

# Temporary Active-Actions as Urban re-appropriation strategies

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From 2005, is promoter of PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE @ POLIMI, a research & operative group that puts the resources of Architecture in the service of the Public Interest. Identifying and proposing solutions for practical problems of human interaction with built environment, but also acting as a catalyst for public discourse through the design of public spaces and services for a better dwelling.

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Places&Themes of Interiors, Milano 2008, eds. together with alt.; The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum, Milano 2005; 100 Houses, Kolon, 2003 (new ed. 2007); Sigurd Lewerentz. Complete Work, Milano 2001/New York 2002, with Flora N., Giardiello P.; Sverre Fehn. Complete Work, Milano/New York/Oslo 1997 (new ed. 2007), with C. Norberg-Schulz.

## Abstract

The erasure from the collective memory of the image, presence and vitality of an urban space is a painful act. Reasons for such dissolutions are multiple: ideology, alteration, progress and, in general, change. Architects and designers have the mission to properly question this erasure. They can develop the capacity to turn this erasure into a powerful source of creativity.

The paper approaches the forgotten urban spaces (mainly the temporary dismissed) through identification, analysis and architectural temporary recovery. These urban spaces may be of the most different kinds: squares, streets, dismissed buildings and/or abandoned plots, small and large sites or industrial compounds and so on. Observation, analyses and proposals for recovery methods address the inventory of problems as well as possible attitudes of intervention. Consequently, this theme might reveal a diversity of cases and approaches that bear witness of the cultural richness embedded in the hidden realms of collective memory. In a 21st century that is overwhelmed by image, information and dynamism, it is particularly important for architects and designers to assume the special role of the creative recovery of forgotten spaces.

## **“A minor geography”: enabling practices for the city social construction<sup>1</sup>**

The urban and metropolitan landscape is no longer defined as "secure and stable place of contemplation, but presents itself as a mobile device and continually altered" (Gravano, 2008). Looking at our cities is possible to see weak but constant upheavals that tend to make explicit and visible forms of resistance and other urban activities. Of such practices is historically possible to identify a cultural model in the initial appropriation of public spaces of the Parisian *flâneur* and his walks through the labyrinthine *passage*, which converted the streets into *interieur*, and in the Situationist International drifts which used maps and topography of the transitional spaces, not just to "fix" the territory, but to change it too radically, transforming the essential structures such as architecture and city planning basing on the subjective perceptual experience (Debord, 1958).

In the contemporary age, the active practice of the metropolitan space has become more structural and more involved and widespread, with a view necessarily welcoming and inclusive.

The city is increasingly seen as an experiential field (Scotini, 2003) and these processes have become more mature and culturally aware, and sensitive as well as to read, interpret and implement the system of some opportunities offered from the urban context, taking both meta-design actions, aimed at the recognition of the value and potential of public spaces, through a descriptive approach (Dematteis, 1995) in reading, decoding and *context providing*<sup>2</sup> of opportunity, and more properly planning actions aimed at activating these spaces: in this sense, dismissed space and abandoned places, unused areas, from being "swamped places" outside the official maps, they become the paradigmatic example of urban spaces to be filled with meaning, value and shape, and opportunities for creative re-signification and appropriation of the city.

These occupation, appropriation and activation actions often tend to draw in the urban fabric a “minor geography” capable of giving visibility and responses to the needs and forgotten desires of an “insurgent” city looking for structures, which is not understood in an exclusively subversive or protesting sense, but as a collective intentionality careful to offer multiple points of view, to give voice to communities that would otherwise be invisible, connecting people, culture, places in a common “discourse” about the social construction of the city, its identity and memory, through the rehabilitation of deleted tracks and abandoned places. According to Sennett, communities “*make uses of disorder*” to trigger their personal identity in the city life (Sennett, 1970).

For this very reason, however, these processes are far from being voluntarily negotiating: left adrift, must layer them on the existing city pervasively but isolated, creating differences rather than plural identities, fractures and urban “solo” whose autonomy could lead to tension, while, if regimented in processes that tend to their standards or control, progressively lose their charge of vitality and experimentation. It is therefore necessary to map the virtuous experience currently ongoing and enable these processes through the planning of design strategies: on one hand, we must develop a paradigm of coexistence between new and existing, and

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<sup>1</sup> This section was compiled by Eleonora Lupo.

<sup>2</sup> By *context providing* we mean a creative process able to produce a context; it is a device producing opportunities solutions and contents.

working on establishing relationships in the urban fabric, on the other hand we must turn participatory design tools and active listening (Selavi 2003, 2007) which stimulate but especially empower the community participation in the practices of city use, while respecting diversity.

The processes of city social construction and re-signification can assume a positive connotation, regarding their negotiations and sustainability, if leveraging on a concept of individual and collective practice that becomes dimension of urban participation, ownership and use of places and public spaces, collective design of relations and conscious expression of plural identities, in a constant process of self-recognition and self-experimentation.

It is therefore an "relational-aesthetics act" (Bourriaud, 1998), a set of practices enabling communities, places and identities, that privilege, in their temporary nature, a widespread aesthetic that involves people in the design of cities through art, design, architecture and city planning: it is often an empirical act, precarious, situational or playful, but is also capable of performing and conforming the space. All these experiences are indeed united by being actions planned in which the more or less temporary intervention nature (from extemporaneous to semi-permanent), or performance, takes a positive value because it is capable of producing a lasting effect over time. Being designed interventions, even if temporary they need to deal with some kinds of bonds and commitments, like spatial gages or economical ones, that makes them more similar to voluntary and conscious actions than extemporaneous ones.

Some of the most significant and distinctive qualities of this urban re-appropriation strategies in fact are:

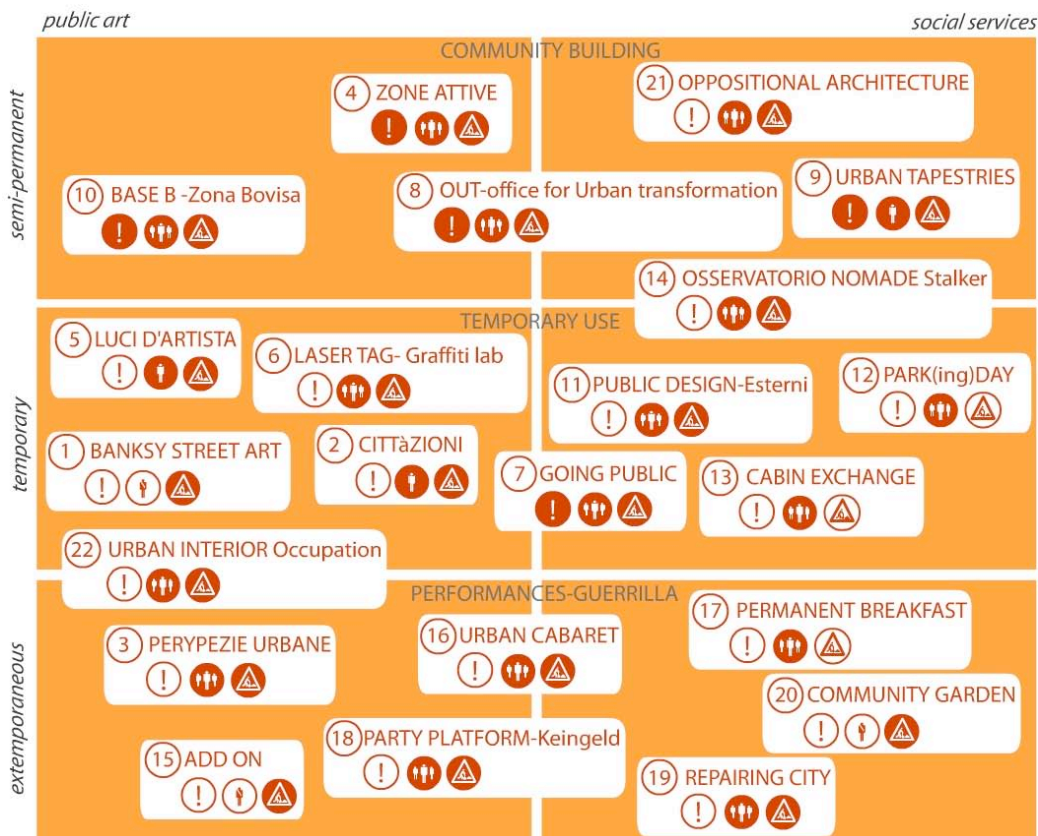
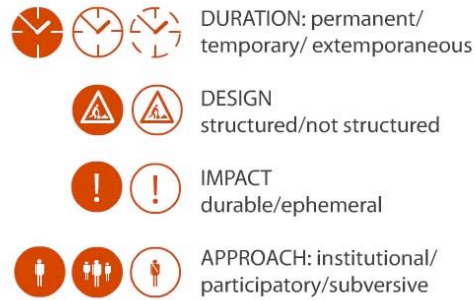
1. The ability to work (and therefore to produce significant impacts, directly and in real time), on social transformations, through self-organization in "territorial laboratories" of networking and involvement of various social actors: although this actions are mainly temporary conversion, recovery and reuse, they are capable of generating consequences that are not ephemeral but permanent and consistent, investing not so much the physical and material realms but intangible aspects as community building (identity and sense of belonging) (i. e. refer to n°8 –OUT and n° 11- PUBLIC DESIGN in the img. 01);
2. The ability to trigger innovation processes from the social creativity, in other words by people collective involvement: these practices describe new subjective geographies in which the emphasis on the individual is associated, however, at the potential of collective actions that expand the concept of authorship to that one of participation, in a virtuous mixture between private and public dimension (i. e. refer to n°11 – PARKingDAY or n°16- PERMANENT BREAKFAST in the img. 01);
3. The emblematicity and sustainability (especially relevant and distinctive for this paper focus, but not meant to be considered as the only possibility) of a methodological process careful to pick the weaker signals and therefore often tending to focus on and re-use residual places, transiting spaces and areas still only potentially significant within the dynamics of the city and urban resources management, voids that, in an extended concept of the term, are dismissed, derelict and abandoned, not only in the sense of physical use and function, but even in a metaphorical sense and meaning, and can become instead the main subject of the representation of possible and practicable development and exploitation of scenarios (in this sense, they are also applicable to the recovery of small towns subject to abandonment and depopulation) (i. e. refer to n°14

–OSSERVATORIO NOMADE and n°19 –CAIRO REPAIRING CITY in the img. 01);

4. The various processes of the “empty spaces” recovery, and their activation goals scales and gradients of depth, which range from acts of pure challenge to advocacy and empowerment activities of infrastructural facilities using a sort of “repairing process” (Navarra, 2008): these interventions are divided into (not necessarily consequential) actions of safety and availability maintenance, design (i. e. through decoration) of aesthetic experiences of appreciation related to the expressive qualities and communicative vocation of the place (i. e. refer to n°15 –ADD ON and n°6- GRAFFITI LAB in the img. 01) and ultimately improvement of their use value and functionalization (i. e. refer to n°13 –CABIN EXCHANGE and n°18- PARTY PLATFORM in the img. 01);
5. The multiple approaches, logics, tools and techniques of intervention, introducing a fusion between art, design, architecture and urban design through a concept of performance, urban happening, event or site-specific service designed to create, substantially bottom-up, “spaces of democracy”: by one hand there is an approach that is in the array of art and then in conversational and public art references for the dialogue between aesthetic experience and collective poetic imagination for the innovation of languages, technologies and behaviors (Zanfi, 2003, Birrozzi, Pugliese, 2007, Altarelli, 2006, Ottaviani, 2007, Galal, 2009) (i. e. refer to n°2 –CITTÀZIONI in the img. 01), by the other hand a guidance that makes the social innovation practices and the design of collaborative services and public design the foundation of its action, in a context where cities and creative communities are platforms for the design of new collective social and cultural scenarios (Manzini, Jegou, 2008, Meroni, 2007, Carta, 2007, Landry, 2000) (i. e. refer to n°7 –GOING PUBLIC in the img. 01);
6. The potentiality of networking in a physical system of connections and relations also with the use of technology and digital devices: from the virtual relief and mapping of these dense and sensible places in the city (i. e. refer to n°9 –URBAN TAPESTRIES in the img. 01);, to their systematization into a diffused and connected system or collaboration and cooperation.

Particularly we like to emphasize here that, rather than an artistic component per se, it is the aesthetic and relational value which gives force to these interventions and underlines their political vocation: precisely because they are potentially perceived as “soft” actions that do not impose deliberately transformations, but simply make them possible, providing structures and contexts that allow the hybridation of institutional projects to self-produced and more spontaneous activities, they manage to be disruptive and effective in generating positive changes, ranging from places re-functionalization to better integration and social cohesion.

## URBAN SPACE OCCUPATION- APPROPRIATION- ACTIVATION CREATIVE PRACTICES



**Img. 01- Map of occupation-appropriation creative practices<sup>3</sup>**

There are many contemporary examples of public design and public art with an enabling and participatory approach on collective areas. In these actions, the public space becomes new means of exchange and recognition practices through the metaphor of the (not) common place, understood as a space full of memories and meanings determined by individual and social relations, but also as a shared place where different cultural instances find a field of comparison and encounter, while respecting differences.

In these experiences the creative appropriation and occupation of spaces becomes a social engine of the community: it is a logic that moves the action from a simple location in the community, to an asset for the community with the community, an action that in itself creates community (Toscano, 2004). Interventions use a perspective of social empowerment, with emphasis on self-determination and recovery of individual and collective capacity, “in opposition to a system that requires inspection and approval” (Pietromarchi, 2005). The city becomes a “interacting system of multicultural communities, capable of expressing different

<sup>3</sup> For reference to the examples in the map see the web Reference at the end of the paper.

forms of urban life” and permitting the coexistence of the material city of the places and the intangible city of flows and relationships.

The concept of temporary is conceived as a positive idea of improvisation and approximation in which the values and characteristics of lightness, transience, mobility and instability reflect a condition of greater freedom, experimentation and cultural cohabitation proposing a city centered on humans and set up a human scale. The metaphor of exhibition and setting up becomes the paradigm of reversibility and convertibility of a contemporary “light city” (Altarelli, 2006), in order to encourage opportunities for reuse through potentially democratic activities and facilities. These are collected in a list of equipment called “dot-actions”<sup>4</sup> from which national governments and private citizens can freely draw inspiration: in this sense, processes of appropriation of public space are real incubators for a “creative city” (Landry, 2000), whose success will be determined by the ability to recreate a sense of citizenship (the genius loci, the continuity of traditions, security and the ability to imagine the future) and simultaneously maximizing some specific opportunities to create real networks of local identities (Carta, 2004, 2007).

### **Berlin: a Case Study<sup>5</sup>**

Berlin is an emblematic context of observation for urban appropriation contemporary strategies: it can be seen, from an unconventional point of view, as a pathway of bubbles emerging from a lively and creative fabric, among the metropolis’ forgotten spaces, behind the curtains of the city as seen from the inside out. The city is nowadays a reference for proposing and arranging exemplary new colonization ways for these spaces, that already represent a fertile ground for the apparently chaotic generation of temporary activities that actually stem from active involvement of the dwellers recapturing their own city.

Strolling along the streets of Berlin today it’s impossible to ignore the presence of several spaces made up of nothing but emptiness, heritage of time: they just catch the eye by their non-existence, due to destruction or non-construction. Such spatial particles spread out in a capillary manner, and the different scattered spaces have a lot in common: a lack of functionality, being made up of raw material that can be identified in their simple structure or skeleton, having immediate visual impact and therefore a potentially direct accessibility. They serve no purpose, as non-built grounds, abandoned places, dismissed spaces or simply temporary pauses between building phases; they originated from World War II bombings, and later were filled up only partially during reconstruction, following previously existing schemes. They are raw material, being marked off by surrounding objects only, by blind walls of neighbouring buildings that unmistakably define their presence. Such elements constitute an external skeleton, an almost supporting structure for new proposing

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<sup>4</sup> In Italian facilities or equipment can be translated with the word "dotazione", that has an assonance with the word "azione", meaning action. There is a play on words that sounds like "facility for action" or better "dowry for action", that gets lost in translation. We propose the term dot-actions in this sense of tools for/points of action.

<sup>5</sup> This section was compiled by Gennaro Postiglione, as a result of an urban exploration workshop organized in November 2007. Students at the Faculty of Architecture and Society of the Politecnico di Milano also participated: Marta Balestrieri, Alessio Casiraghi, Maria Soo-Ran Accorsi, Francesca Guarascio, Alberto Clerici, Paola Di Salvo, Sirene Papadimistru, Maria Elena Soriero, Benedetta Sartori, Giulia Urciuoli, Andrea Pezzoli, Claudia Moranti, marta Vitali, Roberta Filippini, Alessandro Colli, maria Luisa Daglia, Matteo Perin, Silvia Fanoni, Federico Cabrini. Senior students Gabriele Corbetta and Benedetta Cremaschi cooperated in organizing the workshop, while Agostino Petrillo, Urban Sociology professor, contributed to the development of explorations by the students.

actions.

The basic material is nothing but neglected soil, where nature slowly re-conquers its positions. They have an immediate visual impact: open wounds are very easily spotted among buildings, as a brutal interruption of the construction continuum, as gaps or holes that allow a peek into what is happening inside the block. They invite us to enter, following our glance.

Some of these spaces host structures that temporarily occupy empty spaces, architectures conceived not for filling up empty rooms, but rather for repossessing them and giving them back life and function as public spaces or meeting spaces. The common rationale consists in injecting new meanings into these spaces, while waiting for a new permanent occupation – following the stream of the spontaneous phenomenon of temporary activity – stimulating action, furnishing the spaces and making them newly available.

Being aware of this, a field research workshop has been organized to study the urban space repossession phenomenon by means of different techniques: interviews, videos, pictures, canonical architectural representations, and any other form useful for narrating all the slight transformations that characterize several abandoned spaces in Berlin. So, a short journey within this network of well-rooted activities has been planned and developed, rather than to the ground, to the very sociality of the functions that again manifest themselves each time as vital, to generate interaction among people.

As a result, a catalogue of examples has been produced from the survey recognition: the interventions are varied, they can be movable or rooted, reversible, modifiable or adjustable to different uses, according to the success of the activities or to the destination of the ground. The city of Berlin makes available innumerable and well-established temporary and spontaneous initiatives, that have been generating real and tangible do-it-yourself cultures through the last decades, and the identification and mapping of these strategies of gradually giving back life to the spaces by the users themselves, shows a particular and promising cultural substrate of enabling way that have not to go through the channels defined by “classic” planning, which on the contrary is aimed at an immediate achievement of a finished products. We think that telling a story about the life of these places, exploring, investigating and mapping them with the eyes of those who lived them, even for a few moments, has been really inspiring and helpful for other appropriation processes.

Our mapping presents cases of urban empty spaces, that nobody would otherwise currently exploits, used to give room to initiatives by citizens, in a context where owners and potential users are accustomed to the idea of using spaces in a non-permanent way with mutual benefits. In addition, since temporary use contracts exist and are stipulated in Berlin, citizens have chance for realizing their ideas on some space in a simple and legal manner. We present here only three paradigmatic examples, quoting their start-up and realization processes, their results and impact on the local territory as exemplary of the overall catalogue.

### *1. Ein platz fur Marie*

*Process&goals:* In the place of a dismissed and demolished fire station in the area of Prenzlauer Berg, some citizens, reunited in an association and supported by the resident, proposed to re-functionalize the area establishing in 1998 a **children playground and park**, negotiating with the land owner a temporary use

contract lasting ten years, with the approval of the institutional local district body. One architecture studio has been involved to help the resident in designing the activities of the 0-12 years old kids playground: post school activities, sports and creativity laboratories.

*Approach&Results:* The intervention is focused on providing a public service. Some private backers supplied the infrastructure to make the playground available. After ten years, in the 2008, having the initiative been really successful, the temporary contract has been renewed for the next ten years and the re-used area extended and the park implemented for children up to 16 years too.

*Impact:* in the surrounding different initiatives and various other playgrounds have been realized basing on the experience of Marie's park and a district association called *Netzwerk* has been founded too with the mission of qualifying public spaces for people uses, generating an impact both on the physical side and on the intangible one, especially in the creation of a potential network of children parks.



Img. 02- Ein Platz fur Marie, Berlin

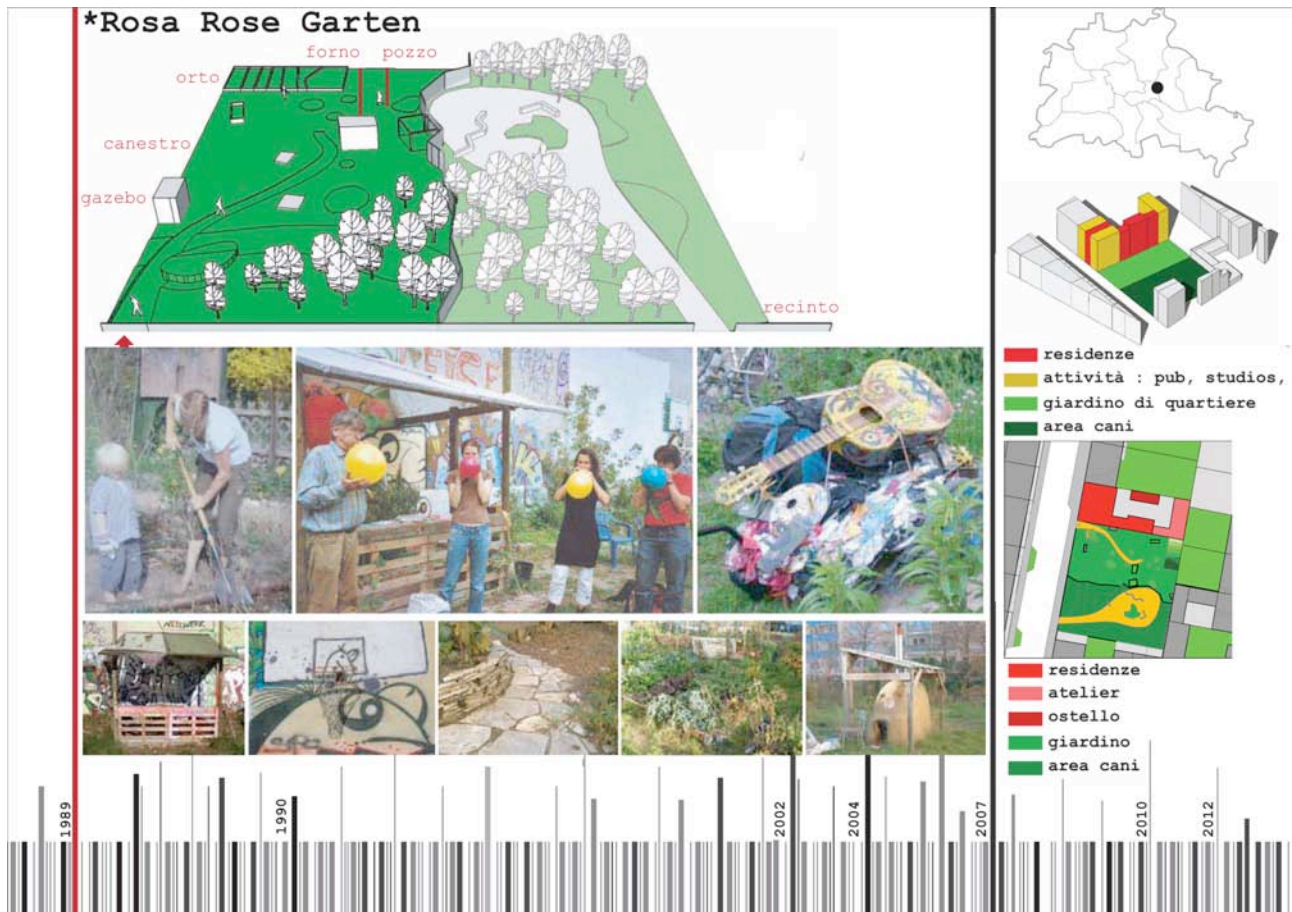
## 2. Rosa Rose Garten

*Process&goals:* a **neighborhood garden** has been conceived by the local community and district in an area close to Friedrichshain, previously occupied by social housing (demolished) and squatted apartment, initiated when the municipality decided to entitle the use of the occupied houses and to clean the area. The community garden has been completely designed and realized by local people and equipped with different structures likes gazebos, public oven and well, to permit different activities like parties and playground, apart from gardening.



*Approach&Results:* The area is now divided in two parts that are mainly conceived to provide simple social platforms, more than services, meaning that thanks to the minimal infrastructures at disposal people can use freely the area to organize collective dinings, barbeques, children parties and so on. They use internet to share each other the initiatives and to invite friends.

*Impact:* The laying of a simple fence has been able to protect and incentive the use of the area, that is now lively and frequented especially in summer, so this can be also explanatory about the need of identifying a first space appropriation element (temporary and movable) as “declarative” starting point of the process.



**Img. 03- Rosa Rose Garten, Berlin**

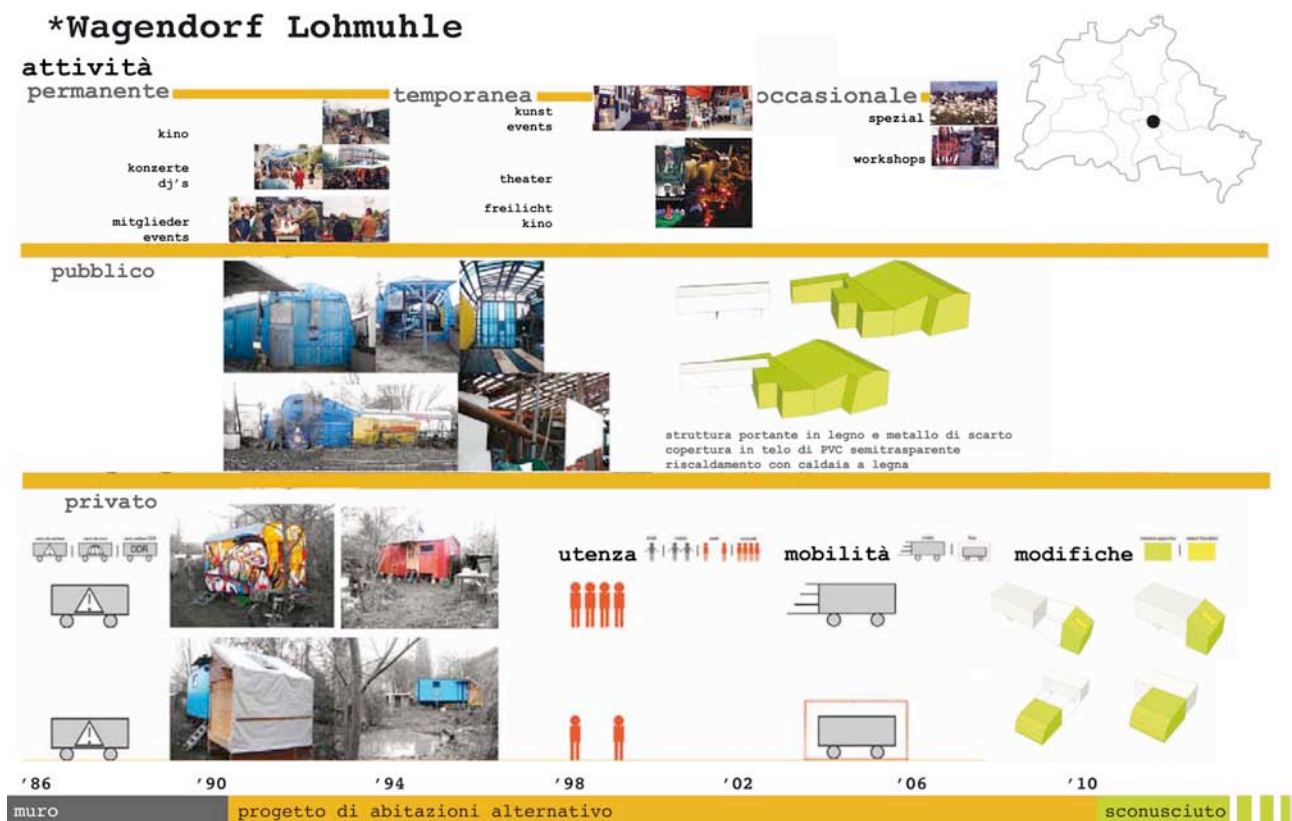
### 3. Wagendorf Lohmuhle

*Process&goals:* In the place of an abandoned area resulted from the demolition of the Berlin wall and previously occupied by illegal camp structures, the initial occupants negotiated with the municipality the possibility of providing collective **aggregation activities** to the surrounding residents, in exchange for getting the loan for use for free of the area for ten years. They were also authorized to establish their **alternative social housing village** to enlarge the community and reinforce the dialogue with the district residents.

*Approach&Results:* This activation process experimented both the use of artistic and cultural interventions and the creation of social services. The use of self-constructed and low budget temporary structures

supported the definition and provision of a very articulated program of cultural and artistic activities, called “Experimentcity” and divided into permanent (cinema, concerts), temporary (theatre, artistic events) and extemporaneous ones (special events). They used abandoned railway coaches still available in the area since the pre-existence of a train station, was the low cost strategy in order to equip the area with temporary residences.

*Impact:* The experimentation aroused the interest of the surrounding residents and their participation demonstrating the possibility of a democratic and pacific co-existence driven by a realm of social creativity and innovation by collective involvement; a cultural association called *Kultur* has been founded too.



Img. 04- Wagendorf Lohmuhle, Berlin

## Conclusion<sup>6</sup>

Evaluating examples and case studies, we observe that a quite long time is needed to embed in an integrated and not hostile way those processes in the existing context and to prove and settle them as successful participative strategies, because social and cultural changes require often negotiation processes and times longer than the ones acceptable by a community, and it's necessary to make them synchronic for people understanding.

Involving the City Council as a mediator between owners and users can be a winning strategy. In order to be a valid proposal, also from the point of view of the city administration, the result of the temporary exploitation process must have high quality, whence the idea of an architectural tender for the available

<sup>6</sup> This section has been compiled by Eleonora Lupo and Gennaro Postiglione.

spaces. Once tested and verified, according to the citizens' needs and requirements, this temporary reuse process initiated by local community and supported by municipality could be standardized to be executed in different places including these seven steps: Identification, Information, Consulting, Deciding, Summoning, Executing, Substituting.

This hypothesis, evolving as verification of the process to be set forth as an example of a possible temporary use, proposes a diversification of the surfaces to be used, which will turn into a combinatory opportunity for spatial and environmental situations: an ample array of exploitation options is configured by coordinating equipment systems and available surfaces.

In such a process, designers and architects play a significant role in the ethical awareness and reflection, commitment and responsibility to become building agents of a shared identity, dis-veiling issues and real problems, or emergencies, for the collective consciousness.

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OUT-Office for Urban Transformation: <http://www.isolartcenter.org/> (8)

PARK(ing)DAY: <http://www.parkingday.org/> (13)

Party platform: <http://keingeld.at/> (18)

Permanent breakfast: <http://www.p-breakfast.net/> (17)

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PUBLIC DESIGN-Esterni: <http://www.designpubblico.it> (11)

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Urban Interior Occupation: <http://www.urbaninterior.net/> - <http://www.urbaninterior.net/berlin> (22)

Urban tapestries: - <http://urbantapestries.net/> (9)

Zone attive: <http://www.zoneattive.it/> (4)