a field guide for

Activating Space

JA Morrow
Rob Shields

Principles

Acknowledge. Community comes first. Consult with people around you about what needs to be done, then commit to what you can give. Make space for those who want to join in. Your work is worth more than money.

Do. A space brings community together. Put your skills to work. Be a creative resource and make ideas real. Be informal and flexible. Experiment. Cultivate.

Reach out. Work from an honest place. Find people who want to build partnerships and understandings. Be clear and accessible in how you communicate.

Redo. Resourcefulness is an art. Share what you have learned. Champion autonomy. Trust the doers. Flourish.

Follow up. Build the future. Be available. Check in with the community. Make a space better than you found it. Reward sweat equity. Celebrate.

Be undeniable.

Forward

This is a field guide for activating vacant urban spaces. It was prepared for the University of Alberta's Kule Institute for Advanced Studies and Research Impact Canada's Knowledge Mobilization and Skills Fund.

There are many terms for activating space. Some people call it *temporary use*. Others, *meanwhile space*. But the purpose is always the same: Find new uses for empty urban spaces.

Nothing in this field guide is theoretical. It is written for individuals and community groups that need help with turning thoughtful ideas about the public good into civic actions. It can also benefit city leaders and planners who need proof that the reuse of empty spaces can enrich the lives of community members. Consequently, this text provides a multitude of case studies that examine how abandoned places can be activated.

This field guide is not a step-by-step rule book. There are no prescriptions about what must be done. Instead, it explains what resources are available and how some places have found success.

Introduction

There are four strategies for activating space:

1 Temporary Use
2 Reuse
3 Programming
4 Counter-Programming

Every city has vacant buildings and underused land. These abandoned spaces burden communities with blight and cost. Worse, the longer a space goes unused, the more likely the damage will be social as much as economic.

Cities often fail to make plans for derelict spaces. Their preference is for property owners to make decisions about redevelopment. Meanwhile, places go unused. In Montreal, one in six retail units are vacant. And in London, England, over 20,000 properties currently sit empty—and the number is rising.

Business as usual is not an option. Shops and industrial sites have been vacated because consumerism and conventional approaches to development no longer work. So common purpose and social partnership must take the initiative.

For neighbourhoods to be vital, vacant spaces must be activated and put to use. Otherwise, it will be impossible to shop locally or support community needs.

The focus of each strategy is somewhat different. For instance, temporary use is ideal for open spaces. Or reuse functions better in places that are turnkey ready. Either way, the same objective remains: Give back to communities that have been left behind.

Any site can be activated. But, if the situation at hand is to ever improve, places need to be left better than they were found. It is, therefore, important to put in groundwork, and people fairly reward the sweat equity of those who give their time and effort.

Activated spaces give back to their communities. They are places where people can provide for each other. And it is best to invite community members to participate in decision-making and provide resources to make their own contribution.

If mishandled, activating space will be nothing more than a redevelopment scheme. It must work for a community's betterment and fulfil local needs. Accordingly, the measure of success is whether it helps community members live richer lives.

Case Studies

1 Temporary Use

People have always made space for temporary events. In the Arab world, impromptu *souqs* and bazaars have been a part of urban life for more than three thousand years. Likewise, throughout Sri Lanka's history, *processions* have allowed people from different castes to gather for social occasions, such as ceremonies and holidays.

Temporary use can adhere to a schedule. It may also involve particular rituals. But in practice, it is *informal* and has a *liminal* purpose. Therefore, it encourages behaviours or actions that break from everyday routine and promote a sense of social belonging.

Temporary use has a variety of forms. It also has no limits on how long it can last. But there are common features. For example, temporary uses are usually cultural rather than commercial. And it works best for events to happen in large open-air venues, like recreation grounds or religious sites.

Landeshauptstadt München

Theresienwiese
Munich | Germany

Munich and Oktoberfest are inseparable. For two and a half weeks every September, the city hosts one of the world's largest festivals.

Bavarians call Oktoberfest *Wies'n*, which is a reference to the festival site, Theresienwiese. It is in the city centre and, except for an administrative building and a few public toilets, there are no permanent structures. In fact, most of the famed beer halls and entertainments are tents that can be put up and taken down in a few hours.

Theresienwiese is more than Oktoberfest. All year, it hosts festivals, trade shows, and community get-togethers, including one of Europe's most popular flea markets. It is also a destination for sporting events, like the X-Games and foot races.

Stadt Eichstätt

Weihnachtsmarkt
Most Villages | Germany

Every December, market squares in Germany and Austria become a winter wonderland. Temporary stalls are set up for vendors to sell anything from crafted baubles to luxury goods. The main draw, though, is comfort food and warm Glühwein.

Germans use the word *gemütlich* to describe the coziness of time spent in the company of friends and family. Thus the markets are designed to emphasise conviviality and togetherness. For example, they often feature fire pits, large communal tables and benches that invite people to gather, be merry and celebrate a winter's evening.

A Weihnachtsmarkt lasts for only a few weeks—because Weihnacht means Christmas. Yet, in winter's darkest nights, the markets are the focus of a community's social life. They create distinctive destinations in town squares that are built to support temporary activities such as markets and festivals.

David Hoffman

Sound Systems
On Any Street | Caribbean

Sound systems are simple. They are little more than a stack of speakers, an amplifier, and a music source. Yet the lack of technical sophistication is also part of their appeal, because they are easy to use and can be set up almost anywhere.

Historically, sound systems were a response to social exclusion. For many communities, social class and religious beliefs limited access pubs or clubs. So some people hosted informal 'blues' or house parties that often became weekend-long events that spilled into the streets.

Many Caribbean artists insist that sound systems do more than play music. They say a system is an emphatic expression of culture and togetherness. For them, the systems create spaces for people to get stuck in, connect with friends, and have an adventure.

The influence of sound systems is global. In Britain, they provide the soundtrack to block parties, such as Notting Hill Carnival. They are essential to mobile dance parties in Brazil. And in other places, they are the backbeat to street festivals and clubs.

2 Reuse

Every city has empty shops and vacant lots. These spaces are usually abandoned because of a lack of commercial appeal or a failure to get permission to redevelop. They can also go to waste because nobody wants to make a long-term commitment.

High streets and urban sites can be brought back to life through reuse. It can be done by loaning a vacant space to a community organisation at little or no cost. In turn, the occupants use the space for local needs, such as the arts, creative startups, or places for people to gather.

Reuse only works if it has willing partners. The occupants have to acknowledge that the space is not theirs to keep. Property owners need to be flexible with leases and conditions. And city officials must grant temporary use permits and help occupants limit their financial obligations.

Portland Works

Works
Sheffield | England

The phrase Made in Sheffield is a mark of pride. For centuries, Sheffield was famous for its steel mills and, for a time, the city produced almost half of the world's cutlery.

Sheffield's cutlery makers—or *Little Mesters* in the local dialect—did not work in factories. Instead, they were self-employed and rented space on low-cost temporary leases from Works, which were warehouse-like buildings in the city centre. So, in many ways, Sheffield set the standard for what would later be called coworking.

In the early 1980s, as Thatcher-era deindustrialisation forced the Mesters to down tools, Sheffield's many Works found new use. Several of them became concert venues and artist studios. Others are now working space for startups. But all the remaining Works only offer temporary leases in honour of the Mesters' proud, bloody-minded independence.

In their second life, the city's many Works became crucibles of culture. As a matter of fact, the new tenants at Western Works produced multiple hit albums, such as Human League's *Dare* and Pulp's *Different Class*.

Eichstätter Kurier

Projekt Leergut
Eichstätt | Germany

The construction of new flats and stores outside Eichstätt's village centre disrupted everyday routines, including how people shop. The changes were so significant that they prompted the closure of businesses in the centuries old Innenstadt.

The village was concerned about the blight of empty storefronts. So it started Projekt Leergut, which functions like an estate agent that connects landlords with artists and startups. But the Projekt is unique because it only allows for short-term contracts—though it has leeway to renew and continue to subsidise existing deals.

The Projekt helps dozens of artists and craftspeople find studios and a place for gallery openings and seminars. It also provides storefronts for entrepreneurs to put their ideas to work.

In the community, the Projekt is well liked. People praise it for being an honest broker for the arts. And they appreciate that it can access the city's resources, including maintenance workers, marketing officers and the planning office.

Bohn & Viljoen Architects

Organopónicos
Havana | Cuba

Throughout the 20th century, Cuba grew sugar cane for export. Until 1959, the sugar went to the United States. Then, after the Revolution, the sugar was sent to the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cuba lost its largest market and only source of pesticides, fertilisers, and heavy machinery. The government responded to the crisis by idling farms. But those actions led to food shortages and rations on supplies.

As the food crisis worsened, the Cuban government allowed groups to start farms on vacant urban land. These farms—which the locals call *organopónicos*—were organic because pesticides and fertilisers were not available. They also made sure people were fed by planting high yield crops.

The organopónicos got Cuba through an acute crisis by supplementing food production. More importantly, they demonstrate how cities can allow community members to be directly involved in local food production by reusing empty lots.

Kanal—Centre Pompidou

Kanal
Brussels | Belgium

In the early 1930s, Citroën built a factory in the centre of Brussels. The choice of location was meant to show that the company made the city modern. And over the next eight decades, the city and factory grew together.

In the mid-2010s, Citroën began to wind the factory down. The Government of the Brussels-Capital Region wanted to preserve the factory's architecture, which is a rare example of modernist design. So they bought it and began the long process of transforming the space into a cultural hub called Kanal.

The former factory's refit will take time and considerable investment. Meanwhile, until work is complete, the city is allowing artists and community groups to have *prefiguative* use of the space. For example, a Home Movie Factory was opened for community members to learn cinema production techniques, screenwriting and special effects design. Other spaces include seminar rooms for adult education, a central-staged theatre, a workshop for steelwork, and outreach services.

Vice

The Bell
Cahokia | USA

In 2016, Bartolami Gallery funded year-long residencies for its rostered artists. The only restriction was that the artists had to open a space in unconventional settings.

Eric Wesley used his residency to turn an abandoned Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois, into an *off-the-grid* studio. The building had already been emptied of fixtures and furniture, and it only required minor maintenance. Wesley did, however, put in a new floor and planted rows of maize in the car park for the installation.

Wesley says that his studio, which he called The Bell, was an ideal place to test new media and ideas. Its low rent let him build installations with materials that are ordinarily cost prohibitive. And the studio's utilitarian layout and peculiar location, away from other cultural venues, let it function as a 'living, breathing space' that can be adapted for multiple uses.

3 Programming

It is not enough to occupy a space. A use is also necessary. Otherwise, nothing happens and there is no benefit to the community.

Long-term use is a form of risk management. It is the reason that cities require feasibility studies and banks give developers lengthy loans. Yet, for all its benefits, risk aversion eliminates spontaneity and makes it difficult to find use for empty spaces.

Programming works *in the meantime*. Simply put, it organises activities—such as art shows, skill-sharing classes, or markets—that are brief or changeable. And by planning for the short-term, occupants and organisers can quickly respond to local needs.

In action, programming allows organisers and community members to experiment with ideas. More specifically, because they are not constrained by long-term commitments, they do not have to make decisions based on feasibility or risk. Therefore, they can get creative and learn about what is possible through trial and error.

Leon Straschewski

Tresor
Berlin | Germany

When the Berlin Wall collapsed, people from the city's East and West began to socialise and find common ground. Some people had difficulty overcoming minor cultural differences. Others found a shared interest in music and emergent subcultures.

To support Berlin's growing techno scene, local record producers opened a nightclub, Tresor. Its first location was a vault below a vacant East Berlin department store. But the club has since occupied other spaces. For a few months, it even had residencies in Detroit, USA.

Tresor only operates on temporary permits. The strategy allows promoters to stay true to their roots in the underground scene. It also lets them adapt to changes in planning rules, rent, and the city's nightlife.

The club is now hosted by Kraftwerk Berlin, which is a decommissioned power plant. The space is shared with art galleries, several small offices, a test kitchen, and rooms for social events. And in the winter months, Tresor occasionally doubles as a day centre for the homeless.

Kristina Petri

Tiefgarage
Eichstätt | Germany

Eichstätt, Bavaria, recently flourished from a sleepy baroque village into a bedroom community. New apartments, hotels and shops have sped up the pace of life. Then construction work stopped for a few months on a major construction when the property owners decided to redesign their project.

Whilst the builders waited for a new plan, local youths decided to put the unfinished structures to use. They asked a property owner and local officials for permission to host events within empty buildings. The answer was a begrudged yes that came with a two-day temporary use permit that restricted all activities to an underground car park.

The permit's constraints gave the youth focus. They limited their plans to two events and used the space's flexibility to their advantage. For the first event, they hosted a nightclub that featured a bar built from scavenged construction waste and a DJ booth in a box van. The second event was a cash-free flea market where guests swapped old clothes and household goods.

Atlas of the Future

Sunshine Cinema
Any Village | South Africa

Africa has a thriving film scene. In almost every country, scores of films and documentaries are made every year. Yet many productions are never seen because of a lack of cinemas, unaffordable tickets, and electric shortages. Consequently, cinema audiences generally come from affluent white neighbourhoods.

In rural Southern Africa, Sunshine Cinema brings films to audiences who have never seen a film on a big screen. They travel the region with a small mobile projector, wireless speakers, a solar panel for power, and a collection of documentaries that focus on African social issues. The Cinema also organises filmmaking workshops and leads discussions about topics shown in the documentaries.

Sunshine Cinema's organisers believe the solar panels are the project's most important component. In addition to providing a consistent source of electricity, the panels make it possible to turn any space into a venue. They also allow people to see alternative technology in use and get an idea for how it can be put to work elsewhere.

4 Counter-Programming

Many places are designed for a single use. After all, high streets were made for shopping and factories for machinery. Yet it is also possible to counter-programme a site to work around infrastructure already in place.

Counter-programming thrives on adaptability and informality. Organisers who are flexible about how they use a space can accommodate different activities. Likewise, if circumstances change, a location can be quickly refit for other uses.

Counter-programmed spaces work with materials at hand. They are not curated to suit a particular style. Instead, they use resources that are economical and commonly found. And this ability to scrounge makes counter-programming collaborative because organisers need to go into the community to source materials and local knowledge.

Vice

Under Bispeengbuen
Copenhagen | Denmark

In Copenhagen, Bispeengbuen is controversial. It is an elevated dual carriageway that was designed to cut travel time between the city and suburbs. Instead, it enables pollution, divides neighbourhoods, and complicates walkability, which diminishes the well-being of residents.

Residents asked the city to tear down Bispeengbuen. But action has been delayed by planning rules and budgetary constraints. So community members took it upon themselves to find temporary uses that undo the carriageway's social and physical barriers.

Community members decided that Bispeengbuen will be a roof under which people can come together. For them, it is an *opportunity space* that promotes collaboration and wellness. They also require all activities to be *hyggeligt*—which means cozy and inclusive.

The space under Bispeengbuen now features basketball courts that double as sites for festivals, markets, and picnics. And it has a kulturhus made of shipping containers that are fitted with an industrial kitchen, seminar rooms, and storage space.

Andrés Villota

Casa Parásito
Quito | Ecuador

There is a shortage of affordable housing in Latin America. The main cause is income inequality. But the problem has been compounded by rapid, unplanned urbanisation and a lack of architectural-quality building materials.

El Sindicato Arquitectura, a design firm from Quito, Ecuador, has built a low-cost house on an apartment block's roof. It is called Casa Parásito. The name is a reference to informal, *parasitic* additions that improve the social function of existing buildings. As such, the Casa demonstrates that standing architecture does not have to be cleared to make way for new homes.

Casa Parásito's design is based on a modified A-frame. It is a conventional form that is stable, lightweight, and economical. The structure and most of the fittings are made from easy to source materials, like corrugated steel or oriented strand board. Plus the interior is sparse and utilitarian, so as to maximise usable space for a single person or young couple.

Nikolaï Posner

Klunkerkranich
Berlin | Germany

Above a shopping mall on Berlin's Karl-Marx-Strasse is a multi-storey car park. Over the last decade, consumer tastes and spending have changed, and parking spaces sat empty. So the owners closed the structure to cars.

Local event organisers realised that the abandoned car park is an ideal site for culture and art. The rent is nominal. It is located on a high street in a popular neighbourhood. And its immense space is versatile.

The car park is now Klunkerkranich. The venue has a public garden, several bars that serve food grown on-site, and seating for several hundred people. The main attraction, though, is a panoramic view of Berlin's rooftops.

Klunkerkranich is mostly built with reclaimed materials, such as wood pallets and old windows, and its furnishings are secondhand. However, the space does not feel tired or castoff. Instead, it has a hep, creative ambience that attracts people who are looking for a different scene.

Zhang Ge

Hot Pot
Chongqing | China

In the 1930s, China built air raid shelters below its cities. Later, during the Cold War, the shelters were reinforced and expanded. Then in the 1990s and early 2000s, the government opened some of the shelters to the public.

The city of Chongqing has China's most extensive system of dugouts and tunnels. In some places, the city has turned underground spaces into a transport network that supports rail lines, highways, and car parks. It has also created sites for museums and wine cellars.

In addition to providing civic and economic infrastructure, Chongqing's shelters have social uses. Summers in the city are extremely hot and humid, so residents find relief in the tunnels' cool air. And recently, a popular and internationally recognised food scene developed when vendors began to sell hot pot soups to a captive audience.

Conclusion

Activated spaces build community. They are places where people come together to provide for each other. And when people gather, they have adventures, form relationships, innovate, and build resilience.

Regardless of outcome, activated spaces are creative. For many people, the biggest barrier to testing ideas or finding purpose is a lack of a place where they can engage a community-at-large. Yet cities have empty spaces ready for use. All it takes is cooperation, social partnership, and a willingness from property owners and city officials to open doors.

The ideal activated space is central, cheap, and flexible. But activating space is about being creative with whatever resources are available. Therefore, if a space can be made to work, then it is for the best.

Finally, an activated space must always give back to the community. Everybody who activates a space must leave it better than when they found it. The same principle applies to people and neighbourhoods. Activated spaces improve well-being and, when all said and done, everybody and everything needs to be in a better place.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
KULE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

Dr JA Morrow is a Research Associate at the University of Alberta's Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies. He is also an Adjunct Professor at the University's Department of Sociology.

Dr Rob Shields is a Henry Marshall Tory Endowed Research Chair and Professor of Human Geography and Sociology at the University of Alberta.

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