

new ideas for OLD BUILDINGS

Guidelines on better use of vacant public property

A quarter of European population lives in small and medium-sized towns and cities. While facing a variety of challenges, these cities often enjoy a high quality of life and many untapped potentials, which should be acknowledged.

Public property is one of the tools left to small and medium-sized towns and cities in order to steer their development.

The guidelines on better use of vacant public property have been developed by NIFOB¹.



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LOOK AHEAD

1. Develop a widely accepted vision of the city

Having a clear picture about the desired future of the city helps to guide decisions about public property. It is of crucial importance that this vision is co-designed, widely accepted, and shared among key stakeholders and citizens. The vision can also include strategic goals in relation to regeneration of old buildings. Implementation of some of these goals should follow soon in order to promote the potentials of new use of public property in local communities.

2. Plan for change

Although one cannot expect some changes in the broader environment, such as natural disasters, political or economic crises, many changes can be anticipated. Most key decisions about public infrastructure needs, such as schools, kindergartens, or public housing, depend on population growth figures, which can be projected in the long term. This is essential for any planning process and can support decision-making about the future use of public property.

3. Maintain records of public property

Public property management is often distributed among various administrative levels, departments, and public companies. Therefore, having a reliable record of all public property in a city is sometimes far from an easy task. Nevertheless, in order to make good use of public property it is very important that these records are established, regularly updated, transparent, and publicly accessible. Open-source online GIS-based tools can be used to update the records through public participation. Using crowdsourcing methods, property can be categorized in terms of physical condition and potential uses.

4. Support civil society organizations

Active civil society is every city's true treasure. Nurture good relations with the civic society as it has a great potential to improve and complement public services. Therefore, it is wise to support civil society organizations and active citizens both pragmatically and through long-term systemic cooperation. This includes free use of infrastructure and help to resolve legal, bureaucratic, and formal challenges as well as establishing long-term cooperation between municipal bodies on the one side and civil society organizations and communities on the other.

5. Use empty property in favour of the vulnerable groups

When deciding about future use of unused public property, it can first be offered to the vulnerable groups that need it most, such as homeless or migrants. This can include implementation of social programs that benefit vulnerable social groups.

6. Use cultural heritage as an advantage

Old buildings often offer exceptional architectural qualities that can be recognized as cultural heritage and cannot be found in new buildings. Although this is sometimes considered as an obstacle for new investments, many user groups find exceptional value in heritage buildings and even bind their identity to the heritage background of the building. They will thus pay special attention to the maintenance of buildings and their surroundings. Exceptional buildings also offer opportunities for exceptional contents and experiments.

7. Embrace temporary use

Empty spaces are often a result of stalled investments, waiting for a more ambitious redevelopment. While waiting for the planned investment, they can be temporarily put into productive use. This is beneficial for users, property owners (as it reduces maintenance costs) and neighbourhoods, as users are the best keepers of the surrounding areas.



8. Restrain from selling unused property

In the climate of permanent austerity, buildings are often one of the few remaining resources municipalities in many cities around Europe still have at their disposal. Although it is tempting to sell unused property, it only brings limited short-term gains. In contrast to selling, making property available to local communities and civil society groups that complement public services brings lasting benefits. Not only in terms of reducing social costs but also in terms of long-term economic gains.

TAKE CARE OF THE PROCESS

9. Support citizen participation in revitalization of empty buildings and spaces

Municipality is the service of its citizens; therefore, they should be directly involved in decisions about public property. Develop consultation procedures concerning desired use of empty property, in particular in relation to larger empty complexes. Inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes also builds upon their responsibility for the common good and encourages their involvement in revitalization and maintenance of public property. Nevertheless, the participative process needs to be designed well and the results of the process should be applied meaningfully.

10. Actively search for potential temporary users

Temporary use of public property has multiple benefits, but in smaller or declining towns and cities there is often not much demand for temporary use. Therefore, promote vacant property, actively search for potential users, and acknowledge the role of independent local actors and self-organised initiatives in relation to this.

11. Establish clear criteria for selection of users

When demand for empty spaces is ample, establish clear criteria and transparent procedures for the selection of users. Long-term goals and vision of the city should guide the criteria more than short-term economic gains. Citizens and various user groups can also be involved in the formulation of the criteria. Giving priority to user groups acting in the public interest can be one of the criteria.

12. Make small steps when revitalising large empty complexes

Larger complexes often present particular challenge for local communities, when looking for funding for renovation, for potential buyers, but also when searching for users. Thus, it is a good idea to put a complex in use step by step. It keeps things manageable and leaves some work to the snowball effect, as most probably one use will attract others and the complex will fill up gradually. In large complexes, it is important to ensure diversity of users and uses, particularly when long-term and temporary uses are combined.

13. Broker between private owners and potential users

When the demand by user groups, acting in the public interest, exceeds the extent of spaces the municipality can offer, take on the role of an intermediary and broker between private owners of empty property and potential users. As a public entity you can bridge the lack of trust, which often prevents private owners from leasing their property to civil society groups. The role of the intermediary can be delegated to another organisation, such as an NGO, who can operate more flexibly and with less formal restraints.



MANAGE AND GOVERN IN AN OPEN AND FLEXIBLE WAY

14. Support networking among users

When several user groups and organizations share a building, it is very important that they establish good working relations and even synergies. This can greatly reduce the hassle of public owners with maintenance issues, so some kind of support to networking among the tenants makes good sense. In particular, in large complexes a common platform connecting users can be established to ease the maintenance and assign responsibilities. This platform can also be formalised in a representative body to take care of the management and provide a link between the owner and the users.

15. Explore the potential for social innovation

NGOs and other civil society organizations can often be the source of social innovations. These can directly contribute to renovation and revitalization of public property and thus raise its economic as well as social value, while also enriching local communities. Support them in their aims and involve them in municipal renovation projects.

16. Leave room for new models of public property management

When dealing with scarce financial resources, try to experiment and encourage civil society organizations to develop innovative approaches and new models of public property management. Strive to develop relationships with users that incorporate an appropriate level of flexibility to enable innovation in management models.

17. Stimulate the use of property owned by the state

In many cities, large empty complexes are not owned by the municipality but by the national or regional public authorities. This makes the communication between the owner and the users very difficult. In these cases, the municipality can take over the broker role, making management and maintenance of the property feasible.

ⁱ New Ideas For Old Buildings focuses on improving public property management to help municipalities increase the real estate occupancy by public participation. The project gathers 7 small and medium sized towns from 6 countries from the Baltic to the Balkans (Latvia, Germany, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia & Montenegro) which are facing economic and social decline. They are motivated to find solutions for revitalising their towns and enhance the quality of life.