

# Enhancing Community Cohesion in Exarcheia, Athens: Focussing on Temporary Uses

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## **Abstract**

The area of Exarcheia in Athens is characterised by the effects of the economic crisis and political activism. This results in a high number of abandoned buildings and spaces and also in a considerable number of illegal squats in the neighbourhood. This paper is outlining an approach how temporary uses can serve as informal planning instrument to foster urban development and increase social resilience. By exploring and categorising temporary uses in the area, challenges were analysed and a concept was developed to respond to those problems. The main approach includes the implementation of a temporary use agency which serves as mediator between local initiators and owners and as a legal adviser. Moreover, temporary interventions are outlined as another important approach. Implemented in the public space they can respond to local needs and increase the liveability in the neighbourhood. The goal of the concept as a whole is to promote temporary use as a flexible approach for urban transformation. First, general potentials of temporary use for urban planning are outlined, to analyse second the area of Exarcheia and third, to explain the concept in more detail.

### **Outlining Potentials of Temporary Use in Urban Planning**

Temporary Use is largely known as a flexible approach for the reuse of vacant urban spaces in planning. Scholars argue that empty spaces are an “inherent feature of capitalism with its cyclical nature and its recurring crisis” (MADANIPOUR 2017: p. 1095) and an integral result of the temporal cycles of boom and bust, resulting in an unequal spatiality of investment and disinvestment (ibid.). In the light of the economic crisis starting in 2010, the downturn has shown itself to a great extent, hitting especially Mediterranean countries severely. Consequently, still today nearly entire streets are abandoned due to the discontinuance of business and missing investment in the cities. Between a development intent, planning and implementation of physical change lag time of several years exists (NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 145). Therefore, temporary use presents the opportunity to respond to lag time and make spaces for secondary or provisional use accessible (ibid.). It can take many forms, community gardens on former industrial sites and start-up companies in warehouses are typical examples (HONNECK 2017: p. 268). Thereby it is not of essential importance if the use is “short or long, accidental or planned, legal or illegal” but intentionally of time-limited nature (NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 144). The temporal is seen as a catalyst for change, assuming the ability to support **urban transformations** and letting citizens participate in the process (see NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 145, MADANIPOUR 2017: p. 1094).

NÉMETH and LANGHORST (2014) state that the benefits of temporary uses are threefold: economic, social and ecological. From an **economic** perspective, groups which cannot afford to rent a building get the opportunity to create their own business by cheaper conditions (NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 148). Especially creative entrepreneurs might use abandoned buildings and spaces for a limited time. Temporary uses can also serve the maintenance of a lot, avoiding rising costs over time for renovation (PATTI & POLYAK 2015: p. 123, NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 148). **Social** benefits are the creation of positive attention to vacant sites within the neighbourhoods, fast respond to local needs and access to space for local communities (MADANIPOUR 2017: p. 1105, NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 148). Temporary uses can also increase vegetation on sites when used for example for community gardening, under-

lining the **ecological** benefits (NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 148). The developed concept for the case study of Exarcheia district in Athens is illustrating how those benefits of temporary use can be reached.

To understand the emphasis of temporary uses in Exarcheia, first general challenges in the neighbourhood need to be outlined. By observation, the area is characterised by a high number of abandoned buildings which are partly in a bad condition. All those vacant spaces represent significant burdens for stakeholders: increased maintenance costs for owners, reduced vitality and value of the whole neighbourhood and aggravation of social problems (PATTI & POLYAK 2015: p. 123). Moreover, the high number of Airbnb places in habitable buildings is changing the housing conditions, especially for the locals, because tourist renting decreases the available new housing possibilities for them (COX 2017). Additionally, there are missing shelters for homeless people (ARAPOGLOU & GOUNIS 2015, SAPOUNAKIS 2015) who are sleeping mainly on and around Exarcheia square as well as in the park of Strephi hill which is located next to the square. Also, shelters are missing for the high number of refugees hosted in Exarcheia (MOVING EUROPE 2016). Compared to other neighbourhoods of Athens, Exarcheia hosts perspicuously more refugees (approximately 1,200 refugees) (REACH 2017).

The analysis had the aim to categorise current temporary uses in the study area of Exarcheia. Therefore, the research team inspected the area and mapped the temporary uses which were visible when walking through the streets. The locations and types of uses are shown in Figure. 1. Temporary paintings and posters are not located on the map but visible as temporary uses of walls. They are spread all over the place and really characteristic for Exarcheia (TSANGARIS & PAZARZI 2018). There is also a remarkable number of political squats in the neighbourhood (TSANGARIS & PAZARZI 2018, MOVING EUROPE 2016), showing an extraordinary political dynamic and resistance against government. Vacant houses are occupied by political activists with the aim of different uses like for example as cultural and political centres but also as community sports

### ***Exploring Challenges and Temporary Uses in Exarcheia***

hall. Political activists also occupied buildings in favour of creating refugee accommodation which could be one reason for the high number of refugees hosted in Exarcheia.

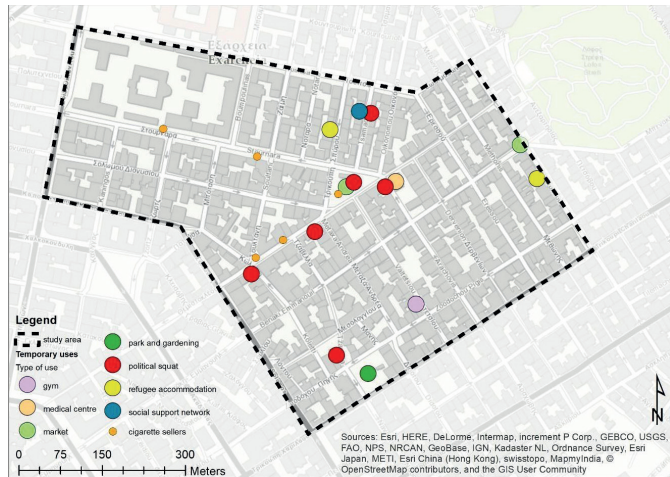


Fig. 1. Mapped Types of Temporary Uses in Exarcheia.

After the analysis, challenges for temporary uses in the area were deduced. There are lots of abandoned buildings in the area which can theoretically be used for temporary uses. A problem that must be underlined in this context is the ageing infrastructure (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 15). Due to that not every building is in the condition for further usage, because of insufficient conditions of electricity connection, sanitary facilities, safety reasons, etc. (TRIANTAFYLLOPOULOS 2015). Another challenge is the presence of illegal squats in Exarcheia which are holding a high conflict potential. The main problem is that they can be emptied at every time by authorities because of their illegal status (MOVING EUROPE 2016) and are therefore highly vulnerable. As shown, the present types of temporary uses are focussed on and initiated by certain groups (most refugees and political activists) (MOVING EUROPE 2016) and therefore not accessible for the public and not enhancing community cohesion. Another widely known challenge for temporary uses is a general high mistrust of the people (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 146). The mistrust exists on all levels of government, administrative or elected and is one of the major resilience challenges (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p.15, 55, 146). This is the result of the contemporary policies, mismanagement, corruption and lack

of transparency among others throughout the last few years (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 15). Nevertheless, trust is seen as a precondition for developing a resilient city (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 48).

Based on the present types and challenges of temporary uses in Exarcheia there is the need for a concept to tackle these challenges and to promote a systematic inclusion of temporary uses. The aim of the developed concept is to generate community cohesion and public access to temporary uses as well as to overcome the high mistrust of building owners. Socially progressive goals (inclusion, diversity, access) in general enable temporary uses (NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 147). These topics are also named as goals in the Resilience Strategy of Athens, underlining the aim to become a proactive and vibrant city (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 42). According to the city's strategy, temporary uses and interventions can produce good results to implement art in public spaces (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 109, 183). Therefore, the Resilience Strategy sets a good basis and awareness of temporary use but leaves the question of 'How?' open. Cities that have a vital activist scene and squatting culture, but missing a legal framework, are struggling to regularise the collective use of abandoned buildings. As a consequence, it stays challenging "to establish transparent temporary use practices" (PATTI & POLYAK 2015: p. 129).

For the long-term implementation of the temporary use concept an independent agency helps to handle the bureaucratic process for the establishment of temporary uses in Exarcheia. Long-term refers in this context to a duration from a few months up to several years, depending on the context. It is also a goal of the city of Athens to create a legal framework for temporary uses in vacant spaces within the city jurisdiction (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 139). This sets a good base for the implementation of the agency. The agency mainly serves as a mediator between house owners and initiators of temporary uses (see Fig. 2). Therefore, it helps to collect information, to get in touch with the responsible persons and gives advice during the process. The agency helps to increase trust and establish temporary uses by focussing on cooperation with locals, cultural initiatives and NGO's.

***The Planning Approach: Enforcing Community Cohesion with Temporary Uses***

The implementation of an agency responds to two main challenges of temporary use in Exarcheia: First of all, the mistrust needs to be overcome. Temporary use requires open-minded owners (PATTI & POLYAK 2015: p. 128-129). Therefore, the benefits of temporary use need to be explained and promoted to owners. The agency can enhance and promote communication channels with locals, the public and non-profit sectors (PATTI & POLYAK 2015: p. 129). It supports a transparent process, enhances participation, community cohesion and promotes local culture (CITY OF ATHENS 2017: p. 109, 139). Secondly, “legal advice is another crucial aspect” (PATTI & POLYAK 2015: p. 129). To legalise temporary use and make it transparent, the negotiation of contracts between users and owners is an important aspect. Moreover, users have relatively little investment security; this also needs to be addressed by negotiating contracts (NÉMETH & LANGHORST 2014: p. 148).

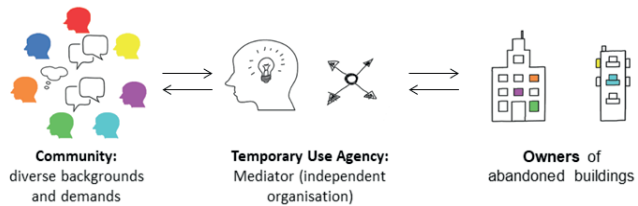


Fig. 2. The Temporary Use Agency as Mediator between Local Initiators and Owners. Source: Own Creation

As a first step to make the agency work, a database (real property cadastre) is necessary. It provides information about the abandoned buildings and their condition as well as contact data of the owners. The database will not be public and is to be managed by the temporary use agency. It provides useful and necessary information about abandoned buildings and which of them could still be available for temporary uses. A second step is to implement best practice examples, preferably with public owned buildings. With best practice examples to visit, the trust of private owners can be increased. This can help to overcome difficulties at the beginning. Also, the legalisation and simplification of the bureaucratic process of temporary uses, especially for refugee squats in the area, is another challenge to tackle with the help of the agency. In connection to the general benefits explained in the beginning of the paper, an increase in temporary uses would also create benefits for the community and the house owners in Exarcheia.

One of the main benefits for the community is that inhabitants can participate in the development of their neighbourhood and widen the bottom-up culture. This leads to an increase in cultural and social activities and events. Temporary use presents a way to get places and space for comparatively low costs but limited time. This helps especially start-ups, projects and temporary uses with an unknown future. Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 show an example of the implementation of temporary use in an abandoned building, outlining the fundamental differences in attractiveness. Examples of temporary use are exhibitions for local artists who do not have the ability to present their work in an organised gallery, events and charity parties, refugee and homelessness accommodation as well as accommodation or meeting points for others who belong to vulnerable groups.

### **Benefits for the Community**



Fig. 3. Unused Abandoned Building. Source: FREE PHOTOS 2018



Fig. 4. Transformation as Exhibition Hall for Local Artists. Source: Own Creation based on FREE PHOTOS 2018

Incentives for private owners to make their buildings accessible for temporary use are needed. Due to the high taxes, the owners spend a high amount of money even if there is no or not yet an option to reuse or sell the building. Consequently, they are in an unfavourable situation (TRIANAFYLLOPOULOS 2015). One incentive could be that the temporary user has to pay the property tax or a percentage of it which would reduce the costs for the owner. With this option, owners would be able to keep their houses, even if they do not have the money to renew and use it at the present time. The potentially increasing number of non-local investors (referring to gentrification) could be reduced and would help to solve the conflict with the housing conditions for locals due to the high number of Airbnb's (COX 2017). Temporary use is an option to maintain the building and to renew it with the help of the initiators. By transforming abandoned buildings into something new, the whole neighbourhood's attractiveness increases. Over the long-term, this can also result in an increase in property values.

### **Benefits for the Owners**

### **Temporary Interventions on Public Spaces**

To not only make abandoned buildings available for temporary use but also to implement short-term uses, temporary interventions come into focus. Short-term is in this context referring to the time span of a few hours to a couple of days. The advantage of those temporary interventions is that they focus mostly on the open space and can change uses of a place for a certain time. One example, known from other European countries, is the “**Car-free Sunday**”: for one day some streets are closed for traffic but open for pedestrians, giving locals the possibility to do sports and to enjoy the surroundings without disturbing traffic noise and congestion. Also, **open-air galleries and cinemas** can enhance abandoned spaces for a certain time by creating small-scale urban transformations and increasing cultural activities in Exarcheia. Especially open-air galleries would give local artists the opportunity to not only paint their work of art on walls but also to inform about their motivations. Another example of temporary interventions are trucks with different services, driving through the neighbourhood. A “**play truck**” could offer sporty play equipment to lend for children at low costs like for example tri- or unicycles, trampolines or skipping ropes. Due to its mobility, the truck can stop at different places, providing toys to children that live in a low-income area.

### **Conclusions**

Temporary use, in general, can work as a planning instrument for a positive development and overcome shortcomings in spatial planning and management (TRIANTAFYLLOPOULOS 2015). The need to manage temporary use in the city is outlined and answered within the developed concept of the temporary use agency and the organised temporary interventions. The concept shows how an independent agency helps to overcome mistrust, manage the legal process and gives advice. Temporary use needs to be seen as an instrument for citizen participation with its potentials to foster urban development in a very positive way. Nevertheless, temporary use and its success stay highly context specific. The flexible and spontaneous nature of temporary use presents an experimental approach that can respond to the demand of diverse populations but also depends on a bottom-up culture.



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