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*Urban Stud* 2005 42: 503

DOI: 10.1080/00420980500035436

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# Reclaiming Urbanity: Indeterminate Spaces, Informal Actors and Urban Agenda Setting

Jacqueline Groth and Eric Corijn

[Paper first received, July 2003; in final form, September 2004]

**Summary.** This paper discusses the phenomenon of ‘informal actors’ influencing the agenda of urban planning and urban politics by means of temporary reappropriation and animation of ‘indeterminate’ spaces. The latter are spaces left out of ‘time and place’ with regard to their urban surroundings, mainly as a consequence of rampant deindustrialisation processes and the ‘shrinking’ city. The unclear and undetermined status of these urban ‘no-man’s-lands’ may allow for the emergence of a non-planned, spontaneous ‘urbanity’. This intervention may be based on different motives: marginal lifestyles, informal economies, artistic experimentation, a deliberately open transformation of public space allowing for equal access and equal representation or a high degree of social and cultural inclusion. These expressions of the ‘lived’ city at present constitute a pronounced paradox for established city planning and urban politics. Institutionalised stakeholders may occasionally appreciate their presence for their inherent potential to enhance attractiveness of and revitalisation of certain parts of the city. On the other hand, these sites and the actors involved also spatialise and visualise a resistance and temporary alternative to the institutionalised domain and the dominant principles of urban development. Urban restructuring in the post-Fordist city, foremost in the development of inner-city areas, is increasingly focused on a unidimensional logic of commodification, monofunctionality and control. Thus, the complex qualities of animated ‘indeterminate’ spaces are difficult to incorporate into planning procedures. They often become threatened in their existence and pushed to the margins. Nevertheless, the urban conflict around these sites and the appearance of ‘non-planned’ planners on the urban scene, may decisively alter the urban agenda and set the themes for further development, which takes their positive economic and social function and their key role in sustaining and renewing urban cultures into account. The paper discusses this phenomenon, illustrated with an account of three case studies in the cities of Helsinki, Berlin and Brussels. The comparative dimension allows for a subsequent discussion focusing on elaborating the conditions of ‘success’ for informal actors in urban development processes. The predominant question then is how these new forms of urbanism can be given a place in city planning in order to pay more justice to the social and cultural complexity that constitutes contemporary urbanity.

## Urbanity at the Centre of Post-Fordism

For the past two to three decades, cities in the Western world have been subject to major

economic, social and cultural transformations, which are gradually affecting changes in urban politics and development. In the industrial Fordist growth model, cities were firmly

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DOI: 10.1080/00420980500035436

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embedded in the regulatory and redistributive framework of the centralised welfare state. In the transition towards a 'flexible accumulation regime' (Harvey, 1989) operating on a truly global scale, this has become dysfunctional. Cities tend to become levels of regulation in a triangular relationship with 'the world' and 'the nation-state' (Boudry *et al.*, 2003). Today's 'decentred' cities are subject to an increasing interurban competition and face the need to assert their position with regard to a global 'space of flows' comprising the main elements of function, information and power (Castells, 1997). At the same time, urban politics and city planning have to respond to the parallel processes of cultural and social change. They are confronted with an urban realm which is no longer marked by more or less homogeneous life patterns and spatial practices, but by a pronounced plurality and fragmentation in terms of lifestyles, by tensions arising from the co-existence of multiple and contested identities and by new mechanisms of exclusion and polarisation as the 'local' corollaries of an increasing global interconnectedness and the neo-liberal re-orientation of the economic sphere (Sassen, 1996). The "compaction and re-territorialisation of so many residents with histories, cultures and demands that disrupt the normative and assumed categories of social life" (Holston, 1998, p. 50) make the post-Fordist city one which is replete with contradictions and oppositions. It is composed of urban landscapes marked off by difference (Sandercock, 1998), where the relation between 'universal' and 'particular' is open for contestation (Robins, 1993). These substantial transformation processes and their effects on the urban are best subsumed under the notion of 'glocalisation' (Swyngedouw, 1997), a term capable of covering the manifold ambiguities and the decisively local impacts and negotiation processes global restructuring entails.

Cities have attempted to answer these new challenges with considerable changes in their approaches to urban politics and city planning. The Fordist city has a state-led, managerial system of city governance and a

predominantly modernist planning regime, closely connected to the Keynesian welfare state. The production of space catered for a relatively uniform society in a system of mass production and mass consumption. It has been superseded by an increasingly more flexible mode of urban development. Central to a city's urban policy now seems to be the subordination of social to economic priorities: contemporary market-led urban development entails an entrepreneurial stance in which diverse actors from across different segments of society (urban authorities, private promoters, parts of civil society) form *ad hoc* 'urban growth coalitions' and engage in more piecemeal, pragmatic planning procedures ('projects') to the detriment of comprehensive, multifunctional master plans (Mayer, 1999; Amin, 1994). Such trends assist both the pronounced institutional transformations marking a shift from 'government' to 'governance', and the dismissal of holistic conceptions of the urban. Recent approaches are equally qualified by a transition from 'hard' to 'soft(er)' issues: for example, culturally led regeneration is given prominence over mere physical renewal (Corijn, 1999). In a condition where

the homogeneous social within the grand master plan has lost its force, it is now the norm to opt for 'pluralistic' and 'organic' strategies for approaching urban development as a 'collage' of highly differentiated spaces and mixtures (Donald, 1999, p. 56).

Programmatically, these changes imply an increasing awareness of the particularities of the city as opposed to modernism's authoritarian and scientific abstraction of the urban life-world. However, assuming that a new planning sensibility is heralded, paying justice to the city's plurality of life-worlds and claims of its inhabitants, is highly misleading. New bargaining systems that mobilise public-private partnerships for more efficient realisations of urban development tasks take the most varied forms as concerns their objectives, outcomes and target groups. The horizontal style of these negotiation systems

thus does not necessarily result in a greater openness to democratic influence and local needs (Mayer, 1994). As ferociously as modernist planning with its practices of mono-functional zoning, the ruthless eradication of the vernacular and widespread sights of repressive architecture has impacted on what Häussermann and Siebel (1987) detects as the normative essence of ‘urbanity’—namely, the ‘confrontation with diversity, the un-expected, the non-planned and the resistant moment’, the space for the articulation and integration of the ‘other’—new urban strategies may impose different, but equally constraining visions. Entrepreneurial approaches in city planning aiming at increasing mobility, international competition and image marketing, all too often tend to homogenise space on consumerist and aestheticised grounds. The restructuring of city centres in particular reflects practices that see the consolidation of the ‘divided’ city: space is functionally and economically shared, but subject to an increasing social and cultural segregation (Robins, 1993).

Academic and public debate on the ‘content’ and the implications of this “re-conquest of the city by commodity and capital”, as formulated by Swyngedouw (2003b, p. 12), is extensive and manifold. Augé’s (1992) account of ‘non-places’, the diverse discussions on the ‘end of public space’ and its increasing commodification, sanitisation and surveillance (Sorkin, 1992; Sennett, 1992; Hajer, 1999), or the exclusionary ‘landscapes of power’ as part of cultural regeneration strategies detected by Zukin (1995), have in common the depiction of the proliferation of a specific kind of post-modern ‘urbanity’. At their most extreme, these new modes of generating or transforming urban space no longer provide for friction: they tend to reduce the city’s complexity, impact negatively on relational spaces of encounter and transition or, simply, may no longer provide the conditions for the ‘city as habitat’ in specific areas. As mechanistic and simplistic as some of these briefly mentioned arguments may partly seem, they all point to the fact that what constitutes ‘urbanity’ in the post-Fordist city is still (or more so than ever)

a contested and rather open notion. The predominant notion of the latter as engendered by market-led urban development seems to pay little tribute to the socio-cultural challenges and divergences of the city. In discursive terms

post-modern urbanism conceives of a multiplicity of diverse and reverberating life-worlds, a ‘plurality of full valid voices’ whose combination moves towards an unknown city (Donald, 1999, p. 138).

Current practice, however, produces spaces that are largely streamlined under a prerogative of commodification and control and based on a mere superficial or aesthetic instrumentalisation of ‘difference’ (Relph, 1987; Harvey, 1989). What is lost in these developments, is—leaving aside the wider implications for questions of social justice and democratic representation—a dimension of socioeconomic richness and cultural mobility upon which the traditional metropolis thrives. In this kind of scenario, single-minded “zero-friction spaces” (Hajer, 1999, p. 31) and staged images of the ‘public’ replace the spaces of idiosyncratic interaction.

However, this dominant notion of ‘urbanity’ is one which is resisted and questioned from many sides and by the most diverse practices of intervention. The post-Fordist city and urban politics are subject to

a multiplicity of struggles and confrontations, involving a wide range of constituencies and social actors, with many of these struggles, in fact relating to the cityscape (Westwood and Williams, 1997, p. 5).

Urban conflict in the Fordist era was largely played out along institutionalised lines, with organised actors, and clearly definable with antagonistic positions confronting each other (Mayer, 1998b). The agendas were clear and predictable. Today’s ‘struggles’ and contestations are as fragmented, differentiated and, as concerns the claims raised, contradictory as their agents. Conflicts become increasingly issues of professional actors and civil counter-worlds, of constellations of the ‘temporary’ and ‘*ad hoc*’ coherences’ embedded

in a specific spatial structure and based on interconnection through a series of networks stretching across localities. This transformation must be seen within the framework of recent urban restructuring and the changes in the local sphere of politics which have engendered decisively new lines of opposition (Mayer, 2000).

When exploring the potential of new urban movements or initiatives to offer 'alternative urban futures', it seems promising to part from the phenomenon of active repossessions and symbolic reconstructions of everyday urban spatial structures that one encounters in almost any city. It is in places that are not coded by market-led urban development—since temporarily left aside from the hegemonic visions of configuration of urban space (due to their having become obsolete in terms of their original function and use-value)—where distinct possibilities for practices of innovation and playful intervention arise. In particular, urban residual spaces such as abandoned industrial areas—i.e. interstitial sites that are weak in spatial terms may, due to their 'indeterminate' character and a certain degree of "semantic emptiness which reigns supreme" (architect Stefano Boeri quoted in Borret, 1999, p. 241)—provide opportunities for new, transitional reappropriations that are assumed by civil or 'informal' actors coming from outside the official, institutionalised domain of urban planning and urban politics. These spontaneous, organic evolutions epitomise a different notion of 'urbanity' from that which is evident in planned developments owing to their dissociation from modernist utilitarian approaches and the logics of planning. In their essence, they thus testify to an ideology which is "libertarian, marginal, deviant and certainly disrespectful of the traditional codes of the city" (Borret, 1999, p. 242). We approach these spaces as sites where clashes in 'urban meaning' manifest themselves, since different pathways of urban development are envisaged by an often temporarily limited activity which eventually may even stand the chance of altering existing planning prerogatives. Thus, these sites reappropriated

for cultural and other uses also typify the new importance and meaning of socially constructed space in the contemporary city as the locus where "values, identities and systems of reference are confronted with each other" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 416). If such kinds of bottom-up interventions and transformations of urban space are understood as expressions of rights based on the 'lived' experience, what is their actual significance on the urban agenda? In which dimensions and to what extent do they inhabit the "germs of a new form of urbanism and urban policy" (Swyngedouw, 2003b, p. 7) current processes fall short of including?

In what follows, the influence of 'informal actors' on the setting of the urban agenda will be illustrated with an account of three recent cases of the reanimation of 'indeterminate' urban space in the cities of Helsinki, Berlin and Brussels. In order to frame the urban conflicts researched, the three case studies will be introduced by a brief discussion on urban dynamics in each city. In each case, we will trace the specific evolution of these reappropriations, attempt to detect the meaning attached to them and describe the inherent qualities and socio-cultural functions with which these transformed sites have been endowed, with regard to their urban surroundings. Some light will be shed on the conflict having emerged: we will examine the character of the planned developments and official stakeholders' prerogatives impacting on the further existence of the spaces and outline the nature of alternative claims and visions of development as advocated by actors engaged in the transitional sites. Particular consideration in all three cases will be given to the specific 'constellations of defence' having emerged in these sites and the means to make their claims heard by the 'informal' actors employed.

Subsequently, we will elaborate on the preconditions of 'success' for processes that are to be encountered in the interstices of everyday urban practice. We will question under which conditions civil actors can initiate or have impact upon the foundation of transformative urban programmes.

### Three Cases

The three covered cases are: Makasiinit (Helsinki), Raw-Tempel (Berlin) and Leopold Station (Brussels).<sup>1</sup> They all three exemplify important, yet ‘undetermined’ places in the urban development. All three are obsolete railway land. They are not ‘marginal’ in the sense that their development would not bear heavily on the overall development of the city concerned. On the contrary, they have strategic positions, but are not (yet) covered by an urban strategy. That is why they are subject to struggles around ‘urban agenda setting’ and why different actors confront their strategic options. Through rethinking the orientation for the future development of the sites, the overall planning for the surroundings is rediscussed. Of course, the selection of the cases is also based on pragmatic reasons of accessibility and knowledge of the context.

The research on the case studies is primarily based on the information obtained from 30 semi-structured interviews with both ‘informal’ actors (i.e. ‘representatives’ involved in the initial appropriation of the residual structures and their transformation and actors prominent in the public debate, such as representatives of citizens’ initiatives) and ‘formal’ or ‘institutionalised’ actors (city planning authorities, estate owners, local political representatives).<sup>2</sup> The interviews aimed to elucidate contrasting meanings, claims and visions associated with the sites by diverse urban actors. Further sources of information are relevant academic research, existing media coverage and the documentation issued by actors directly involved in one of the three sites.

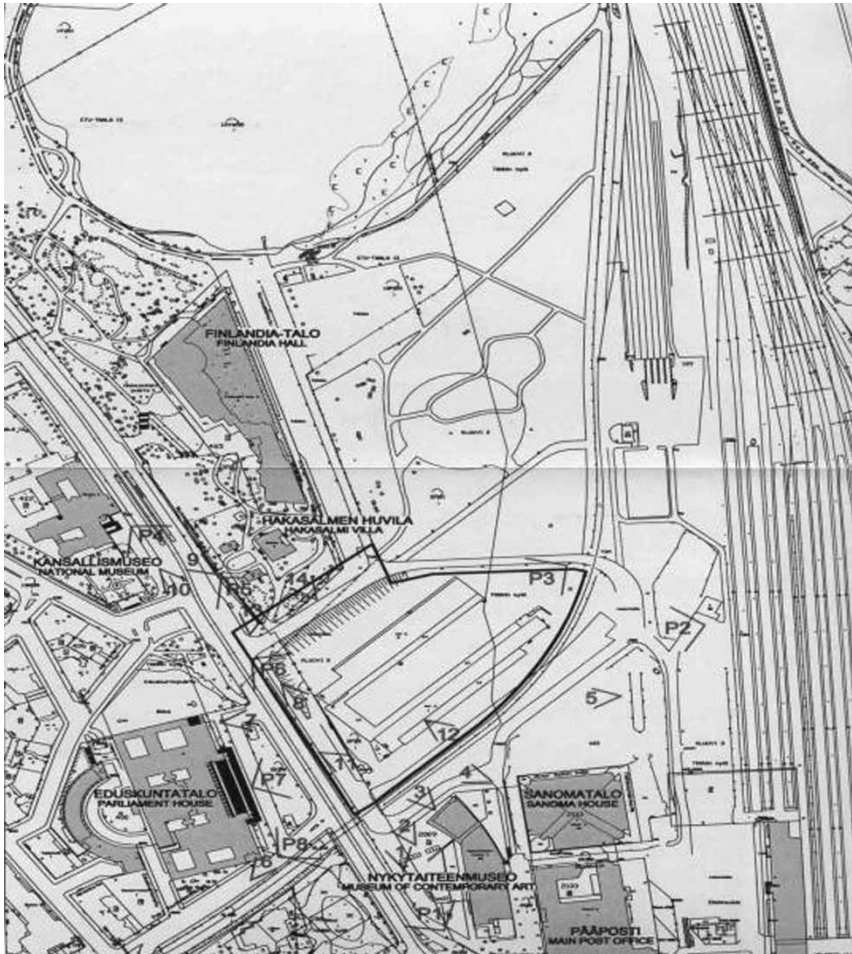
#### ‘Makasiinit’, Helsinki: ‘Warehouse Utopia?!’

In the shadow of uncertainty, the warehouses have become a ‘metaspace’, a place of opportunities and surprising encounters. They are a state of mind, a feeling that things are in a certain (free, unusual, relaxed, activating) way (artist Kataarina Katajisto; quoted in Lehtovuori, 2000a, p. 36).

The conflict around Helsinki’s old warehouses in Töölönlahtibay—commonly referred to as the ‘Makasiini’—is a telling example of the competing visions of ‘urbanity’ in the *reimagining* the Finnish capital has undergone in the past decade. Finland has experienced a rather late correlation of economic crisis and subsequent urban restructuring. Helsinki, however, quickly entered the ‘global city age’ from the beginning of the 1990s onwards (Cantell, 1999). This development was a direct result of its changed geopolitical situation entailing a newly defined role on the international scene. This new situation which forced the city to place itself firmly on the global map is characterised by the adoption of new strategies to achieve success in a changing global environment (Helsinki University of Technology, 2001) and has entailed major changes in urban planning and policy: at present, the planning regime is oscillating between its modernist background and new streams of strategic planning and market economy policies. Current urban development prerogatives, especially in exposed areas of the city centre, have been intertwined with a strong focus on urban development through economic ‘growth’—reflected, for example, in a growing accent on consumption facilities, the widespread application of the ‘glass-palace phenomenon’ and a general striving for a ‘neat’ and controlled city (Hentilä, interview). Concomitant with these tendencies is a new awareness on the part of the city authorities of the role of culture and cultural place marketing strategies in urban development, evident for example in the city authorities’ determined bid for European Cultural Capital 2000, the commissioning of reports on the city’s cultural life and creative potential from abroad<sup>3</sup> and cultural flagship developments such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, ‘Kiasma’.

The former railway sheds that are the subject of this research are located in the most central, not least in symbolical terms, inner-city area of Helsinki. Töölönlahtibay—framed by the Finnish Parliament, the National Opera House, Alvar Aalto’s Finlandia Hall and the two recent developments of

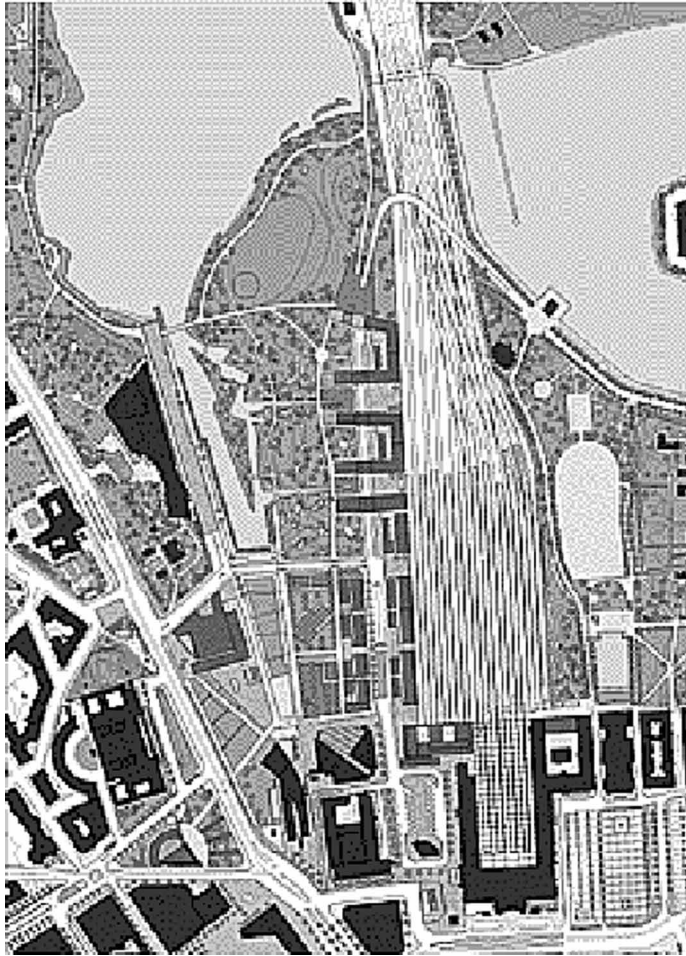




**Figure 1.** The U-shaped warehouses in Töölönlahtibay, central Helsinki. *Source:* Information package of the Music Hall Competition, City of Helsinki (2000).

‘Kiasma’ and ‘Sanomatalo’ (the seat of the main Finnish news corporation)—has evolved historically as a monumental space and the seat of ‘high culture’ (see Lehtovuori, 2000b), or, in Lefebvre’s terminology (1991), a ‘space of representation’ par excellence. The u-shaped wooden structures of the ‘Makasiini’, which occupy an area of about 10 000 square metres, offer a striking visual contrast within this monumental setting. Being one of the oldest buildings in the centre of Helsinki (erected in 1898 for goods storage), it was abandoned for use by the State Railways in 1987 and subsequently became a rough and deserted ‘no-go-area’ in the heart of the city.

At the beginning of the 1990s, two collectives of artists (‘Muu Ry’ and ‘Vapanden Aukio’) in search of affordable space in the inner city occupied the premises which then subsequently took an unplanned, organic path of transformation from ‘Helsinki’s Bronx’ to the ‘living-room’ of the capital and gradually evolved as the stronghold of a new grassroots urban culture.<sup>4</sup> Parting from an initial focus on artistic production and consumption assumed by various actors from the independent art scene, the warehouses have since attracted very diverse and continuously changing ‘users’ and events, making the space a veritable ‘non-institutionalised’ social and



**Figure 1.** *Continued.*

cultural institution in the heart of the city. From the very early stages of reappropriation, the ‘Makasiini’ has emerged as a space which does not speak the traditional language of planning: its fluctuating ‘tenants’ were bound by temporary lease contracts to the estate owner (the Finnish Railway company), thus allowing a ‘spontaneous urbanity’ to arise which has been open to constant change and flexible, almost personalised, transformation of space. Or, as Lehtovuori asks

Where else in the city centre could you pick a piece of wire, do something with it and may be ‘exhibit’ it, or where else could you spontaneously repair a small corner? (Lehtovuori, 2000a, p. 37).

Over the following years, the ‘Makasiini’ have come to occupy a heavily exposed presence.<sup>5</sup> The residence of small businesses mainly related to ‘green’ commerce and cultural production, a versatile and peculiar event space, a springboard for cultural novelties and the setting of the city’s most popular flea market attracting more than 400 000 people a year, the warehouses “allowed for certain things to happen which would not have happened anywhere else in this city” (Kajas, interview). This transformation into the “common people’s place in front of the Parliament” and the creation of a public sphere not exclusively bound to the logic of consumption, have fostered the emergence of a meaningful meeting-place for people



from diverse segments of society to “learn a positive urbanity, to encounter the other and to enter into interaction” (Kajas, interview). Thus, the manifold activity in the warehouses has contributed to and exemplifies Helsinki’s cultural sea-change of the 1990s: a residual space by then completely ignored by urban authorities has been reclaimed by emerging civil society and has thereby

offered opportunities to reveal existing representations of space, the dominant space of the city authorities, planners, police etc. and question this order by carnivalesque ambivalence (Cantell, 1999, p. 257).

However, the transformation of the warehouses into the ‘living-room’ for a rather large user base of urbanites was not taken account of by the city planners nor was it regarded as a factor to be considered in further planning decisions.<sup>6</sup> The middle of the 1990s mark a new impetus for the recentralisation of Töölönlahtibay and its cultural and symbolic exploitation, coinciding with the city’s new image awareness, and plans for the construction of a new Music Hall (based on earlier proposals of the early 1990s) on the site of the ‘Makasiini’ were brought forward by the authorities. The Music Hall development is a joint project by the state, the Sibelius Academy and the National Broadcasting Company YLE. Although not very spectacular in architectural terms, it is a national object of prestige and a symbol of ‘high’ Finnish culture traditionally to be located in the centre of the city.<sup>7</sup> From the early stages onwards, the city applied a policy of ‘no alternatives’ as far as the location of the new development was concerned, implying the ‘natural’ demolition of the warehouses. Declaring the area of the warehouses as “vagabond space on the most valuable land in Helsinki” (Deputy Mayor Korpinen), the City Planning Department firmly insisted on the need to remove the old shunting yards in order to “free land for new urban functions and enabling Central Park to be extended right down into the heart of the city” (City Planning Department Helsinki, 2000, p. 122).

The subsequent planning for the development of the Music Hall is characterised by rhetorical silences and a great deal of concealment on the part of the city authorities: until 2002, the Music Hall was the only major new development not figuring on the website of the City Planning Office and there was no public debate on its actual costs and financing. Also, an agreement between the city and the state on the share of building rights (dating back to 1986) was not revealed: this agreement, however, stood behind the fixed game of exploitation of the area. Thus, this planning procedure reflects an extreme case of divergence between the domain of city planning considering the site as ‘virgin’ land and the domain of the ‘lived’ city.

However, from 1998 onwards, the unclear status of the warehouses has engendered rising public awareness and has fuelled resistance. At that time, the ‘Pro-Makasiini’ movement—a loose platform of supporters uniting politicians, residents of the adjacent neighbourhood, researchers and diverse cultural and social associations—emerged and its emergence marks the articulation of voices external to the space. The influence of this fluid conglomeration of actors has been profound. As a forum for public debate, it has succeeded in initiating a city-wide discussion on the planning and decision-making procedures highlighting the inherent qualities of the activities that have evolved in the warehouses. The activities of this loose organisation of actors included regular public discussions, diverse petitions for the preservation of the structures, a ‘Makasiini’ website, a ‘Pro-Makasiini’ manifesto and a petition signed by more than 30 000 inhabitants. Furthermore, the group drafted an alternative re-use plan for the warehouses, allowing for an open-ended and flexible development of the site by preserving its built structures and drawing on the current socio-cultural potential. Transgressing the mere issue of the preservation of the vernacular structures and the value of its grassroots urban culture, the public discussion has taken on a much wider significance as to according to ‘whose’ vision the city of Helsinki should evolve in

the future. This profound repercussion of the conflict around the development of the site was most evident in the election campaign to the City Parliament in 2000, which became in essence an election about the future of 'Makasiini'. In the same year, 'Pro-Makasiini' organised the largest civil action in the city of Helsinki since the early 1970s: the 'Human Wall' involved 7000 people forming a ring around the built structures in order to provoke a political reaction and openly to present alternatives (see Figure 2). Apart from the conventional channels of influencing the decision-making processes (petitions and legal complaints), the actors involved in the defence of the 'Makasiini' have thus predominantly engaged with playful means in order to gain a public stance and wide media coverage. However, in 2002, the final plan for the construction of the music hall was adopted after fierce debates in the City Parliament and, in 2004, the new development will replace the warehouses with only a 'kitsch' memory trace of a few incorporated wooden elements

to evoke the original structure. The fact that "In this place, the diverse centre of the city is realised in the true sense of the word since the warehouses are used in the ordinary lives of a very wide sector of society", as is conceded by a senior city planning official (Sundman, 2002), was subjugated to a rigid planning procedure primarily reflecting the old dichotomies between 'high' and 'low' culture. The disappearance of Helsinki's warehouses thus is a strong example of how cultural strategies of redevelopment are increasingly used to create a coherent visual representation of the city and a "consumable vision of civility" (Zukin, 1995, p. 21); a strategy which—when materialised in the production of urban space—inevitably involves the neglect of variety and cements social injustice.

Notwithstanding the actual outcome of the conflict around the warehouses which has been in tangible terms a negative one for the civil actors of 'Pro-Makasiini', substantial changes to the urban agenda of Helsinki can



**Figure 2.** Makasiini, Helsinki: the 'Human Wall', 2000. *Source:* Helsinki Sanomat (2000).

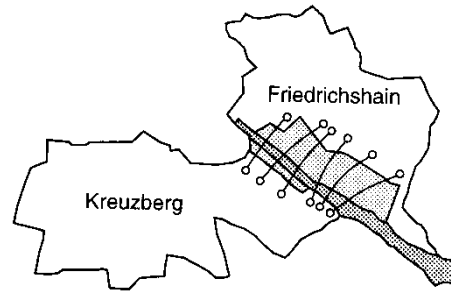
be traced. From a situation where the city planning authorities had not been at all aware of the cultural and social complexity of the warehouses whose ‘non-value’ was merely approached in architectural and functional terms, the final phases of the articulation of this conflict manifest a different level of debate and an increasing cognisance on the part of the city authorities of the diversified social and cultural issues highlighted in this distinctive kind of place “where anyone, also the marginal, can come” (Katajisto, interview).

Whether this growing rhetorical sensitivity with regard to temporary spaces and its creative and lively potential may provoke an impact on similar planning decisions in Helsinki in the future, is at present left open.

### Raw-Tempel, Berlin: ‘The Parallel Universe in its Pioneering Phase’

Berlin wird ... [Berlin is becoming ...] (slogan of the City Marketing Office until 1995).

The case study in Berlin offers striking parallels to the evolution of a complex, innovative and spontaneous urban activity in a former abandoned, residual space that was observed in Helsinki’s warehouses. The ‘RAW-Tempel’ (‘Reichsbahnausbesserungswerk’—i.e. railway workshop of German State Railways) is a vast area of industrial structures embedded between a socioeconomically problematic residential area of extreme density (Boxhagener Kiez, district of Friedrichshain) and a radical openness which is part of an extended stretch of urban wastelands on the north side of the River Spree (‘Oberer Spreeräum’) (see Figure 3). This wide urban ‘vacuum’ is the result of Berlin-specific derelict land which, at the beginning of the 1990s, was ignored by the construction and development boom focusing on the more central area of ‘Berlin-Mitte’.<sup>8</sup> In the past decade, this urban fringe has evolved as a “laboratory for examining the residual” (Oswald, 2000, p. 84), a safe haven for sub-cultures and the ‘temporary’. However, the Upper Spree area



**Figure 3.** The RAW-Tempel site in Berlin: the ‘urban void’ situated in between the districts of Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg stretches along the River Spree. *Source:* Tu Berlin and Nexus (2002) Urban Catalysts. Berlin site analysis.

at present is increasingly seen as the new major development axis in Berlin: its sheer size and central location offering—in the eyes of the investors—singular potential for retail and third-sector business development. Recent plans such as the ‘Media Spree’ project<sup>9</sup> commissioned for the development of the area clearly manifest the one-sided, ambiguous character reflected by the restructuring of Berlin since 1989. In post-reunification Berlin—where urban development processes seem to produce themselves in a veritable time-lapse and the impact of strong economic pressures on planning procedures are manifest with the shortest delays—new projects almost exclusively follow the illusionary logic of the growing ‘international service metropolis’ by focusing on the already oversaturated office and retail sector and parting from a radical ‘*tabula rasa*’ strategy (Technische Universität Berlin and Nexus, 2002). However, although the development hype and models of discourse emerging at the beginning of the 1990s in Berlin have been rendered irrelevant by urban reality, they continue to sustain current mono-functional development tendencies. Berlin now counts as one of the poorest German cities facing an increasing socio-spatial polarisation and a decline in population within the city limits. Overoptimistic forecasts of the early 1990s, however, assumed an expected population growth of 1.4 million by the year 2010 and projected the need for 11–15 million square metres of new office space. At present,

more than 10 per cent of office space developments remain vacant (Krätke and Borst, 2000). Within the neo-liberal reorientation of the planning system, largely a consequence of Berlin's dramatic fiscal crisis, the city at utmost occupies the role of a service provider for external investors and lacks either a coherent policy or the means of its implementation (Heeg, 1998). Häussermann and Kapphan (2000) even comments on the complete 'disappearance of politics' in this vein.<sup>10</sup> While the 'Planwerk Innenstadt' (1996) serves as the rhetorical doctrine for all future projects, reality produces much more pragmatic compromises and private investors are accorded unusual planning freedom.

The case study of 'RAW-Tempel' exemplifies the positive development potential of a space without defined function in a status of waiting; and the chances for sustainable bottom-up development arising from given conditions. The area of 'RAW' covers about 10 ha and was until 1993 used for the repair and storage of trains. At its peak, it employed

more than 1200 workers. More than 100 years of continual industrial use left a densely built environment construed as a 'city within the city': buildings once used for administration, a former doctor's surgery, a gas station and several large construction halls are lined in a row along a stretch of piazza-like cobblestone ground (Figures 4 and 5). Comparable with the 'Makasiini', the abandoned site of 'RAW-Tempel' has initially been reappropriated by pioneers from the independent art scene who were attracted by "the atmosphere of secrecy and enchantment" (Weigert, interview) and had the clear objective of providing 'free' space for the establishment of cultural and social projects on a secluded site. Unlike the case of Helsinki, a strong non-commercial registered association ('RAW-Tempel e.V.')



**Figure 4.** The RAW-Tempel site plan (in black): the train tracks of Warschauer Strasse station form a barrier to the south, while the northern part is separated from adjacent residential areas by a strong wall.  
*Source:* Tu Berlin and Nexus (2002) Urban Catalysts. Berlin site analysis.





**Figure 5.** The cobblestone courtyard area: this huge area of space, currently a public meeting place, is being threatened by plans to construct a traffic route which would cut it in two.

agreement with the property owner at the time (EIM, a daughter company of the German Railways) with the Cultural Office of Friedrichshain taking the position of an intermediate tenant of the site and then letting the space for a symbolical rent to the association. The association engages in internal conflict management and serves as a public interface, but does not exert an influence on the ‘content’ of single projects or the overall development of the site. Thus, the space has rapidly been colonised by diverse initiatives and individuals from the districts of Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg and has over a period of only three years evolved as an open ‘parallel universe’, a complex entity still relatively free from economic and spatial constraints where a radical pluralism flourishes. At present, this unique site is used by more than 40 different socio-cultural projects both from the professional and experimental scene; it functions as a major stabilising element for the neighbourhood and offers a high degree of social inclusion. Less politicised and more accessible to the public than remaining squatter initiatives in adjacent Rigaer Strasse, “this is an incredibly tolerant space, this is the quality of it all” (Raab, interview). Projects cover youth work, integrative activities for

the long-term unemployed and a theatre run by homeless people. More than “a mere artist’s colony and a cultural incubator” (Weigelt, interview), ‘RAW’ is also an important venue for political debate and several Berlin-based grassroots initiatives. In 1999, the first ‘Bottom-up Conference on Poverty’ was held on the site. Also, the space has emerged as a tremendous socially stabilising element for the district

There constantly emerge fields of tension which can be alleviated with a space like this one where it is still possible to do something with very little money (Kaufmann, interview).

From an initially unhampered existence favoured by political support from the district authorities, the status of the site became increasingly precarious with ownership being transferred to an offspring company of the German Railways in 2000. Vivico GmbH functions as an investment company and has the mission to exploit former railway land under full profit maximisation. This transfer of ownership coincides with the aforementioned development pressures on the ‘urban bathtub’ of the Upper Spree area and marks the planning for the commercial exploitation



of the site of 'RAW-Tempel'. A feasibility study commissioned by the new property owner thus foresees the construction of office and retail developments at high building densities with only minor preservation of the remaining industrial structures. Despite the fact that this proposed concept of 'themed leisure and services' has not been adopted by the District Council and the potential for implementation of the envisaged wholesale development was only minor given the very unfavourable investment conditions, the temporary lease contract was prematurely cancelled in 2001 leaving the association of 'RAW-Tempel' in a quasi-illegal status on the site. Clearly, the presence of the 'temporary' users was viewed as a disturbance to be got rid of and an impediment to further development proposals by the new property owners.

The immanent threat posed by the cancellation of the lease has stirred up activists and a circle of local supporters demanding to be included in the forthcoming planning process. Unlike in the case of Helsinki, the actors striving to preserve the 'creative chaos' of the site are 'insiders'—namely, a project partner of the RAW-association, 'workstation'. This association set up a strong civil initiative with the aim to elaborate alternative plans by applying radical planning practices which would safeguard present activities and their function within the neighbourhood. The main philosophy of this initiative is made clear in its programme which asserts that

Bottom-up urban development may not depart from form, but has to develop a programme which opposes content to the anonymous spatial production of commercialised containers (Ideenaufwurf, 2002b, p. 3).

'Ideenaufwurf' ('Call for Ideas') undertook a citizen survey among 1800 people in the neighbourhood, issued a public call for ideas and organises fortnightly debates and numerous workshops on themes of sustainable urban development. This platform has continuously striven for a dialogue with the

developer and all other parties involved in the process. As a flexible but increasingly professional forum for intervention (uniting researchers, architects, interested citizens and the tenants), it has eventually also succeeded in addressing its claims via formal channels. Within the planning competition process held in 2001, 'Ideenaufwurf' thus emerges as a highly influential external counsellor. The winning entry of the competition eventually reflects, as a result of this pertinent intervention, important changes to the original one-dimensional feasibility study: It clearly acknowledges "the residual space as a physical breeding-ground for the development of sustainable urban structures, cultures and networks" (Ideenaufwurf, 2002) which risks being destroyed by the built conceptions of traditional urban planning processes. The new plan allows for a process-oriented development of the site, a piecemeal exploitation drawing on the potential of the 'temporary' uses and advances the integration of 'soft tools' in the planning process (providing for the continuous participation of civil actors). However, the new plan is problematic for the temporary uses due to the fact that its non-fixed conditions equally allow for a rapid development of the site once favourable investment conditions are provided. The current 'success' achieved in term of a more sensitive development of a space offering a complex social and cultural network appears thus very much to be contingent on the weak economic situation in the area which makes rapid change impossible. The future of this 'indeterminate' space and the further presence of the projects on the site are thus wide open. Notwithstanding this ambivalent evaluation, the platform of exchange created in the course of the conflict between planning aspirations and 'grassroots' claims seems to be a persistent one. Extensive networks to similar projects have been created and a city-wide discussion on the potential of temporary uses for sustainable urban development has been initiated between developers, 'users' and the city authorities. This again can be considered to be an asset for future scenarios.

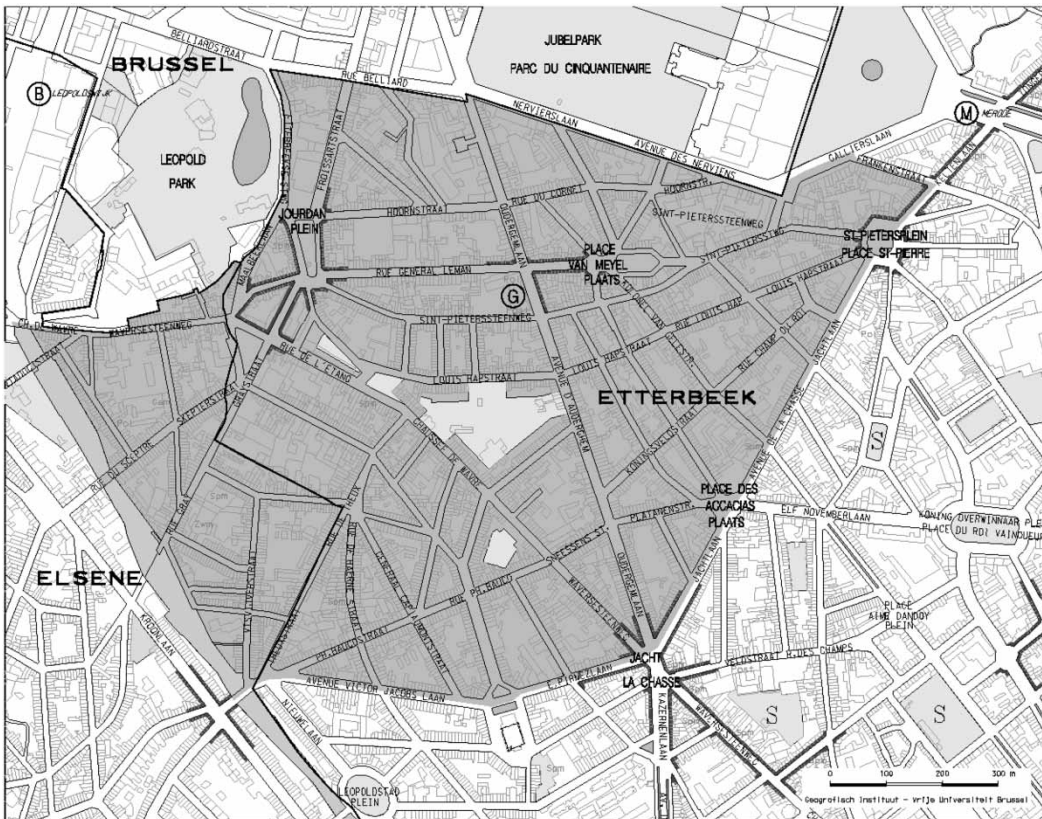
### 'Léopold Station', Brussels: 'La Gare n'est pas perdue!'

A Benjaminian thought: Brussels is modernity in a state of ruin, beyond the point where one might still believe in something like complete salvation. Optimism, therefore, is out of place, and certainly the utopian belief in wonders or miracles. A dying city has no need for quacks: it needs painkillers and nurses (R. Laermans, 1999, p. 301).

The third and final case study included in this research is slightly different, not least because of the very ephemeral nature of the activity covered. The case study relates to the abandoned train station situated adjacent to the European Parliament complex in Brussels' Leopold quarter (Figure 6) which became the setting of a three-month-long 'illegal'

and, in essence, cultural occupation which provoked important repercussions on the planning and political agenda in an urban environment characterised by a particularly pronounced stalemate situation as regards its development plans and the opposing claims of the inhabitants.

Brussels' 'Quartier Léopold' epitomises the massive upheavals the city has undergone since the 1960s as a consequence of the strong quest of the local élite to transform the city into an international 'capital of administration'. Within the context of a highly fragmented and inefficient planning system (Corijn and de Lannoy, 2000) almost devoid of participatory possibilities and a Kafkaesque political and administrative domain, the infamous process of 'Bruxellisation' has all too often led to an *urbanisme sauvage*.<sup>11</sup> Its disastrous consequences for the evolving city as



**Figure 6.** The 'Quartier Léopold', Brussels, seen in the wider context of the area of Jourdan-La Chasse. *Source:* VUB, Geografisch Instituut.

sustainable habitat is particularly evident in the Leopold Quarter. Originally a socially diverse neighbourhood comprising a mixture of residential, small commercial and cultural functions, the Leopold Quarter has experienced a radical spatial and social reconfiguration during recent decades. The installation of the Centre International de Congrès, under which official guise the development of three massive modules of office space was handled until its inauguration as the European Parliament in 1993, has entailed a mono-functional restructuring bonanza brought forward by a monopoly of diverse operations comprising European and national decision-makers, post-modern architects and private investors. The office space increased from 317 000 square metres in 1960 to 2 800 000 square metres in 2000. The number of inhabitants in the European quarter decreased by half from 49 500 in 1970 to 24 700 in 2000 (Corijn, 2004). With the construction of the European Parliament, 32 per cent of total office space of Brussels was located to the area of the Leopold Quarter (van Wunnik, 1996). The installation of associated lobbies, diplomatic representations and other international bodies in the neighbourhood has resulted in an increase in commuter traffic by 40 per cent and an on-going neglect of architectural heritage due to waves of real estate speculation. The ‘internationalisation’ of the area is furthermore evident in an extreme reconversion of traditional commercial structures and a rhythm of activity adapted to an office clientèle (Piérard, 1999). The complex of the Parliament itself forms an almost ‘extraterrestrial’ presence in the neighbourhood. The provision of all necessary functions inside the complex makes it a closed universe and its esplanade (*la dalle*) is a rough and deserted no-man’s land after office hours. There never has been a coherent policy at the level of the communes or the Brussels region to manage this extreme transformation, let alone a public body or an institution possessing the mandate and power to ensure co-ordination between property needs and other actors (Co-ordination Europe, 1995). As a consequence, the neighbourhood has seen a

long history of its inhabitants’ struggles for the preservation of vital urban fabric and the containment of hitherto uncontrolled development. The resistance against the ‘Euro-saga’ has predominantly been assumed by the residents’ association, the Association du Quartier Léopold (AQL). Since its foundation in 1987, this organisation has continuously intervened in the development process by employing an impressive array of legal means, scientific experts and urbanistic tools. Even though it is the only residential association in Brussels to have achieved a legally binding agreement with the main consortium of developers—the Société Espace Léopold (SEL)—and thus stands for an extraordinary quasi-professionalisation in the field, the recourse to juridical and constructive means has proved highly unbalanced in the context of the developmental dynamics of the area. To date, SEL has not implemented the contractual agreements of the Accord Cadre of 1988.

The remnants of Léopold Station—the first train station to be built in Belgium (1858) and retained on the Parliament site as an afunctional, nostalgic phantom in the wake of the construction of the European Parliament complex—had become for many the transcendental image of the modernist forces impacting on the city. As Coussement states

This almost surrealist image hurts due to the brutal contrast between two different eras, two scales, two functions of a city changing from a provincial into a European capital (Coussement quoted in Demey, 1992).

The symbolic connotation of the residual Léopold Station was fully taken advantage of when the abandoned building was festively appropriated by the cultural collective BruXXel.org in October 2001 (see Figure 7). Individuals and associations from various artistic, political and social domains and from both the French and Flemish communities of Brussels formed this loose grouping. The main actors behind BruXXel.org—“very mixed people with equally mixed aims” (Brees, interview)—are Cinema Nova, an independent cinema entirely run by volunteers and



**Figure 7.** The occupation of Leopold Station, Brussels, October 2001.

City-min(e)d, a socio-cultural association predominantly engaged in temporary urban artistic interventions and with a strong vision of sustainable urban development. The original motive of the collective was to organise a series of critical actions in view of the imminent EU Summit in Laeken, at the end of the Belgian EU presidency in December 2001. The objective thus aimed at, with the occupation of the station building, was the creation of a ‘free zone’ in an area declared as an official and inaccessible *zone neutre* for the time of the Summit. However, this civil establishment of an “alternative info-point in the heart of Euroland” (BruXXel.org, 2001) coincides with a high profile phase in the further development of the neighbourhood. At the time, the highly controversial decision on the extension of the European Parliament complex by two additional modules D4 and D5 was still pending, but coming under increasing pressure for delivery by the developers and the European Parliament.

The extension to the three current modules would provide a further 38 000 square metres of offices and 11 000 square metres of infrastructures on the European Parliament site and implied the total demolition of Léopold Station. The project had already been given a *certificat d’urbanisme* by the Commune of Ixelles in 1999; however, since the Commune was not able to handle the *dossier* (in the sense of obtaining major modifications from the developers SEL), it delayed the delivery of the building permit and transferred responsibilities to the Brussels Region.

The initial aim of the occupants thus soon increasingly and complementarily shifted to the contradictory dynamics of the planning process highlighting the plans for the final demolition of the station building itself, with the maxim ‘Se poser sans s’opposer’ (‘Being present but not being against’). For the following three months, the station was transformed into a lively and open space of “rencontres,



débats, information and convivialité” (BruXXel.org, 2001). The cultural scene consisted of a continuous and versatile programming of artistic performances, public debates ranging from immigration policies to ecological issues and various socio-cultural events. These activities went beyond the built environment of the station: BruXXel.org organised several street-based actions in the neighbourhood, ‘Monopolville’ (posters caricaturing notorious Brussels-specific urban development practices) and a ‘Reclaim the streets’ parade through the neighbourhoods of St Gilles and Midi. With the objective of “keeping the space as open as possible and as closed as necessary” (Brees, interview), strikingly new elements were introduced to the setting of ‘Espace Léopold’ and the monumental aesthetics of *la dalle*, a former non-space serving merely as a passageway from *nulle part à ailleurs* (from nowhere to somewhere else). These elements appeared in a different light and manifested a successful redefinition of inhabited public space and the lived-in city. In the derelict train station, a fleeting space was thus created that is both locally rooted and globally connected and in which the participants demand both the right to their locality and recognise the wider social and political issues at stake.

Somewhat symptomatic of the chaotic planning context of Brussels, this ‘illegal’ occupation gained open support from the municipality of Ixelles, governed by a progressive coalition with the Green Party as the strongest fraction. Owing to wide media coverage and the occupants’ strong public presence, the action led to a powerful, fleeting coalition of inhabitants and diverse Brussels-based associations opposed to the further extension of the European Parliament’s infrastructure. By means of a substantial, but rather unusual, intervention in urban politics, the ‘external’ collective subsequently engaged in a game of playful diplomacy and ‘statements against statements’ forcing all the actors involved in or affected by the planning of D4 and D5 to debate openly the various issues at stake. The main matters of dispute highlighted by the occupants and the public

debate concerned the actual legitimisation of the extension, the conservation of the historical station, an improved spatial integration of the whole complex and the provision of public facilities for the inhabitants of the Leopold Quarter. The daily turmoil created by the occupation in the immediate vicinity of the European Parliament (EP) led to pronounced internal divisions within the institution. Several hundred MEPs signed a petition in favour of the preservation of the station and a re-examination of the planning for D4 and D5. This resulted in a unique public meeting between AQL, the developers and representatives of the EP in February 2002. In the course of these events, the European Parliament as the main actor behind the development process in the Leopold Quarter was forced to appear publicly for the first time, to declare its interests and to take account of the criticism voiced by the neighbourhood and Brussels’ inhabitants. The transient and non-dogmatic character of the intervention by these informal actors of BruXXel.org, based on an almost carnivalesque ambivalence, was manifested in the final ending of the occupation: when there was no scope for further substantial changes, the occupants abandoned the matter and left the premises in a festive parade.

What, then, have been the changes to the urban agenda that this extremely transitory intervention has provoked in the context of the Leopold Quarter? Approached in quantifiable terms, the findings might seem unsubstantial and tend to support the argument that it was a “mere symbolic effort of the temporary, fun versus zero concrete results” (Pétitions Patrimoine, interview). The final building permit was decided upon by the Brussels Region in March 2002 with only minor amendments to the proposed plan by SEL: the remaining ‘shell’ of the station (Figure 8) will be flanked by two office blocks of 38 000 square metres. The predominant issues raised by voices opposing the development are acknowledged merely as non-binding notes in the document. The Commune of Ixelles, however, considers the amendments to be an outstanding success: it





**Figure 8.** The remnant of Leopold Station in 2002, seen from the entrance of the European Parliament.

has received 4.2 million Euros in compensation for the planning and SEL is now legally and financially obliged to deliver the agreements made in the Accord Cadre in 1988 (which stipulates the provision of 42 800 square metres of residential functions for the neighbourhood). Beyond this tangible dimension, however, there are a number of positive changes to be discerned. First, with the profound disorder created by the temporary appropriation of the residual station, an ‘old dossier’ has been brought back into the public and political domain for discussion. Secondly, the intervention exceeding the immediate local context has, due to its unconventionality, created a space of communication between different actors in friction which had not existed before. Furthermore, the city-wide ‘urban meaning’ with which the station and its surroundings were endowed during the occupation, has reignited the debate about the poor public quality of the Parliament’s *dalle* and has engendered considerable political impetus for its transformation into a more open, animated space. Thus, a rather new and to a certain degree non-planned means of civil intervention marking a convergence between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘urban’ in the planning process has provoked dynamics and results not evident in the context of the Leopold Quarter. With the strong articulation of ‘external’ voices, a formerly deadlocked situation marked by a

rigid opposition of two antagonistic positions has been reactivated/transformed into a forum of dialogue and a new focus on possible sustainable development scenarios for the area gained in exposure at a city-wide level.

### **Discussion: The Need for Free Zones**

First, the three case studies presented reflect the reappropriation and the qualities of the subsequent transformation of the ‘indeterminate’ spaces chosen—what, for example, Sandercock conceives of as a form of ‘insurgent urbanism’—an intervention that

embraces uncertainty as potential space of radical openness which nourishes the vision of a more experimental culture, a more tolerant and multifocal one (Sandercock, 1998, p. 120).

The three cases present a different time scale. In Brussels, the intervention was meant to be limited to the end of the Belgian presidency of the EU; in the two other cases, the action lasted much longer. The former was immediately oriented to agenda-setting; the latter were more oriented to imposing a set of activities. The level of organisation was also very different—from a temporary association (Brussels), to a more durable collective activity (Helsinki) to a formal and legal organisation. These different types of organisation determine the level of ‘legality’ and acceptance.

But it has to be stated that the main actors determining the 'legal' status of these types of actions are both the local authorities and the proprietors. They determine whether the temporary activities are repressed or not. The longer the action takes, and with the first obstacles arising, a broader field is incorporated: the neighbourhood and sympathisers are informed, consulted and mobilised. It is through such coalition-building opposing the 'official' planning that an agenda-setting is obtained, that the informal actors become players in the public debate.

The distinct structures created in these spaces reclaim the main elements of Lefebvre's (1991) 'differential' space: it is a space created and dominated by its users from the basis of its given conditions. It remains largely unspecified as to its functional and economic rationality, thus allowing for a wide spectrum of use which is capable of integrating a high degree of diversity, and stays open for change. In the three cases presented, a kind of 'urbanity' is produced in which the 'lived' and the contradictions that constitute urban life are nurtured, their deliberate juxtaposition allowing for a more complex vision of development than is evident in their immediate urban surroundings or in the unidimensional planning proposals to which these areas are subject. The cases are not merely examples of bottom-up planning. In the first place, they do not struggle to impose an alternative plan or project. They want another type of public debate. In the second place, the metaphor of 'grass-roots' versus 'top-down' continues a hierarchical model of planning in which the 'top' is considered to have a clear agenda. In fact, the cases show that the conflict initially turns around agenda-setting and methodology, around the way the problem is described. The urban actors studied all wanted the futures of the places to derive from more complex urban thinking and to be based on a more hybrid coalition. Rather than 'bottom-up planning', the actions have to be understood as creating platforms to attract different urban actors and as searching for coalitions and synergies that lead to a more adequate

diagnosis and possibilities for new ways of thinking. They want to offer an encounter between different elements of the fragmented and segmented polis that can no longer be adequately categorised in terms of clear-cut interest-groups. It is the planning approach as such that is challenged.

This more 'complex' vision reclaimed revolves, in general terms, around the need for uncontrolled, non-commodified places that are socially sustainable and capable of integrating a mix of socio-cultural, economic and political activities. It is a claim for 'free zones'. "Theorising about freezones has been limited" (Urban Unlimited, 2004, p. 4). In research about free zones in Brussels and Rotterdam, carried out by an international team in which we collaborated, the theoretical weaknesses are related to the paradoxes between temporary free-zoning in real space and the permanency of imaginary free-zoning urban networking, between planning and creativity, between structure and emptiness. We have indicated four planning misconceptions related to 'planning' such free-zone activities (Urban Unlimited, 2004, pp. 14–15): creative environments do not spring into being as a result of top-down measures; nor are they part of government aids to sub-cultural activities; but they occur in the temporary lack of planning; and, they are not in the first place part of the competition between cities to attract creative clusters. The cases studied in this article confirm these conclusions.

Furthermore, the dimension of the city as a 'collective historical memory' emerges; residual structures, even though stripped of their actual functions, provide the mental base and specific aesthetic qualities for further activities that incorporate their preservation. Regarding the notion of 'public space' reflected by these spaces, a complex public realm is being created where new relationships with the 'public' are forged which are less instrumental, but more qualitative than is the case in most institutionalised forms of arts and culture: access is more equal since largely detached from economic imperatives. In all these characteristics, the configuration of the 'urban' as encountered in the three

cases appears as one which reclaims a certain degree of what Häussermann and Siebel (1987) describe as *möglichkeitssinn* ('sense of possibility'): by leaving certain things undefined and open for the future, space is provided for the co-existence of multiple activities and encounters.

The articulation of the urban conflict that evolved around these sites first of all highlights the lack of efficient democratic participation inherent in the strategies of urban renewal and instruments of big-city politics. Furthermore, it sees the formulation of a substantial critique against one-sided visions with detrimental side-effects for the sustainability of the urban realm. In current academic discussions, urban initiatives are often criticised for defending particularistic interests or privileges at the expense of more universal social justice orientations which were at the centre of urban movement struggles during the 1970s and the 1980s. However, in the three cases researched, the involvement of 'informal' actors is characterised by the formation of fluid platforms of 'defence' that are composed of participants from across different segments of society whose action repertoire goes well beyond that of the infamous 'NIMBY' fraction of urban movements. Transcending particular community interests or the mere preservation of the *status quo* as concerns the built structures, these actors address the wider framework of urban politics and urban development schemes in the city. The means applied in order to voice their claims equally testify to a wide scope of intervention: they include direct action in order to gain public attention and media coverage, independent analysis of urban problems and the demands for participation in the relevant decision-making boards. The civil stakeholders involved in the activity or debate around the cases are not clearly definable in straightforward terms as to a coherent 'identity', but rather by their involvement in the space itself.

Striking in this respect is the fact that, even though their objectives are set in opposition to the dominant planning prerogatives and the institutionalised domain, they do not take a resistant or reactionary stance, but rather a

deliberately transformative stance that is guided by non-material considerations. This constructive 'project identity' in turn allows for rather unusual coalitions to emerge which may also include actors from the local political sphere or city planning (as has particularly been observed in the examples of Brussels and Helsinki). Apart from a quasi-professionalisation evident in the drafting of alternative re-use plans or in the intervention in the planning process, the issue of networking with different actors (socio-cultural associations, academia, representatives of the media) on a city-wide level becomes one of increasing importance. These actors are able to cultivate and communicate a vision of development and become part of the planning process; they contribute, as is particularly evident in the cases of Helsinki and Berlin, to the revalorisation of the spaces but at the same time are faced with a situation in which the mainstream planning system risks impacting negatively on the inherent qualities of these sites.

What then are the pre-conditions for 'success'—i.e. when do these 'bottom-up' claims on urban development stand a chance of altering the planning proposals in tangible terms? As obvious in a comparison between the three cases researched, only in the case of Berlin did the actors manage to intervene decisively in the further development of the space, managing to 'secure' its qualities for the time being. The conditions for this partial 'success' story, however, appear to be very much contingent on the present negative investment conditions and the relatively low profile of the area in which RAW-Tempel is embedded. Here, the planning regime is faced with a situation (pronounced effects of the 'shrinking city' and low private investment levels) in which current urban reality can no longer be handled adequately with traditional planning instruments. A problematic economic situation for planning arrangements thus favours *ad hoc* flexible decision-making procedures and compromises. If civil actors succeed in seizing the opportunities provided by the new and fragmented political arrangements, they may influence the concrete

shape of the post-Fordist development path. Essential in these circumstances is the support gained from professional activists and political advocacy groups who make their resources available and create ephemeral local coalitions for the issues targeted.

In the cases of Helsinki and Brussels, however, real changes to the planning agenda as a result of civil interventions have been prevented by both the overdetermined character of these spaces in terms of their central location, and the relatively advanced and rigid planning process at the time of intervention of civil actors.

However, leaving aside their limitations, the 'informal' actors have contributed to democratising the processes around issues of urban development, even in the case where their specific demands are not reflected in the final planning status. It can be argued that the creation of a complex public sphere found in all three cases is not a mere 'added value' of the struggles described, but their actual significance to the urban agenda. The urge to revisit abstract, authoritarian visions of development has been fuelled and sustained by a wide mobilisation of public support going beyond the 'local' and the confines of the actual spaces. It is this evolution which has the potential to initiate city-wide discussions touching upon more complex exigencies than the spatially delimited conflict encountered. The creation of forums of active negotiations between different stakeholders in opposition is another important consequence to be mentioned in this respect.

In a condition where the setting of the urban agenda can no longer be the expression of a harmonious consensus, the definition of a politics and a form of city planning that can bridge the gap between these multiple heterogeneities without repressing their inherent difference and tensions is one of the biggest challenges (Harvey, 2000). This 'call' for a new urban programme is faced with countless difficulties and obstacles to its realisation since it runs counter to the established mechanisms of city planning and would demand other, more participatory and sustainable priorities for development than the one

dominating at present. However, the enabling side of sub-cultures where different, more complex notions of 'urbanity' are realised and are brought up on the agenda is a first and essential step towards change. Cities need to allow for the clustering of creativities and to consider the agendas emerging from such informal complexes. Places for such clustering can not be completely planned in 'cultural clusters' (Mommaas, 2004) or 'breeding-grounds'. They strongly depend on the investment of informal actors occupying indeterminate spaces. The outcomes depend less on planning practices than on the state of mind of urban leaders. Urban development needs 'free zones', but they need also a certain freedom of zoning. They depend on the ways in which the urban vision allows things 'to happen'.

## Notes

1. The sites were chosen within the framework of an interdisciplinary post-graduate course on 'European Urban Cultures' (POLIS), involving study periods in each of the three cities.
2. Helsinki: 11 interviews; Brussels: 8 interviews; Berlin: 5 personal interviews and information from 6 interviews by NEXUS for the exhibition "Innensichten" ("Views from inside") May–June 2002.
3. Landry (1994): *Helsinki as a living work of art* and *Helsinki—towards a creative city*.
4. As artist Katarina Katajisto states

For us, it had always been THE obvious place to go. At that time, the cultural scene of Helsinki was very stiff and institutionalised, allowing no room for other, more alternative activities. 'Makasiini' was just an empty space where to go in order to do something, a space forgotten by the people where the special atmosphere meant as much to us as the location.

5. From a sample of 500 people interviewed, 93 per cent knew of the presence and the location of the warehouses and more than half reported visiting the space at least once a year (Manninen, 2001).
6. During the Cultural Capital Year 2000, however, the City of Helsinki fully exploited the potential of the site which was used as one of the main venues to promote 'new' urban culture.

7. Its construction costs are estimated at 80–85 million Euros. However, the project is financially insecure due to the high annual maintenance costs and cutbacks in public expenditure.
8. Oswald (Urban Catalyst, 2001) refers to the Berlin-specific phenomenon of urban vacancies as ‘bathtub urbanism’—i.e. the existence of massive stretches of wastelands in the middle of the city. Some had been occupied by the Berlin wall and thus were not available for development from the 1960s, others were occupied by major infrastructure and industrial sites which have been abandoned due to deindustrialisation processes since the early 1990s.
9. ‘Media Spree’ is a recent project to develop the waterfront of the River ‘Spree’ into a new location for media-related industries and services.
10. Berlin’s current fiscal crisis amounts to a debt of about 41 billion Euros. The percentage of unemployment is 18 per cent which is a total of 317 000 people (2003).
11. A major factor preventing a coherent and transparent urban planning regime in Brussels is the relatively high degree of autonomy of the city’s 19 communes and the lack of a city-wide authority. At present, there is an ever-increasing fragmentation of powers and responsibilities.

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## Appendix. Further Sources

### Helsinki

- [www.makasiinit.com](http://www.makasiinit.com) (Makasiinit website).
- [www.hel.fi/ksv/english/index.html](http://www.hel.fi/ksv/english/index.html) (City Planning Office Helsinki).
- [www.livady.fi](http://www.livady.fi) (Architectural Office, design of the re-use plan of the warehouses).

### Berlin

- [www.raw-ev.de](http://www.raw-ev.de) (website of RAW—Temple).
- [www.friedrichshain-magazin.de](http://www.friedrichshain-magazin.de) (free journal on urban developments in the research area).
- [www.urban2-berlin.de](http://www.urban2-berlin.de) (website of the European Development Programme Urban II in the research area).
- [www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de](http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de) (website on current redevelopment projects in Berlin).
- [www.workstation-berlin.org](http://www.workstation-berlin.org) (project partner of RAW e.V., initiator of the 'Call for ideas').
- [www.scheinschlag-online.de](http://www.scheinschlag-online.de) (free independent magazine on architecture, urban planning and development in Berlin).
- [www.urbancatalyst.de](http://www.urbancatalyst.de) (EU research project on the potential of temporary uses in residual areas for urban regeneration).

### Brussels

- [www.bruxxel.org](http://www.bruxxel.org) (BruXXel.org, main organiser of the occupation of Leopold Station).
- [www.nova-cinema.com](http://www.nova-cinema.com) (Cinéma Nova).
- [www.collectifs.net](http://www.collectifs.net) (website of different political and socio-cultural collectives based in Brussels).
- [www.bralzw.be](http://www.bralzw.be) (Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu).
- [www.citymined.org](http://www.citymined.org).
- [www.recyclart.be](http://www.recyclart.be).
- [www.disturb.be](http://www.disturb.be) (association of researchers engaged in urban debate).
- [www.ieb.be](http://www.ieb.be) (Inter-environnement Bruxelles).
- [www.ixelles.be](http://www.ixelles.be) (Commune of Ixelles).