

How 'temporary urbanism' can transform struggling industrial towns

August 18 2017, by Robin Chang



The city of Dortmund is seeking citizens' input on plans for this 44-hectare brownfield site of Hoesch Spundwand und Profil in Dortmund. Credit: Robin Chang, Author provided

What will become of manufacturing towns in a post-industrial world? From the Ruhr region of Germany to the American "Rust Belt", once-prosperous factory cities are today faced with dwindling industry, shrinking populations and fundamental questions about their role in the

modern global economy.

The population of Detroit, Michigan, for example, an auto manufacturing centre that was once one of the United States' largest cities, [has declined](#) from 1.85 million in 1950 to 675,000 in 2017.

Reinvigorating these [legacy cities](#), as they are sometimes called, is not easy – but it is not impossible. Based on my research in Europe, and inspired by the work of the urban planning nonprofit Die Urbanisten, located in my hometown of Dortmund, Germany, I have identified several innovative redevelopment models that may offer lessons for post-industrial cities across the globe.

These three movements focus on ephemeral, flexible solutions that are broadly applicable to any city seeking to reinvent faded manufacturing zones: [tactical urbanism](#), [sustainable landscapes](#) and the [tiny homes movement](#).

Temporary, tactical urbanism (Plantage 9, Bremen)

For decades, the [post-industrial harbour city](#) of Bremen, in Northern Germany, struggled to adapt to the socioeconomic ideals of the 21st century.

Today, it is known for the success of its [tactical urbanism-inspired](#) approaches. Officially coined by the [Street Plans Collaborative](#), this approach broadly encompasses all short-term, low-cost, scalable measures that instigate longer-term, community-building change.

In Bremen, the [ZwischeZeitZentrale \(ZZZ\)](#), a local organisation set up to work as a project middlemen, set out to match underutilised urban spaces in Bremen with projects in need of a home.

One result was [Plantage 9](#), an old textile factory turned culture and innovation hub with over 30 independent, creative and entrepreneurial temporary users, including a food-truck kitchen, bike repair workshop, and studios and galleries for young artists.

Some of these businesses stayed for less than two years. Others remained, and in 2012 these users negotiated a new lease and management contract between the city and the collective. Plantage 9 has gone from a pilot project to a community association with an ongoing role in the city's cultural life.

This temporary urbanism experiment succeeded in large part because of citizen engagement. ZZZ played a moderator role between citizens and the municipality, working with a cook, a bicycle mechanic, students, teachers, photographers and filmmakers, among other Bremen residents, to conceptualise and coordinate these tactical initiatives.

As Plantage 9-style matchmaking revitalised lifeless spaces with exciting projects, Bremen's national reputation has changed, too – from struggling post-industrial city to dynamic urban innovator.

Sustainable landscapes (Zomerhofkwartier, Rotterdam)

Local residents in Rotterdam, Netherlands, have also cultivated comprehensive urban revitalisation processes in one neglected neighbourhood. The result: [Zomerhofkwartier, aka Zoho](#), the new face of a former industrial area near the city's central train station.

Originally conceived as a temporary project by the group ZOHOCITZENS in 2013, Zoho now includes permanent co-working spaces, along with studios that host events, classes, green spaces. Already

in this decade-long process that its developers have dubbed "[slow urbanism](#)", the area has matured into one of Rotterdam's core makers' district.



Plantage 9 in Bremen. Credit: Robin Chang

Zoho's innovations include [climate-proofing](#), and the site serves as an urban laboratory for ecological adaption and transition. Thus far, the project has implemented water collection, storage systems in public spaces, green roofs, urban gardens, and the reduction of hard surfaces.

The ultimate goal is to increase the whole district's ecological resiliency and the socioeconomic vitality of the district through the micro-greening of the specific locations in the urban concrete fabric.

Tiny Houses (Berlin)

The [Tiny House Movement](#), which relies on small modular units that recall images of cottages, has ballooned in the aftermath of the US housing crises as an alternative for affordable housing. These wee residences, which are sometimes standalone and other times secondary units, have even inspired an American TV show, "[Tiny House. Big Living](#)".

This movement is firmly established in North America, but is still developing on the European continent (as this [tiny house map](#) confirms).

While the typical context for tiny homes is residential, the [Bauhaus Campus Berlin](#) collaboration between the Tinyhouse University and Bauhaus Archive from the Museum of Design in Berlin is demonstrating how these units can temporarily reconceive unused spaces for social justice, learning and research.

Inspired by the challenges with providing housing for new residents and refugees in Germany, for example, the project established in early 2017 an educational forum and workshop that allows people to learn how to build their on tiny homes.

Recently featured in [German media](#) alongside other similar projects, Bauhaus Campus Berlin includes 12 [tiny homes](#) on the front lawn of the museum and promotes tiny house building through design crash courses, panel discussions, and other cultural gatherings.

Scaling innovation

These European narratives reveal resilient trajectories of temporary urbanism, comprehensively coordinated at the neighbourhood scale,

using informality to engage citizens and ensure that municipal governments respond effectively and inclusively to contemporary urban quandaries.

Temporary use [at the street and neighbourhood level](#) in its diverse range of formats are not limited to post-industrial cities, nor are they confined to Europe. Denver, Colorado, for example, took a tactical approach to launch [one of the US's first large-scale modern bike share systems](#) in a highly automobile-dependent city.

And Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, included pop-up landscapes as part of [the revitalisation of its Delaware River waterfront](#), engaging entrepreneurial municipal officials, urban planning agencies, and landscape designers to strategically harness and catalyse investment.

Something is working. But from a scholarly perspective, however, we still know little about the mix of enablers and drivers that inspire such transformative moments. What, exactly, are the factors that make one temporary urbanism project succeed where another fails?

Much critical literature seems stuck on questioning whether the ephemeral has just as much impact as the planned, and whether citizens are as entitled to create effective urban revitalisation as professional planners are. And most current research on temporary use is descriptive or expository – narrating and cataloguing the process and types of users, formats and instruments seen in tactical initiatives.

Critical scepticism is healthy to understanding the change. But I believe that this adaptive practice is the next frontier in [city](#) planning.

Ultimately, we have to work backwards to measure the specific dash, dosage, amount and numbers of specifically defined stakeholders, processes, and mechanisms necessary to replicate those results and

develop pre-configured "recipes" for more resilient temporary urbanism.

By deconstructing the successful conditions and their combinations can we help cities across the globe build new and modern futures for their residents.

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