



retill  
TEMPORARY USE • DYNAMICS FOR LIFE

DEEP DIVE STUDY VISIT RIGA

COMMON

OWNERSHIP



European Union  
European Regional  
Development Fund

★URBACT  
Driving change for  
better cities

**We are all co-owners of  
the city and therefore  
co-responsible for it.**

**Lessons learned from the REFILL Deep Dive Study Visit in Riga 28 - 30 June 2017.**

**Text and design: François Jégou, Strategic Design Scenarios, REFILL Lead expert and Selam Mebrahtu, Strategic Design Scenarios.**

**Cover page:**

**REFILL Deep Dive Study Visit in an empty public space not far from Turgeneva str. 17, Free Riga residency house for social project in Riga (Latvia).**

**Photo by Strategic Design Scenarios.**

**REFILL Deep Dive Study Visit and sightseeing of empty buildings around the City Centre in Riga (Latvia).**

**Photo by Strategic Design Scenarios.**

Compared to all problems threatening cities vacant buildings don't seem to be a major one: some places are empty and that's all. But mankind hates void and too many empty buildings are the symptom of something going wrong in the city (buildings especially when well situated should represent an economic value. If they are not used then probably the local economy is not working well...). In psychological terms it's also generating a feeling of nonsense (if it's empty and not used, then somebody in need should be allowed to make use of it. This after-taste of both dysfunction and absurdity was latent all along these 3 days of Deep Dive Study Visit spent in Riga.

Marcis Rubinis, one of the founder of Free Riga NGO supporting temporary use organized an introductory walk as a way to take stock of vacant buildings in Riga:

**“See these banal new constructions just in front of these beautiful old buildings that stays empty. There are more than a thousand of empty constructions like this one in Riga”**



Harry Rosenstein, a real estate owner collaborating with Free Riga to add:

**“Here in Riga, too many building have been demolished when they could have been re-furbished!”**

Vacant buildings in front of Dzirnavu str. 27 Free Riga Artists' Summer Residence in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

# 1. TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY OF VACANCY



Dzirnavu str. 27 Free Riga Artists' Summer Residence 2017 in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



At the beginning of the REFILL project partner cities were talking a lot about the vacancy of spaces and building as a problem for cities to fight against. Along the development of the project, partners quickly switch to think in terms of potential of temporary use instead. During the initial walking tour across Riga Kirils Mihejevs, from the Property Department of the City of Riga pointed the many abandoned buildings and degraded facades:

**“Our department fines the owners of these properties multiplying the local tax by 2 or 3 to force them to maintain the buildings”**

Old property with degraded facade paying increased local taxes as a fine established by Riga city Property department. Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

David van Baden from the Economic department of the City of Ghent replies:

**“We’d love to have empty buildings like these in Ghent”**



REFILL Deep Dive Study Visit and sightseeing of empty buildings around the City Centre in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

At first sight empty buildings are a problem but beautiful historical building as seen in Riga represents a great potential first for temporary use and then for redevelopment.  
Els van Kooten, from the Property department of the city of Amersfoort modulated:

**“Empty building represent more an asset than a problem but they shouldn’t be too many”**

For Kirils Mihejevs:

**“Temporary use is a complementary tool to keep the buildings not degraded and not dangerous before redevelopment”**



Old property with degraded facade paying increased local taxes as a fine established by Riga city Property department.  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

REFILL Deep Dive Study Visit of the Strickis Villa in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



Beyond this first starting level some of the key figures of temporary use in Riga demonstrate that it is much more than a lever to soft maintenance of empty properties. Martins Mielavs shows with the Strickis Villa a good example of turning a vacant property into a viable business:

**“We are hosting events, parties, weddings. We don't have a licence so we operate with a nearby restaurant to provide the catering and we are fully booked”**

The Kanapes Cultural Centre is a second temporary use success story in Riga more oriented to culture. David Kanepe founder of the centre and co-founder of Free Riga argue:

**“10 people organizing 300 events per year, 2000 regular visitors and 25000 followers but we loose our time reapplying every 3 months and interacting with 28 different points of the city administration”**



Kanapes Cultural centre, 2014 in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Davis Kanepe.



## 2. MEDIATION



Visit of Puskina str. 11 and discussion led by Marcis about unlocking emptiness for TU and discovering TU as a service for owners in Riga (Latvia). Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



Katrina Krigere one of the 2 founders of Animal Liberation NGO hosted at Free Riga Puškina str. 11, a workshop house for social and arts projects in Riga (Latvia). Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

Temporary use requires mediation. As Katrina Krigere one of the 2 founders of Animal Liberation NGO hosted at Free Riga Puškina str. 11 temporary use states:

**“we are only interested in animals therefore we are very grateful to Free Riga to take care of all the technicalities and make a temporary use of the space for us possible”**



For Irina Mikelstone:

**“We have difficulties to find the right space for temporary use within the aim of our Property department to push redevelopment”**



Katerina Bonito from the city of Ostrava presented the roadmap to put temporary use on the legal city framework advocating for outsourcing the mediation:

**“It will never work if we try to organize the mediation within the city administration. We need the flexibility and skills of the civil society to manage the coordination platform”**

REFILL Deep Dive Study Partners discussing on program overview and setting the topic with input from visitors on their local challenges and expectations at Free Riga Dzirnavu 27, Riga (Latvia). Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

David confirms that letting it go to the citizens brings innovative ideas the administration cannot generate:

**“The temporary users adopted a very strange system to share the rental charge: they started by asking the different participants to the temporary use what they were willing to pay and reached 75% of the sum just by internal crowd funding”**



REFILL Deep Dive Study Visit Puškina str. 11, a workshop house for social and arts projects managed by Free Riga.  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

Along those 3 days the discussions balanced between focusing on private owners versus public owners of vacant properties: with whom to start? What is the easiest way to go? Beyond this on-going debate between participants there is certainly the eternal difficulties of collaboration and mutual understanding between the two worlds of private stakeholders and of public authorities.

As Irina Mikelstone from the Property department of the city of Riga says:

**“City administration struggles to open the dialogue with private owners”**



REFILL Deep Dive Study Partners discussing challenges and limitations of Free Riga as TU mediator at Dzirnava 27, Riga (Latvia). Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



Els van Kooten adds:

**“Owners are not necessarily based in the city where their properties are. It’s therefore difficult to get in contact with them. Real Estate agents have different business models and think in different ways”**

Kirils Mihejevs explains:

**“The possibility of getting a resident permit for a person who bought a house for more than 250,000 euros is causing the proliferation of vacant buildings. The foreign investors mainly from Russia and China don’t take care of these buildings which causes a faster degradation”**

Empty buildings in the center of Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

Marcis Rubinis reports a different experience in engaging temporary use processes:

**“We as Free Riga, turned to private owners as negotiation with the public authorities in Latvia was too slow”**



Marcis Plume owner of recently renovated building AT Terbatas Str. 28, Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



The logics at work and the engagement are radically different. Marcis Plume owner of recently renovated building situated on Terbatas Str. 28 points the competition mechanism at work between private owners:

**“We were happy to finish renovation first and we saw how our case inspired other properties in the area to also start renovations”**

David van Baden presented the case of The Box, a “plug and play” store installed in one of the street suffering shop vacancy in an area near the Dampoort station in Ghent. The Box is fully equipped with all facilities (multipurpose space, cooking place, sanitary, etc.) and all licences (permit for selling food and drinks, etc.) and is available for rent for the week or the weekend for a fixed price and for a maximum of one month:

**“We played with the notion of temporality on the one hand to allow young entrepreneurs to try new businesses for a short period and without risks of huge financial disasters and, on the other hand, to showcase the private owners that there is a demand for flexible shops and restaurants spaces”**

With this example the city of Ghent shows how public authorities could cross this public-private division and really innovate to interact with private sector dynamic.



Project The Box Gent, a plug-and-play store of a 85m<sup>2</sup> fully equipped surface available for people that have a business and want to sell something or provide a service to the general public. It is located in Dampoortstraat, a street with most vacant stores/restaurants in Ghent (Belgium). Photo by David van Baden.

[www.theboxvlaanderen.be](http://www.theboxvlaanderen.be)



An apparently banal explanation from Marcis Rubinis triggered a lot of debates:

**“Mediator, it’s much more of a rocket that is being made while flying”**

For certain of the public authorities taking part, this work-in-progress is rather negative and a potential sign of loss of control whereas for other participants this very process is the essence of co-design and adaptability, as it should be made.



Property department of Riga signs the Memorandum Free Riga, Riga (Latvia).  
Photo by Memorandum Free Riga.



Dealing with a topic such as temporary use of vacant spaces is challenging city policy practices and help them to evolve. New city administrations are emerging: as Elisabeth Hublé from the Property Department of the city of Ghent says:

**“We are not bending the rules, we learn how we can use the rules to serve our aims”**

Saskia van Dijk from the Matchpoint association in Amersfoort:

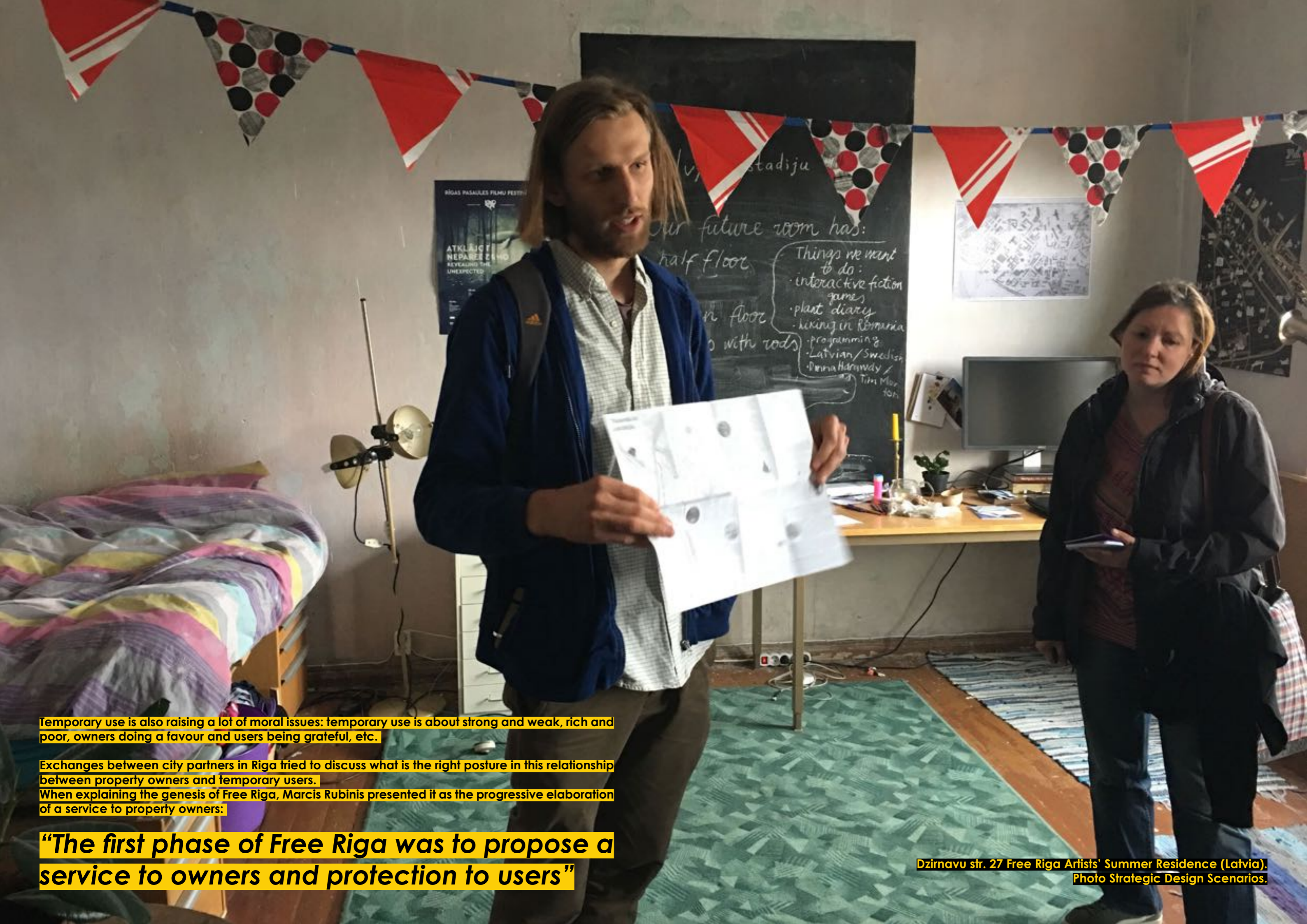
**“We have to find the worms holes to join the 2 worlds of property owners and temporary users”**

Refill Deep Dive Study Visit Partners discussing after the presentation of the economic benefits of temporary use in Ghent at the City Property Committee of Riga City Council. Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

# 3. REBALANCING THE POWER



Kanepes Cultural centre in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo by rigathisweek.



Temporary use is also raising a lot of moral issues: temporary use is about strong and weak, rich and poor, owners doing a favour and users being grateful, etc.

Exchanges between city partners in Riga tried to discuss what is the right posture in this relationship between property owners and temporary users.

When explaining the genesis of Free Riga, Marcis Rubinis presented it as the progressive elaboration of a service to property owners:

**“The first phase of Free Riga was to propose a service to owners and protection to users”**

The NGO started with contacting private owners, defining with them the profile of temporary users that may fit in their empty properties and scooting them, refurbishing the minimum to make the place livable, organizing contract and insurance and making sure that the contract is respected and the owner is pleased with the temporary tenant.



The neighborhood of Free Riga Artists' Summer Residence 2017 at Dzirnavu str. 27 in Riga (Latvia). Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.

David van Baden wondered about Free Riga:

**“You are doing a lot for owners but what do you get in return? Not much apparently...”**

If it's a service to owners then Free Riga should be paid for it. Part of the tax reduction property owners gets hosting users could be used for it and reinvested into renovation. And David adds:

**“In Ghent, we have some companies selling go-between services to avoid squatters. They look for appropriated temporary users to answer owners requests and for that service they get paid”**

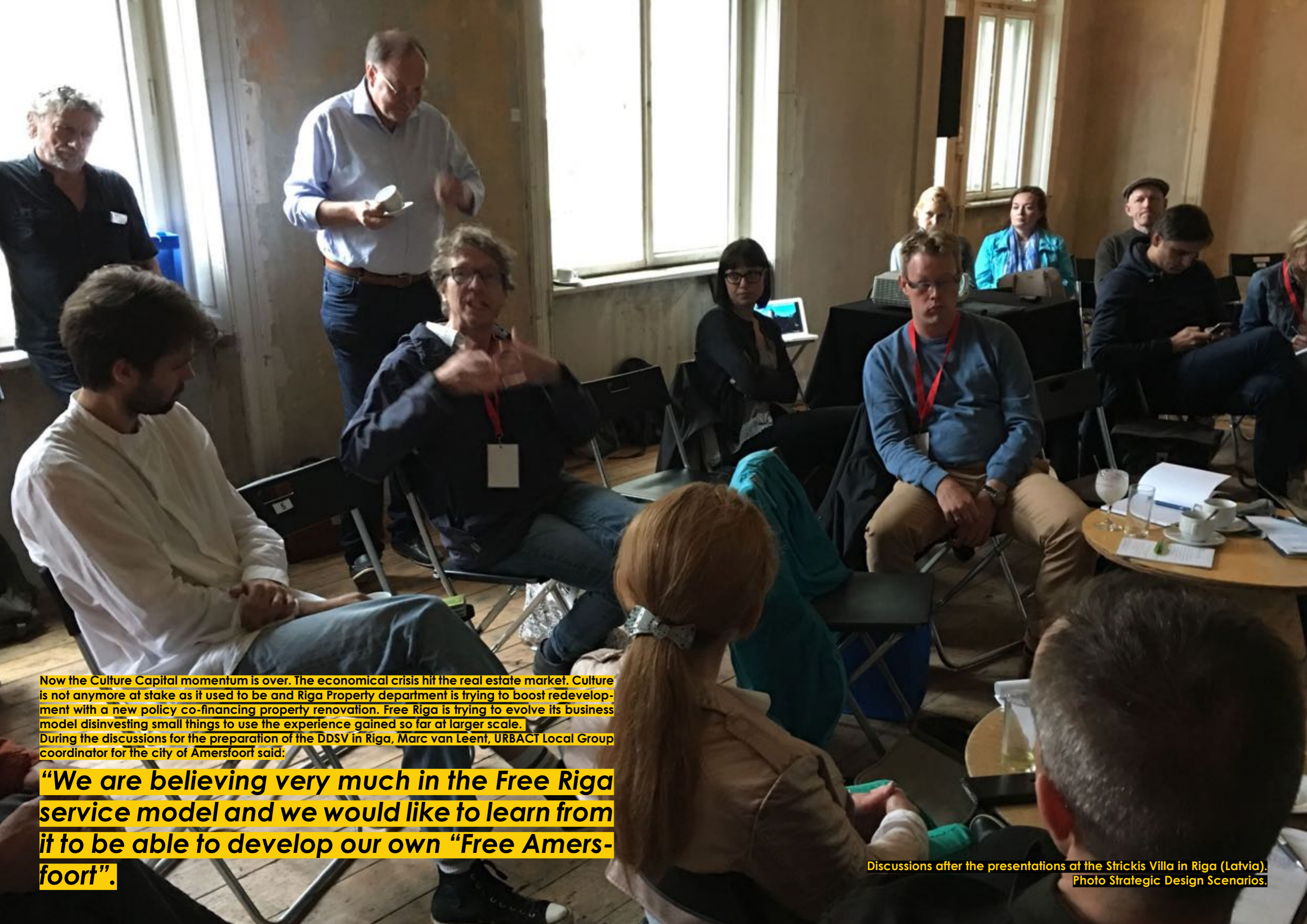
"What is driving us?" asks Marcis Rubinis reflecting on Free Riga...

**"Free Riga is a public benefit NGO whose mission is to make these empty places alive"**



Free Riga is born from the necessity to find spaces available to host the many artistic events scheduled during Riga Culture Capital year. Riga city administration composed with the constraint and facilitated with tax reduction owners that would accept to host temporary users. Free Riga as an NGO got a Public Benefit status to become an eligible interlocutor in this tax reduction scheme and became a sort of "open and diffused cultural centre". As Marcis Rubinis says:

**"The idea was to reduce the costs of places that happens to be available. Literally unlocking what was free for the benefit of all the city"**



Now the Culture Capital momentum is over. The economical crisis hit the real estate market. Culture is not anymore at stake as it used to be and Riga Property department is trying to boost redevelopment with a new policy co-financing property renovation. Free Riga is trying to evolve its business model disinvesting small things to use the experience gained so far at larger scale. During the discussions for the preparation of the DDSV in Riga, Marc van Leent, URBACT Local Group coordinator for the city of Amersfoort said:

**“We are believing very much in the Free Riga service model and we would like to learn from it to be able to develop our own “Free Amersfoort”.**

Discussions after the presentations at the Strickis Villa in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



In the mean time, "Free Amersfoort" turned into Matchpoint REFILL. The idea is to enlarge the model of company involving in social projects, donating resources, sharing knowledge, etc. in order to include private owners giving temporary access to their empty properties.

Saskia van Dijk from Matchpoint foundation presented the strategy on which Matchpoint REFILL is based:

**"Spotting what's in it for me for both owners and users ; connecting the 2 worlds both face to face and through a digital platform ; providing a pop up toolbox with examples of contracts, do's and don'ts, lists of experts, relevant links ; proposing business coaching to temporary users so that they could improve their economic condition and access the normal real estate market"**

Discussions after the presentations at the Strickis Villa in Riga (Latvia).  
Photo Strategic Design Scenarios.



# refill

TEMPORARY USE • DYNAMICS FOR LIFE

**REFILL partner countries:**

**Ghent (Belgium – Lead partner) - Amersfoort (Netherlands) - Athens (Greece) - Bremen (Germany) - Cluj-Napoca (Romania) - Helsinki (Finland) - Nantes (France) - Ostrava (Czech Republic) - Poznań (Poland) - Riga (Latvia)**

**REFILL Lead expert: François Jégou, Strategic Design Scenarios**

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



**European Union**  
European Regional  
Development Fund

**URBACT**  
Driving change for  
better cities