



Future city centre: Sustainable offers as the key to revitalisation

Guidelines for action

German Environment Agency



SONa

Stadtzentren als Orte
nachhaltigen Konsums

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Lisa Frien-Kossolobow

P.O. Box 14 06
06813 Dessau-Roßlau
Phone: +49 340-2103-2416
buergerservice@uba.de
Internet: www.umweltbundesamt.de

Authors:

Kathrin Anger, Ulrike Knörzer (adelphi consult GmbH, Berlin)
Michaela Roelfes, Franziska Stelzer (Wuppertal Institute for
Climate, Environment and Energy gGmbH, Wuppertal)

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FUTURE CITY CENTRE: SUSTAINABLE OFFERS AS THE KEY TO REVITALISATION

Guidelines for action

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About this guide



About this guide

How can city centres be revitalised? Brick-and-mortar retail is becoming increasingly less important, resulting in closures and vacancies in city centres. As city centres have primarily been designed as places of commercial consumption to date, the classic shopping city is facing new challenges as a result of these developments. Many bricks-and-mortar retail shops in city centre shopping streets are finding it difficult to keep up with the competition from online retailers. At the same time, approaches for sustainable consumer cultures often remain niche, even though they are important for sustainable development.

City centres can become **vibrant places for sustainable consumption** and thus meet the current challenges at the same time. The establishment of pop-up stores, swap and repair centres or similar sustainable consumption offers attracts new groups of visitors and at the same time manages to implement sustainable usage concepts on vacant spaces that combine economic value creation with ecological added value. This is what this guide is all about.

Aim of the guide

With these guidelines, we would like to encourage people to develop (new) ideas for transforming city centres and test them on site. Sustainable consumption includes, for example, environmentally friendly, sustainable consumption practices from the areas of repair, saving resources, extending the useful life or using instead of owning.

Who the guide is for?

The guide is aimed at interested stakeholders from civil society, municipal and city administrations and business development agencies who would like to combine a local project initiative to revitalise the city centre with sustainable consumption.

What the guide contains?

It shows ways of combining urban development with sustainable consumption. Using various examples and practical factors for successful implementation, we illustrate what needs to be considered - from the development phase, finding spaces, the involvement of relevant stakeholders through to the long-term sustainability of a project.

The guide is based on the project “**City centres as places for sustainable consumption**”, which was funded by the Federal Environment Agency (UBA). Experience

from the EU project NiCE - from niche to centre, which is also being carried out by the UBA, was also incorporated. In three pilot cities (Duisburg, Schwentental, Würzburg), we developed ideas for the sustainable (re) design of city centres into vibrant places of sustainable consumption together with practitioners and tested them on site. The contents of the guide offer a practical approach to our project results, with the aim of inspiring further projects and thus revitalising city centres in a sustainable way.



Sustainable consumption options and their contribution to the development of vibrant and resilient cities



2



Sustainable consumption options and their contribution to the development of vibrant and resilient cities



Sustainable consumption options support the development of our cities in a variety of ways. They have positive effects in various areas and help to make our cities fit for the future. The most important aspects in detail are:

- **Ecological sustainability:** sustainable consumption offers help to conserve resources. For example, by repairing items and sharing goods, the life cycle of products is extended, which reduces the need for new production and therefore the consumption of resources. This leads to a reduction in the municipality's ecological footprint and supports local sustainability goals.
- **Promoting innovation:** Sustainable consumption options can act as a catalyst for innovation in the municipality. They inspire new business models and social innovations and can also have an impact beyond the city limits (see pilot "Zukunfts- haus" Würzburg).
- **Waste reduction:** Repair cafés or sharing programmes, for example, contribute directly to reducing the volume of waste by extending the lifespan of products. This relieves the burden on municipal waste disposal systems and reduces the costs associated with waste management.

- **Promoting local identity:** Special offers in the area of sustainable consumption can become unique selling points for a municipality and strengthen its image as progressive and sustainable. This can increase the attractiveness of the city for residents, visitors and businesses.

Synergies and cooperation as an important factor: key players working together

In order to achieve a sustainable revitalisation of city centres with sustainable consumption practices, a holistic approach is essential. This should take into account the **interplay of economic, social and ecological aspects**. Close cooperation between local economic development project initiatives, civil society and local and city authorities forms the basis for the successful impact of city centre sustainable consumption projects.

Firstly, it is essential for local, city centre-related project initiatives to precisely identify **specific target groups and their needs**. Equally crucial for success are **local networking and the establishment of co-operations** outside the pilot team. Partnerships with existing retailers and traders in the city centre can prove to be particularly profitable and **create synergies**, thereby strengthening the local economy in the long term. Supportive framework conditions - especially access to space and premises - are fundamental for the project initiatives so that inspiring concepts of sustainable consumption can be realised.

From the field - the bonus card from “Zukunftshaus” Würzburg

In order to create synergies between providers of sustainable products and services, the “Zukunftshaus”, as a registered cooperative, has developed an annual bonus card for its members. With the bonus card, members receive a one-off benefit, such as a discount or an additional service, from a total of 30 sustainability-conscious companies and partner organisations. The bonus card makes visiting the individual shops more attractive, increases the respective customer base and highlights the diverse range of sustainable consumption options in Würzburg.

“Local networking with groups and organisations with an affinity for sustainability is essential in order to make your own project known in the appropriate circles. This is how we at “Zukunftshaus” Würzburg have built up a solid base of interested parties and customers, which brings us financial stability (see our cooperative concept “Zukunftshaus eG”). At the same time, we inspire committed people to volunteer for our project and spread the word, which works particularly well at “Zukunftswerk e.V.”.

Lisa Spängler, Board of directors – “Zukunftshaus” Würzburg



The municipal administration itself also plays a key role as a decisive institution in the revitalisation of city centres. For small and medium-sized municipalities in particular, the challenges are increasing due to limited human and financial resources. At the same time, the success of city centre projects in the context of sustainable consumption stands and falls with the fundamental commitment and ability to act of

political decision-makers and the administration as well as the spatial and structural conditions on site. Therefore, a committed “caretaker” person in the administration who takes on the topic of city centre projects for sustainable consumption can make the decisive difference and positively influence the success of such projects.

1 “Zukunftshaus eG” offers the areas of renting, buying and repair acceptance in the “Zukunftshaus”. The exchange area is operated by the non-profit organisation “Zukunftswerk e.V.”

2 The non-profit organisation “Zukunftswerk e.V.” has set itself the goal of making sustainable lifestyles and consumption models better known and offers a permanent exchange service as a concrete place for resource, environmental and climate protection.

Active communication with and involvement of interested parties is just as important. Both for the municipal administration and for the project initiatives (see chapter “Effective participation and communication”). Experience also shows that pilot projects that are carried out as “test runs” increase the general acceptance of sustainability projects, as citizens are involved in the process at various stages (see chapter “Co-design as an opportunity to rethink city centres”). **Pilot projects** such as pop-up stores (see pilot “Nachhaltig made in Duisburg”) provide creative impetus for city centre development, arouse curiosity and bring a breath of fresh air for new initiatives in city centres. **Initiatives such as the three pilot projects** in this guide can serve as experimental spaces for sustainable consumption practices and show that there are alternatives to “fast consumption” in chain stores. They take up everyday practices that are both sustainable and practical for users.

Sustainable consumption practices can act as catalysts for the revitalisation of city centres and at the same time contribute to sustainable urban development.

The demand for environmentally friendly products and services is growing.³ Projects that focus on sustainability can not only be economically successful, but also strengthen the sense of community and promote awareness of sustainable consumption.⁴

Opportunities for the development of sustainable consumption concepts in city centres

- **Transformation of utilisation concepts:** The current situation in city centres offers the opportunity for a reorientation - away from a pure retail orientation towards multifunctional spaces that increasingly focus on sustainable consumption offers (see pilot “Sustainability Made by Duisburg”).
- **Resource-conserving urban development:** The further development of existing buildings instead of new buildings can make an important contribution to resource and climate protection. This applies to both energy-efficient refurbishment and circular construction.

- **Participatory development approaches:** Temporary pilot projects and real-life experiments offer the opportunity to test sustainable utilisation concepts and actively involve urban society in the transformation process.

The following three pilot projects in Würzburg, Schwentinental and Duisburg show how sustainable consumption can work in city centres.

Co-design as an opportunity to rethink city centres

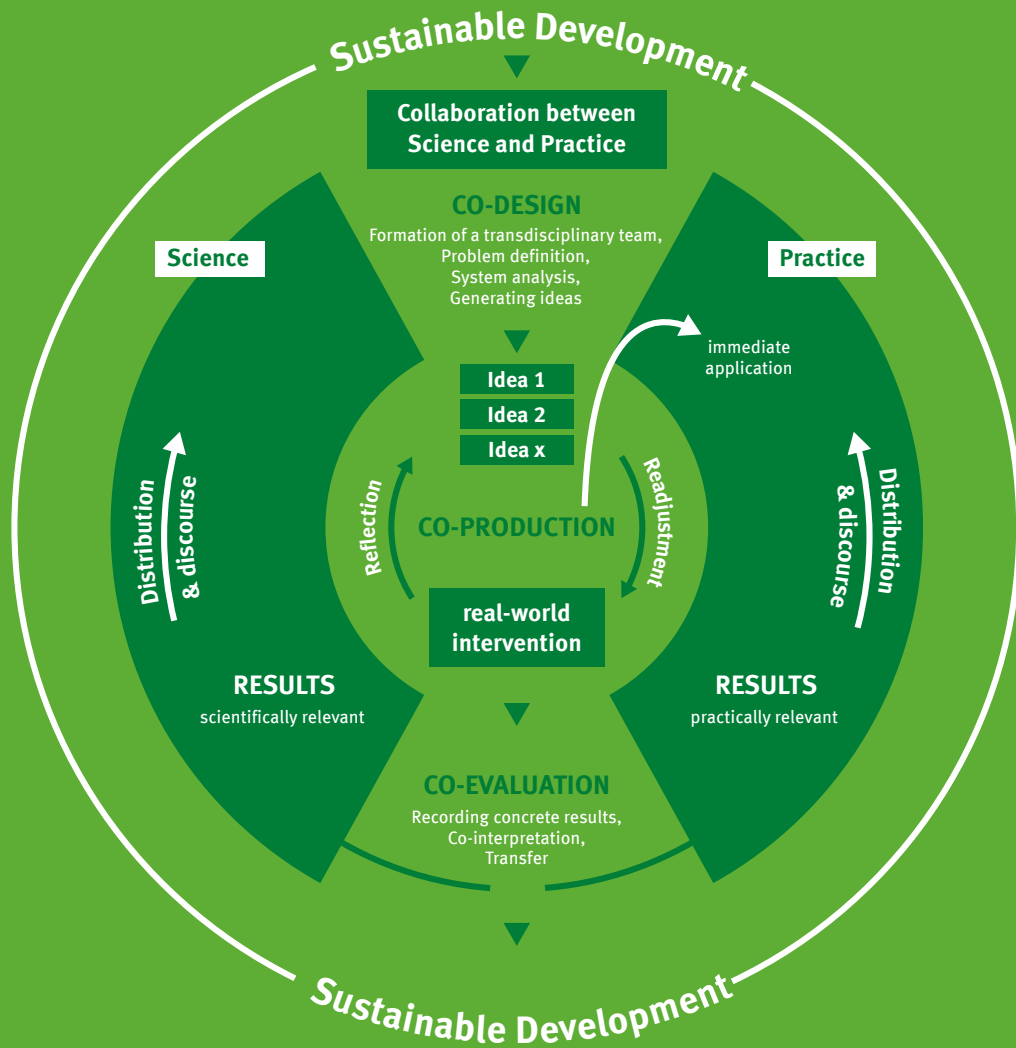
Cooperation between different stakeholder groups remains crucial for the design of meaningful and effective temporary use projects. Co-design is such a cooperative and creative design process in which various stakeholders - e.g. citizens, companies, scientists and administrations - jointly develop sustainable solutions for local challenges. The collaboration takes place on an equal footing. This means that all participants contribute their knowledge and perspectives and arrive at a common understanding of the problem. It is not just about collecting opinions, but also about active co-design and experimentation.

Co-design is a central component of so-called real-world laboratories (Wanner & Stelzer 2019), which, in addition to the co-design phase, also include the co-production and co-evaluation phases (see section on impact measurement). Co-production refers to the phase of experimenting with and testing measures. Ideas are trialled, adapted and further developed directly in practice. Co-evaluation means a joint review and reflection of the results in order to record/include all perspectives at the end of such projects and to arrive at an overall view of what has been achieved and its effects.

³ see e.g. [market data on “green” products](#), Federal Environment Agency 2019

⁴ Bullinger, D. (2022). Trade and city - different after Corona than before? [Pdf]. In A. Appel (Ed.) & S. Hardaker (Ed.) (Eds.), City Centres, Retail and Corona in Germany (pp. 223-238). Würzburg University Press. <https://opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de/24885>

The Three Phases of Real-World Laboratories⁵



⁵ Wanner, M.; Hilger, A.; Westerkowski, J.; Rose, M.; Stelzer, F.; Schäpke, N. (2018): Towards a Cyclical Concept of Real-World Laboratories, In: DisP – the Planning Review, 54(2), S. 94-114. doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2018.1487651

Important features of real-world laboratories are:



Collaboration at eye level:

all participants contribute their knowledge and perspectives.



Flexibility and openness:

the process is open-ended and non-linear, but develops dynamically.



Experimenting and testing:

Ideas are trialled, adapted and further developed directly in practice.



Focus on the needs of users:

The solutions should be suitable for everyday use and inclusive.

Real-world laboratories thus create the opportunity to rethink city centres and develop innovative and socially robust solutions together with citizens, businesses and administration. Open experiments in urban spaces allow sustainable concepts to be trialled, creative spaces to be built and the needs of different stakeholder groups to be directly integrated. Whether temporary

meeting zones, pop-up stores or new mobility concepts - collaborative design makes it possible to make cities more liveable and adaptable. It is crucial that dialogues are held with different people and their different perspectives in order to strengthen urban spaces not only functionally, but also socially and culturally.



From the field – co-design in the “TauschRausch” Schwentinental pilot project

At the **beginning** of the pilot project, a functional team was formed consisting of two employees from the Schwentinental municipal administration, a student project employee from the administration for on-site coordination and a 15-strong shop team made up of volunteers.

An important part of the project before work began in the shop was a **conceptual workshop** held with many different interested stakeholder groups to create a diversity of perspectives and integrate knowledge and needs - a key aspect of the co-design.

The collaboration was also characterised by the fact that **regular reflection** took place within the team and the collaboration took place on an equal footing and with a high degree of openness. This led to active co-design and involvement in the overall idea. A wide variety of interest groups were also involved on an ongoing basis and the shop's range and formats were flexibly adapted to the needs and demand.



“We have realised: The success of “TauschRausch” Schwentinental is rooted in the diversity of our partners. By networking business, politics and civil society at an early stage, we have put the project on a strong foundation. With the valuable support of the town council, local associations, institutions and companies, we exceeded our expectations for the pilot project. Together, we developed a lively concept and overcame challenges through continuous dialogue. This alliance of volunteers, administration and businesses is proof of this: Only together can we create sustainable change.”

Kim-Kathrin Jebe, Specialist in climate protection, energy and mobility – “TauschRausch”

Pilot projects in three German city centres



Infach: konsequent:

3



“Zukunftshaus” Würzburg

(House of the Future Würzburg)

Initial situation



The “Zukunftshaus” is a shop that **combines four areas of sustainable consumption** under one roof in Würzburg city centre (1B location). The four areas offered in the “Zukunftshaus” are **buying** sustainably produced products, **renting** (rarely used) everyday items, **repairing** (or having repaired) small electrical appliances and the money-free **exchange** of clothing and everyday items. The “Zukunftshaus” was opened in 2022 and is operated by “Zukunftshaus eG” (registered cooperative).



Pilot idea



The pilot of “Zukunftshaus” Würzburg consists of three different components that were implemented within one year:

1. The **pick-up and delivery service for repair equipment and rental items**: Customers of “Zukunftshaus” were able to have repaired products delivered to their homes and used rental items collected from their homes, all climate-neutrally using a bicycle courier service. This additional service was offered for a trial period of six months (July to December 2024)⁶.
2. The “Zukunftshaus” has written a **manual “How to... “Zukunftshaus”?”**, a guide to the structure of the “Zukunftshaus” and the function of the individual areas. Interested project initiatives can learn more about the background. The aim is to create more “Zukunftshaus” in Germany.
3. [A virtual shop tour](#) was created and made available on the homepage. The 360° tour includes explanatory videos on the individual areas of the “Zukunftshaus” ([renting](#), [swapping](#), [re-pairing](#)). Thanks to this advance online information, customers are encouraged to visit the shop and take advantage of the wide range of products on offer.



⁶ This part of the pilot is part of the „NiCE - From niche to centre“ project, which is being implemented by UBA. The NiCE project is funded by the Interreg Central Europe Programme with co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Further information on the project can be found at: <https://www.interreg-central.eu/projects/nice>

Potential impact



The concept of the “Zukunftshaus” with its four pillars of sustainable consumption is unique to date. With the handbook and the virtual shop tour, it inspires others to imitate similarly diverse consumer offers in the city centre. The **pick-up and delivery service for repair equipment and rental items** was advertised in various ways over the six months, but ultimately did not meet with the hoped-for interest from customers.

The service was not sufficiently utilised for several reasons:

- ▶ **Low demand:** the central location of the “Zukunftshaus” in the city centre significantly reduced the basic need for delivery and collection services (customers more frequently in the city centre).
- ▶ **Lack of direct contact with customers:** The predominantly online booking process (for rental customers) minimised direct contact with customers. Customers for repair items could be approached personally, and there was often no need for the delivery service among this customer group. If there was a need, the price was the decisive exclusion criterion.
- ▶ **Logistical hurdles:** Delivery or collection by the “Radius” bike courier could only be offered for the next day. This required “buffer day” made the service inaccessible for spontaneous renters.
- ▶ **Pricing:** At 10-33 euros, the price for delivery or collection was significantly higher than the customers’ **willingness to pay** of around 5 euros (determined by a preliminary survey). Even the “half-price delivery/collection” promotion at the pilot half-time did not result in the service being used more frequently.
- ▶ **The complex booking process:** Compared to purchases in online shops, booking a collection for rental items was rather complex. There was no simple “one-click solution” for booking “collection of a hire item”. Instead, additional steps were necessary to book the service at: a call to the “Zukunftshaus”, an email or using the comment field when booking. This additional hurdle made the service even less attractive.

However, the “Zukunftshaus” is also a meeting place thanks to its central location in the city centre. In May 2024, it won the **“Good Example 2024”** competition⁷, which was organised by radio station Bayern 2. It was also featured in the **ARD evening programme**⁸.

Further information can be found at

“How to ‘Zukunftshaus’?”:

www.zukunftshaus-wuerzburg.de

360° tour of the “Zukunftshaus”

Würzburg: [www.zukunfts-
haus-wuerzburg.de](http://www.zukunfts-
haus-wuerzburg.de)



⁷ www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/gutes-beispiel-2024-zukunftshaus-gewinnt-bayern-2-wettbewerb.TLRtix5

⁸ The report in the ARD evening programme is available online at: www.ardmediathek.de/video/abendschau/zukunftshaus-ist-das-gute-beispiel/br-fernsehen/Y3lpZDovL2lyLmRIL2ly-b2FkY2FzdFNjaGVkdWxlu2xvdC80MTA2MzU-zNDM4MTNfRjIwMjNkXzAxNjQ5N0EwL3NiY3Rpb24vZjQ0NjVkdDctNGM5ZC00M2Y1LWlyOWUtNzc4ZWlyMDc2NTYz

“TauschRausch” Schwentinental

(Exchange Rush Schwentinental)

Initial situation



The town of Schwentinental was created in 2008 from the merger of the two former municipalities of Raisdorf and Klausdorf. Due to the supra-regional transport routes that run through the town area, the town was split up and the former shopping streets in the two district centres, together with their traditional village centres, were displaced by the newly created commercial areas into the residential and settlement areas. These traditional rows of shops are still visible and, due to the short distances and local ties, regularly frequented shopping locations for local residents. The mostly smaller, owner-managed shops offer a high potential for identification and various opportunities for more flexible (mixed) use, which can act as a kind of substitute for the few contact points and opportunities for social interaction in the urban area. The “TauschRausch” pilot project took place in one such previously vacant shop



Pilot idea



“TauschRausch” Schwentinental was a clothes swap in the format of a pop-up store with talks and workshops on the topics of climate, sustainability and resources and took place between February and October 2024. A clothes swap offers the opportunity to swap your own clothes for other used clothes free of charge. The aim of “TauschRausch” was to test the swap shop as a contact point for sustainable (consumer) awareness and social encounters in the city and to gain impetus for the further urban development process in Schwentinental.

The project was led by the specialist for climate protection, energy and mobility of the city of Schwentinental in cooperation with the volunteer office of the city of Schwentinental and carried out in cooperation with the DRK Raisdorf, the Förde-vhs and the BUND environmental and waste advice centre Schwentinental.

Potential impact



The clothing exchange has helped to get people excited about the principle of swapping and a sustainable understanding of resources. A place of community was created that enabled cross-generational and cross-cultural togetherness and offered a quality of stay. This incipient change in awareness of sustainability continues to act as an impetus for the concrete revitalisation of vacant shop spaces in the district centres in order to create places of sustainable consumption.

Further information can be found at

www.schwentinental.de/detail/kleidertauschboerse-schwentinental-tauschen-teilen-fuer-mehr-nachhaltigkeit

“Nachhaltig Made by Duisburg”

(Sustainably Made by Duisburg)

Initial situation



Duisburg is a city in the Ruhr region that has experienced drastic structural change over the last century and in which the traces of these economic cuts are still visible today. Duisburg's population has comparatively low purchasing power and is already experiencing a clearly visible vacancy problem in the city centre. This is particularly noticeable when visiting centrally located shopping centres such as the Königsgallerie or the Averdunk Centrum, where the majority of shops are empty. The municipality and Duisburg Business & Innovation GmbH (DBI, municipal business development agency) are working tirelessly to revitalise central retail locations to a high standard. At the same time, they are faced with a fragmented, partly anonymous group of property owners and unfavourable, difficult location factors for traders.



Pilot idea



A pop-up store selling exclusively sustainable products “Nachhaltig made by Duisburg” breathed new life into a vacant shop space in Kuhstraße and created a sustainable consumer offering in the central shopping street. The commercial space is used for multiple purposes: it is the office of DBI’s City Management & Neighbourhood Development HUB and a venue for smaller events and consultations. Last but not least, micro-entrepreneurs who previously did not have their own shop space can offer sustainable products here. Thanks to the multifunctional use, many issues relating to financing and managing the shop space have been resolved efficiently.

Potential impact



“Nachhaltig made by Duisburg” has so far had no other observable impact on the development of vacancies in the city centre - apart from the multifunctional shop created as part of the pilot. At the time of writing, the pilot has not yet been completed due to delays in implementation: Right at the start of the pilot, the property owner with whom good terms had previously been negotiated for the use of a large retail space on the ground floor of a shopping centre backed out. Thanks to the perseverance and conceptual flexibility of the DBI employees, it was nevertheless possible to adapt the pop-up store during the pilot phase. This example illustrates how important the perseverance and conceptual flexibility of initiatives are when implementing pilot projects. The shop concept has been well received and DBI has satisfied customers who are happy to find local and sustainable products in the city centre, as well as satisfied small-scale producers who would otherwise have to rely exclusively on online retail. Last but not least, “Nachhaltig made by Duisburg” is having an important impact on municipal economic development as an institution, where sustainability was previously discussed primarily as a question of industrial transformation. Medium and long-term effects of the pilot project on the use of commercial space and thus on the vacancy problem in the city centre are therefore not ruled out, but are within the realms of possibility.

4

**Factors for
the successful
implementation
of city centre
projects on
sustainable
consumption**



Factors for the successful implementation of city centre projects on sustainable consumption

Establish a culture of experimentation: Use pilot projects as interim stages for city centre development

Pop-up

Increasing the attractiveness of city centres and shopping streets is a major undertaking, especially in cities that are already experiencing a trend towards desolation. Many cities have comprehensive concepts with which they want to achieve major effects through structural interventions and long-term measures. Interim uses - i.e. the temporary use of vacant commercial space at favourable conditions - can have an incubator and bridging function: Citizens, retailers and producers can already experience and try out city centre experiences of the future in smaller or larger spaces. They can discover sustainable products in pop-up or concept stores or visit places with less or no consumer pressure (e.g. community centres, socio-cultural centres, district living rooms, break rooms, etc.). Used wisely, interim uses can be a kind of plug for the dreaded desolation of shopping streets and city centres through the creative and community-oriented revitalisation of vacant spaces.

Open spaces

A central concept for places outside of consumption and commerce is that of “third places”, also **known** as “**places of community**” or “**places of encounter**”. Projects that emphasise the creation of third places focus on strengthening citizens’ self-efficacy and sense of community. They can often be found in local, identity-forming but vacant locations (e.g. municipal libraries, old shoe factories, former village schools or film theatres, etc.). As inviting meeting places for the local community, they are valued as **urban living rooms**, as open spaces for engagement, as contact points for local initiatives, for which they offer stages and platforms for projects, creativity and exchange.

In a narrower sense, the third place can be traced back to the American urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s book “The Great Good Place” (1989). He distinguished between the home as the first place and the workplace as the second place and, derived from this, he considered cafés, restaurants, bookshops, hair-dressing salons and other meeting places to be central to a city’s community.

Today, the term is **used more broadly** in academia and practice, with a shared understanding that third places can be houses, spaces, institutions or squares that enable visitors of all ages and cultural backgrounds to meet and exchange ideas in an informal setting, without a fixed programme or pressure to consume. Another important feature of third places is that they are easily accessible. Third places are often created bottom-up, in response to a specific local situation, orientated towards local needs and resources and/or by committed individuals or institutions.

The relevance for city centre revitalisation can also be seen in the existing and newly emerging funding lines that are intended to support the development of third places, see, for example, the funding line of the Ministry of Culture and Science in North Rhine-Westphalia, which is already supporting third places for the second time.⁹

⁹ See: www.mkw.nrw/themen/kultur/kunst-und-kulturfoerderung/dritte-orte



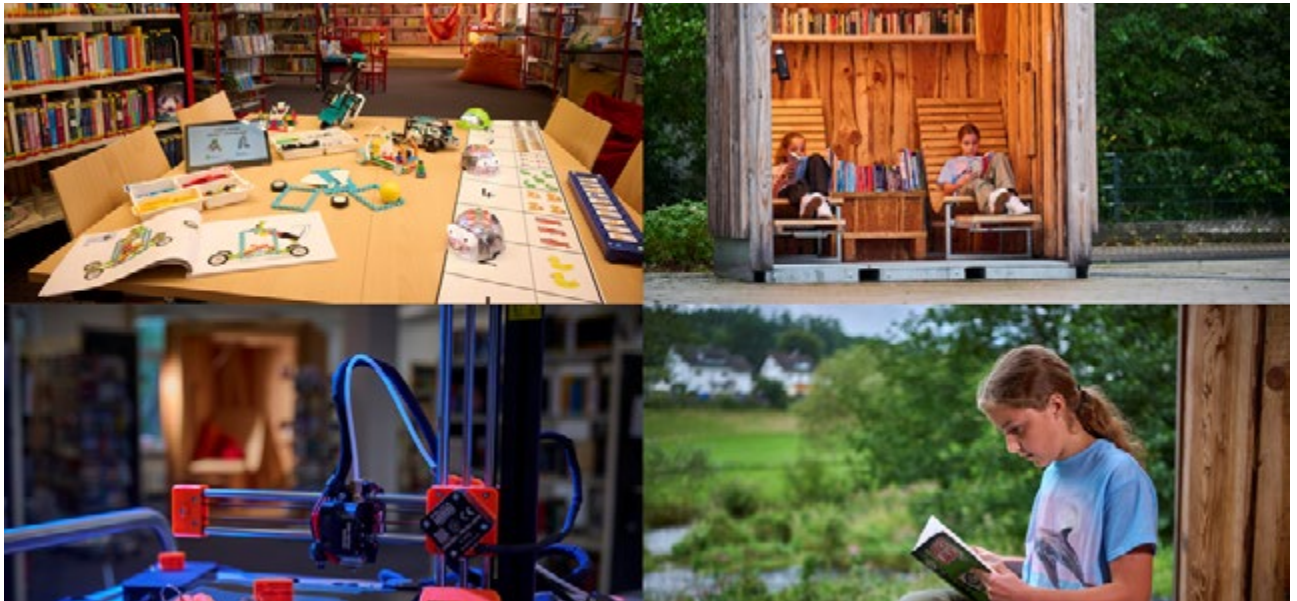
From the field - library of the future in Bad Berleburg

In Bad Berleburg, a concept for a multifunctional public library was developed as part of a participatory process: There are digital channels such as the Onleihe, but also an interactive reader platform. In addition to a central building in the town centre, there are decentralised bookcases, reading baskets and book messengers. The library itself sees itself as a meeting place for everyone, across all generations, with analogue and digital services and also for events. The Third Place is based on a network of volunteers, schools, daycare centres, associations, institutions and companies and develops new services as required. A feel-good atmosphere has been created that invites people to linger and “just be there” without any pressure to consume.

Experimental approaches are needed in practice to make this possible. Apart from the financial and legal framework conditions, we as a society need more courage to try things out and thus inevitably also the courage to persistently and optimistically confront a multitude of major and minor challenges. A **culture of experimentation** is needed at different levels and among all those involved¹⁰, which must be recognised and supported, not least in local government (see the section on “Effective participation and communication”). However, a culture of experimentation requires more than just courage. Experience has shown that interim utilisation, real-life experiments

and pilot projects provide courage for upcoming changes. These formats unfold their potential for the necessary sustainability transformation particularly when they connect people, take their interests into account and are designed in a participatory manner (see also the chapter “Co-design as an opportunity to rethink city centres”). In this way, learning environments are created in which all participants can actively shape change processes, experience self-efficacy and develop sustainable practices.

¹⁰ www.reallabor-netzwerk.de/downloads/gaia_4-2023_stellungnahme-reallabore-ges.pdf and to www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/937516/c25c2242080e70b431da58d349a03df8/A-Drs_20-18-103a-data.pdf



Ongoing challenge: gaining access to vacant properties

Our **three practical projects** did not take place on the streets or in public spaces in the city centre, but instead focused on the management of (partly vacant) commercial spaces in central shopping streets and city centres. We investigated whether sustainable consumer offers could be an answer to the tendency towards desolation in many city centres and shopping streets. To this end, we organised an ideas competition in which local initiatives could apply (see chapter on pilot projects). Applicants were asked to provide a plausible description of their access to a vacant commercial space in their application. We therefore did not include one of the major challenges (access to space) for the establishment of sustainable consumer offers in city centres or central shopping streets in the focus of the pilots.

One of the three pilot projects clearly demonstrated just how challenging and relevant this topic is: the informal promise of a suitable, vacant commercial space was associated with much less commitment from the owner than all project participants had expected. The contact became so unreliable at the start of the pilot project that the initiative was forced to look for another property after a few months. During this process, it became very clear that even in municipalities with a major vacancy problem in central shopping streets, it is not easy to rent these vacancies for interim use on affordable terms. This is because the city centres do not belong to the local authorities and their buildings are often not owned by local residents, but by profit-oriented property companies.

“In the case of non-urban properties, we are of course also dependent on whether the property owners are interested in cooperation and positive urban development.”

Gianna Reich, Project Manager City Management & Neighborhood Developmentg – Duisburg Business & Innovation GmbH

While a few cities in Germany are very successful in influencing the use of buildings in city centres and shopping streets with a municipal right of first refusal, this instrument is not available in most cities. It is therefore important to maintain constant contact with property owners using tact and clever approach strategies in order to find and utilise windows

of opportunity for sustainable consumer offers. Intensive and trusting cooperation between local initiatives, municipal business development and local government is therefore a prerequisite for the sustainable mobilisation of commercial space in city centres. However, it is also essential to mobilise the real estate

industry for a sustainable transformation of city centres.

Once the hurdle of basic access to vacant commercial space has been overcome, we believe there are **two key instruments** and strategies that support initiatives in many cities in realising their ideas:

- **Rental funds** in local authorities support new businesses with a high proportion of the rental costs by typically renting the space themselves and then subletting it to businesses at a reduced rent. In North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, the conditions are based on the state government's SoFortprogramm Innenstadt, from which many local authorities have obtained the funding for their rental funds. They then typically subsidise 80 %

of the cold rent for a commercial space of less than 300 square metres for two years, provided the tradespeople meet a number of conditions.

- The idea of **space sharing** - the multifunctional use of commercial space by different initiatives - reduces individual costs and ensures resource efficiency, such as with concept stores, where local small producers jointly operate a shop space and not only share the costs for rent and operation, but also support each other organisationally. However, space sharing can also be realised as time-differentiated multiple use: Ice cream parlour in summer and Christmas biscuits in winter, office space during the week or during the day and event venue at the weekend or in the evening.

From the field - the municipal right of first refusal

The city of Hanau, which has had noticeable success in revitalising the city centre with the city centre project "HANAUaufLADEN" (including space sharing), is a municipality that has successfully implemented a municipal right of first refusal for the city centre and old town¹¹. In force since 2019, the pre-emption right statute is seen as the most important steering instrument for city centre development that is more strongly oriented towards the common good. We were told that the municipality does not necessarily have to make use of its pre-emption right. Rather, the very existence of this instrument forces a direct dialogue between the municipality and the real estate industry.

Effective participation and communication

Involvement of interested groups and individuals

In theory, projects to create sustainable consumer offers in city centres can be initiated by very different stakeholder groups. Looking at the three pilot projects within the framework of SONa, one project was initiated by the city administration, one by the municipal business development organisation and one by civil

society. The need for participation varies depending on where the project was initiated. Navigating local government can be a particular challenge, especially for initiatives from civil society. Municipal administrations could support implementation by creating suitable framework conditions (e.g. rental funds) (see chapter on stabilisation). Municipalities can support initiatives here by defining a central contact person within the municipality.

¹¹ In the project "City centres as places for sustainable consumption", two policy papers "Third places" and "Municipal instruments: Right of first refusal and rental funds" were developed. When these guidelines were finalised, these documents were still in the coordination phase and were not yet available in their final version. All documents will be available on the website of the Federal Environment Agency.

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For **initiatives from municipal administrations** - not least when budgets are tight - the political commitment of city councils and senates and good intra-municipal cooperation, i.e. short paths within the administration, are particularly important. This can be achieved through interdepartmental exchange meetings or a central placement of city centre projects in the organisational structure.

Municipal business development organisations focus on the central issue of financial viability when evaluating pilot projects. Here it could be beneficial to work together with local companies. These include the real estate industry in particular, as well as local retailers and their organised representatives such as associations and chambers of industry and commerce.

The identification of relevant stakeholder groups for the respective project should take place from the outset and the actual involvement of these groups should take place early and continuously to ensure that the projects receive long-term support. Communication with relevant interest groups and urban society is time-consuming and requires sufficient personnel capacity for coordination and management. A regular exchange can be organised via round tables or steering groups, for example. It is worth defining a permanent person within the project who is responsible for the ongoing organisation of the steering groups (see “From practice - “Zukunftshaus” Würzburg support group”).

Participation: When and how?

Projects that enable citizen participation through workshops or surveys are often more widely accepted, as they take into account the needs and demands of residents and thus minimise conflicts¹². It should be clarified at the outset whether the aim is to find solutions together or to implement concrete solutions. Will citizens be involved in temporary activities or is it a matter of long-term cooperation? A clear understanding of roles contributes to realistic expectations. There are many possible formats, such as public information events, workshops, surveys and digital participation platforms, which enable interested and committed people to contribute their opinions and ideas. It makes sense to consider already established organisations, as there may already be players in the neighbourhood who specialise in participation.

Transparency in communication

Good public relations work is crucial for building trust and increasing acceptance of the projects as well as ensuring that the projects can be experienced and that the changes in the urban space can be seen and experienced. To ensure transparency, relevant information should be provided **in a target group-specific, comprehensible and timely manner**.



¹² BBSR - Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development at the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (BBR) (ed.), 2024. Multi-functional city centre development and participatory culture. BBSR online publication 102/2024, Bonn.

Communication can take place via various **channels and media**:

- ▶ websites
- ▶ social media
- ▶ newsletters
- ▶ public events

An open dialogue not only promotes understanding, but also enables projects to be adapted to changing conditions and needs. Effective communication that extends beyond the city boundaries can also act as a location factor and enhance the city's reputation.

Word of mouth and personal recommendations should not be underestimated, as should communication via familiar and low-threshold channels such as the **city magazine**. Signposts and **displays** for spontaneous visitors can also be very helpful.

From the field - Würzburg "Zukunftshaus" support group

The support group¹³ set up as part of the delivery service pilot in Würzburg consisted of 10 people from different stakeholder groups: the "Zukunftshaus" cooperative, the Radius bicycle courier service, the city of Würzburg, the sustainability laboratory (WueLAB) at the University of Würzburg, the Umweltstation Würzburg, "Zukunftswerk e. V.", the memo Foundation and the Federal Environment Agency. This meant that various key interest groups were represented. The aim was to integrate the pilot into a larger network, to promote the dissemination of the project and to strengthen the networking of the members of the support group. The advisory group supported the implementation of the pilot and provided a forum for **advice on challenges**, including how to attract even more customers to the delivery and collection service. A local closing event was also organised with great commitment by the support group. The regular meetings (every two months in Würzburg for two hours, hybrid or on-site) created a successful framework in which the various interest groups came together, exchanged experiences and improved the piloting.

Stable structures: from implementation to a permanent institution

The revitalisation of city centres through sustainable consumer offers is a promising approach for sustainable urban development. But how can such initiatives be successful in the long term?

Sustainable consumption options in city centres thrive in the long term through **symbiotic cooperation** between initiatives and local government. Their **lasting success** is ensured by a balanced interplay of **economic profitability, social anchoring and innovative potential**.

¹³ This part of the pilot is part of the "NiCE - From niche to centre" project, which is being implemented by the UBA. The NiCE project is funded by the Interreg Central Europe Programme with co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Further information on the project can be found at: www.interreg-central.eu/projects/nice



Financial stability: Diversified income and municipal funding models

Sustainable consumer offers require a solid financial basis. This requires diversified sources of income and targeted municipal support. Cities can provide support through funding programmes, microloans or discounted premises. Alternative financing options such as crowd-funding are also well suited for start-up financing. Ideally, initiatives should rely on various sources of income such as membership fees, service fees, business collaborations or donations. This mix creates a robust basis for sustainable growth.



Community anchoring and networking: Synergy between “initiative” and urban structures

One key to success depends on being anchored in the local community. Municipalities can act as mediators, promote networks and create platforms for exchange (e.g. round tables with local trade and business associations, business development and start-up networks). Integration into urban development concepts and decision-making processes strengthens acceptance and promotes sustainable change in urban consumer culture.



Continuous innovation and training: Municipal support for knowledge transfer

Municipalities can offer further training and support knowledge transfer through workshops, seminars and conferences in municipal institutions. Municipal innovation labs or collaborations with universities or research institutions can help ensure that offerings keep pace with the times and adapt to changing needs. The exchange of best practices and new ideas from other cities can also be promoted.



Professionalisation and quality assurance: Strengthening competitiveness

Cities can support the professionalisation of the business model by providing guidelines and advice on topics such as management, law and marketing. The use of municipal expertise helps to increase quality and efficiency.



Raising awareness and measuring impact: The basis for targeted optimisation and customer loyalty

Awareness-raising creates a deeper understanding of sustainable consumption patterns and their social significance (e.g. visualisation of a product's water consumption and transport route and suggestion of sustainable alternatives), while impact measurement makes their effects transparent (see also next chapter: Learning impact measurement).



Infrastructural support: Use of municipal premises

Municipalities can provide urban spaces for sustainable consumption offers, e.g. vacant buildings for pop-up stores or areas for urban gardening. Digital infrastructures such as urban online platforms improve networking and accessibility. Municipal pre-emption rights enable cities to secure vacant properties for sustainable use (see “In practice - Municipal pre-emption rights”). In this way, they influence the use of buildings at an early stage and reserve strategic areas for inner city revitalisation in cooperation with local initiatives.



Digitalisation: Expanding reach and accessibility

By developing an omnichannel strategy¹⁴, project initiatives can be seamlessly linked online and offline. Urban digital platforms (such as nebenan.de), mobile apps (e.g. Too Good To Go) and social media presences make it possible to reach a wider audience and share real-time information about available offers. Online booking systems for sharing services, virtual marketplaces for local, sustainable products and digital communities for repair cafés expand the range of possible uses.

Learning Impact measurement

When designing the impact measurement of pilot projects, the collaborative creation of a theory of change can be a suitable starting point. In addition to a shared vision as the desired goal for the pilot project, such a theory of change also contains other components such as the resources utilised, the services provided and their impact. The interplay of these building blocks is connected with each other by means of arrows and maps the overall impact paths of the project. Both positive and negative correlations can be noted in the Theory of Change and feedback can also be recorded.

A Theory of Change is a formulation and visual representation of interconnected activities, developed products and achieved and medium-term expected results that lead to a desired long-term vision.

A distinction is made between three different levels of intended and possible effects:¹⁵

- ▶ direct impacts, which are expected within the duration or spatial context of the project;
- ▶ medium-term impacts, which are expected after the project has been completed, but which are closely related to the temporal or spatial context of the project;
- ▶ long-term impacts that could potentially occur outside the temporal and spatial context of the project

Such a distinction is important, as pilot projects only have a limited influence on medium and long-term effects (e.g. the development of vacancies in the city centre).

Of course, it should be borne in mind that the effects of pilot projects can naturally only be planned or predicted to a limited extent. It is therefore necessary and sensible to continuously adapt the approach.

¹⁴ An omnichannel strategy refers to an integrated marketing approach in which all of a company's sales and communication channels (e.g. stationary, online, social media) are seamlessly linked (Gabler Wirtschaftslexikon).

¹⁵ according to Schäfer, Bergmann & Theiler, 2021

In order to tackle impact measurement in practice, suitable criteria and associated metrics must be developed and harmonised within the core team of the project. These could be the following, for example:

- ▶ for the area of process quality:
 - **Participation and involvement:** organising regular exchange meetings within the team
- ▶ for the area of project results:
 - **Events:** Number of organised events and number of participants
- ▶ for the area of impact:
 - **Development of networks:** Expansion of cooperation with relevant stakeholders

- **Learning and capacity building:** Project participants state that they have gained experience that enables them to carry out similar projects in the future

- **Continuation:** The pilot project or the project is continued

Data can be collected to determine whether the criteria have been met by means of **guided interviews**, a **review of press releases** or a **survey of customers**.

Based on the evaluation results, the impact paths of the Theory of Change could be updated in order to create an overall picture. As part of a co-evaluation, the overall picture would then be jointly analysed, reflected upon and revised by the project team from practice and science.

From the field - conclusion from the perspective of the town of Schwentinental

“TauschRausch” Schwentinental ended as planned on 31 October 2024, after a 6-month funding period by the SONa project and a subsequent three-month extension by the city of Schwentinental. The fixed-term lease for the shop space in the Raisdorf district ends at the same time.

The project is rated as successful by the town of Schwentinental. Thanks to the project's support from the town council and local associations, institutions and companies, the pilot project was largely able to fulfil the initial expectations. The three-month extension of the project impressively underpins the positive interim evaluation: it confirmed both the high level of acceptance of the programme among the target group and the successful expansion of strategic collaborations.

Although it is a comparatively small project with a limited reach overall, there was regional awareness beyond the city (e.g. in local newspapers, neighbouring towns and at district level). Two key project objectives can therefore be considered achieved:

The swap shop was able to establish itself as a kind of meeting point in the Raisdorf district over the course of the project and network various stakeholders in the urban area.

The pilot project has brought people into dialogue with each other in a variety of ways and, as a new type of offer in Schwentinental, has set an example for sustainability that other projects can build on in the future.

Helpful tools and links

Project websites

Designing city centres as places of sustainable consumption:

<https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/themen/nachhaltigkeit-strategien-internationales/raum-siedlungsentwicklung/stadtzentren-als-orte-nachhaltigen-konsums>

Sustainable lifestyles: From the niche to city centres (NiCE):

<https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/themen/nachhaltigkeit-strategien-internationales/raum-siedlungsentwicklung/nachhaltige-lebensstile-von-der-nische-in-die>

Practical guides and best practices

Guide: Thinking together what belongs together: Municipal climate protection and sustainable consumption. Ideas for municipalities and districts

<https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/publikationen/zusammendenken-was-zusammengehört-kommunaler>

Virtual exhibition of good examples:

<https://www.cike.sk/en/virtual-exhibition-of-good-practices/>

Guidelines for project design Mercator Foundation Switzerland

<https://www.projekte-mit-wirkung.ch/>

Good examples of funded projects in municipal development policy

<https://skew.engagement-global.de/im-fokus-detail/gute-beispiele-gefoerderter-projekte-in-der-kommunalen-entwicklungspolitik.html>

Guide: Urban experiments: From the idea to implementation Guide from Zukunftsnetz Mobilität NRW

<https://www.zukunftsnetz-mobilitaet.nrw.de/media/2022/5/16/db49cf12f84e697f50c9232a1cbb25d1/znm-leitfaden-stadtexperimente.pdf>

Alliance for vibrant city centres

<https://lebendige-innenstaedte.de/>

Publications and guides

Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR) (2021). New Leipzig Charter. The transformative power of cities for the common good.

https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/veroeffentlichungen/sonderveroeffentlichungen/2021/neue-leipzig-charta-pocket-dl.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3

Federal Association for Housing and Urban Development (vhw). (2018). Stadtmacherinnen und Stadtmacher Eine Positionsbestimmung - Stadtentwicklungs-Initiativen als stadtgesellschaftliche Ressource.

https://www.vhw.de/fileadmin/user_upload/06_forschung/Stadtmacher/PDF/Stadtmacher_Positionspapier_21_Februar_2018.pdf

Publication: The culture of experimentation. Creating sustainability together in real-world laboratories

http://www.r-n-m.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/die_kultur_des_experimentierens_2017_rnm.pdf

Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR): „Sustainable inner cities and centres (ZIZ)“ funding programme

<https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/veroeffentlichungen/bbsr-online/2024/bbsr-online-126-2024.html>

<https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/veroeffentlichungen/bbsr-online/2024/bbsr-online-100-2024.html>

<https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/veroeffentlichungen/exwost/54/exwost-54-2.html>

<https://www.bmwsb.bund.de/Webs/BMWSB/DE/themen/stadt-wohnen/beirat-innenstadt/beirat-innenstadt-node.html>

The magazine on the pilot projects of the National Urban Development Policy

[Nationale Stadtentwicklungspolitik - stadt:pilot 22](#)

Programme strategy: Vibrant centres - preservation and development of city and town centres

https://www.staedtebauforderung.info/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/Programme/LebendigeZentren/Programmstrategie_Lebendige_Zentren.pdf

Alternative financing methods

Practical guide: Crowdfunding for sustainable projects

https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/fakultaet3/files/CSM/Leuphana_Praxisguide_Crowdfunding_nachhaltiger_Projekte.pdf

Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR): „Sustainable inner cities and centres (ZIZ)“

<https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/forschung/programme/ziz/zukunftsfaehige-innenstaedte-zentren-node.html>

Adalbert Raps Foundation: Microfund to support small-scale projects

<https://www.raps-stiftung.de/aktuelles/mikrofonds-der-adalbert-raps-stiftung-in-bayreuth>

Knowledge and learning platforms

Platform for social innovation & enterprises for the common good

<https://sigu-plattform.de/>

Learning platform for unconventional participation formats

<https://urbane-liga.de/>

Urban experiments as an instrument of urban development

<https://www.transforming-cities.de/denksalon-stadt-auf-probe/>

Third places / places of community

Third places: Houses for culture and encounters in rural areas

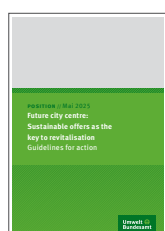
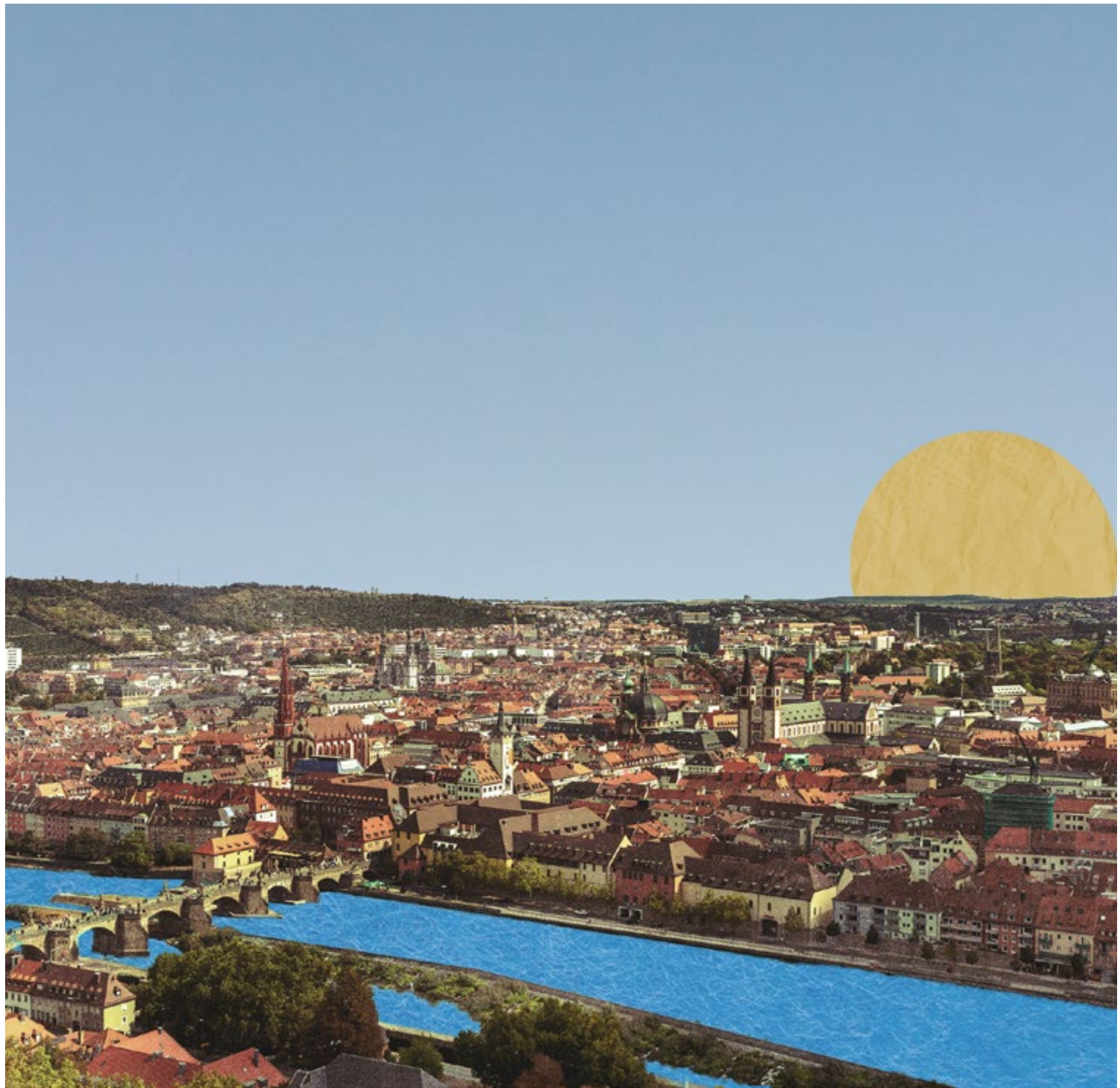
https://www.mkw.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/broschuere_dritte_orte_onlineversion_einzelseiten.pdf

Third places Meeting spaces in the age-friendly cities

https://koerber-stiftung.de/site/assets/files/34668/spotlight_demografie_dritte_orte.pdf

NRW City Centre Networks

https://www.innenstadt-nrw.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Service/Veroeffentlichungen/Magazin_Innenstadt/202101_Dritte_Orte/Mag01_21_Dritte_Orte_final_web.pdf



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