

***Young people develop
empty spaces.***

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Introduction.

For many young people, the city is a significant biographical stepping-stone. Here, most of them start their professional education, find their first job and close friends. The city offers an ideal environment for individual development, which, on the other hand, simultaneously shapes the city. Undoubtedly, the future of the city belongs to the youth. But young people are missing space for self-directed use in our cities. Abandoned buildings, particularly in cities with high vacancy rates, offer great potentials for a reuse by dedicated young people. This reuse is not only gainful for young people but can also revitalize cities and their neighborhoods.

But what kind of city do young people figure for themselves? What are the things they will engage in, what will they take a stand for and how will they respond to the different cities' legacies'? Can they preserve buildings, landmarks and abandoned properties independently, and can they use these urban spaces responsibly and sustainably not only temporary but maybe even in the long run?

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In order to find out how young people can develop their own spaces, which kind of instruments they apply and how they organize these projects, the research program "Young people develop empty spaces" was developed in 2011. The research program is founded by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR) which is a departmental research institution under the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development (BMVBS). Within the research program twelve pilot projects, all initiatives of young people, showed which urban spaces and related conditions are particularly suited for the appropriation of vacancies by young people.

Since 2009, many different participatory projects for young people actively shaping their urban environment have been examined thoroughly under scientific supervision by the BBSR. During the course of the project "Adolescents in Urban Neighborhoods", trust in the youth has been successively increased while offering them opportunities to take on responsibility. Giving young people a greater say in urban development was the goal of this research fields. Urban structures are only sustainable if they provide young people with a high quality of life and an opportunity to develop their ideas. But how do they design their own environments? And how can they become more involved in urban development? In order to get young people involved at various levels of urban development, this field of research investigated diverse methods for successfully communicating with adolescents, and for getting them integrated and involved in projects. The long-term goal was to generate



a participatory culture for young people and to provide the foundations for the creation of vibrant cities that are attractive to young people.

Especially young people need social space for their activities and for the communication with one another. This kind of space, however, is actually becoming increasingly difficult to find in urban areas. Social space is formed by the environment in which the youth grows up and live. Adolescent development is influenced by their daily experiences at home, on their way to school, in school, and in the surrounding neighborhoods. To turn these experiences into positive ones, and to make young people active members of civil society, they must become more involved in the procedures and processes of urban planning and development than they have been in the past.

In order to explore the aspects outlined above, pilot projects were developed to assess innovative approaches so as to give a broad overview of the current needs young people have in urban neighborhoods and to identify appropriate solutions. One focus of the research was on the instruments young people could be encouraged with to participate in the design of their cities and which would allow for their needs to be accurately represented. In addition to this, available funding was to be provided to support projects that young people chose, planned, and carried out on their own. The basic idea of the research field "Young people develop empty spaces" which was founded in 2011, was to examine in which way young people develop and reuse empty houses and how they find creative new ways of financing and funding as they do not have the same conditions as professional actors. If politics, authorities and tenants were to accept young people as new actors in the development of empty houses, cities and quarters could surely profit from it.

The projects all have in common that they are based on voluntary organizations structures. The participants have a common interest in the improvement of their environment or the creation of new spaces for common use in addition to or as replacement to already existing offers in their cities. But many different factors do influence the implementation of these projects. The challenges are to organize the project in a self-directed way, to motivate new participants and to create new ways of decision making. A further barrier is to find and convince tenants to open houses for the use by young people. The success of those projects depends on decent contracts between user and tenants as this is also deciding on how long young people can use the property: as interim use or as a long-term use. The most critical and challenging factor is to create and to apply methods of financing as this is a further requirement of the success and the continuance of the projects. Moreover, important conditions also are good networks, which boost the image of the project, a high number of supporters and the facilitation of new ways of financing (crowd funding...).



Exemplary and successful ways of developing empty houses by initiatives of young people can be explored in the following two projects.

KOMPOTT in Chemnitz: Open Houses - rethink urban development!



Main idea

As active members in this project we try to challenge and change the current political, economic and social circumstances in order to realize our ideas by creating a space for people in search of a self-determined and collaborative way of living and organizing. In the KOMPOTT we want to offer a low-threshold possibility of participation and an experimental area for people in order to collectively design their space and to put into practice their ideas of living together. The KOMPOTT experiments with self-organized and self-determined revitalization of urban space and aims at interfering in the discourse of urban development in Chemnitz. As a heterogeneous group, the project wants to create private and public space in a city that is weaned of urban fun and liveliness due to demographic changes. In a shrinking city as Chemnitz with many abandoned spaces our purpose is to reclaim space for experiments of alternative living, organizing and the implementation of different interests by different people.

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We therefore pursue the following principles:

- Equality of all residents, activists and audience: no formal hierarchy.
- Politically and socially active open space and support of activists.
- Ongoing political education and discussions.
- Nonprofit-orientated practice and organizing.
- Collaborative usage and living instead of private housing Context.



The demands for open houses and accessible urban spaces for alternative concepts have a common desire: to stop the ongoing privatization of municipal real estate that occurs in many cities as it is common practice nowadays. The city Chemnitz has the advantage of still holding a Municipal Real Estate Company (GGGmbH). Therefore, the basis for negotiations concerning vacancy is a different one compared to cities with private Real Estate Companies without possibilities of political control. The four houses of the KOMPOTT are owned by such a municipal subsidiary. Chemnitz, as a city with a Municipal Real Estate Company, a high vacancy rate and due to its demographic situation, can provide spaces for new creative forms of urban development and has the opportunity to rethink urban development. About 14% of all apartments are vacant and young people rather leave the city than stay. Marketing and image campaigns have tried to change this image, however, it did rarely change the apparent unattractiveness of the city for young people. In the competition of cities this fact is perceived as a negative location factor. Thus, the city finds itself caught up in a difficult situation: On the one hand, as the focus of city planning and development has been lying on spaces of reproduction (labor and material gratification) in form of shopping malls since about 20 years, this now is out of date. On the other hand, vacant buildings that offer great potential for urban adventures are now torn down or developed in an illusory manner (e.g. renovation without tenants), while in some other cities, abandoned spaces inspire self-organized revitalization projects and are driven forward.

People in the project and self-organization

The KOMPOTT is composed of a very heterogeneous group of people. Still, we have a lot in common: we are in search of and experimenting with alternatives to the current practices of urban development. The project is open for everybody sharing the outlined ideas, values and principles so that workers/non-workers, artists, students, culturally active and interested people, scholars and political activists and groups come together. The residents and artists in the KOMPOTT design their rented flats and ateliers themselves, create collaborative spaces and are active in different working groups of the project. There are also a lot of active people not actually renting a space but being involved in the project with interest in the process and the discussions. And of course there are the visitors who using the alternative and public space in many different ways.

As we try to avoid hierarchical organizing, the main decision making institution is the weekly assembly of people in the KOMPOTT. The main assembly takes place every Tuesday evening and is not only the venue for collective decision making but also people interested in the project. Furthermore, all administrative and associational tasks are discussed to self-manage the project. Different working groups exist within the



project to address different topics, e. g. construction, finance, living, etc. The working groups are closer to problems and desires of the affected working area or already collected knowledge in this field and assure that the project organizes itself in a decentralized way. The nonprofit organization Urbane Polemik e.V. (English: Urban Polemic) then is the legal form for the official communication and cooperation with the municipal offices.

Self-financing the KOMPOTT and cooperation

The aim of the project is to finance the project consisting of four buildings in an autonomous way in order to be independent. The self-financing concept is composed of an exchange of a low rent that tenants pay in return of them being responsible for the self-directed renovation of their rented spaces. The rental income is crucial for keeping and developing the sustainability of project in terms of revitalizing the housing structure, energy efficient concepts and eventually securing a long-term usage but most importantly to stay independent. The funding of the federal ministry in the project EXWOST was an important additional financial support. It helped accomplishing the restoration of the former vacant houses in a faster and easier way with the financial possibility to e.g. externalize building work in the house. Moreover though, it was helpful for the project as it provided a good reputation towards the expectations of local authorities and supportive relations to external experts in various fields such as legislation, accountancy or alternative energies. Besides, material requirements in the KOMPOTT are covered by donations, by collecting bulk garbage or bartering with other local and alternative projects. Moreover, we cooperate with different people and organizations for different matters: Firstly, we collaborate with municipal institutions, e. g. with the mayoress of Chemnitz, Barbara Ludwig in terms relating to the local authorities and regularly exchanging experiences. Secondly, we work with different municipal offices and public organizations for cultural, political and social matters. Furthermore, the municipal real estate company and owner of the four buildings, the GGGmbH, is, an important partner for the project in all aspects of renovating and negotiating. Lastly, we are imbedded in a network of a variety of local and regional nonprofit organizations providing us with collaborative support in different matters.



So far...

Up to now, with more than two years in the four former vacant houses, many things have evolved in the project:

- Restoration of three houses completed with private apartments and artist studios
- Creation of public spaces such as the Literary café Odradek with readings, political discussions, and music performances or
- Volxxküche (self-organized public kitchen) in the public space ZUKU NFT: meeting, discussing and enjoying vegan food
- Establishment of the Umsonstladen (free shop) for giving and taking clothes
- Renovating two apartments for welcoming guests and artists in residence
- KOMPLOTT: art shop with self-made products and exhibitions of art from local artists
- KOMPOST: urban gardening project by members and neighbors

Future challenges

As the three-year-rent-free-contract will expire by the end of the year 2013, we are currently in a stage of discussion and preparation of our future strategies and planning regarding the coming long-term contract with the house owner. The central aim is to agree on a contract which offers us opportunity to keep and further develop the houses as self-organized space for a long time. Thus, we are being consulted by a team of nonprofit association of consultants and a lawyer who gained lots of experiences in self-organized and collaborative projects. Hence, we are discussing different possible legal forms and types of contracts allowing the sustainable long-term use of the four houses. Possibility discussed are e.g. the model of the German Mietshäuser Syndikat which supports the self-directed purchase of houses or the conclusion of an hereditary lease contract (German: Erbbaupachtvertrag) with a duration of more than 30 years. The Tenements Syndicate is a singular, cooperative and non-commercial holding company with democratic basis for the purchase of houses. The Syndicate supports and advises projects in financing and legal issues so that self-organized houses can be taken from the capital market. Main instrument is a jointly managed "solidarity fund". Thereby, creative spaces for initiatives, affordable rents, and self-determined living can be offered. The current negotiations will not only be an essential and deciding process for the projects future, but also for the city and the local area in terms of securing innovative forms of revitalizing vacant buildings and young people's dedicated involvement.



Phase2: a work-in-progress laboratory of ideas in the north of Erfurt.



Context

Erfurt is the capital of the German federal state Thuringia. With a population of about 200.000 inhabitants, it is by far the biggest city of the region and therefore not only its political center.

Besides a historical and touristic well used city core, Erfurt bares a highly interesting quarter in its north. Alongside a high density of Wilhelminian style apartment buildings, the quarter is shaped by its need for rehabilitation, a comparatively high percentage of abandoned houses and stores, a lower level of rental prices but also a younger population of inhabitants, a higher percentage of foreigners and people with migration background. All together the quarter is in the focus of spatial planning and backing for more than ten years now.

Of course all these negative aspects might be understood as opportunities as well. Vacancy holds also a chance of (not necessarily always temporary) usage for creative stakeholders, (social) entrepreneurship and certainly young people claiming their role and position in society.

Within this field of impossibilities we already started a project to promote the participation of young people in the context of city development in 2009. Unlike typical participation approaches we concentrated on the empowerment of young actors by supporting concrete projects focusing on public space and the city, conceived, realized and evaluated by young people themselves.

With these findings and process-related experiences we decided to take part in the program "Young people develop empty spaces". While our previous activities granted an active network and a direct access to different groups of young people in the city, we initially needed to find and acquire a building that would meet the needs of our concept.



Since an arrangement with a private owner of such a property brought up concerns regarding the possibilities of a professional cleansing or disposal in the future, we consequently went for a partnership with the administration of the city. Through this course of action we not only assured collaboration with a body that was potentially willing to pursue a draft of longer duration but also laid an important cornerstone causing a sustainable impact on the local comprehension of participation in city development.

Having an idea: Phase2

The project Phase2 is an alternative concept for the utilization of abandoned buildings in order to demonstrate that the reanimation of those houses by adolescents can be interesting and procreative for the local community. From our point of view it is a win/win-situation for nearly everybody: The administration of the city has not to deal with another decaying building anymore and adolescents find affordable free space to work on their ideas. Furthermore they also get the chance to acquire and design urban space. Instead of silent, inanimate houses there is turmoil of creative, young people who enrich the cultural diversity of the district.

Phase2 concentrates on the conversion of a 100 years old building called Saline. It stood empty and was threatened to decay for almost a decade. Our idea was to reanimate this abandoned house under the responsibility of its new tenants: young artists, sociocultural actors and town planners. At first we reached out for young people to picture how they would wish to use different rooms of the Saline. They were asked to develop drafts to implement their idea of reanimating a small part of the house - and consequently the Saline itself. Step by step the adolescents rebuilt the house themselves and were challenged to find their own solutions in terms of building: a young architect in training elaborated a redeveloping plan for laity and there were regular assignments with all tenants making the Saline habitable.

Unlike a professional property developer the participating adolescents lacked the availability of huge amounts of capital and materials. In contrast they do have comparatively a lot of time at their disposal, which they chose to invest into their new domicile. As a result these young actors together developed new strategies to align the actual condition to their needs, e.g. by finding new ways to recycle materials or much cheaper solutions to follow constraints of fire safety or statics. Having a look from outside into these rooms, one could get the strong feeling that those rooms are not finished yet and maybe they never will. But operating in a state of work-in-progress is very attractive for young people because of giving them free space for trial and error. It also provides an open point-of-view for their own creative work and to face all challenges



of low-budget building. This of course, goes along with self-determination and –organization and with a high willingness of honorary work. This creative bunch of people not only restored but altered their rooms into art studios, a recording studio, a silk screening-workshop, a photographic studio, an editorial office and much more. Besides the long-term tenants there are also groups who are not only using the premises temporary but also focusing on how this house could be rearranged in their work. Both, tenants and temporary users, are not only reanimating the Saline but the district itself: Like a lighthouse, the Saline with its different events and exhibitions tries to include and attract neighbors from around but also people who otherwise wouldn't find their way into the north of Erfurt, a district suffering a bad reputation.

Alongside the already existing high variety of usage they still are working on the building. But that is how it should be: The Saline is changing and new free space has to be exposed for new ideas and tenants. Not only the building but the project at all is a work-in-progress.

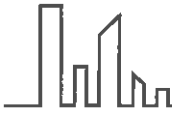
Problems and challenges

Young people tend to claim spaces and adopt them towards their prospect and needs. Unfortunately already adopted places are not easily open to other claiming groups. The reclaiming process of a whole building like the Saline is quite similar. Those groups of young users might find themselves quite fast being stakeholders of their own compartments. A lasting identification with the whole building as a community of shareholders on the other hand will take a lot more time to be achieved. One of the main challenges of the projects' approach might be the final transfer of responsibility from the organizing party to the group of participating young people. At the end they are challenged to find an organizational framework to ensure a sustainable development of the building and advancement of its concept.

Of course in face of a long term and sustainable attitude the question about property remains. For sure, it is most unlikely that young people (aged between 16 and 30 years) will have the capital to just buy their own free spaces. That just leaves a mode of using property of other entities like public as well as private bodies.

Since these young groups tend to invest themselves in terms of time or labor but not (so much) financially this modus operandi comes with certain limitations:

- Temporarily usage, believing that there will be a chance of financial return for the owner party in the future
- Renting, to gain a legal base and to cover the basic costs of the property



- Trust, that these young actors need to gain by showing their capabilities (even if lacking capital) and trustworthiness over a specific period of time

So if one would want to sustain these project-like-approaches, one should find models of transferring respectively gaining property. Since the temporary aspect of this type of "youth usage" is also an expression of youthfulness and therefore constructive and consistent.

Of course collaboration with a local public body like the municipality seems promising: it might dedicate a building to a youth project or even buy one for that purpose. A long-term building lease might work if there is a structured (enough) organization as a partner on the side of the youngsters.

To realize a continuity that is capable to overcome changes in generation and demographic fluctuations the implementation of an agent in-between, e.g. a foundation, seems to be a resilient solution.

Finally the further development and renovation of the building remains a challenge for all participating actors – especially since the initial financial support by the research program expired at the end of 2012. From now on construction works have to be financed alternatively, e.g. by public and private fundraising, crowd-funding and of course by the tenants themselves.

In this regard a point of no return in terms of ownership is foreseeable. There will be a specific point in time when the amount of invested money, labor and passion eliminates a returning of the building.

Future perspectives

In fact the future perspective of the project might be seen from two different angles. Of course the further development of the property in terms of renovating as well as in the context of a strategic idea of forming a common entity out of the variety of tenants and concepts of usage stays more than relevant. In this regard we are going to realize further empowering projects. The flagship approach might be the setup of a founder's laboratory to enable the young tenants to enhance their ideas of activities to finally make a living with it.

But of course, this project approach bares also a Meta level. The process of empowering young people, the resurrection of a whole building and the realization of alternative concepts of usage always comprehend a solid level of partnership and communication with local authorities and politics. Therefore this project is on the mend to impact on the way the local administration handles abandoned spaces, their alternative possi-



bilities of usage and participation processes and the demands of young people in general.

Conclusions.

New daring concepts: Long-term contracts and temporary use

The best approach for providing space for young people is enabling contracts for a long term use of vacant buildings. Temporary use is mainly for an economic upgrade of districts which are not profitable for the real estate market and, thus, lead to a new disposal option for private and real estate companies. Therefore, this means can not be our claim if taking public participation seriously. These methods depict, mainly in the viewpoint of civil actors, an unattractive option as it is mainly an interim solution for the activists who need sustainable and guaranteed experimental spaces. For the political actors and the real estate companies it often seems to be difficult to ignore these developments as the city nowadays is usually perceived as a company. Booming cities, that have little space to offer and many potential users, are of great interest for real estate speculation. Even more, our only claim can be that the vacant spaces are made available to people in rent-free contracts or for the symbolic sum of one Euro for purchase.

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Fulfill the qualifications for innovative ideas and concepts

The claim of creative activists and other members of civil society for the self-directed revitalization of spaces can not be ignored by local politics but could be seen as an important element in an innovative city. The municipalities have to accept and set the stage for people who want to regain urban space for the collective implementation of their perception of living. This requires trusty relations between citizens and municipalities. Citizens should be seen as producers of space, project developers and direct representatives of the demands of a city. They have to be considered as protagonists building the cultural diversity in a city. Fulfilling the qualifications for self-organized and self-determined projects by citizens can provoke a win-win-situation for all parties.

Selection of space for experiments and creative use

It seems as if only in shrinking cities it is possible to try out innovative forms of participation in city development processes. But also cities without high quantities of vacancies mostly have properties which don't fit the claims of the property market and thus can be released to a creative use. Our ideal projection would be all cities recognizing the advantages and also the general demand for self-developed spaces and defining special areas for creative uses. Especially cities that are confronted with



social protests have to change their attitude towards actively including the civil society in their planning processes.

New forms of financings

Young people do not dispose of own financial means but a great amount of ideas and sometimes even more time than adults. If they revitalize vacant buildings they need to find appropriate ways of financing and cooperation partners. It would be ideal if they were left to zero- or low-rent housing with only having to pay the additional running costs. This is especially possible with properties that are in municipal property. A suitable approach then is the hereditary lease contract, which ensures a safe and long-term use. However, regardless of renting or purchasing of the property, the projects must generate income to cover the running costs. The revenue can be composed of, e.g. sub-letting of the premises, organization of events or catering undertakings. The largest source of revenue for projects in the field of research was, however, the raising of funds and sponsors. New forms of sponsorship are used, such as crowd-funding, which consists of a large-scale soliciting of funds via an internet platform.

Alternative forms of constructing

Projects who work in a self-organized way by young people do often have low needs and basic requirements since only little funding is available. Moreover, they try to find innovative and cost-saving ways of constructing. They use recycled materials that are collected from recycling sites or from abandoned buildings, they renovate and construct as much as possible in a self-made manner. This often leads to an experimental but innovative trial and error progress. Thus, these projects can also be seen as research sites for innovative ways of building and as a projection of future projects.



Questions for further research.

How can the approach be transferred to properties of the private sector?
What conditions, attractive financing systems or programs of the municipality have to be arranged?

Are there judicial limits for self-made buildings? Is there any problem with liabilities?

How can voluntary engagement be more appreciated, honored in the society or supported financially?

How can the communication between municipality and alternative projects be improved?

How are these approaches perceived by the inhabitants especially of growing cities with a lack of abandoned space?

If such approaches are actively changing the understanding of participation process in city development and spatial planning, how can these experiences be transferred to other divisions of a local authorities?

Team.



Friederike Günther received her Master's degree in Media Culture from the Bauhaus University in Weimar and her Bachelor's degree in Communication und Social Science from the University of Erfurt. During her Masters, she published a scientific magazine for media culture, called *eject*, and is now the editor of *HANT* – magazine for photography. Since 2010 she has been organizing cultural events as well as exhibitions in a young off-space gallery in Erfurt. At present she works in a local project which focuses on youth participation and empowerment in local areas.



Stephanie Haury is a graduate of the Diploma in Architecture and Spatial planning at the University of Karlsruhe and Barcelona. After her studies she worked as an architect in Holland and later as a scientific associate at the Chair of Urban Planning at the University of Siegen. Currently she's working as an urban planner and researcher in the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR) in Bonn. There she heads different research programs with focus on urban planning with adolescents, urban reconstruction and interim uses of public spaces.



Martina Klaus is just finishing her Bachelor in European Studies with focus on Cultural studies at Chemnitz University of Technology. Before studying, she made an apprenticeship in Tourism and worked 3 years in touristic companies in Spain. In Chemnitz, she is involved in various political and cultural projects. Since 2011 she is part of the KOMPOTT an initiative of young people which started the experiment of putting into practice their ideas on self-organizing and self-funding in four previously vacant buildings.



Ines Marion Knoefel is currently studying Philosophy as well as German Literature and Linguistic at Chemnitz University of Technology. Since 2008 she is active in alternative urban development, interested in the question of how vacant buildings can be regenerated by young people on a simple and sustainable level. She has worked with urban planners and the local cityplanning officials to develop an innovative model of regenerating a vacant building complex in a participatory process. She is one of the founding members of the KOMPOTT.



Sarah Langer recently completed her Master in Management and Organization Studies at Chemnitz University of Technology after receiving a Bachelor in European Studies. Since 2012 she is working as research assistant at the Chair for Innovation Research and Sustainable Resource Management, Chemnitz University of Technology. Since 2008 she is active in alternative urban development, especially interested in self-governed concepts of organizing and revitalizing vacant buildings by young people. She also is one of the founding members of the KOMPOTT.



Steffen Präger is about to finish his Master degree in communication science at the University of Erfurt where he already did his bachelor in communication science und sociology. As a freelancing trainer, moderator and consultant he was involved in international, national and local projects concerning empowerment and participation, employability and entrepreneurship, community intervention and city development. Since 2008 he is the CEO of a non-profit association - acknowledged as an institute of the University of Applied Science Erfurt in 2011 – working on lifelong learning topics on the bases of model projects.