

Urban Catalyst

Strategies for temporary uses –
potential for development of urban residual
areas in European metropolises

Final report (Extract)

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»Urban Catalyst« has been funded by the 5th Framework Programme „Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development“, Key Action 4 „City of Tomorrow Cultural Heritage“ of the European Union. The research project has investigated the potential of temporary uses as a motor of urban change. Co-ordinated by »Studio Urban Catalyst« at the Technical University of Berlin, a network of 12 partners from five European metropolises – Helsinki, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna and Naples – has developed models of action and strategic planning tools, integrating the potentials of temporary uses into a long lasting urban development and forming an unique archive which is now available to architects, planners, municipalities, developers, property owners and temporary users.

Background

Directly behind Berlin's Ostbahnhof rail station there is a wide expanse of wasteland. The investment projects for this site, which can be found in glossy brochures under the ambitious sounding name »Spreerraum Ost« (Eastern Spree River Area) have to a large extent been put on ice. The cranes are missing, the cityscape is falling apart, and wild growth proliferates between disused tracks. The regional and urban rail route, which divides the site, appears to lead through a

lifeless prairie. But the view from the train is deceptive. Visitors and even many locals would never guess that this prairie is alive. Hidden behind the grey silhouettes of the apparently empty industrial façades, in inner courtyards and old warehouses there is a vital laboratory of all kinds of different uses. Young graphic designers, artists, architects, and film makers can be found behind the old façade of the former East German SED party newspaper's head office »Neues Deutschland« and the adjacent barracks. At night, the grey area south of the rail track, which appears derelict at daylight, turns into Berlin's most renowned club mile.

The phenomena of derelicted sites caused by de-industrialization processes, abundance of infrastructure or political faults are not only Berlin specific but represent a common part of the urban fabric in nearly all European metropolises. The post-industrial change in Europe has generated very different social, economic and spatial conditions in urban centres – a polarised map where certain cities enjoyed un-precedented boom and regeneration while others failed to absorb vast, often centrally located areas left discarded after the closure of industries decades ago. Commercial development in cities like Helsinki continues to profit from a strong real estate market while economic crisis and collapsed property markets in Berlin have led to a slow

down and virtual standstill in property development. In a context of an oversupply of space and high vacancy rates many developers resign to apathy and »wait for better times«. However, the success and failure of urban transformation processes cannot be measured by short-term growth alone. A booming economy with an over-inflated real estate market can banish all creative energy from the city, making it impossible for young and weaker economies to thrive, potentially endangering what one might call a »sustainable mix«.

Both scenarios reveal a crisis in current planning tools, which fail, to different degrees, to initiate and direct sustainable urban change. While traditional state initiated planning is no longer affordable, the radical shift to neo-liberal planning policies has failed to offer inclusive models. Boom and gentrification can lead to social exclusion and an increasingly divided urban society, while the failure of market driven development to adapt in the context of economic collapse has led to apathy and stagnation. Both gentrification and neglect are symptoms of a crisis, which should be considered as an opportunity to critically examine and question the existing planning procedures and consider alternative models of development.

Over a period of two years, Urban Catalyst composed of an interdisciplinary team of architects,

planners, lawyers, sociologists and representatives of local municipalities has researched specific sites in five European metropolises which represent the spectrum between economic success and crisis: Helsinki, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Naples. The test areas selected were characterised either by a time gap – a moment of standstill between the collapse of a previous use and the beginning of new commercial development, or revealed the problems of gentrification and social exclusion created by a thriving real estate market.

The phenomena of temporary use itself has been the main point of investigation

During the first stage of research. In numerous case studies the research partners analysed temporary users in the test areas.

All studies demonstrate how the sites have been developed by cultural pioneers, who sought to set up and secure their own livelihoods with the lowest possible cost, but investing time, energy, creativity and self-commitment. The need to separate oneself from mass culture and to experiment with new lifestyles has been as important as the desire to set up profitable and stable businesses. All sites were characterised by a time gap – a moment of standstill between the collapse of a previous use and the beginning of new commercial development. This time gap has provided opportunity for new, unplanned activity and sites have become breeding grounds for new forms of art, music, and pop culture, as well as for technological inventions or start-ups. The uncertainty and openness attract and inspire. Informal economies become reception and integration thresholds into society for new arriv-

als and penniless immigrants, other temporary users took refuge from established lifestyles and enjoyed the openness and freedom offered by the claimed spaces. The virtually cost-free access to these spaces gives financially weak players the opportunity to grow in a protected but unsubsidised environment and become active participants in the shaping of their city. While traditional economies fail to re-vitalise urban wastelands when the market is down found spaces and materials are recycled with a minimum of investment and physical interventions – »Urbanism light«.

Temporary users do not develop in isolation, but in heterogeneous clusters with specific use profiles and identities. The users' capital is not financial means, but creativity, commitment, and social networks. Mutual support and non-monetary bartering relationships generate stable micro-communities. Unlike shopping centres, which often seek to artificially generate heterogeneity and variety, here the gradually emerging social networks and communities with shared values are the decisive motors for a development process. However, sometimes, temporary users remain a stopgap, falling victim to an increase in rent and land value that they themselves helped to generate through pioneering activity. But it is this very capacity to increase the value of a derelict site, which has been well noted by internationally operating corporations like Shell or Nike who have begun to discover the capital hidden in the creative potential of the sub-cultural scene. In this context of these developments a re-evaluation of the role that temporary uses play in our cities seems both relevant and timely.

The research has shown that the importance of temporary use as “catalysts” for urban change has indeed been of great importance. The analysis of temporary use activities throughout the 1980s and 1990s has provided a valuable pool of knowledge with precedents that are extremely relevant for current and future development in European metropolises. Up to now traditional urban development tools such as master planning completely neglected the potentials of temporary use. In this sense Urban Catalyst has been motivated by the following aspects:

Can local authorities, urban planners, and project developers learn from temporary uses?

Can temporary uses show new ways for urban change, an alternative to impotence, lethargy, and waiting for better times? How can stakeholders play an active role in weak development contexts? Which tools and models of action are needed and who has to be involved?

Scientific / technological and socio-economic objectives

The purpose of the research is to develop, evaluate and check solutions for stimulating residual urban spaces in five different European survey areas. This entails realizing the following main goals of the project:

Investigating the crisis of urban planning

The first stage of the Urban Catalyst project has been determined by two main goals: On the one hand the research teams concentrated on analysing the phenomena of temporary use. Each team provided several in depth studies on different

types of derelict sites and of temporary users. On the other hand the research intensively illuminated contemporary patterns of urban planning which often form crucial obstacles in the course of temporary users projects.

The most customary assumption is the follow of traditional patterns of commercial development: site owners or project developers commission a design, which is then negotiated with local planning authorities. The principal idea is to draw up a desired end condition, which is then translated into a master plan. The expectation is that once a certain percentage of tenants is secured, the project will go ahead. However, it is these patterns that have been put at risk in the current economic climate. Either, local real estate markets are in crisis with an oversupply of rentable spaces and high vacancy rates, local residents object to the plans, contamination is found on the site, old buildings are protected by preservation orders or, areas of urban renewal are that large that a short term development cannot absorb the available space. The development procedure fails to kick off, leading to stagnation and long-term vacancies. Private investments are not forthcoming and public coffers are empty, so that they cannot fill the gap. With developers resuming to “wait for better times” there is hardly any room to act. This crisis, the “Urban Catalyst” research team argues, should be considered as an opportunity to question the existing mechanisms and consider alternative models for action involving temporary use scenarios, which can show ways out of this situation. A more careful observation and analysis of the spontaneously occurring processes in our cities could offer new answers where traditional urban develop-

ment and planning fails. Breeding grounds for new ideas often develop at sites, whose location is considered problematic from an investors point of view. New experiment occurs where the model described above fails or is delayed for years or even decades. The case studies within the 5 European metropolises show that urban wasteland is not only an oasis for rare species of plants and animals, but should be reconsidered as a nucleus of a different type of urbanism.

Although these phenomena occur often outside conventional planning procedures, they have significant effects on urban development and urban culture.

Based on the analysis of case studies and current urban planning modes the research´s objective was to offer a new understanding of temporary uses as a neglected potential, which can play a strategic role as an addition to capital-oriented urban development concepts. What can planners therefore learn from processes, which take place without planning and whose essential characteristic is spontaneity? What role can they play in this process? Can inherently dynamic processes be controlled at all? Can temporary uses be initiated or cultivated? As the "Urban Catalyst" research team demonstrates, the instruments and tools used by urban planning to date do not give any, and if so merely inadequate, answers to these questions. But what happens if the economic situation does not permit conventional project development according to the »Construction site-one-two-three-developed« pattern? Or vice versa, an overheated real estate market banishes all creative energy from the city?

Investigating potentials of temporary use

A second step in the course of research formed the description of potentials of temporary uses for lasting urban development. The aim was to identify

- spin-off effects among temporary users and other stakeholders and their consequence for the on site development
- the economic potential: economic stimulation of urban areas, promotion of new businesses, promotion of innovative trade.
- the social potential: integration of socially marginal groups, stabilization of socially threatened city areas.
- the ecological potential: recycling unused or underused buildings, infrastructures, areas, and building materials. Demonstration of the reuse of available resources, areas, and buildings on the basis of „best practice solutions“.
- obstacles and deficits for the development of temporary uses: legal and economic basic conditions, inflexibility of the people in charge, etc.

Creating models of action and new instruments

How to act? The stimulation of temporary uses stands at the beginning of an interactive, open process of development which reacts flexibly to the complex dynamics of urban structures which are changing faster than ever. Models for the gradual development of urban wastelands reduce the danger of bad planning and bad investments. They can react flexibly and quickly to changing demands and can adapt the aims of development to the tasks at hand.

Implementing tools by the engagement of stakeholders

Today´s methods of civil participation have little influence since citizens and possible users are only taken into account when the planning is essentially completed.

All partners of the Urban Catalyst team had to become action researchers during the final stage of the project in order to fit in with the demand of the project not only to analyse phenomenas but also to put the developed tools into real practice.

Each test area has been transformed to a laboratory and involved temporary users site owners and local authorities. The local projects promoted models of social self-organization and self-initiative.

The urban development is based on the management of the diverse private initiatives and interests and thus releases private resources for innovation, work, and capital. It thus promotes the responsibility of the participants to themselves and strengthens their identification with their urban environment. Social groups which are excluded in conventional processes of urban development are integrated and made into initiators and responsible participants. This strengthens social networks, promotes social diversity, and forms the foundation for business start-ups and the development of new economic branches with minimal initial capital and without intensive state support.

The development of universally applicable strategies for socio-economically effective, direct activation of urban wasteland is one of the main goals of this research project. In doing so, the

project combines the study of new means and methods with their implementation and assessment in different countries. „Urban Catalysts“ was an interdisciplinary project.

Integration of different disciplines

Urban planning is traditionally determined by architects, political and local authorities and property owners. The Urban Catalyst project aimed at creating a platform for a broad range of stakeholders all negotiating and participating in shaping models for the cities future. The catalogue of means was not only be developed from classic planning disciplines, but also by incorporating different professions such as project developers, private enterprise, sociologists, economists, and lawyers, as well as the most diverse European interest groups and institutions. Businesses, state authorities, academic institutions, scholars, planning offices, and also citizens were linked with one another and supported by the Template.com platform, providing relevant information on the activities of each team.

The project unites different solutions in terms of city planning, economy, and communication towards developing residual urban spaces and guarantees technological and cultural transfer in Europe. By developing new means and establishing the interactive communication system, „Urban Catalysts“ stimulated the reprogramming of city spaces which up to now had been functionless, promotes synergetic effects between the users, and thus also opens up new possibilities for employment.

Contribution to Community social objectives
The quality of life and health in cities can be im-

proved considerably by revitalizing functionless city spaces through the activation of temporary uses. Temporary uses generate a great number of activities. They develop public activities in unused city spaces, create intensive exchange between different social groups, and compensate for the deficits of urban infrastructure. Temporary uses are site-specific. They improve the social network of the inhabitants by associating themselves with existing resources and programs.

Municipalities benefit from the economic and cultural activity in otherwise forgotten areas. They could effectively transform desolate areas without putting themselves at the mercy of investors. They would also act as lessors in their role as landowners.

Dissemination of results

Dealing with temporary users means dealing with complex systems. Traditional planning instruments often neglect relevant parts of the urban dynamic due to a lack of knowledge and communication. A first step towards new urban planning strategies is to communicate the urban catalyst case studies and best practice examples as well as the developed instruments and strategies to experts and stakeholders in the field of urban planning. Apart from the internetplatform the project itself became an catalyst spreading innovative results to local key agents at numerous conferences.

Conclusion

The objectives described above all focus the crucial point of research: how could temporary uses be instrumentalised as a catalyst within

processes of urban and cultural change. In order to exploit its potential we have to revise existing concepts of planning. Both, traditional, state-led planning as well as the more recent neo-liberal and developer driven approach to planning have failed, in some respect, to meet the challenges posed by post-industrial change and economic crisis. "Urban Catalyst" attempts to offer tools and strategies that might inform a new approach to planning without falling back onto a nostalgic call for state subsidies and financial aid: a strategic and time-based approach that is inclusive and stimulating: "Urban Catalysts" proposes to reconsider financially weaker parts of population and economy which often fuel temporary use and encourage their participate in urban change. In this way, different types of urban spaces (waste-lands, low-standard neighbourhoods, etc.) which developer driven planning has failed to absorb can be reconsidered and addressed. The approach would call for a more active participation of all stakeholders: state institutions (municipality) or site owners might act in an initiating and stimulating role, while temporary users themselves are taking action on the site. Positive interaction or even combination with investment projects by players with high financial power seems possible resulting in win-win situations for all parts. The encouragement of temporary use would lead to the inclusion of a more varied spectrum of interests, individuals and spaces while generating stability and values, which ultimately offer themselves for commercial exploitation. A mental rethinking can lead the way out of stagnation and lack of action, as many already successful examples in Europe prove.