security and also cheaper insurance for the owner than when it's empty. They add value: it's better for the property and the area if a building is used, and also makes it easier to rent it out again or to redevelop it. (Vacant City:p.36)

An Europe-wide well known example for the agency-based approach to vacancies can be found in **Bremen**. The ZwischenZeitZentrale (ZZZ) has been founded in 2008 as an NGO working in initiating temporary use in vacant premises. The ZZZ activists track down empty buildings and spaces, contact interested parties, clear up legal issues, obtain permits, speak to local politicians and councillors about utilisation plans, calculate costs, attract additional donations and develop their own ways of using the spaces. They're not just looking for short-term uses; they'd ideally like to develop long-term perspectives, even if interim tenants have to be moved to a new location. The speciality of the case is the official acceptance of their work: since a few years ZZZ works on the basis of long-term contract with the City of Bremen, it can be considered as an extension of the public sector, situated and working outside the official buildings. There are now several departments involved in different areas of Bremen's temporary use project: The initiative is being supported by the Senator for Finance, the Senator for the Environment, Construction and Urban Transport, and the Senator for the Economy, Employment and Ports; and the Senator for Culture and Bremeninvest are also active members of their respective steering committees. There are several objectives, including the reduction of running costs caused by vacancies, the revival of quarters and the provision of workspaces to start-ups and creative artists.

The examples above have shown that the establishment of new institutional structures is an important aspect of the revival of vacant premises. However, such agencies rarely become 'normal' part of the local municipality: due to their special way of working most often NGO-s or private entities fulfil this task, in close connection with the public sector, as an arms-length extension of it.

#### **4. THE INCLUSION/SOCIAL ASPECT OF PARTICIPATION MODELS**

It is not easy to achieve a situation that civic initiatives produce tangible social effects. Most often the active persons behind civic initiatives are coming from the middle class, having difficulties to represent the interests of those who are really poor.

Successful renewal projects with strong participation in deprived urban areas most often lead to gentrification. The dilemmas of participatory planning in urban areas has been discussed in the article „Participation-or-inclusion“ <http://urbact.eu/participation-or-inclusion>, illustrated by examples taken from Budapest and Berlin.

The essence of the article is that to achieve socially balanced outcomes it is not enough to ensure equal access to everyone in the course of the participatory planning process. Even if the doors are open, the most vulnerable persons or those having ethnic/migration background, will not come in, they will never attend planning meetings. The case of Teleki tér in Budapest illustrates well the outcome: in the renewed public space the influence of the actively participating lower-middle class residents resulted in the pushing out of those disadvantaged population groups (homeless, Roma), who were originally dominating the place. The case of Helmholtz square in Berlin shows the more inclusionary approach and outcomes, which was based on the presence of public money, allowing to employ social workers who could include or at least represent the interest of those social groups which would otherwise be excluded from the participatory process.

## 5. HOW TO CREATE CONNECTION BETWEEN ACTORS: RESIDENTS, EXPERTS, ACTIVISTS, POLITICIANS

All the issues discussed in this short article raise difficult communication challenges. The different actors, such as residents, experts, activists, politicians all have very different views and interests regarding concrete issues of activating underused properties in our cities and in the related participatory processes.

There are many models to link to each other these actors. At the end of this paper I describe a unique experience I had in **Bratislava**, when I was invited as expert to the Street Festival „WhatCity?“ in May 2018. <http://whatcity.sk/en/intro/>

The issue of this street festival was the street itself. Mickiewiczova is a street at the edge of the inner city of Bratislava, currently dominated by heavy through traffic and parking cars. The aim of the event was to have fruitful discussions between different types of actors, including local and international experts, about who owns the streets and how it would look if the traffic disappeared and the streets belonged to people once again. For one day, the street was closed for traffic to show what it can offer to the city. Instead of cars, it was dominated by a long dining table that invited people to engage in discussions, try new food or take part in fun activities.

Instead of presentations, this event had the unique format of one-to-one talks between speakers and visitors in order to facilitate communication and expert knowledge exchange. The role of the invited speakers was to go through 3 x 20 min dialogues with participant who select them as a speaker (‘slow date’). This format did not require any presentation. The discussions were recorded and broadcasted, so more people could listen to them in parallel. This is a very interactive form that teaches people to listen and cultivate dialogue.

Those who wanted to participate had to buy a ticket (€5 – a very low price, just to ensure that really interested people participate), and make a choice of speakers and preferred times beforehand. The speakers were announced before the meeting and they could be ‘reserved’ for the discussions simultaneously on a first-come, first-served basis. Each talk was 20 minutes long and there were three rounds of talks. Visitors were able to listen to other ongoing discussions through headphones with instructions about how to find the preferred talk and on which channel.

During my three discussions I was talking to a green activist, to a planner at strategic development office and a local politician (member of the city assembly).

In the course of the meeting leading local politicians as well as hundreds of local residents participated. Such methods really enable unusual ways of communication.

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## Contacts

**Maarten van Tuijl, Lead Expert sub>urban**

[www.temparchitecture.com](http://www.temparchitecture.com)

[maarten@temparchitecture.com](mailto:maarten@temparchitecture.com)

**Luca Lanzoni, Lead Expert MAPS**

[l.lanzoni@culturadellacitta.it](mailto:l.lanzoni@culturadellacitta.it)

[www.culturadellacitta.it](http://www.culturadellacitta.it)

**Nils Scheffler, Lead Expert 2nd Chance**

[www.urbanexpert.net](http://www.urbanexpert.net)

[scheffler@urbanexpert.net](mailto:scheffler@urbanexpert.net)

**Iván Tosics, URBACT Programme Expert**

[tosics@mri.hu](mailto:tosics@mri.hu)

[www.mri.hu](http://www.mri.hu)



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