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Temporary Use as a Participatory Placemaking Tool to Support Cultural Initiatives and Its Connection to City Marketing Strategies—The Case of Athens

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Abstract: For many cities, abandoned or underused spaces pose a major challenge, but temporary use is being manifested as a tool that can offer solutions. So-called “meanwhile spaces” provide opportunities for city officials to create the conditions for the cultural economy to be supported while simultaneously meeting urban regeneration goals and supporting city marketing purposes. In European cities, such as Berlin, Ghent, Nantes, and Bremen, there are examples where “temporary urbanism” is being incorporated into mainstream policy and is forming part of the city’s identity and tourism promotion. Temporary use is discussed in the context of current challenges facing European cities (austerity crisis, unemployment, refugee crisis, lack of affordable housing or office space). In this paper, the focus is on the creative sector. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked discussion on how temporary use can cover a community’s needs. In this contextual framework, the scope was to explore the conditions under which temporary use becomes an effective policy tool and discuss management issues and difficulties that may arise. A description and analysis of the particularities of initiatives that were implemented in Athens compared to the ones in other European cities are presented. This paper is partly based on the works of the Athens URBACT Refill project, which included an extended consultation process with local stakeholders. Further field research was conducted regarding how temporary use initiatives with a cultural focus have been managed and the way the relations between owners, managers, and users were formed. Feedback from users and stakeholders’ representatives is presented. The key findings refer to the evaluation of the approaches used in temporary use initiatives with a cultural focus, the future perspectives, and the difficulty with drawing early conclusions on the effectiveness of these initiatives and the impact on the reputation of the city. Finally, the discussion is linked with promoting Athens as a city that allows experimentation by citizens’ groups and cultural initiatives in the context of temporary interventions.



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1. Introduction

Temporary use strategies as part of urban planning practices and local strategies are receiving increased attention, especially in the context of the discussion on the response to the socio-economic challenges many cities are facing worldwide. Temporary use is defined by its short time frame and flexibility and has been referred to as “temporary urbanism”, “interim use”, and “meanwhile use” [1–6]. The types of spaces that are linked to temporary use can vary from former industrial buildings, office spaces, apartments, and shops to empty lots and unused public spaces in the city. Their vacancy can be linked to urban shrinkage, financial downturn effects, poor management, and so forth [7]. Some scholars place the discussion on temporary use within the urban commons context where claiming public buildings is often mentioned as a key step in the relevant literature: The idea of land or services that are commonly owned and managed in the context of peer-to-peer production and participative citizenship has become popular and is associated with

the decisions for a more sustainable urban future [6,8,9]. Its popularity is often reflected in the promotional material of cities as part of city marketing efforts. Temporary use initiatives become key elements in the efforts of city officials to promote an image of a city that experiments and allows cultural initiatives to flourish. Cities and communities are increasingly aiming to improve their reputation through initiatives and events rather than traditional advertising, and temporary use offers this opportunity [10].

Informality, participatory processes, and the way citizens and groups can influence decisions and lead to better management of buildings and other resources are central to the urban studies discussion and the comparative approaches to cities [11–15]. Ostrom's work on managing common resources and the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) has led to the discussion on the urban commons and the dilemmas that can occur in their management [16,17]. Foster and Iaione [18] linked this discussion with the urban realm and described how the urban commons have been incorporated into urban policies, albeit not without problems. They refer to the example of Bologna but also mention other cities, including Athens, where this approach has been incorporated into policies in an effort to encourage citizens and grassroots groups towards common solutions. They are also posing the question of whether this new interest in "urban commons" moves away from the initial self-organization to a state-driven approach, a question that is central to the research presented in this paper.

Temporary use is not new, but over recent years it has gained popularity and become part of the images used in city marketing. It is celebrated as a policy tool to enhance public space and provide resources for the social and cultural economy to develop on a neighborhood level. Cities such as Torino have witnessed a change of identity that is based on new creative spaces and nowadays initiatives such as the Bunker and the Toolbox, hosted in empty buildings, reinforce this new identity for the city [19]. Placemaking is a key element in the discussion as it describes small-scale interventions where participatory processes are at the center, which is the case in temporary use initiatives. Richards and Duif [20] connected these two processes and present them as interrelated because of their connection to the local community. A key advantage of temporary use is that it can be linked to forms of more participatory approaches to city marketing, even though there are limited references in the literature on this connection. This paper aims to add new information to this discussion through a case study. City marketing has evolved into a powerful image-building strategy with significant relevance to the functions of the contemporary city and its particular socio-economic characteristics [21–24].

Temporary use practices go much further than setting up a community garden. More complex issues are tackled, such as creating the conditions for cultural groups and artists, which are not able to operate within the free market, to find a space and coexist. Often, the positive effects of temporary use through neighborhood improvements create conditions for owners to reclaim their property for commercial use. There are cases where real estate companies use it as a tool of speculation, for example, in the cases of cultural gentrification [25–27]. Artists and creatives are often the victims of this and find themselves in need of support because of their vulnerability (precarious working conditions, short-term unemployment, low wages, etc.) [28–30]. The way temporary use is linked to the needs of artists and creative groups is a central theme of this paper.

In Athens, temporary use interventions and bottom-up initiatives came as a reply to the austerity crisis and offered opportunities to promote a "poor but sexy" image [31,32]. The crisis has had a strong effect on the reputation of the city and triggered a discussion on rebranding the "city in crisis" [33,34]. Tziouvas [35] refers to the rediscovery of Greece and Greeks during the crisis in the context of resistance and exoticism. Grassroots movements and temporary use are part of this narrative, including spontaneous interventions organized in the city. Under this contextual framework, the paper seeks to explore how local stakeholders (city officials, public bodies, communities) in Athens are responding to the need for a coherent and effective strategy for temporary use and what dilemmas arise during its planning and application. It also draws on the way temporary use is determin-

ing the reputation of Athens, with reference to the official city marketing campaign and promotion material of Athens [36]. Since temporary use considers mostly public buildings, housing issues are not dealt with in this paper and the emphasis is instead on social and cultural uses. For the city of Athens, a temporary use strategy is of primary importance because the city has been witnessing a severe economic crisis which created the need for effective management and policies [33,37].

This paper is based on research carried out by the author during the period 2016–2020. The findings are derived from field research and interviews, as well as the author's participation as local coordinator in the URBACT Refill project on behalf of the municipality of Athens and the Athens Development Agency. An attempt is made to address a gap in the literature regarding the recent emergence of temporary use as a placemaking tool, but also as a trend in connection with its effect on the identity and reputation of a city, drawing on experience with the initiatives in Athens. The main research question is related to the temporary use initiatives in empty buildings, and the impact on the city and its reputation, the neighborhood, and the users. The discussion draws on conclusions from an extended study overview, participation in open discussions/consultation meetings, observations, and in-depth interviews from key informants.

2. Temporary Use as a Placemaking Tool in European Cities

Buildings, shops, and other properties that are being underused or are abandoned present a problem for many European cities as high streets, shopping districts, office blocks, etc. stop fulfilling their purpose and their vacancy generates negative feelings. For each city, the reasons for this and the policy responses differ. Vacancy is also a problem for a city's image and identity, especially for cities that are already witnessing a downturn in their economies, in which case vacancy becomes a visual representation of this dystopian reality [1]. Some cities are at the epicenter of this trend and research on the temporary city concept is, to a great extent, linked to the city of Berlin. Vacancy and the particularities of the post-1989 situation in Berlin (e.g., the unclear ownership in the East) helped attract creatives and artists and led to the rebranding of Berlin as a youthful and artistic city [38]. Honeck [39] (p. 270) describes how the 1990s and 2000s were "the golden age of temporary use", while in the years after 2010, this changed due to the rise of rents. For Berlin, temporary use is mostly connected to artistic/cultural uses and the concept of the creative city. Supporting bottom-up initiatives, allowing experimentation, and providing open spaces for citizens are promoted as a positive element in city marketing campaigns [2]. A recent example of temporary use which also reflects the approach of the public sector in Berlin can be found in the case of the "Haus der Statistik", where the building was bought by the state in 2017 after pressure by the delegates of the groups that were responsible for temporary use [40,41].

Non-governmental groups with a key role in temporary use that work together with the public sector can be found in many cities. In the United Kingdom, initiatives in London such as Off Market and Meanwhile Spaces, and The Island in Bristol are often mentioned as paradigms of temporary use [6]. Plateau Urbain acts as an agency and runs different projects in Paris, linking vacancy to social challenges such as the immigration crisis; its action led to a new charter that supports temporary use solutions in 2019 after the successful "Les Grands Voisins" [42]. In the cities and examined projects presented in Table 1, although cities face different challenges (deindustrialization, gentrification, touristification, etc.) and follow separate paths, a ministry, municipality, or other public actor is in charge, in some cases working closely with an NGO or a citizens' initiative.

In post-industrial Bremen, the ZZZ agency operates as an intermediary between owners and users with support from the local government. The "Wurst Factory" is a characteristic successful example where a private owner allows temporary users from the creative sector to make use of a part of his factory building with the support of ZZZ [43]. Groups such as "Toestand" in Brussels and "Free Riga" in Riga take this discussion a step further by implementing an "activist" approach towards empty spaces, yet without

following traditional squatting practices. Free Riga is mostly trying to raise awareness on the issue, for example, by mapping vacancy in the city, organizing events, placing stickers on the outside, and putting pressure on the municipality by outreach actions. Toestand is working on a more autonomous method—in a book manifesto published in 2018 it is explained how opening up spaces for a few days can create conditions for a discussion at the neighborhood level and increase pressure on state authorities regarding abandoned buildings and spaces [44].

Table 1. Examples of temporary use projects with a cultural focus in European cities.

City	Key Projects/References	Key Stakeholders
Athens	Gallery of Merchants, Kypseli Market, Polis2	City of Athens, Impact Hub, creative sector
Berlin	Haus der Statistik [41]	State of Berlin, citizen delegations
Bremen	Wurst Case [43]	ZZZ, creative sector
Brussels	Alee du Kaai [44]	Toestand, Leefmilieu Brussel
Ghent	De Nest, DOK [45]	City of Ghent, citizen groups, creative sector
Nantes	Ile de Nantes [45,46]	City of Nantes, SAMOA, creative sector
Nicosia	Food Market [47]	City of Nicosia, artist groups
Ostrava	Provoz Hlubina, DOV [45,48]	City of Ostrava, creative sector

In some of the cities, strong official support mechanisms can be found. For example, in Ghent city, officials have prioritized temporary use, offering special financial and legal support, and in Ostrava, the reuse of buildings for cultural purposes and the formation of cultural clusters are a priority for the local government [45,48]. In Nantes, the Ile de Nantes area is being promoted as an experiment for temporary use, with priority given to the creative sector; SAMOA is the key stakeholder of this project [46]. Stakeholders are often volunteer groups or non-profit groups that have a strong interest in occupying empty spaces with a fixed-term contract. For the users, in most cases there is no possibility to extend the temporary use period, which means that even if a particular initiative proves to be successful, it will still have to be halted. In the case of the temporary use of the Municipal Food Market in Nicosia led by artists and community groups, the fact that the new use of the building was already decided meant there was no chance to change in the time schedule, and it closed down in the summer of 2019. This came as a disappointment, as the initiative had succeeded in attracting the attention of inhabitants, bringing together many different groups, and working on some common ideas between Greek and Turkish Cypriot artists [47]. The “Nest” experiment in the city of Ghent, where the old municipal library building was used as a meeting point for groups and initiatives of the city, is similarly a project that had a closing date, despite its dynamics. In the case of “DOK”, temporary use only concerns the summer periods [45]. These initiatives might be adding a positive, attractive element to the city’s reputation and therefore city officials are facing a dilemma when they bring them to a halt, as they seem to lose a unique opportunity for city promotion.

Regarding the examined case studies, despite their differences, a common element is the involvement and key role the public sector actors play in an effort to support bottom-up initiatives. For each city, the developmental priorities and socio-economic circumstances differ: For some (Bremen, Nantes, Ghent), the post-industrial era is a key factor; in others (e.g., Berlin), there is a pressure on real estate prices; and in Athens, the financial crisis plays a key role regarding both vacancy and temporary use. Cultural uses are prioritized or strongly supported in all of the cases. Nevertheless, not all of the cities are promoting temporary use in their city marketing strategy according to their tourism or city branding campaigns. For instance, in Nicosia, temporary use was not recognized as a key part of its image.

3. Athens, Vacancy, and Temporary Use Initiatives

Athens has been strongly affected by the debt crisis and the economic downturn of the last decade. In many parts of the city center, the effects of the crisis are visible in the form of vacant office spaces and shops, with an important part being owned by public entities. According to Triantafyllopoulos [49], vacancy in the city center of Athens poses an immense problem, with a large part of the office space not used (30% at the beginning of the crisis, dropping to 16% in 2017) and many traditional shopping streets having lost their users; 18% of the total building stock is empty, in some cases concerning listed buildings. Empty shops have been representing 25 to 50% in specific neighborhoods such as Kypseli, Koukaki, and Exarchia. Office vacancy mostly occurs in the Central Business District of Athens where many properties are owned by the public sector [50]. The policy response to the austerity crisis at a city level did not place vacancy as a priority and it mainly consisted of two basic targets: increasing tourism and attracting investors (the former Hellinikon airport regeneration being a key project) and real estate buyers. The increasing popularity of Athens as a tourist and “golden visa” destination led to strong pressure on the housing market through real estate speculation and Airbnb rentals. The tourism boom of Athens in 2018 and 2019 has also led to tourism-related investments affecting the real estate sector [51–53]. The emphasis on tourism development resulted in neglect of other priorities.

Recent urban planning reforms have not always been able to meet the needs of the city and have neglected the vacancy issue, even though it could provide solutions, especially for vulnerable groups [54]. For example, most cultural workers and artists have been living in precarious circumstances, especially in sectors like design, where most workers are freelancers [55]. Larger institutions that were dependent on private funds and donations were able to increase their influence during the crisis, but smaller enterprises are struggling [56]. There is a need for support, as cultural workers were already suffering from the austerity crisis effects and many of them have lost some of their income [57]. Funding schemes cannot be effective as long as affordable space is not provided and in Athens this need has been well documented [58]. The new situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the precarious status of work in this sector in Greece and the need for a support mechanism [59].

Temporary use is increasingly becoming part of the political agenda for the metropolitan area of Athens, which is under pressure from the increased number of community groups and bottom-up movements during the crisis [60–63]. The municipality of Athens is the leading actor and over recent years relevant initiatives have been tried out based on the principles of placemaking. Its inclusion in the URBACT Refill network and the discussions and workshops that were organized at a local and transnational level led to an Integrated Local Action Plan and created a consensus on the need for more temporary use initiatives. During the network’s meetings in Athens, there was great interest from various stakeholders. Apart from the primary stakeholders, many others attended meetings (e.g., representatives from the national association of property owners, art groups, etc. [45]). Temporary use initiatives were also connected to a new narrative for the city, that of an open, creative, experimental city, and this was, at least to some extent, incorporated into the marketing strategy for Athens. As the role of citizen participation—especially with the support of online tools and the “democratization” of city marketing—is at the center of academic discussion, the consensus on these initiatives created the preconditions for them to be commonly accepted by citizens as representative of the Athenian identity [64,65].

The “Pittaki Street project” is probably the most characteristic example regarding the connection to city marketing, despite the fact that it is a temporary intervention rather than a temporary use as defined in this article. Pittaki Street was an underused, small street which completely changed its image through a lighting installation in 2012, based on an effort by people from the neighborhood and citizens that were invited to donate old lamps, chandeliers, and lamp caps. Although this was a limited intervention, its impact was important and created a discussion on citizen-led actions in the city. Looking at the

main promotion video of the municipality of Athens, the image of Pittaki (Figure 1) is presented as one of the main identities—the “postmodern” one [36]. In 2019 the installation was discontinued by the group that initiated it.



Figure 1. In the city marketing spot “This is Athens” (0.34), the Pittaki Street installation is used as one of the images and is characterized as “The Postmodern” identity of Athens [36].

Regarding the municipality, a first effort to create a common, temporary use space was through the Synathina kiosk launched in 2013, which attracted 266 citizen groups as users until it closed down in 2019 [66]. The “Traces of Commerce” project hosted in the small shops of an abandoned gallery was a next attempt at temporary use in 2015 situated in the so-called “Gallery of Merchants” (Stoa Emporon), which lies in the city center on Voulis Street. During the austerity crisis, the shops were not being rented as a consequence of the crisis and the bureaucratic procedures of the owner (Ministry of Labour) that did not allow flexibility in pricing and contracts. The temporary use initiative was based on an open call to artists, creatives, cultural groups, and so forth, to use the empty shops of the arcade for free for a short period. More than 300 applicants from the creative and cultural sector showed interest, from which only 24 were selected. Among them a Fab-lab, a hat designer, a fanzine editor, a flower shop, and others were hosted for periods of eight months in the shops where they demonstrated their activities and organized workshops and talks. The main stakeholders were the Ministry, the Municipality of Athens, the users of the shops, the different communities that used the space, and the neighbors; these groups cooperated without tensions (H. Biskos, Initiator Traces of Commerce, personal communication, 18 December 2020).

The reopening of the Kypseli Market as a temporary use social entrepreneurship hub in September 2018 was a milestone and attracted the attention of the local inhabitants, the media, and city practitioners. The former food market was used as a meeting point/event space by citizens for some years after it closed down in the early 2000s, until its recent refurbishment. The public consultation process before the opening was unique in its concept: A theater play organized by theater group Urban Dig was open for anyone who wanted to take part on Fokionos Negri Street outside the market during the last phase of its reconstruction. This process and the open contest have been discussed critically, mostly regarding the way the local community was involved [63,67]. The open contest was also “unconventional”: According to the call, any legal entity could apply for the management of

the space providing a business plan that would promote social entrepreneurship and open up the market to the neighborhood's needs. The management was assigned to the Greek branch of the "Impact Hub" network. Impact Hub introduced a model that would generate income without creating any competition to the existing businesses around the Kypseli Market (this was a concern expressed by local shop owners). The model chosen was based on the collaboration of three sectors: civil society, social entrepreneurs, and municipal services, the latter being fulfilled by the opening of a municipal one-stop shop [68]. The purpose was to turn the market into a space that would be eventful and meaningful for the neighborhood, while hosting shops connected to the social economy and involving the existing businesses and residents in its planning. The eight shops that were occupied by social entrepreneurs had different characteristics (Wise Greece sells products from small producers, Archipelagos is a second-hand shop, etc.) and two refugee support points run by NGOs (Caritas, DRS). The sustainability of the project for the following years was safeguarded by a fund (People's Trust) offering €5000 as capital for each user and the possibility to receive another €5000 as a microfund later. The reopened Kypseli Market was also projected on the media in the context of a narrative describing Kypseli as a vibrant, multicultural, experimental neighborhood. Figures published showed that the impact was quite important until the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 100,000 visitors, many events, and heavy media coverage [68].

For the Municipality of Athens, "Polis2" was a follow-up temporary use strategy carried out by the Athens Development and Destination Management Agency based on the outcomes of URBACT Refill. It was a project accompanied by a communication strategy that aimed to boost entrepreneurship while reviving city center neighborhoods by supporting the reuse of abandoned stores. Through the "Shop in the Center" initiative, empty shops were used as temporary exhibition space or meeting points for artists, designers, and other groups. A pilot project involved Plateia Theatrou, a place which used to be lively for many decades as a retail shopping area and as a center of night-time entertainment, but was more recently characterized by its abandoned shops. Within Polis2, the Gallery of Merchants project was also relaunched; in December 2018, the 11 shops were again occupied by various groups of designers and others. This time a team within the municipality was assigned with the management and the call for users was thematic (makers' spaces). Apart from Polis2, the "Open Schools" program that the municipality of Athens initiated in 2018 utilized assets that were underused in the city, particularly school buildings [66]. More recently, the Municipality of Athens officials announced an extra fund for the creative sector and the city marketing actions in the context of the post-COVID-19 promotion of the city [69]. During the COVID-19 crisis, providing space to the community during lockdown became a key theme and temporary use an obvious solution. The "Great Walk" (Megalos Peripatos) was a recent intervention where two lanes of Panepistimiou Street, a central axis of Athens, were allocated to cyclists and pedestrians, however this was not received very well by citizens or in the media [70].

4. Experimenting with Temporary Use in Athens: Opportunities and Tensions

The Kypseli Market and Gallery of Merchants projects offer the opportunity for a discussion, especially the latter, where an evaluation is possible after the completion of the second phase in the end of 2019. The common thematic approach (makers' spaces), the efficient promotion and management by city officials, and the well-organized events created conditions for more efficiency than during the first phase. One of the findings is that a bottom-up approach without institutional support struggles to be effective. This does not come as a surprise because citizens, creatives, and others find it difficult to stay committed for a long time to a common goal as personal circumstances, exhaustion, and/or a lack of financial incentives do not facilitate long-term commitment [40]. The support of social entrepreneurship experts that were appointed by the municipality for the Gallery of Merchants in this second phase was crucial: "the support the users got in terms of everyday management and communication proved to be valuable, it would be very different if we

had let them organize everything themselves; this is a fact that the users also acknowledge” (Tsikrika S., communication advisor Gallery of Merchants, personal communication, 15 January 2020). The impact of the initiative in both phases was important as it received many visitors and triggered a conversation regarding the empty shops, arcades, and office spaces of Athens. The owners of the nearby shops, cafes, and bars claimed that they were affected in a positive way. Another impact was that some of the users were able to try out solutions for this short period of time. After the period of experimentation, two participants opened permanent shops to develop their commercial activities in other areas of Athens [45].

The experimentation with temporary use in Kypseli is expected to provide important lessons. According to the former Vice Major of Civil Society and Innovation (Zepou A., personal communication, 27 March 2019), “this model is unique for the Greek policymakers, even for the European ones. The municipality is the owner but took a step back to allow experimentation and the development of synergies in a non-formal way”. Representatives of stakeholders of Kypseli such as “Focus on Fokionos”, artist groups, and shop owners evaluated their involvement in the planning steps and the opening and first period of operating differently, as they had high expectations which were not met. Some of them blamed the new use for upscaling the area even more and for operating as a “motor of gentrification”. The discussion on Kypseli’s future and gentrification has been at the center of public debate: In an article in the newspaper *To Vima*, the fear that Kypseli will be “losing its soul” was expressed [71]. During the meetings of URBACT Refill stakeholders, the representatives expressed the need to evaluate these initiatives after some time. But how do cultural users themselves evaluate these initiatives? Regarding the empty shops in the Gallery of Merchants, makerspace owners acknowledged the importance of getting the opportunity to test their ideas in a space open to the public, to be part of a network and receive support [72]. Giorgos Keranis, appointed expert from the Athens Development Company, which was responsible for the support of the initiative, comments on the role of the municipality: “Normally you would expect that these groups would opt for a self-organised regime in the context of an urban common, still the majority appreciated the support and guidance offered” (Keranis G., personal communication, 10 December 2020). The same conclusion was shared by the representatives of Impact Hub, who run the Kypseli Market, regarding their role as facilitators/managers. Temporary use is also compatible with the current atypical working conditions: As freelance and project-based work is increasing, more professionals, especially the ones active in the creative sector, are searching for an affordable working space [58].

Despite the strong involvement of NGOs, creatives, and social entrepreneurs, the municipality controls the procedures so it is difficult to connect them to a bottom-up, alternative cultural scene. In Athens there are very few non-governmental groups, such as “Communitism”, a group that uses abandoned buildings for cultural events, that work on temporary use and can be considered independent [73]. However, the city authority officials were able to link these spaces to images of solidarity, openness, and artistic experimentation in their official communication channels. The Kypseli model of outsourcing the management for temporary use can be linked to positive outcomes for both sides. For the municipality it meant that no direct involvement was needed and that everyday management was not a concern. At the same time, the initiative did not get an “institutional” status and was promoted as “alternative” and bottom-up, an image that fit the city marketing agenda. According to Impact Hub representatives, their involvement is seen as a challenge since the work and effort spent for the initiative are not connected to profit but to the innovative character of the project. Social Impact Assessment (SIM) was not foreseen for the cases of Athens, although figures have been published in the case of Kypseli, revealing a positive outcome for the first year [68,69]. Further research and quantitative data that would shed light on participation and impact measurement are necessary. Experimenting with temporary use came at a key moment, when the effects of the financial crisis created a need for new ideas. Underused or closed-down places were reintroduced to the neighborhood, visitation grew, groups from the social and creative economy achieved visibility, and

media attention and the process of temporary use reached the public sphere [45]. According to A. Zepou, “temporary use of empty buildings triggered synergies that would not be possible on any other occasion; sometimes just creating a physical space where groups can meet is already innovative” (Zepou A., personal communication, 27 March 2019).

Is the negative image of a “city in crisis” turned into a positive one based on solidarity and experimentation through temporary use projects? Experimentation with temporary use regarding underused space, transport, and the public realm has been a trend the last years for many cities and is also at the center of discussion for the post-pandemic city [74]. Even before the pandemic, temporary use was increasingly reported in the news, described as a democratic, open tool for reclaiming urban space. In many cities it is celebrated as the epitome of the circular economy; for example, in Amsterdam the case of the reuse of the abandoned shipyard De Ceuveld has been highlighted, alongside other temporary use projects that were supported through the “Broedplaatsen” initiative [75,76]. Temporary use does not only appear as a trend or a buzz word in larger metropolitan areas such as Amsterdam, London, and Paris; smaller cities, such as Ghent or Nantes, emphatically promote temporary use as a mainstream policy tool and a main regeneration tool and element of the place’s identity [77]. A key advantage of temporary use is that it allows the trial of solutions and can operate as an experiment; this is linked to the discussion on “slow planning” which Nantes uses in its policy texts [45]. Clearly, a vibrant, experimental city is considered a relevant and positive image for the cities of Table 1 and these elements are often included in city marketing efforts.

The emergence of social and solidarity economy initiatives is recognized as a key image of Athens and, to some extent, this development can be linked to temporary use. The emergence of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is mentioned as a key characteristic of the debt crisis response in Greece despite the ineffectiveness of the state policy towards a sound support system and a functional legal framework. SSE takes the form of co-operatives, anti-middlemen movements, time banks, and so forth. Arguably, SSE represents a new form of socialization, political participation, and economic activity in cities, with a strong symbolic value [78,79]. Despite this, in terms of city marketing goals, the city officials mostly focus on increasing tourism visitation. To some extent, the “experimental” city with the vibrant graffiti scene and the connection to the financial crisis contradict the images of a pleasant city-break destination, which is still part of Athens’ current reputation. While still suffering from the financial crisis, interesting new tourist images arose. The “new Berlin” image that was enforced by the prestigious Documenta event in 2017 and the emergence of neighborhood groups that organize events or interventions created a specific reputation for the city [80,81]. Arguably, the Synathina initiative and the temporary use projects were part of this new narrative for the city. Participatory processes are of key importance and unless the rationale is explained and agreed upon, the citizens (either individuals or owners of businesses) might feel excluded and become annoyed. In Kypseli the new use of the Kypseli Market is seen by certain stakeholder groups as an outsider intervention. Shortly after the opening, graffiti stating “Hipsters move back to the city center of Athens” pinpointed this tension. The political dimension cannot be neglected when discussing temporary use and city marketing. Temporary use is strongly linked with the appropriation of urban space and the connections between local communities and the built environment, and under certain circumstances it can empower these connections, leading to urban regeneration effects and a feeling of belonging. Rae [82] describes the role of these connections as the “civic fauna” of the city, highlighting their importance.

5. Conclusions and Takeaways for Planning and Policy

As in the case of Berlin in the 1990s, Athens could be entering its own “golden age of temporary use”: The municipality, the grassroots communities, and central government agencies have been involved in experiments using abandoned buildings. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again changed the city agenda, leading to new discussions on how temporary use can accommodate community needs, and so the willingness to experiment

becomes stronger. The experimental nature of temporary use, the chances for failure, and the high expectations lead to public discussions on efficiency, risk taking, and impacts. In some cases, such as at Plateia Theatrou, the expectations that temporary use would work as an instrument for urban revival were not met. This is connected to the limits of placemaking initiatives which are evident in temporary use initiatives as well [83].

In the examples of different paths followed by cities, in most cases the public sector agencies played a key role, moving away from complete self-organization; this has been recognized as a factor and documented in the existing literature on urban commons as well [18,41]. In Athens this is also the case; however, a “hybrid” model was tested at the Kypseli Market, opting for a more bottom-up approach. On the other hand, in the case of the Gallery of Merchants, the first period evaluation led to the decision to follow an approach where the municipality had a stronger involvement. Allowing temporary use to occur spontaneously from grassroots movements is not a popular solution in Athens or most other cities. Therefore, further incorporating temporary use in existing or new urban policies and planning laws is gaining popularity as an option. Especially for the creative sector, temporary use offers opportunities for testing out ideas, building up a network, and confronting insecurity and can be dealt with as part of a cultural planning approach. The case of the Gallery of Merchants project in Athens showed that the presence of cultural groups and artists attracts attention and can have a positive impact for the whole neighborhood. Mostly, it can have a positive effect on the sustainability of the creative sector. Hence, it could be further developed as a collaborative tool for the creative and cultural sectors in the context of a wider policy.

In most of the examined cities, temporary use images were used by city marketing campaigns and became part of a new narrative for each city (e.g., Nantes as a “slow city” [46]). In Athens it fits in the effort to follow a rebranding strategy as a “post-crisis city”: lively, artistic, showing solidarity, and in favor of experimentation. The global fame of the Acropolis and the classics as the main element of the city’s identity and tourism appeal is being replaced by these new images and identities, such as the “new Berlin” one [84]. The fact that temporary use initiatives involve many stakeholders and have a bottom-up character is seen as a positive element for the city’s image. However, at a time when affordable housing and working space are becoming increasingly scarce in cities, a temporary use policy must not only relate to marketing purposes but should focus on its effectiveness, since especially for the cultural and creative sector, it manifests a means to overcome insecurity. A bottom-up approach without some kind of public support is not always sustainable according to the interviewees and the examples from other European cities and the need for support is evident. In Athens there is a strong need to provide further support for temporary uses especially in connection with the creative sector, as cultural workers are suffering from the austerity crisis effects and many have lost some of their income. Funding schemes cannot be effective as long as affordable space is not provided and in Athens this need has been well documented. The new situation arising since the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the precarious status of work in the creative sector and the need for a stronger support mechanism.

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