



Re-Use of Vacant Space in City Centers & Good Practices in Graz

Report by Session host:

Franziska Schruth, StadtLABOR GmbH, Dr. Holger Hoff, Universität Graz, Wegener Center

Further actively involved people/ organisations:

Number of Participants: 17

Short introduction:

The main idea behind the “House of the Future” is to consider vacant spaces in Graz to be opportunities: the “House of the Future” is being created in a central location as an open, multifunctional, inclusive place for climate, circularity, sustainability and community action and it creates space for dialogue, cooperation and co-creation (living lab approach). The Re:Space project activates vacant space along a rundown street in Graz so it can become once again a “gateway to the city“. Further innovative initiatives for re-using vacant spaces were presented from Berlin, Aachen and Hanau to share their experiences. In the workshop, we compiled and discussed good practices and experiences for the use of vacant properties.

Participants:

Participants came from eight European countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Austria and Italy. Their professional backgrounds ranged from working in government departments, foundations, municipalities, universities, NGOs and companies.

Summary:

The first half of the workshop dealt with several compact impulses on good practices revitalising vacant properties in cities in Austria and Germany. Examples included three initiatives in Graz, Austria, as well as projects in Berlin, Aachen and Hanau, Germany. Three projects were presented by the workshop hosts, two projects online by external speakers. The second half of the workshop gave time for discussion.

The examples from Graz comprised a pop-up store „Herrengasse 10“ - pilot project in the NiCE-Project - focusing on retail of local circular products, as well as the „House of Future“ as a follow-up concept. It is meant to be a one-stop-shop in a central location as an open, multifunctional, inclusive place for circularity, climate protection and community action. The Re:Space project is an ongoing challenge-based learning with students in Graz activating vacant ground floors along a street between the main station and the city center, promoting the Business Improvement District (BID) approach. All three cases target and conceptualize and test a (interim) use of an empty warehouse in Graz.

Two projects in Berlin, „Mall Anders“ and „Haus der Materialisierung“, gave insights in activities that have already ended. „Mall Anders“ used an abandoned shop space within a big shopping center and programmed it with students over a period of 8 months. This science driven project especially showed the dependency of initiatives on single stakeholders, turning ideas into action and conceptualizing a suitable program for broad public participation. The „Haus der Materialisierung“ was established



under different circumstances - a huge space within a vacant city block was open for interim use for several years and was activated by mainly civil society/ community based initiatives for reuse and repair of materials without commercial focus.

The two projects „Haus der Neugier“ in Aachen and „Stadthof“ in Hanau dealt with former department stores in the city centers that were bought by the municipalities. In Aachen after a phase of socially oriented interim uses, the city placed the public library together with an adult education center and student co-working spaces into it in order to give it a strong social function. Similar in Hanau, where the city as new owner of the building gave itself time to redefine its use by a great participatory process - expecting the whole space to have positive impact on the surrounding area.

The following discussion focussed on two questions:

1. What innovative approaches and practices (success factors) can you identify in the various projects?
2. Which of the aspects mentioned (and maybe others) create ‘added value’ (what kind?) and ensure the project gets off the ground?

Participants emphasized, based on what they had heard and knew from other examples, the strong need for “third places” created through projects like the ones presented. They noted that communities, with the right drivers and infrastructure, can transform vacant spaces into lively meeting points. The importance of active participation and community-building efforts should not be underestimated.

Interim uses of vacant spaces also help to create positive images and strong stories, which can later support developers in building on this momentum.

As additional value, participants highlighted the benefits of diversity, curiosity, and liveliness. They also mentioned that interim uses bring important aspects such as opportunities for social encounters, a sense of safety, and new jobs into city centers.





Images 1-4: Deep Dive Session, March 11, 2026 „Re-Use of Vacant Space in City Centers & Good Practices in Graz“, © StadtLABOR

Specifics from the Session:

The role of cities and municipalities as described in the projects in Aachen and Hanau provoked special attention. It was emphasized that cities should take an active role and agree to a participative process for the re-use of abandoned spaces. Also, cities as owners of buildings have more time for reaching a break even point and may have a broader definition of return on investment than private owners. Nevertheless this is not the usual way to go.

One participant from Belgium brought up „fees“ for property owners who leave spaces vacant and asked if there exist experiences among the other participants concerning this issue. She said that this is an effective way of tackling vacancy rates.

Key insights of the session:

Similar challenges arise, particularly when trying to convince property owners of vacant spaces to support experimental projects. The logic of the market often conflicts with such idealistic goals. On the other hand, there are many positive examples that provide motivation to continue. It is encouraging not to give up networking, as sooner or later a stakeholder will emerge who supports the idea.

Links to further information:

Session hosts:

- StadtLABOR GmbH, Franziska Schruth: franziska.schruth@stadtlaborgraz.at
- Universität Graz, Wegener Center: Dr. Holger Hoff: holger.hoff@uni-graz.at

Presented cases:

- Pop-Up Store “Herrengasse 10”, Graz, Austria
<https://stadtlaborgraz.at/de/2024/09/zwischenutzung-herrengasse-10/>
- “Haus der Zukunft”, Graz, Austria
<https://stadtlaborgraz.at/de/2025/09/haus-der-zukunft/>
- “Re:Space”, Graz, Austria
<https://sc.rce-vienna.at/projekte/projekte-2025-2026/oekoprofit/>



- **“Mall Anders”, Berlin, Germany**

Philipp, Thorsten, Katarina Marej und Leo Fenster. 2023. Didaktische Experimente im Spielfeld zwischen Universität und Gesellschaft: Ein transdisziplinäres Lernlabor im Einkaufszentrum. In Transferwissenschaften: Mode oder Mehrwert? Hg. Konstantin Kiprijanov, Thorsten Philipp und Thorsten Roelcke, 255–269. Berlin: Peter Lang.
<https://www.peterlang.com/document/1305521>

Philipp, Thorsten, und Katarina Marej. 2023. Experiencing Third Spaces in between University and Society: Transdisciplinary Learning Experiences in a Shopping Center. In 9th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd’23), 997–1004. Valencia: Universitat Politècnica de València.
<https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd23.2023.16348>

Philipp, Thorsten und Robert Jende. 2025. Die Stadt als Labor. Wie Do-it-yourself-Kulturen Wege transdisziplinären Lernens eröffnen. GAIA - Ökologische Perspektiven für Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft 34: 282–289.
<https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-25150>

- **“Haus der Materialisierung”, Berlin, Germany**

<https://depositonce.tu-berlin.de/items/c86fa349-488c-498f-b0d9-cc23f6ef3dae>

https://www.plateconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Plate_2023_proceedings.pdf

<https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/plate2025/article/view/10357>

https://opac.dbu.de/ab/DBU-Abschlussbericht-AZ-35122_01-Hauptbericht.pdf

- **„Haus der Neugier”, Aachen, Germany**

<https://www.aachen.de/in-aachen-leben/kultur/haus-der-neugier/>

- **„Stadthof”, Hanau, Germany**

<https://stadthof-hanau.de/>