



Practices in second hand spaces: Producing value from vacancy

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Temporary uses have become an established tool in European cities for reactivating vacant sites and supply financially weak users with space. But what is often represented as a win-win situation for users, owners and the authorities is also characterised by precarious conditions for the users. They need to take the interests of different stakeholders into account and are forced to adapt structural givens with low-budget investments. To deal with this, they rely on alternative practices like sharing, do-it-yourself, collective self-organisation, try-outs, recycling and flexible operation. We have been able to experience this for ourselves as temporary users and two of the four founders of ZZZ – the ZwischenZeitZentrale. ZZZ is a funded agency, financed by the local authorities of Bremen (Northern Germany) with the aim of initiating and supporting temporary uses in vacant spaces. The aim of this note is to highlight the users' alternative practices and their potential for bringing about urban transformation in a more sustainable manner. To this end, we will discuss the development of five temporary uses within the framework of the ZZZ, and in reference to the concept of *second hand spaces* we have developed on the basis of our experiences.

From the concept of temporary use to *second hand spaces*

Urban transformation has meant that many industrial areas and ordinary buildings fell vacant for good. Many offices, shops, houses, buildings and factories became empty relicts of former decades as needs and practices changed. In many German cities, temporary use has emerged as an established tool for reactivating these vacant sites to try out new uses and provide affordable spaces in expensive urban areas, even if regulations for rebuilding and use are very

tight, and local authority departments occasionally pursue conflicting strategies. The term 'temporary use' pays scant regard to the numerous qualities of the phenomenon, however. It stands out by only highlighting the limited lifetime of the use. The term promotes temporary use as a stopgap for the real estate market and became a buzzword emphasising the reduction of vacancy costs. "Temporary uses' and 'urban pioneers' are valued as a 'means to an end' rather than as alternatives to dominant (capitalist) forms of urban development' (Colomb, 2012: 143). We propose the concept of *second hand spaces* (Ziehl et al., 2012) to emphasise the sustainable effects of temporary uses on urban development, instead of underlining their limited duration. The concept of sustainability with its three sectors of ecological, economical and social (including cultural) impacts requires that projects have to generate positive effects on all of these three levels in a balanced way to lastingly improve cities. The term sustainability unfortunately tends to be misused, especially by politicians and developers, to portray developments as valuable even if they generate effects on only one of the three sectors. Many people moreover mistakenly assume that sustainability is another expression for long-term impacts. We are often confronted with this confusion when we highlight the sustainability of short-term projects.

Second hand spaces are often found within the scope of temporary uses. They permit spaces to be used on favourable terms. A short-life let can match user's needs – organisers of exhibitions, movie-screenings, pop-up stores and pop-up restaurants need unique spaces for temporary uses. Start-ups are looking for spaces where they can try out a new (business-)idea. But the attendant investments are not affordable for most users. Particularly where uncertain and short periods of use are concerned, investments can be very risky: the higher the expenses, the longer the time required to amortise them. Another barrier is obtaining permission from the authorities to change the use of a property. Every building is legally dedicated to a specific use. To change this use can be awkward for owners, the authorities and the neighbourhood. In many cases, the responsible department demands expensive conversion measures. But many temporary uses fortunately obtain permits for using spaces at favourable terms, and the authorities can make concessions. For the operators of *second hand spaces*, these circumstances give rise to a precariousness situation, however. They need to invest time and money without assured concessions and lifetimes.

All *second hand spaces* are first and foremost distinguished by the fact that they result from a more or less self-determined adaptation of buildings and brownfields to the changed needs of their users. They evolve against a background of different demands on urban spaces and provide opportunities for interaction, participation, and start-ups at reasonable rents. The financially weak users of *second hand spaces* start off in a more or less rough space and with an

uncertain or short duration of use. As a consequence, they develop an individual aesthetic distinguished by simplicity and an improvised quality informed by the atmosphere, traces, remains, and history. In the process, they recycle the tangible and intangible values of vacant sites for economic, ecological, social, and cultural reasons, redefine them, and create something new from them.

ZwischenZeitZentrale Bremen

We developed the concept of *second hand spaces* out of our experiences as operators of ZZZ – the ZwischenZeitZentrale Bremen. ZZZ is an agency that sets up interim spaces, funded and financed by the local authorities of Bremen. As a result of historic peaks of deindustrialisation, the Free City of Bremen in North-Western Germany ended up with the highest debt per person of all the German *länder* – 30,000 Euros per resident. Budget constraints are therefore the kind of austerity Bremen has to cope with. The administration is seeking to try out new approaches in dealing with the challenges posed by structural change and new forms of labour: First of all, the Hanseatic city wants to revitalise vacant buildings and brownfields as a place for industry. Secondly, as a university city, it tries to keep young graduates in town. This way, the City of Bremen has combined its lack of financial resources und the abundance of vacant sites productively: In 2009, the Senator for the Economy and Ports of Bremen, Bremen’s Senator for the Environment, Construction, Transport, and Europe, the Senator for Bremen’s Finances, Immobilien Bremen (an authority acting as the owner of Bremen’s council properties), and Wirtschaftsförderung Bremen (an authority promoting trade and industry in Bremen) all united in a call to set up an office for temporary uses, to reopen vacant buildings and sites and test new ways of reusing them.

In an interdisciplinary team of four, we were commissioned to start up ZZZ as an office to support, advise and initiate diverse projects, and to wake up vacant buildings and brownfields with new uses and users. The concept behind ZZZ is to make space available to people’s ideas that would otherwise be unfeasible because of excessive rents. In principle, anybody with space requirements that cannot be met by the regular real estate market is taken into consideration as a user. The pertinent contract terms are carved out individually, but basically adhere to the principle of relatively favourable rents for a fixed-term use. In return, the users are prepared to adapt their demands and concepts to the property, and to invest a great deal of voluntary work in upgrading it, as ZZZ has no budget to offer for reconstruction work.

ZZZ has nonetheless managed to open up around fifty vacant spaces for new uses since 2010. We have always primarily considered our role to be that of a user advocate, and try to negotiate the best possible conditions for them. But we know very well that projects can only be accepted and successful if we succeed in meeting the needs of all the stakeholders. We therefore try to shape projects from the outset in such a way that they have a preferably positive impact on users, owners, local authorities and the citizens. Other tasks include very intensive PR efforts to generate greater public acceptance of temporary uses. We need to fight objections to temporary uses, particularly amongst private owners whose real-estate holdings think that they have immense spatial resources at their disposal. But most property owners are apparently not very interested in the direct advantages of temporary uses such as lower overheads, the structural upgrading of property and making it known to the public, as well as the protection provided from dereliction and vandalism. We are furthermore often confronted with expectations that vacant buildings can be let at the usual market terms in the near future. The doors to many private properties hence frequently remain closed despite years of vacancy. The council's real estate also often only becomes available once the authorities' favoured marketing schemes are ruled out or have failed. The time slots are usually very short indeed.

Practices in second hand spaces

The inter-agency context of ZZZ is helpful to initiate and maintain temporary uses, as it substantially simplifies access to public property as well as municipal decision-makers. The users nevertheless need to cope with ambitious periods of use and concessions with little in the way of a budget. For managing this, the operators and users we have worked with in the ZZZ framework came up with special practices. By virtue of sharing, do-it-yourself (DIY), collective self-organisation, testing, recycling and flexible operating hours, they start utilising and developing spaces according to their needs. In the following we will illustrate these practices by way of five *second hand spaces* initiated and arranged by ZZZ.

Sharing

We need to differentiate between the sharing of material and immaterial goods. The *Sportamt* project in Bremen's former Department of Sports building is an example of sharing material assets. As a collective of political activists and cultural prosumers, the people behind the *Sportamt* project are not focused on an individual economic benefit. All earnings from hosted events are reinvested in the infrastructure for the cultural program and renovation of the derelict building. The users have furthermore established a sharing infrastructure at the

site. A shared workshop and ‘tool bar’ are for example open to anybody wishing to become involved. Most studios are also shared. This is different from *Plantage 9* – another workspace in Bremen to be named after its address. All of the thirty users here have their own room where they work in very different jobs. That they identify themselves as a group is reflected in the joint label *Plantage 9*, a shared logo, a joint website and an annual, jointly organised Open Day. The users emphasise an immaterial public profile to be perceived as a group working under one roof, and have reinterpreted a former void as a presentable address for their operations.



Fig.1: Temporary garden cafe at Sportamt (© Michael Ziehl)

Do-it-yourself

We have made out two different DIY practices in relation to *second hand spaces*: designing and producing things you usually buy, and fixing and rebuilding spaces you usually hire craftsmen for. The *Glasbox* project, for example, is at first glance a shop for handmade items. But actually it is much more. As a platform

for handcrafted products ‘made in Bremen’, *Glasbox* simplifies the marketing of self-made products and motivates people to create and manufacture their own products. Although the shop is run by just one person, about fifty producers are behind the concept and test the marketability of their ideas. The shop already had to move twice in two years owing to short-life contracts. All three locations were renovated by the shopkeeper with support from her friends. The self-built, flexibly designed interior furnishings enabled her to move after only one year without losing too much of her investment.

From the outset, *Neuland* was a limited three-month summer residency of a local music club. The people involved transformed a former rehabilitation centre into a self-styled venue for events like concerts, theatre performances, public discussions and parties. The users’ experience in DIY-practices of building, converting and repairing enabled them to realise the project. *Neuland* also benefited from the technical skills of the diverse and widespread network behind the club.



Fig. 2: Opening of *Glasbox* at its first location (© Michael Ziehl)

Collective self-organisation

Neuland and *Sportamt* are organised as collectives. Both are characterised by attempts to share, and to remedy cultural, social and political issues. The

members make decisions on a consensus-driven and egalitarian basis. On the one hand, this kind of organisation suits their collective way of working and living. And on the other, it's a necessity for handling large buildings such as factories, office blocks or schools originally designed for many people. User groups that are organised collectively are better able to deal with vast spaces and complex room schedules. Another example for collective self-organisation is provided by the *Palace of Production*. Under the slogan 'Workers of the new world of work unite!', this project has brought together about 70 professionals with different backgrounds to pursue their work in a diverse and supportive community. The contributors lived and worked in the former sorting department of the 'Bremer Woll-Kämmerei' (BWK), a disused wool combing factory in the north of Bremen, for one month. The building provided them with over 4.500 square meters of variously sized rooms, including small offices, larger studios and vast workrooms. The group jointly filled the building with a diverse and specified program of uses. In addition to their own workrooms and studios, they also installed coworking spaces, a shared kitchen in one of the former laboratories, and finally organised a common exhibition in the vast attic.



Fig. 3: Temporary workplace at the Palace of Production (© Michael Ziehl)

Testing

With the help of *second hand spaces*, uses can be tried out in ongoing urban renewal processes. They are usually not developed on the basis of master plans or

business plans. Their future is more open and indeterminate. Their users generate the places step by step. They test their intentions on a smaller scale and make careful investments. For example, most of the users of *Plantage 9* and also the shopkeeper of *Glasbox* were unsure if they would be able to earn a living from their business ideas. The relatively low rents enabled and motivated them to test their concepts. Given the low rents and incremental investments, the risk of ‘failure’ is reduced. In these cases, *second hand spaces* drive an entrepreneurial urbanism. The *Palace of Production* was designed by ZZZ to find out if the area is appropriate for ‘creative workers’, considering its problematic location in the periphery of Bremen. In the medium term, the local authorities want to transform this industrial area, which mostly consists of abandoned buildings, into a more diverse part of the city. At the end of the experiment, some participants from Bremen wished to stay on and continue using the vacant building for their work. But as the authorities regarded them as obstructive to the ongoing urban renewal process, they were ultimately not allowed to. Instead of supporting an incremental process, the responsible planners preferred to make a clean sweep and follow their master plans.



Fig. 4: Studio at Plantage 9 (© Michael Ziehl)

Recycling

As most users of *second hand spaces* lack money and time, they make very inventive and resourceful use of any items they find. Wooden cable drums from

a brownfield were transformed into seats and tables, for example. A stage was built from abandoned metal shelves found in an empty storeroom. And the wooden boards of a disassembled drywall were used to create a sculpture on the roof of a hangar. The practice of recycling originally arose out of a shortage of materials or from financial hardship. But it has since emancipated itself from this. As an economically and ecologically sensible practice it stands for thrift and sustainability. Even whole buildings can be ‘recycled’ – if they are used as found and no reconstruction work is done. The people behind *Neuland* and *Sportamt*, for instance, transformed a former rehabilitation clinic and a former office building into cultural hotspots without changing their architectural fabric. Former surgeries were hence used as exhibition rooms and former offices as studios. This manner of recycling has both active and passive aspects, as it exercises an influence and is influenced in turn while the buildings are adapted to one’s own activities, and the latter are adapted to the opportunities afforded by the site.

Flexible operation

Setting up *second hand spaces* often calls for compromise and flexibility on the part of their users in terms of time and space. The users of the *Sportamt*, for example, demonstrated flexibility where the time aspect was concerned. Because the building’s heating system had been dismantled, the users adjusted their utilisation concept and limited their use to the year’s warm period instead of spending great amounts of money on a new system in a building with hardly insulated walls. In the case of *Glasbox*, the proprietor had to be flexible in terms of space. The first location was situated between sex shops in a deserted pedestrian zone, the second one at the back of an expensive shopping street. *Glasbox* has meanwhile opened in the ‘creative quarter’ of Bremen and appears to have found its place in the city.

Effects on urban transformation

Users’ practices are characterised by the unstable conditions inherent in *second hand spaces*. Due to the precarious situation of most of the users, they would be unable to maintain or develop *second hand spaces* in the long term even if they wanted to. They need to give way for regularly tenants or real estate developers. Some have to leave because concessions run out or their contract is not extended. Given our experiences working for ZZZ, we nevertheless believe that *Second hand spaces* can support the development of urban society in a sustainable way. We have witnessed how they have contributed to turn Bremen into a more vibrant city, opened up new ways of participation for urban dweller that want to

involve themselves in urban development and carry the potential to strengthen social coherence amongst its participants. The described projects have helped to create new job opportunities for creative workers, established places in the urban structure that are more open to the public and can furthermore help to save physical resources. In the following we will illustrate some of these impacts. A city like Bremen is not changed by a single project, but a multitude of them can transform it, and the residents' attitude, over a longer period of time.

Tension between openness and exclusivity

The *second hand spaces* initiated by ZZZ have addressed a wider range of actors than conventional development projects, which usually attract investors with business objectives. Instead of money, users have invested their social and cultural capital as well as their muscle power and time. From this they have created some unique urban spaces that are in many cases at least partly open to the public like for example the *Sportamt* and the *Neuland*. In this sense, *second hand spaces* question the ways we use our city and how we define public space. The projects have challenged the increasingly regulated, privatised and diminishing forms of public space in Bremen. But rather than bemoaning the erosion of the public realm, this collective body of work focuses on new possibilities to open up places for lifestyles and subcultures that have to space in the city. Practical experience has shown that this aspect of bringing different lifestyles and subcultures together can also cause serious problems, however. The users of the *Sportamt*, for example, on the one hand need to deal with complaints from neighbours about noise, tags and graffiti. And on the other, the project itself often attracts very homogeneous user groups. The operators of *Sportamt* deal with the tension of wanting to be an open place for everyone, but on the other hand being predominantly a place attracting mainly left-wing leaning, which create symbolic barriers of exclusion for other interested participants. This aspect is relevant for nearly all *second hand spaces* initiated by the ZZZ. Even if we try to provide cheap spaces for all kinds of people, the ones who will mostly be attracted are artists and culture workers, because they are used to adjusting to precarious working conditions. Bringing people together while also maintaining projects that establish openness, diversity and adaptability are two different pairs of boots.

Inclusion of low-budget users and practicing democratic decision making *Second hand spaces* motivate financially weak users to take part in urban developments that would normally be excluded by high rents. They help residents gain access to spaces for exploring and highlighting what they need from their environment. They are therefore able to influence the design and thinking of their cities – at least to some extent. At the same time, *second hand spaces* open up places where

local conflicts can be negotiated by conflicting parties directly. For example, the users of the *Sportamt* concurred with complaining neighbours on the basis of common interests and tactical alliances against the planning authorities. In contrast to individualisation and competition, *second hand spaces* in Bremen were usually self-organised by collectives with flat hierarchies. In many cases the users act in a collective manner. On this basis, the contributors gain vulnerable experience in grassroots democratic decision-making processes that help to establish other tools of negotiating city development and planning. But not all user communities are successful in doing so. Most of them have to establish an association because a legal form is required to sign contracts and rent spaces. This implies a hierarchical form of (self-)organisation with different grades of responsibility. Organising in an association can ultimately undermine the aim of running a location with non-hierarchical structures.

New spaces for new forms of work

The world of work is changing rapidly – especially in cities. Due to the ongoing shift from regular jobs to freelance work and the state’s withdrawal of social benefits, people are in need of affordable spaces to establish new forms of income and offer new forms of social and cultural service. This potential is not being recognised by many politicians and decision-makers as yet. A manager of Bremen’s *Promotion of Trade and Industry* agency, for example, did not appreciate our aim to establish cheap working spaces for freelancers in the *Palace of Production*. He criticised that ‘real jobs have to be created’ instead. He aimed to reindustrialise the area by locating big enterprises there. Whereas the example of *Glasbox* shows that individual economic developments can indeed arise from cheap workplaces. The proprietor started the shop at an unattractive place and eventually moved to one of the most fashionable areas of Bremen offering a platform for more than fifty freelance producers. In Bremen, *second hand spaces* and their location in large buildings had the effect to bring people with different occupations together. From this, we have experienced that many new co-operations and business innovations resulted from this spatial arrangement. For example, the proprietor of *Glasbox* had met many of her business partners years ago, when she participated in the *Neuland* summer residency project, which only ran for three months. Today, they continue their collaboration by using her shop as a platform to sell their handcrafted products. Even if the projects only have a short lifetime, this period is often so intensive that networks and co-operations last well beyond it.

Preserving and saving resources

Although many properties cannot be let again after losing their original use, their rental prices remain in force, at least in the books. The owners speculate for better times, while the objects remain vacant until the ravages of time, water damage, or vandalism increase or prevent larger-scale investments. Developers are generally less interested in renovating buildings – especially properties from the 1960s and 70s – than building new ones. The users of *second hand spaces* place lower demands on the design and facilities. By reopening them, they have protected buildings from decay, extended their lifecycle and ultimately helped to save resources – which can have a positive, lastingly ecologic impact. *Plantage 9* illustrates how: The building was bought by the local authorities and slated for demolition to give way for the construction of a new road. Due to their tight budget, the authorities changed their plans and left the building vacant. That created an opportunity to reuse the building and slightly transform it. Initially, ZZZ started a one-year interim use. This trial period was so successful that the authorities could be persuaded to reinvest and carefully transform the building into a workplace for micro-enterprises. This process saved all the embodied energy of construction and minimised the required investments.

Vacancy as a resource for generating multiple forms of value

Owing to the transformations currently taking place in our industrial and knowledge-based society, what urban residents require from their urban spaces is also increasingly changing. There is a need to fashion the required adjustment processes as sustainably as possible, also in view of climate change and diminishing resources, while the ecological, economic and social aspects must be balanced. We believe that *second hand spaces* can provide suitable urban planning solutions in this task. Policy makers, urban scholars and city planners need to make up their mind if they would rather regard temporary uses as a means of taming unstable real estate markets, or if they prefer to focus on the users and understand them as active interest groups articulating a changing society (Kil, 2013).

The users' predominant benefit is the possibility to design a place to match their own needs. In doing so, they acquire practical experience in reusing, reintegrating and revalorising buildings and brownfields, while conserving resources without great investments. But despite all these positive factors, they pay the price of precariousness. The same principle also applies when their own activities lead to a revalorisation of rents and the property itself. As Arndt Neumann points out in reference to Klaus Overmeyer (the author of 'Urban

Pioneers'¹): 'Young newcomers and creative people turn neglected neighborhoods into attractive places. Newly created identities and scenes attract further investments and established entrepreneurs and residents. While the real-estate industry profits from the increasing rents, the 'original triggers of the long-standing transformation process are excluded from the value-added chain' (Overmeyer and Behörde für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt, 2010: 14). 'Such young creative people become the victims of their own success' (Neumann, 2012: 349). We believe however that while precarious interim users are the first to be kicked out, they merely accelerate, but do not cause the gentrification process. Experience from Bremen shows, that users request locations in high-price areas like the city center, in gentrified areas and where gentrification already started but not in those parts of the city, where gentrification is not looming and rents are going to stay on a low level. Furthermore we experienced that interim uses are only in rare cases deliberately instrumentalized to increase rents. Most real estate developers and owners shun the effort and expect more trouble than benefits. But if interim uses lead to an increasing demand of an asset they do not hesitate to kick them out. This impedes the aim of the ZZZ to establish a trustful relationship between users, owners and developers.

Referring to urban development in Berlin since the early 2000s, Claire Colomb emphasises that 'interim spaces are characterized by a tension between their actual use value (as publicly accessible spaces for social, artistic, and cultural experimentation) and their potential commercial value' (Colomb, 2012: 138). To do justice to the importance of *second hand spaces* for sustainable urban transformation, policy makers, urban scholars and city planners need to evaluate them on the basis of their use value. This is hence not only a question of value, but also one of evaluation. Focusing on the use value could pave the way to the development of concepts allowing users to share in the values they create, and remedy their precariousness. What this would call for as a minimum would be better conditions of use, an opening up of long-term perspectives instead of replacing users with financially stronger stakeholders, and providing them with planning security. The willingness to do so seems to be growing slowly. But at this moment in time, interim users still need to rely on the optimistic attitude that is so vital for taking part in the process at all.

The presentation of five ZZZ projects in reference to the concept of *second hand spaces* has served us to illustrate self-determined uses of vacant spaces. As this

1 The book *Urban pioneers* published by the Senate of Berlin (Overmeyer and Berlin Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, 2007) promoted operators of temporary uses as entrepreneurial risk-takers in urban and economic development (Färber, 2014) and became quite influential in the debate about temporary uses in Germany.

note shows, such uses are a basis for establishing alternative user practices. In most cases, the users' situation is characterised by precariousness. *Second hand spaces* can have a sustainable impact on the ongoing urban transformation of the western world nonetheless.

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