

The Just City Dimension

How under-used space and infrastructure can become testbeds for new cities

This article is part of a series of articles based on the 14 Partnerships of the Urban Agenda for the EU. Structured around the three city dimensions of the New Leipzig Charter (the Productive, the Green, and the Just City), the articles link Partnerships' actions and activities with other relevant EU projects and initiatives supported by Cohesion Policy (including Urban Innovative Actions, URBACT, or Article 7 cities benefiting from the ERDF). The articles demonstrate the key role of cities in the Urban Agenda for the EU, and focus on specific actions they have led and implemented. Overall, the articles aim at showcasing practices and experiences on how different tools and funding support can help cities face their challenges in a strategic way towards sustainable urban development.

Author: Marcelline Bonneau

European Commission

Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

Directorate 1 – Deputy Director-General for Implementation (REGIO.DDG)

Unit – Inclusive Growth, Urban and Territorial Development (REGIO.DDG.03)

B-1049 Brussels

Contact

E-mail: REGIO-URBAN-TERRITORIAL@ec.europa.eu

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How under-used space and infrastructure can become testbeds for new cities

Urban space has evolved and changed dramatically in the last two centuries, with an acceleration in recent decades. Economic and social transformation processes in Europe have led to the abandonment of many buildings and spaces, from former industrial or rail infrastructures to factories, construction sites, slaughterhouses, large health and social care facilities, shopping centres, offices or incomplete buildings.

At the same time, their potential has arisen in increasingly densified cities: from blemishes on the urban landscape, they become opportunities to maximise existing land and infrastructure, for artistic purposes and citizen appropriation, to look at urban space differently, to design trendy spots to go out or shop, to bring neighbourhoods back to life, and to experiment with and incubate the city of tomorrow. Overall, whether these projects are led by citizens, private companies, universities, public authorities or all of these actors together, they play a crucial role in transformative change towards sustainable, liveable and just cities, and municipalities should support these projects.

Support opportunities are provided by EU policies and programmes, but many challenges remain, such as ensuring inclusiveness and social cohesion, and balancing the need for more compact cities with their liveability. This article presents practices that some European cities have developed to overcome these challenges.



Die Komplette Palette, near to the river Weser in the district of Hemelingen, Bremen, Germany © Dennis Ritter

The EU context and need for integration

Addressing the management of under-used land, spaces and buildings requires an **integrated, life-cycle approach** to all aspects of the adaptation or revitalisation of urban spaces, including financing and funding strategy, enabling policies and regulations (including spatial planning regulation), governance and stakeholder engagement, and connection to the rest of the city and the surrounding territory.

This topic has been an important focus of the European Structural and Investment Funds especially under **the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regulation for 2014-2020**. In particular, the investment priorities focused on promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility by supporting employment-friendly growth. This requires the conversion of declining industrial regions and the development of more accessible natural and cultural resources. It also means promoting social inclusion and combating poverty and any discrimination, by providing support for physical, economic and social regeneration of deprived communities in urban and rural areas.

In addition, managing under-used land, spaces and buildings can potentially address the five policy objectives of the **Cohesion Policy as designed for the 2021-2027 programming period**. In particular, Sandra Gizdulich, from the Italian Agency for Territorial Cohesion, stresses:

‘Policy objective 5 is about “bringing Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories”. This is, basically, the approach on rehabilitating neighbourhoods, together with living in a greener (policy objective 2) place with social cohesion (policy objective 4). We could also address the other two policy objectives (1 – a more competitive and smarter Europe and 3 – a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility) this way as well.’

The multiplicity of topics and policies covered and governance levels involved in this process is illustrated by the fact that this issue has been addressed by four Urban Agenda Partnerships, focusing on **Circular Economy**, **Culture and Cultural Heritage**, **Jobs and Skills in the Local Economy** and **Sustainable Land Use and Nature Based Solutions** respectively.

Moreover, this issue directly covers the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’, as well as three other SDGs:

- SDG 9, to ‘build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation’;
- SDG 13, to ‘take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts’, by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy;
- SDG 15, to ‘protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss’.

Local stakeholders are also increasingly concerned about including such goals and actions in city strategy and management for public and common spaces. They are pushing for a bigger role in their **governance**, towards **social inclusion**, in particular through the development of a social value for temporary use (e.g. **STUN Camp**), as well as using a ‘**commons’ paradigm and governance**¹. Local stakeholders engaged in such activities are booming, for example in projects like **Communa** and **Toestand** in Belgium, **Plateau Urbain** and **Yes We Camp** in France, **Free Riga** in Latvia, **Meanwhile Space** in the United Kingdom, **Paradocks** in Austria, and **AlteMu** in Germany, to name a few.

Territorial integration is also key in the renewed **Leipzig Charter** for influencing territorial development strategies and spatial planning systems for the formation of more compact cities, with an intensification of urban services to contain urban sprawl and suburbanisation. At the same time, the Charter and a number of European strategies indicate the need to balance more compact cities with green infrastructure and nature-based solutions, as a tool to build sustainable, resilient and liveable urban spaces.

The multiple benefits of managing under-used land, spaces and buildings

Managing under-used land, spaces and buildings can be key to improving urban management, strengthening environmental protection, and upscaling social innovation. It can limit the negative impacts of **urban sprawl** while seeking to achieve ‘**no net land take**’ by 2050 to reduce the loss of soil functions and ecosystem services, as requested by the **European Commission**. It can also reduce cities’ impact on climate change by integrating **grey energy** in the reuse and

¹ ‘Commons’ is to be understood as coming from **Elinor Ostrom’s definition** of ‘common-pool resource’, a resource which is shared and managed by a community following rules defined by this community.

renovation of buildings². Where cities are **increasingly compact** and aim to maintain a reasonable size, it helps those buildings and spaces to be reused, improving the local economy and social activities through various usages.

Abandoned buildings and land are also key witnesses of **local heritage** and can have touristic and architectural value (e.g. **ROCK, CLIC, Ge.Co, OpenHeritage, RURITAGE**). Taking care of them also ensures **safe** and **secure** urban areas are maintained, for example via the maintenance of buildings.

Such a focus can also support the **revitalisation** of cities, ensuring **lively and dynamic neighbourhoods**. **Experimenting** with **new types of activities** and promoting social innovation also supports **jobs and skills** development, including the design of **new business models**. Last but not least, the transformation of abandoned industrial buildings into residential ones can also solve **housing shortages** in growing cities.

Recurring challenges

There are many challenges in making the most out of vacant and under-used spaces and buildings. First of all, there is a lack of transparency regarding information on under-used urban land parcels (including zoning or use class designations, ownership, relevant policies, designations and restrictions, size and contamination, as well as information on how these sites might be developed in terms of both temporary and final use options) towards the public sector, private sector, citizens and other stakeholders. Accessing this information can be complex, as it comes from multiple sources and is sometimes not publicly available.

There is also a lack of effective regulation to address land banking (e.g. tax penalties on the unproductive use of land) and planning regulation (mechanisms that set timeframes for development and prevent demolition without a planned development), or to develop value capture mechanisms (in the public interest). In addition, the rehabilitation of ancient buildings must often pass through specific permits from national ministries of culture and their regional

² 'Buildings are responsible for approximately 40 % of energy consumption and 36 % of CO2 emissions in the EU. Currently, about 35 % of the EU's buildings are over 50 years old and almost 75 % of the building stock is energy inefficient, while only 0.4-1.2 % (depending on the country) of the building stock is renovated each year. Therefore, more renovation of existing buildings has the potential to lead to significant energy savings – potentially reducing the EU's total energy consumption by 5-6 % and lowering CO2 emissions by about 5 %.' (**Urban Agenda Partnership on Circular Economy – Action Plan**)

bodies and agencies, which require specific skills to complete and therefore delay or hinder the whole process. There can also be inconsistencies and/or overlaps in several regulations applying to the same building or site, such as cultural heritage protections, building requirements and environmental requirements.

In the case of collaborative management of such spaces and buildings, public procurement might limit the chance of civil society stakeholders to implement their proposal. Some limitations are introduced as part of state aid rules that prevent the provision of financial resources to local associations in order to rehabilitate and maintain the building to be re-used.

In terms of governance, cities have yet to develop a more proactive enabling role in terms of increasing awareness and information levels around under-used urban sites among potential stakeholders, users, investors and developers. The current practices for making the most out of vacant or under-used spaces and buildings are still experimental and non-systematic, depending on the knowledge, capability, capacity, finances, competences and proactivity of local administration.

The remainder of this article presents practices developed by European cities to overcome some of these challenges.

Circularity at the core of managing under-used spaces and buildings

Adopting a **circular approach** enables the most to be made of existing buildings' available resources, especially in industrial areas in transition. The [Sustainable & circular re-use of spaces & buildings handbook](#) is a practical tool to support this process. It is an output of Action 9 of the Urban Agenda Partnership on [Circular Economy](#), 'Manage the re-use of buildings and spaces in a circular economy', led by the City of Prato. It lays the foundations for establishing an overall strategy that looks at a new model of urban re-use management for cities that aim to become more circular. With a widespread review and analysis of good practices in urban re-use, the handbook provides cities with inspirational suggestions of different solutions that can be applied, taking into account specific urban environments.

Collaborative management of urban commons for more efficient and meaningful rehabilitation

Bottom-up approaches and citizen engagement have been key in enhancing cultural heritage, strengthening local identity, contributing to heritage preservation and, all in all, co-creating meaningful cities. Collaborative management of vacant spaces, in particular, has shown its potential in the heritage sector for **social valorisation of a common good**, as well as **pioneering** a new approach to bridge the gap between conservation, preservation of cultural heritage, and contemporary urban issues such as sustainability and accessibility.

For the Italian Territorial Cohesion Agency, it is crucial to ensure the delegation of the management of vacant spaces and buildings to specific communities. Municipalities need to find arrangements with current public procurement rules to ensure that communities can manage sites, yet they also need to prevent state aid cases. This has been the focus of Action 4 of the Urban Agenda Partnership on **Cultural Heritage**, focusing on collaborative management to adapt or reuse spaces and buildings for cultural and social development, led by the Italian Territorial Cohesion Agency in collaboration with several local and regional authorities. As Sandra Gizdulich from the Agency explains:

‘Let the municipalities create an integrated approach around this rehabilitation process, while first establishing local regulations to enable this process. The approach by the commons is key and Italian cities have shown that we can be very effective in this process!’

In particular, Gizdulich points to the following key Italian exemplary cities and practices:

- Torino, which has already proven itself to be quite an innovative municipality by leading on URBACT **Innovato-R** and contributing to URBACT **BoostInno** networks, signed a pact with a local community to rehabilitate places. This is an agreement of shared management without funding.
- Naples, lead partner of the URBACT **Civic eState** and **2nd Chance** networks, prepared the Urban Civic Use Regulation, allowing citizens to point to empty buildings and the municipality to expropriate private owners of these buildings, and letting communities manage them. This was made possible as a commons approach is included in the regulation, adopted in 2015 and labelled **URBACT Good Practice**.

- Bologna, which worked on its Public Procurement procedures within URBACT **Procure**, developed a regulation of its commons, **Beni Comuni è Bologna**, for citizens to propose and take care of regeneration of urban commons in the city.

As the implementation of regulations is so varied in all Member States, the Agency and other partners of this action decided to create a **handbook** for better regulation, with examples and inspirations of administrative acts, regulative skills, and many other useful insights.



Scugnizzo Liberato in Naples, managed by the commons, Italy © Civic eState

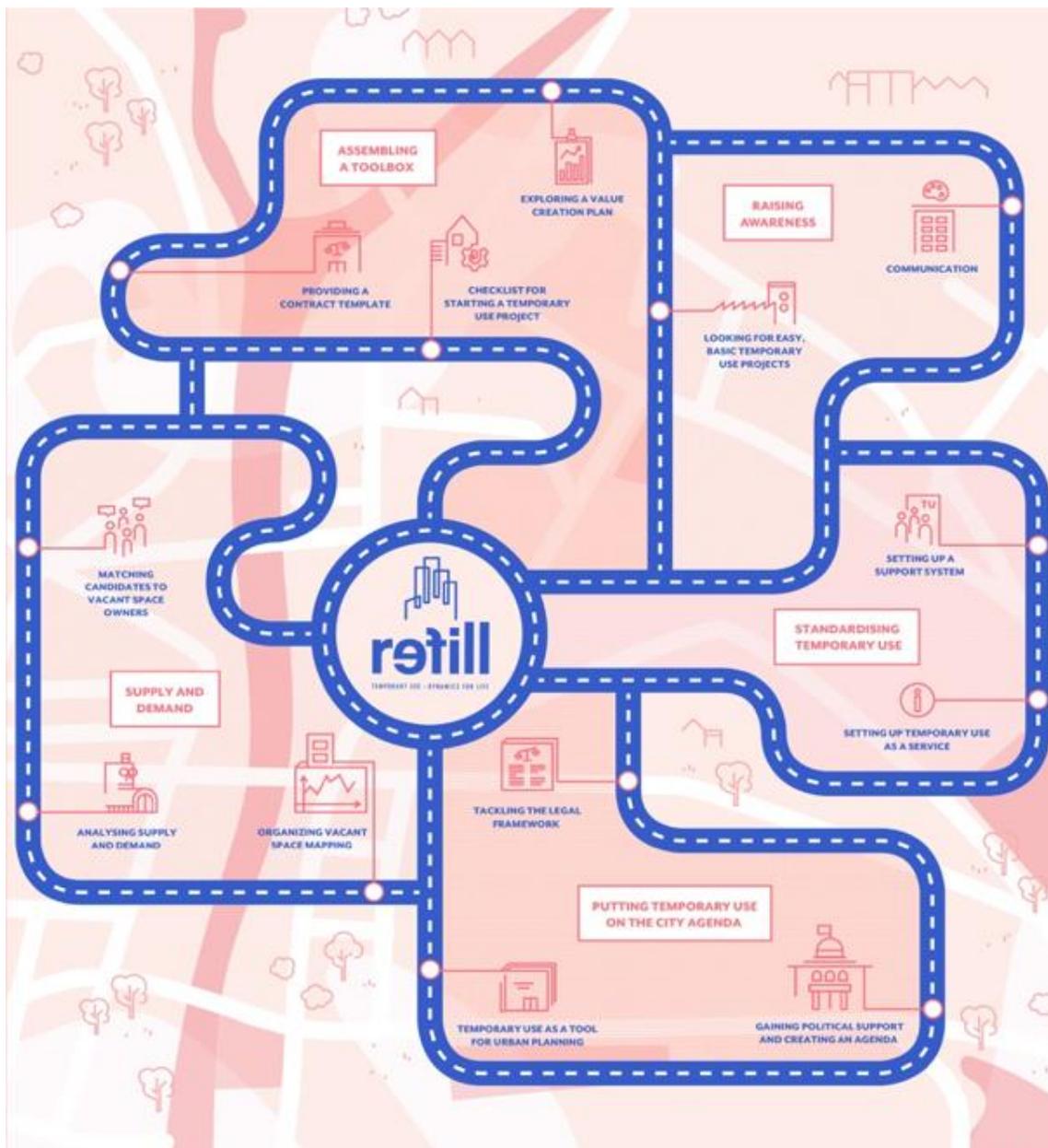
Temporary use of vacant spaces for social and digital innovations

Temporary use is a common tool used to make the most out of vacant spaces and buildings by occupying them during a period of time, which can be predefined upfront or left open. Several URBACT networks (**TUTUR**, **REFILL**, **Second Chance**) have experimented with this for the **benefit of owners, users and cities**. The REFILL network has in particular designed five types of activities and steps to **embark on a temporary use journey**:

- **Raising awareness** and **informing** about temporary use interest and added value;
- **Mapping** vacant spaces, **analysing** needs and **matching** candidates to the owners of vacant spaces;
- Putting temporary use on the **agenda** while gaining political support, creating a temporary use agenda, tackling the legal framework, and benefiting from temporary use within the urban planning process;

- Assembling a **toolbox** by creating a checklist to get a temporary use project on the road and exploring a temporary use value creation plan, with an adequate contract template;
- Setting up a system to **support** temporary use and implement it as a **permanent city service**.

Examples of cities embarking on such a journey can be found in the [REFILL final publication](#) and the URBACT [Remaking the City platform](#).



Temporary use journey map © REFILL (can be downloaded [here](#))

The value of temporary or transitional use has long been proven due to its **social, economic, cultural and environmental values**. This means that social innovation has been at the heart of methodologies in which the physical revitalisation of an area goes hand in hand with collaboration with civil society. That is the approach that the City of Ghent, Belgium, lead partner of the URBACT **REFILL** network, has developed for more than a decade through a wide range of actions. As Ariana Tabaku and Emma Tytgadt from the City of Ghent explain, ‘we have to make the city with citizens, and temporary use has been a key tool for us to do so’.

In particular, the Municipality sees itself as a key facilitator and promoter of temporary use of vacant spaces. It has developed a specific type of public servant function, that of **neighbourhood managers**, who play the role of **intermediaries** between citizens (and their initiatives), the city’s administration, and vacant spaces and buildings. Playing a coordination role goes into the **matchmaking activities** that the Municipality organises between empty spaces and potential occupants (e.g. in its former library, which was empty after it moved to a new location). The Municipality also goes one step further by engaging with property owners and citizen initiatives offering mediation and juridical support, as well as **temporary use start-up funding**.

The City of Ghent leverages on temporary use as a **vector for place-making and a bottom-up and open tool for urban regeneration**, as was the case in ‘De Site’ and ‘DOK’, and strongly **communicates on the benefits of temporary use of vacant spaces**. Last but not least, the City of Ghent works on the development of a commons approach based on Naples’ good practice (see above) to develop a **new ecosystem of spaces for public-civic cooperation**.



Municipality-supported temporary use activities in Ghent, Belgium © REFILL

In Helsinki, Finland, an **Article 7 city** benefiting from the ERDF and also a partner of the REFILL network, this matchmaking and supporting role has been taken one step further with the use of digital tools. In particular, in the Kalasatama district, a living lab for smart and sustainable innovation, **Flexi spaces** have been developed as an online service model for sharing public spaces (e.g. schools and libraries) outside of their usual opening hours. Users can find and book spaces by the hour, for a wide range of activities. As Maija Bergström from Forum Virium Helsinki explains:

‘Once the space is booked, users get access for self-service use through a smart lock. We believe that smart city solutions will enable us to make the most out of the available city spaces. For this, we need to further experiment how to make the process user friendly, both for the owner of the space and for the occasional user, and add services that support sharing where needed.’

The City of Helsinki’s Circular Economy Strategy includes support to the idea of shared spaces,



and as such, the Flexi Space model. The model has now been piloted in 15 Flexi Spaces: in a residential building, two libraries and commercial buildings. These spaces were booked 2 148 times, by 520 different users.

The space sharing model for city-owned buildings is currently being further developed by the city, whereby it uses the Varaamo service (the user interface for Helsinki’s resource reservation service). The spaces include around 100 library premises and tools such as laser cutters, cabins and outdoor parks.

Flexi Spaces pilot spaces door with smart lock in Helsinki, Finland © Forum Virium Helsinki

Setting up an agency to make the most out of abandoned buildings and spaces

Working with abandoned or vacant buildings and spaces needs concrete tools and instruments. Ensuring identification, matchmaking and management of these tools and instruments is key. This has been embedded in municipality-led organisations. For this purpose, the City of Bremen, partner of the URBACT **TUTUR** and **REFILL** networks, has designed a Temporary Use Agency, the **ZZZ** (ZwischenZeitZentrale) Bremen. Led by a group of architecture and urban planning activists, the role of the ZZZ since 2009 has been to ‘wake-up snoring buildings and spaces’, as Daniel Schnier and Oliver Hasemann from the ZZZ put it. Eager to address the demographic challenges of the city, revitalize its economy and hold onto young graduates, the municipality began to regenerate its brownfields, turning industrial buildings into art studios, incubators and workspaces; temporary use has bought time to understand the community needs and decide on the final use of the space.

Concretely, the tasks and activities of ZZZ are to:

- **Promote** the re-use of buildings and spaces;
- Carry out **inventories** of vacant properties and facilitate their re-use;
- Take on a key **brokering role** between owners of buildings and potential residents;
- Support initiatives with **legal advice** and **project development**, as well as with start-up funding;
- Develop **strategies** to re-use buildings and urban spaces according to different models based on the needs and vision of the city.

It supports various projects, from economic to social and cultural, and short-term to long-term uses. Most of the activities focus on deprived neighbourhoods, particularly in lesser-known areas.

ZZZ works as a mediating agency that supports projects in close collaboration with representatives of the administration and municipal undertakings. This is key to ensuring activities are purposeful, as Schnier and Hasemann explain:

‘Throughout our activities, we are providing temporary residents with the opportunity to change their city, and to experiment with new uses before long-term investment. Temporary use is key in strengthening bottom-up initiatives. We are facilitating this process, but this would be

impossible without the leadership and support from the Municipality, which strongly believes in the potential of our activities.'

The agency is run by an active temporary use crew, the **AAA – Autonomes Architect Atelier**, with strong networks to users and subcultures. In terms of its governance model, three departments of the municipality (Economic, Labour and Europe; Finances, Climate Protection, Ecology and Mobility; City Development and Housing) fund the agency (EUR 560 000 annually) and are represented in its Steering Group: where necessary, they provide direct connections to civil servants and elected representatives. Delegating this matchmaking role to an external agency in turn prevents the deceleration of the process due to long public competition processes.



The ZZZ team in Bremen, Germany © Lukas Klose

Renovating vacant flats to address a lack of affordable housing

While **1 in 6 properties** in European cities is vacant, a large number of people lack housing – particularly housing of good quality. In Mataro, a Spanish city of 127 000 inhabitants, some 2 759 flats are empty. Meanwhile, 1 400 households are on the waiting list for social housing, with only 265 available units. The reason for these flats being empty may be that their owners do not have the resources to renovate them or are afraid of tenants not paying their rent. This is combined with the difficult social reality following the economic crisis of 2008, whereby 30 % of unemployed people are long-term unemployed and the average rent has risen in cost by 27 % in the last five years.

The Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) **Yes We Rent!** project is therefore developing **innovative solutions** to reactivate private vacant flats, in order to bring them back into the rental housing market and make them available at below-market rental costs to households in need of affordable housing. This is being implemented through a three-step approach:

1. Reactivating private empty flats by offering incentives and support to risk-averse owners;
2. Using the renovation of flats as a means of capacity-building for youngsters who are not studying or working;
3. Establishing a cooperative of tenants, drawing on empowerment and self-management to provide its members with access to decent housing at an affordable price.

In concrete terms, the project had to prepare a legal basis for preparing the rental guarantee fund, in order to provide subsidies to private owners to ensure the **vacant flats would be reused as affordable housing**. This describes, amongst other aspects, the legal mechanism for guaranteeing payment to the owner, and the legal relationship between all the involved parties – the owner, city council, cooperative and tenant – including the rental mediation, handover of keys, rights and responsibilities, collaboration in the management of the housing, and so on.

The project has developed a template for a rental contract between the owner and the tenant and a template for the contract between the owner and the city council, regulating the temporary transfer of the flat into the ‘Yes We Rent!’ housing scheme (including an agreement on adhesion, subsidies for renovation works on the flat, etc.). Standards for renovation and rehabilitation works and the energy efficiency of the flats, as well as their related subsidies (up to EUR 20 000 per flat) have also been developed. The cooperative of tenants is expected to continue with this practice once the UIA project has finished.

The project has also developed a communication campaign to attract both owners to the scheme and tenants to the cooperative. The cooperative Bloc Cooperatiu was registered in February 2021 and is now working to increase the number of members, which has doubled in less than six months. They have been working very intensely to define the model of the cooperative, its legal documents (such as by-laws and rules of procedure), business plan, and criteria for allocating members to the flats. Furthermore, it will be in charge of attracting and

managing empty private flats for its members beyond the project's lifespan and continuing with the support and incentive scheme installed by the city.

The reactivation of vacant housing has also been made possible through **training in labour skills for vulnerable young adults** to improve their chances in the job market.



Young people being trained to renovate a vacant flat in Mataro, Spain © Yes We Rent!

What role should cities have in promoting the management of under-used spaces, land and buildings?

As the examples above have shown, managing under-used spaces, land and buildings can have multiple benefits and cities should definitely think further about these opportunities. Many have already done so and can serve as leading inspirations for others.

Crucially, under-used spaces, land and buildings are part of a wider reflexion upon urban areas and urban life. On the one hand, cities need to balance the fact that they must prevent urban sprawl and become **more compact, but also more liveable**. On the other hand, some 'under-used' spaces are not actually under-used by all: they can be used for biodiversity conservation, to host grassroots initiatives and community engagement, as incubators to new businesses, and so on. In addition, as per the urban restoration targets to be included in the EU nature restoration law, such spaces can be used to develop urban greening plans in cities of more than 20 000 inhabitants, following the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**. Last but not least, examples

of temporary use and prototyping have also proven both the potential and need to further experiment with a form of living labs for what the cities of today and tomorrow could look like.

As such, the new funding opportunities listed in the article should definitely prompt cities to use under-used space and infrastructure as testbeds for new developments. Support for investments in urban areas is notably available through Cohesion Policy, which has 8 % earmarked for sustainable urban development at the level of national allocation of the ERDF. The future **European Urban Initiative** will also support cities to develop strategies and integrated approaches to be used to replicate and innovate such urban projects and activities.