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## Zeitschriftenartikel

»Free Riga!«

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# FREE RIGA!

Jonas Büchel

The history of the Empty Spaces Network in Riga is also the history of the Free Riga 2014 movement. Developments since summer 2013 highlight the situation and status of the public discussion relating to re-purposing or re-usage of vacant spaces, above all in the context of contemporary and independent cultural work in Riga.

When the Empty Spaces Network organized its first workshop in the Goethe-Institut in Riga in June 2013 with the participation of international and Latvian culture managers and urbanists, the 2014 opening of the European Capital of Culture Riga was just around the corner, preceded by half a year of numerous meetings of the culture managers in the Network, discussions with policy-makers, urban development decision-makers and other actors and persons interested in the urban process. The local actors in the Network were aware that in Riga the space needed for art, cultural work and social cultural activity is not available. A lively and strong program by the European Capital of Culture 2014 could not belie the fact that spaces for exhibitions, actions and the independent culture industry was either extremely limited or not available at all.

However, in the Network's discussions another point from among the group's diverse interpretations and points of view crystallized – the complete absence of both urban and governmental cultural planning, an comprehensive vision of the development of the culture industry in Latvia and all the more so in Riga. Among the most affected: independent cultural centers, young people who often represent only informally organized initiatives and interests, contemporary art, alternative socio-cultural projects, in the final analysis all of the actors with the potential to change a city. People who open up the atmospheric and social spaces so urgently needed for change and that so-often invoked change management.

At the same time, a process of transformation particularly involving these spaces pervaded and pervades Riga as has no other eastern European metropolis – until recently, the city's mental map only knew minimally developed alternative-living structures or alternative approaches to political and social action. In the wake of an economic and financial crisis that truly hit Latvia like a social bomb, a critical mass of urban and cultural actors emerged for the very first time. People who were ready and willing to open up spaces and niches. A different attitude on the part of the inhabitants towards their city, with a more open-minded perception, intervening in the process of urban evolution, a quality of awareness that not only puts in question the overall guidelines for planning and shaping

the city, but is also ready and willing to actively engage in this shaping.

In early summer of 2013, a new dynamism entered the network – several participants agreed that the group needed to establish greater connection to the public, the issue of vacant sites and lack of space for activities in the cultural sector had to be put forward more strongly. Perhaps the group should even develop a more proactive public profile. The city needed examples of an altered form of site use and of new models of urban action.

The summer came, the annual art festival Survival Kit approached and in the otherwise so quiet north-eastern European urban summer a group of activists, among them participants from the Empty Spaces Network as well as persons with a long-standing interest in the issue of empty spaces, was seething and bubbling behind the doors of the contemporary Latvian art center. The group had committed itself to encounter the issue of vacant space in Riga, at least in the vicinity of the city center, with the means of urban activism: then, suddenly and overnight, shortly after the opening of the art festival, "Occupy Me"-stickers were to be seen on many an empty building and object. Shortly thereafter, the group, which until then had acted cautiously, appeared in social networks under the name Free Riga 2014 and an astonishing reaction occurred: within a few days, the group's popularity jumped to a thousand and more interested persons. But the reaction was not only virtual – a meeting convened in September in the Kanepes Kulturas Centrs was overrun with young people with an interest in their city, in the cultural, social and physical particularities of their environment. In the course of the following weeks, a young social movement evolved out of this concept that dominated the social, political and media landscape of Riga in the second half of 2013 and the first months of 2014. Up to this point no one had reckoned with such a great interest in this issue. Here, urban development served as a perfect incubator for social and political sentiments and interests.

The idea emerged from the movement that empty sites must be mapped, that young people should call attention to their cultural interests, that the group should have a stronger public profile, that the issue must be discussed with both private and public owners, an open social dialog was urgently needed! This had far-reaching consequences for its social quality: a new generation of city dwellers with completely different interests from what had been until now assumed by planners is articulating itself not only towards decision-makers and politicians, but also with itself, thus creating

a positively connoted urban identity among young people.

In any event, Riga has evolved to the extent that at least a few politicians have grasped the trend and have intervened energetically in the dialog and have even taken part in Free Riga meetings.

Here, what is of interest is that in the subsequent course of development, after the movement had proactively sought opportunities for testing new and interim usages and called upon the public to designate buildings, above all private owners approached the group. Owners who perhaps had long been searching for options to positively up-value their buildings by means of an interim usage solution, or as the case may be, transferring an object to the initiative on a long-term basis.

In the meanwhile, a large, vacant post-industrial object by the Tallinnas iela, on the immediate outskirts of the city center and located in the neighborhood of one of the first alternative city quarters came into the center of the group's attention. One of the Network actors had noticed the complex for some time already and now the group began to actively concern itself with the city-owned facility.

A truly incredible spectacle about the interim use of the property set in: the city administration, under intense pressure since now the art festival Survival Kit was also expressing interest in the facility for the sixth edition of the festival in September 2014 – the theme of this year's festival could be no more impressively presented in Riga than on this location with over 20 individual buildings, an area of approx. 10,000m<sup>2</sup> and an immense usage potential for art and culture.

In October 2013, the Empty Spaces Network organized a further, even more strongly represented and attended public conference on the issue of interim and temporary usage. Participants in the group engaged themselves parallel to this and organized a master class on the theme of temporary use with a spatial artist and architect on the site.

After the turn of the year came inspections of the site, various meetings with the head of the city's property registry and the increasing use of media and urban divings which sought to win over other interested persons for the complex on weekends, and to generate more publicity.

The grounds, an old parking lot for ambulances and police cars of the City of Riga, which had lain empty for a few years, could serve not only in the urban context, as a connection between two streets, quasi as a passage for art and culture, but also as a spatial, district-level social incubator. A neighborhood center at this location makes

a great deal of sense, in particular in view of the high rate of homelessness and people in immediate social need in the surroundings. In addition, some of the buildings, above all the administration building facing the street have a cultural and historical value that as yet has not even been investigated.

The facility's size, structure, complexity and the attractive connection to urban space, in the direct vicinity of an old chocolate factory, near one of Riga's most important and largest maternity hospitals, and even now with relatively high-quality and popular cultural offerings at the highly frequented Miera iela offer a potential that, with a cultural usage, will greatly surpass in the future what has been envisioned to date.

Since the developments of recent months have resulted in interest in Riga's vacant sites increasing to such a great extent, a further effect has now entered upon the scene. Spaces that until now seem at all as even coming close to use are suddenly accessible to artists, as just recently in the case of one of the city's highest buildings, the former Press and Publishing Building directly on the bank of the Daugava River across from the city centre, which shortly before the completion of this article was at least in part taken over by one of the most important actors in the art industry.

Together with other existing cultural and social movements, the Empty Spaces Network is seeking to focus public attention on vacant space in Riga. The process of re-thinking, both on the part of the municipality and above all private investors and owners, has taken on a dramatically rapid development. The example of the old city parking lot at the Tallinnas iela can serve as an example here; over 20 buildings of completely different quality are already on the Free Riga movement's list: apartment buildings, smaller-scale commercial buildings, culturally and historically valuable wooden buildings, old educational facilities, and the number of persons with an interest in repurposing is continually increasing. But what was and is most important for all parties involved is the sudden increase in readiness to of people to engage themselves for the urban environment, urban space, to actively co-shape our living environment, to be an actor in and for urban space.

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Occupy me! The stickers of the Free Riga movement indicate empty spaces © Kevin Josse