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THEMES CONTRIBUTIONS

Title of the contribution	The Recycled City: New Uses in Old Settings
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In most European and North American cities, as well as in the overcrowded metropolises of the developing world, the most unevenly distributed and scarcely available resource is space. For a long time, the real estate sector counted among the leading industries in many Western cities, accounting for a significant proportion of their economic growth. As a result of the economic growth of North American and European economies in the first half of the 2000s and the corresponding explosion of real-estate prices, renting living and working spaces has accounted for an increasing proportion of individual and family incomes, gradually turning urban living into an everyday struggle for private space.

However, in the past years, as a consequence of the real estate bubble's explosion and the resulting financial meltdown, a significant surplus in available square meters emerged even in the most dynamic city economies. A few years after the outbreak of the economic crisis, only in the Netherlands, known for the extreme density of its settlements and the lack of space, there is over 6 million m2 of office space, that is, the 16% of the country's total office capacity, laying abandoned. This proportion is even higher in Amsterdam where it reaches 18%, the equivalent of 1.3 million m2. According to a study by the Delft University, for an approximate 400-800.000 of this stock it is virtually impossible to find a tenant, because of their obsolete spatial organization or disadvantageous location. In the meanwhile, the fate of office buildings has reached many other building types, namely school buildings, factories, workshop buildings, commercial spaces and residential buildings all across the country.

This phenomenon is by no means specific to the Netherlands. If the urban landscape of Amsterdam and Rotterdam is dominated by unrentable office towers, Leipzig's empty residential buildings, Rome's disaffected movie theaters, or Spain's deserted hotels join the list of vacant properties in Europe. Not to mention the countless halted construction sites across Southern Europe: as an interviewee of Benoît Felici's documentary film 'Unfinished Italy' remarks, "the most important architectural style of post-war Italy is the Unfinished Sicilian." The long-time underused properties are revelatory about the economic crises, but not only about that: they tell about the rigid management concepts of the pre-crisis era, unable to keep up with the changing economic and social circumstances.

Vacant real estate is an important element of all property systems; otherwise it would be impossible to find flats, shops, offices to rent. However, above a certain rate, vacancy is harmful to everyone. Owners pay charges after their unrented shops, apartments, offices as well, unused properties are deteriorating, losing their value throughout the process. The commercial activity of a neighborhood is gradually degraded with the presence of vacant properties that don't generate any traffic and deprive neighboring shops from entire groups of potential customers. Boarded-up houses and shops with lowered shutters worsen the public safety of an area, where nobody sees what happens on the street.

As a consequence of the crisis, many formerly prosperous cities of Europe and North America found themselves in the same position as East German towns after the fall of the Berlin Wall or cities of the American "rust belt", when they lost their industries and a large proportion of their inhabitants. In this sense, Detroit and Leipzig, with a radical decline in their population, were precursors of other cities in recognizing and trying to manage their empty properties. Seen from a contemporary perspective, the "Shrinking Cities" project initiated in 2002 by the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig, the Bauhaus Stiftung in Dessau and the Archplus journal is nothing less than a preliminary study to get ready for a broader crisis, an experiment to elaborate methods and instruments to treat the problem of vacant properties and urban areas spreading out all over Europe and North America, a proposal to introduce a new urban planning vocabulary, the preparation of the terrain for easing the economic crisis by the means of urbanism.
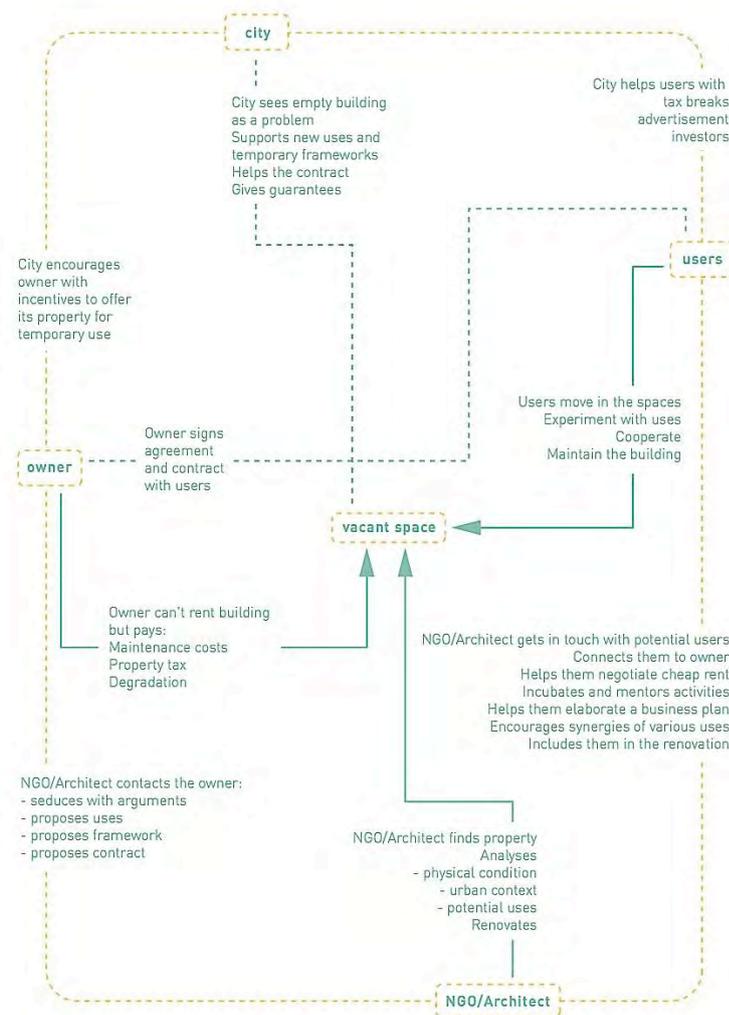
Urban actors across Europe respond to the problem of empty properties in various ways: the lack of financial resources leads governments and municipalities to re-interpret their existing infrastructure and to re-activate it by involving new functions and new actors. Some states introduce extra tax for properties vacant for more than 6 months (Great-Britain), others establish legal means to requisition long-time vacant residential buildings owned by legal persons or institutions and to convert them into social housing (France). Yet other states offer tax breaks for owners who allow social or cultural activities in their empty properties (Czech Republic, Poland). Some municipalities create online maps about the available vacant properties (Amsterdam); or fabricate legal and financial incentives to encourage the temporary use of unrented shops (Vienna).

Evidently, systematic responses to vacancy begin with enumeration. Besides the reluctance of real estate developers and municipalities alike to disclose their vacancy data (fearing that this information may damage their reputations and commercial perspectives), many authorities simply do not dispose of relevant records and thus have no means to inventory their vacant spaces. This insufficiency or inaccessibility of government, municipal and corporate databases makes it difficult to estimate the real proportions of vacant real estate and the potential of their conversion and reuse, delaying the elaboration of related development and management plans as well as policy proposals. The insufficiency of municipal and state real estate inventories also raises the question of transparency: how to create a database in which both centralized administrative knowledge and disperse citizen knowledge are represented?

In many cases, the response to this question is offered by community mapping initiatives, that is, the crowdsourcing of real estate data. Organizations in cities with as diverse development contexts as New York, Paris, Hamburg or Vienna initiated the collective mapping of vacant properties. In New York, Brian Lehrer, a radio host at WNYC invited listeners to contribute to his "Halted Development" crowdmap. The community map, indicating unfinished construction sites, gave a significant help with its revelatory power and arguments to the policy initiative as a result of which unfinished luxury condos were converted into social housing (http://goo.gl/maps/wy8xw). The New York-based homeless-rights organization "Picture the Homeless" used a similar strategy when its members created a map of empty properties in the city (https://vacantnyc.crowdmap.com/). In Paris, the housing-rights organization Jeudi noir launched an inventory of long-time empty buildings (http://www.jeudi-noir.org/2012/10/29/vous-connaissez-des-batiments-vides-envoyez-nous-ladresse); and this task is taken up by (im)possible living in Italy (http://www.impossibleliving.com), Leerstandsmelder in the German-speaking countries (http://www.leerstandsmelder.de), and by Lakatlan in Budapest (http://lakatlan.crowdmap.com/) and Central Europe (http://www.vacantcentraleurope.eu/). Community mapping projects, by developing new mapping techniques and by learning new methods, tools and technologies from each other, may contribute to a greater visibility of the vacancy problem: therefore a participatory

mapping campaign can help shaping the policy concerning vacant units of real estate as well as put pressure on municipalities to formulate new policies in this issue.

Mapping is, however, only the first step in strategies to reuse vacant properties. The responses given to the problem of empty properties appear at various levels of urban planning. The inflexible planning system characteristic of the modernist era has been gradually replaced by "soft urbanism", allowing for experimentation and for trying possible functions at test-sites, before fixing them by large investments. This open-ended planning system also gives more emphasis to the temporal dimension of developments, enabling temporary uses and successive phases in the development process.

city

City sees empty building
as a problem
Supports new uses and
temporary frameworks
Helps the contract
Gives guarantees

City helps users with
tax breaks
advertisement
investors

City encourages
owner with
incentives to offer
its property for
temporary use

users

Users move in the spaces
Experiment with uses
Cooperate
Maintain the building

Owner signs
agreement
and contract
with users

owner

vacant space

Owner can't rent building
but pays:
Maintenance costs
Property tax
Degradation

NGO/Architect gets in touch with potential users
Connects them to owner
Helps them negotiate cheap rent
Incubates and mentors activities
Helps them elaborate a business plan
Encourages synergies of various uses
Includes them in the renovation

NGO/Architect contacts the owner:
- seduces with arguments
- proposes uses
- proposes framework
- proposes contract

NGO/Architect finds property
Analyses
- physical condition
- urban context
- potential uses
Renovates

NGO/Architect

Cooperating stakeholders in temporary use.
Graphic: Adam Albert

To consider the "in-between time" opening between the moment a property goes vacant and its new use as an opportunity, design professions were also helped by new considerations of the limits of the shrinking market and the discovery of areas ignored by official planning mechanisms. This approach gives preference to small-scale, often temporary, community-oriented interventions over extensive construction projects, responding to the needs of local communities instead of to the requirements of speculation-driven investments.

Each empty building needs a different intervention and program in order to achieve its resurgence, and this task requires a new strategy from the architectural profession, as well. When the Dutch landscape architecture firm Rietveld Landscape presented in the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennial the exhibition "Vacant NL" in which the agency inventoried about five thousand empty public buildings across the Netherlands, they took position in support of a new architectural paradigm. Instead of serving large-scale demolitions and investments targeting fictional users, the new paradigm gives preference to the reuse of existing buildings and infrastructural elements with helping them gradually adapt new functions. According to the new model of architectural interventions, experiments lead to the testing of new functions, where successful uses are fixed in the program and failed ones get ejected from it.

The Vacant NL exhibition and its catalogue, the "Dutch Atlas of Vacancy" exploded in the national architectural discourse like a bomb, and offered a strong new orientation to the country's architecture policies: instead of new developments, architects should focus on abandoned buildings. The 2012 International Architecture Biennial of Rotterdam followed a similar path: as a central part of the Biennial, the office Zones Urbaines Sensibles (ZUS)

From office building to cultural centre. The 6B, Saint-Denis, 2012. Photo: Levente Polyak

tested their economic and urban development concepts in and around a vacant downtown office building baptized "Schieblock", designating it as a "test site". The goal of the temporary use of the Schieblock was to fill it with sustainable economic functions, re-establish its connections with the surrounding urban fabric and throughout this process, in order to turn the Rotterdam downtown into an attractive, dynamic location. The core of the of the Schieblock's program is to pair and connect various functions in a mutually fecundating way, stimulating the exchange of competences and information, and creating links between different social groups. The members of ZUS call this development model "unsolicited architecture", where architects act as real estate developers by initiating projects instead of waiting for commissions. Besides reusing and reconnecting empty buildings, this development model also offers an incubating process to NGOs, social and cultural activities as well as and start-up companies, for whom affordable workspace may give important help to establish themselves. The role of economic and civil incubator is one of the most important promises of abandoned properties, that makes vacant real estate increasingly interesting for urban strategy- and policymakers.

Garden at the rooftop of Schieblock. Rotterdam, 2012. Photo: Levente Polyak

Despite the efforts of municipal and governmental actors, the incubation function is best realized by NGOs: many European cities witnessed the establishment of "in-between use agencies" helping the cultural and social reuse of empty properties, in order to help strengthen these spheres, as well as to support neighborhood renewal. The employment of in-between or temporary use as a tool for urban development is a delicate process, based on establishing communication between owners and potential users, on network building, and on the identification of resources and the collection of data. This requires a flexible legal framework, a fast decision-making process, local sensibility and the continuous integration of experiences in the model. This process may be significantly facilitated by the establishment of an intermediate organizations, independent enough from but cooperating and exchanging information with municipalities, whose functioning is not decelerated by the system's cumbersome bureaucracy. Organizations of this kind (like Berlin's Coopolis or Leipzig's Haushalten) build databases and cooperation networks, involve and connect competent actors, delegate tasks and assure the constant flow of information between offer and demand. Transforming empty properties to allow them adopt new uses offers advantages to all: owners profit with the renovation and preservation of the building, users access affordable work and living spaces, residents enjoy their revitalized neighborhoods,

merchants benefit increasing traffic and sales, and the design professions gain new work opportunities and expanded professional perspectives.
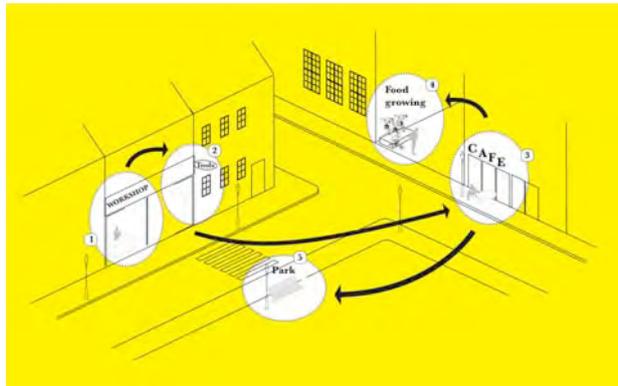

Diagram of a proposed neighbor-scale temporary use system for Budapest. Graphic: Leonard Ma

This is the background of the KÉK – Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre's Lakatlan project (http://lakatlan.kek.org.hu/en/about/). To deal with the problem of vacancy was particularly relevant in Budapest, as the city has suffered more from the economic crises than many other European cities. The recession, combined with many building types becoming obsolete and no longer able to respond to contemporary needs, as well as with the mismanagement of real estate properties owned by private as well as public owners, has emptied a significant proportion of the city from its previous functions and use. Over 30% of office spaces are vacant in Budapest alone, adding up to an estimated million square meters of wasted space, not to mention the countless empty storefronts, abandoned residential buildings and even commercial complexes.

In the Fall of 2012, KÉK launched a lecture series with a variety of presentations from the fields of architecture, urban research, planning, economic development and homeless rights. In parallel, we developed a crowdmap using an Ushahidi platform, inviting citizens to participate in the mapping process (www.lakatlan.crowdmap.com). To map vacancy, we needed to define categories and temporalities vacancy, to create a system that is organized according to the type of property as well as to the period during which the property has been vacant. For identifying the properties, we needed to keep the editing process open, enabling users to comment on each others' entries and to accumulate information concerning any property.

In the meanwhile, the task of mapping vacant properties requires cooperation between institutional and non-institutional sources of information. Municipalities dispose of the cadastral map, the registration number of each property, their geographical location and size. To complement the official information, participating citizens have their everyday observations and memories that they can transform into timelines telling about the duration of vacancy of each property, the previous occupations, their success or failure: this may give a more complex picture of the issue of vacancy, of small commerce as well as of housing shortage or the process of post-industrialization. In the crowdmap's website, therefore, citizens can upload their observations, in a way that they constitute a database comparable to the municipal set. We created an easy-to-use interface and provided a wide access to the website; the accuracy of the observations is double-checked with the help of various verification methods.

Since its launch, the Lakatlan lecture series and the crowdmap have quickly become catalysts of the public discourse on vacant properties. Representatives of homeless organizations, NGOs, art galleries, design initiatives as well as the City Hall have equally found their interest in reusing vacant spaces in various areas of the city. In this process, the map proved to be more than a simple instrument to visualize information: it is in the same time a tool to attract participation and an interface to stimulate discussion, helping reshape our perception of the city. Helped by the map, a veritable experiment has begun to unfold: granted a project gallery by the City of Budapest, the Lakatlan project set itself in 2013 to initiate a matchmaking process between owners and potential users, establishing the notion of "in-between use" both in the official discourse and in public opinion.