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EDITORIAL

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The Complex Value of Temporary Communities

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Abstract

Across Europe, a shortage of affordable housing and workspace coexists with widespread vacancy in buildings, lots, and public spaces. Since the 1970s, squatting, anti-squatting, and co-management practices have turned this contradiction into an opportunity, with young people, activists, and creatives temporarily reclaiming empty spaces and, when displaced by rising rents, forming urban nomad communities. While the social and cultural relevance of these initiatives is widely recognised, the value they generate—and how to assess it—remains poorly understood. This thematic issue brings together 10 contributions that examine how temporary reuse of real estate and public space creates value for real estate management, urban development, and local communities, and why diverse actors choose to engage in it. The collected articles present cases from Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Germany, Italy, Curaçao, and Australia, and identify four interrelated dimensions of value: activation, commons, care, and transformation that unfold differently across places, scales, and temporalities. Together, they argue that temporary communities generate effects that persist beyond the end of the temporary use itself, reshaping perceptions of place and future development trajectories, and call for new frameworks to recognise and support this complex value.

Keywords

spatial justice; temporary reuse; urban nomads; vacancy; value creation

1. Introduction

In Europe, we are facing a significant challenge: there's a shortage of affordable housing and workspaces, even as many cities are dotted with vacant buildings and lots that offer great potential for new uses. It's a striking contrast: countless homes, offices, public buildings, and industrial buildings are empty while people are searching for a place to live, work, and come together. Since the 1970s, movements around squatters, anti-squats, and co-management have emerged as innovative alternatives for utilising these spaces—even if only temporarily.

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Young individuals, activists, and creatives are claiming these spaces and exploring new ways of living and collaborating. These temporary communities highlight the pressing demand for urban space, usually occupying spaces at no or low rents for a limited duration, in many cases actively contributing to the community's vibrancy. Unfortunately, real estate and financial dynamics often force these groups to relocate, marking the shift from temporary residents to urban nomad communities—either by choice or circumstance.

These urban nomad communities are diverse, including young adults, students, workers, immigrants, and those experiencing homelessness. For some, it's a decision born from creativity and adventure; for others, it's simply a matter of necessity. To date, research and practice have yet to fully capture the value that urban nomads create through the temporary use of spaces, but their role in urban regeneration is recognised as significant. With the current high levels of vacant properties and, at the same time, a high demand for (affordable) space, the topic of temporary reuse is generating much interest in academia.

1.1. Temporary Use and Value Creation

In the gaps between different real estate use cycles, unused spaces constitute an opportunity for urban actors to give room to ideas for various uses based on public/private needs or subjective visions. Time and temporality have become important aspects of space value in contemporary cities. In some cases, temporality is organised and managed commercially, such as in coworking spaces like Spaces, Frame, WeWork, etc. Many of these started as experimental initiatives to temporarily reuse vacant office space but have since developed into commercial real estate and asset management companies. The temporary availability of vacant real estate has become a precious urban resource, allowing a variety of potential uses. As such, the reuse of vacant real estate is an open field for experimentation. Several temporary use projects experiment with combining different financial and economic models for the (co)governance of space, generating multiple impacts on the community, real estate, and neighbourhood.

Research has provided evidence of temporary reuse projects that reactivate unattractive areas, through experimenting with adaptation and different forms of reuse, both in buildings and in public space. Short-term initiatives experiment with innovative approaches, diverse forms of temporary dwelling, creative management, and collaborative initiatives. These initiatives contribute to diverse forms of placemaking and provide a wide range of social and financial-economic benefits but also face drawbacks and risks for the actors involved. For example, when a new use creates an attractive environment, at some point real estate rents and prices will increase, and the initiators of the reuse might be forced to move. Temporary uses are increasingly included in real estate management and in planning. However, assessment methods to understand, measure, and evaluate the multiple impacts and values that they generate across different levels and scales are lacking.

More knowledge is needed to support stakeholders, public authorities, and decision-makers in considering the complex value added by temporary communities. Hence, this thematic issue posed the following questions:

- How does temporary reuse contribute to value creation in real estate, urban development, and local communities?
- Why do diverse actors engage in temporary reuse, and how do they benefit from it?
- What methods are applicable to assess temporary reuse values for real estate management and urban studies?

Starting from these questions, contributions were invited that push the boundaries of how we understand, assess, and manage temporary re-uses and value creation at different scales. The aim of this thematic issue is to gather critical perspectives to advance knowledge for scholars and decision-makers in the fields of real estate management, urban planning, and multi-actor collaboration, to ensure equity in urban development.

This thematic issue compiles articles focused on the temporary use of buildings, urban spaces, and locations. It explores various aspects of temporary reuse, highlighting values related to temporality, liveability, and spatial justice, while also providing tools and frameworks to assist in decision-making and policy on this subject. The inspiration for this issue arises from the NOMAD postdoctoral project of Chiara Mazzarella, funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions under grant number 101109623.

2. The Contributions

2.1. Economies of Collective Temporary Occupations in Brussels

Mazzarella et al. (2026) investigate the economies generated by collective temporary occupations (CTOs) to reuse vacant real estate in the Brussels-Capital Region. Although community-based occupations are widely acknowledged for producing social and cultural value, the diverse economies they activate remain less defined. The results of a comparative case analysis show that CTOs operate as hybrid economic systems, combining artistic creation, circular production, welfare services, and sharing practices, producing value through care, cooperation, and repair. This article positions CTOs as experimental forms of post-growth urban development, emerging as urban labs and examples of strategies for rethinking vacant properties.

2.2. Radical Heritage: The Introduction of Urban Fallows and the Value of Cyclical Rest

In the context of climate breakdown and socio-economic precarity, Sanliturk and Schmidt (2026) introduce the concept of urban fallows for rethinking urban heritage through the dynamic interplay of time, value, agency, and space. This article reframes vacant buildings as latent commons, as spatial and cultural reservoirs imbued with social memory, ecological potential, and the capacity to host alternative urban futures. Based on research by the Radical Heritage summer school, this article explores how to activate new value channels and cultivate new spatial sensibilities oriented towards long-term care, time, and cultural revaluation in the urban environment.

2.3. Making Time Matter: Intermittent Urbanism and the Politics of Staying

Cordeiro et al. (2026) propose intermittence to understand how temporal dynamics organise the everyday urban experience, framing intermittence as a rhythmic form of changes in use. The analysis of four Lisbon-based cases exemplifies how intermittent practices can sustain social, ecological, and cultural infrastructures without relying on permanent spatial occupation, while also exposing temporal inequalities tied to digital systems, ecological rhythms, and public space governance. The article argues that recognising time as a shared, structured, and unevenly distributed urban resource is crucial to understanding how people negotiate presence, continuity, and the politics of staying in contemporary cities.

2.4. Time After Time: Community-Led Participation in Urban Development Practices in Rotterdam

Santos et al. (2026) discuss the role of community-led initiatives (CLIs). Although they have been seen as contributors to sustainable and socially just urban transitions, their capacity to shape formal urban development processes remains insufficiently understood. This article examines how a grassroots case in Rotterdam can engage city-making over time. Findings indicate that temporary use enabled a common based on socio-cultural programming, shared stewardship, and informal knowledge infrastructures. The article argues that CLIs should be recognised as urban commons with the potential to inform more inclusive, collaborative, and reflexive approaches to urban development in Rotterdam and comparable contexts.

2.5. Caring Temporalities: The Role of Urban Space for the Liveability of Fluidly Housed Youth

Stadtlander et al. (2026) explore the role that public space plays in providing care for fluidly housed youth. These young adults are experiencing fluctuating conditions of homelessness, moving between couch-surfing, staying in overcrowded or informally occupied spaces, and sometimes experiencing periods of rooflessness. This article identifies three overarching socio-spatial needs of fluidly housed youth and three corresponding spatial potentials to activate and adapt urban space through radical care. It identifies urban spaces suitable for building infrastructures of care that meet the needs of privacy. Lastly, the article addresses how infrastructures of care can be developed to meet shifting needs in urban space.

2.6. (Food) Justice in the Interim? Temporary Urban Gardening, Welfare Activation, and Plural Valuation

Temporary urban gardening is seen as a tool for addressing vacancy, sustainability, and social inclusion, but how justice is enacted within welfare and labour market activation initiatives remains poorly understood. Bakunowitsch (2026) examines justice in a publicly funded urban gardening project in Dortmund, Germany, situated on a temporarily available plot and implemented as a labour-market activation measure. While participants experience gardening as meaningful and a source of social participation and belonging, these values are bounded by welfare regulations, temporary land lease, and non-market exchange rules. The article contributes to debates on temporary urban use, welfare-governed food practices, and inclusive sustainability.

2.7. Leveraging a Street Festival for Lasting Transformation in a UNESCO World Heritage Neighbourhood

Regales and Simons (2026) examine the impact of the Kaya Kaya street festival in Otrobanda, a temporary cultural event that has contributed to the repositioning of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Historic Willemstad, Curaçao. In this case, the temporary use of vacant historic properties and underutilised public spaces to host various cultural activities played a key role in positioning the neighbourhood as an attractive and artistic place. This article contributes to wider understanding of urban strategies by offering insights into how events as temporary use can contribute to revitalising historic neighbourhoods.

2.8. Taking Up Some Space: How Urban Space Use Supports Material Circularity in Outdoor Public Spaces

Reijtenbagh et al. (2026) analyse how temporary use of and for public space can accelerate the circular economy, based on a study of Amsterdam, revealing three main findings. First, the use of temporary vacant space serves different value propositions for different stakeholders. Second, value is created at different levels: the project level, the area level, or the city level. Third, the use of public space as a depot for public space materials creates both sustainable and public value.

2.9. Embracing the Liminality of Common Spaces: A Proposal for an Analytical Framework to Interpret Temporary Uses

Casprini et al. (2026) conceptualise temporary uses as a possibility to co-create common spaces, reconciling a multiplicity of stakeholders' values. Although being time-bound, temporary uses can generate social values. However, these values are hard to capture in traditional evaluation metrics and might be susceptible to favouring market values over social values. Based on a case study in Forlì, Italy, this article provides empirical evidence about how a shared identity is negotiated in the temporary reuse of abandoned real estate. Furthermore, the authors propose an interpretative analytical framework to understand how social values are co-created and distributed at the community level.

2.10. STAR (Sustainable Temporary Adaptive Reuse) Toolkit: Innovation for Value Creation in Commercial Property

In Australia, Connell-Variy et al. (2026) observed that the changes to work practices following COVID, particularly working from home, have affected commercial office values in Central Business District markets. This has resulted from companies needing less space and taking advantage of discounts on high-quality office space. In response to these shifts, efforts to rejuvenate the commercial property sector in Australia include the development of the Sustainable Temporary Adaptive Reuse (STAR) Toolkit. The STAR Toolkit develops a series of resources that enable owners to assess an asset's short-term reuse potential. This article demonstrates the capacity of the STAR Toolkit to help reposition an asset by sustainably reusing vacant space.

3. Discussion

Across the contributions (Table 1), vacancy is framed as a condition of possibility. Cases show how vacant spaces in buildings or in the public space can become commons, common spaces, cultural incubators, infrastructures of care, sites for circular economy, incubators of diverse economies, or platforms for collective action. Temporary communities activate resources that would otherwise remain dormant, generating new social relations, governance arrangements, and imaginaries for urban futures, creating places that were just empty spaces. Temporality challenges the conventional understandings of urban value rooted in permanence, ownership, and productivity.

The articles in this thematic issue question how diverse forms of temporary uses in real estate and public space generate different dimensions of value. The dimensions of value studied in the 10 articles can be grouped in:

activation value, commons value, care value, and transformative value. The challenge for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers is therefore to consider how temporary communities create, negotiate, and distribute value over time and empower these communities through different temporalities (short-term, medium-term, or long-term) according to different social needs and urban development trajectories.

Table 1. Overview of the contributions in the thematic issue Temporary Use and Value Creation in Urban Context.

Article Authors	Article Objective	Temporary Use Case Analysed	Case Location	Values and Impacts	Methods for Understanding Values
Mazzarella et al. (2026)	Investigate diverse economies generated by reusing vacant real estate	Collective Temporary Occupation	Brussels Capital Region, Belgium	Economic activation; transformative value CTOs as post-growth urban development labs	Comparative case analysis
Sanliturk and Schmidt (2026)	Rethink urban heritage through the concept of *urban fallows*	Vacant heritage buildings reframed as latent commons (*urban fallows*)	UK, Brazil, India, Japan, Serbia (based on Radical Heritage summer school)	Commons governance; transformative and future-making	Conceptual framework development informed by summer school research
Cordeiro et al. (2026)	Understand how temporal dynamics organise urban experience through the concept of *intermittence*	Intermittent urban practices	Lisbon, Portugal	Care and social reproduction; transformative and future-making	Comparative case analysis
Santos et al. (2026)	Understand the role of community-led initiatives in urban development processes	Community-led initiative	Rotterdam, Netherlands	Commons governance	Qualitative analysis through single case analysis; longitudinal action-research
Stadtlander et al. (2026)	Explore the role of public space in providing care for fluidly housed youth	Public/urban space use by fluidly housed youth	Brussels, Belgium	Care and social reproduction	Mixed-method approach
Bakunowitsch (2026)	Examine how justice is enacted within welfare–labour market activation initiatives via urban gardening	Publicly funded urban gardening project on temporarily leased plot	Dortmund, Germany	Care and social reproduction	Qualitative analysis through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis

Table 1. (Cont.) Overview of the contributions in the thematic issue Temporary Use and Value Creation in Urban Context.

Article Authors	Article Objective	Temporary Use Case Analysed	Case Location	Values and Impacts	Methods for Understanding Values
Regales and Simons (2026)	Explore long-lasting impacts of a street festival on a heritage site	Street festival	Willemstad, Curaçao	Economic activation; transformative and future-making	Case study analysis
Reijtenbagh et al. (2026)	Analyse how temporary use of/for public space can accelerate the circular economy	Temporary vacant public space used as material depot	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Economic activation (plural value)	Case study analysis
Casprini et al. (2026)	Conceptualise temporary uses as a means to co-create common spaces	Socio-cultural common reuse	Forlì, Italy	Commons and governance	Case study analysis
Connell-Variy et al. (2026)	Develop a toolkit to assess the short-term reuse potential of commercial assets	Vacant offices	Australia	Social, environmental, economic activation	Research output analysis

Thus, the articles in this thematic issue show the complex value of temporary communities and how it unfolds across different value dimensions, scales, and temporalities. Some impacts are immediate and tangible during the use, providing services to *users*, visitors, or residents. Other dimensions of value emerge gradually through the accumulation of trust, knowledge, social networks, collective identities, and capacities for self-organisation. When temporary use comes to an end, its effects persist through transformed perceptions of place and (sometimes) in transformed development trajectories.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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