



CITY LIFE

The Lost Property Office

Abandoned offices and storefronts provide affordable temporary space for creative urban innovation

BY ANDREW STANDEN-RAZ

Without human activity a city's surface beauty is no more than a picturesque movie set. Unfairly considered behind New York or Berlin in innovation and contemporary design, Vienna has found a way to unlock the potential of its ample unused, lofty commercial and residential buildings, repurposing them as *Zwischennutzung* (temporary use) workspaces for young creative innovators.

New venues like the privately owned Alte Post (Old Post Office) host organic-food markets, contemporary art events and the "Take" fashion festival. Hacking our existing spaces opens our minds and transforms rooted notions of identity. And the city gains enormously, while ensuring that creatives, from street artists to app designers, have inspiring places to innovate.

PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SIMON VERES, TONI SCHMALE

Whether basement or penthouse, the Neuer Kunstverein Wien takes full advantage of unused space in the art-deco Hochhaus Herrngasse.

This year, the city of Vienna is assessing tenders for the creation of a centralized Kreative Räume Agentur (Creative Spaces Agency), with a budget of €450,000 over three years to coordinate the allocation of vacant spaces. Since the end of 2015, the city's *Mehrfachnutzung* (Multiple Use) coordination team – an initiative of the city's Department of Development and Planning, MA18 – has pledged to "bring together empty commercial property with those seeking working spaces."

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Financially, re-purposing these temporary spaces is a win-win for property owners hit by the financial crisis. Contracts for sharing running costs in lieu of inflexible leases preempt squatting, halt decay and add to the building's cachet when it goes back on the market. For Jutta Kleedorfer at MA18, "betting on prevention in a time of scarce resources is a way of investing in the future."

The department works with many stakeholders: Local revitalization offices (*Gebietsbetreuungen*) promote new initiatives and participate in planning; the association Lokale Agenda 21 promotes sustainable neighborhood development; the Vienna Business Agency provides funding; the Austrian Economic Chamber (WKO) maintains a database of available spaces; and private initiatives act as intermediaries.

With an estimated million square meters of unoccupied commercial property available, Vienna approached Lukas

Boeckle, a kind of poacher-turned-gamekeeper, a squatter who then joined the system. For his Masters thesis in architecture, he set up Trust 111, a "guerilla" urban-take-over project that turned a group of decaying empty properties on the rundown Schönbrunner Straße into artist studios and various unregulated businesses, including the PopInn boutique hotel advertised via Air BnB.

Trust 111 was shut down by a fire a year later and Boeckle went on to form ImPlanTat, a non-profit *Verein*, and finally the Nest Agentur, a city-affiliated agency that has launched two successful projects for some 150 "creatives." As a GmbH (an Austrian LLC), Nest allows Boeckle and his partners to act as both property managers and agents for funding non-profit exhibitions in the space itself.

"I'm interested in the gray area between business and the nonprofit system," he said. "When I finished university, I thought, why build new when there is so much empty space that people can't afford?" Since then, the former pocket of urban blight has become a Boho district of upscale shops and renovated lofts. "We had a hybrid concept with Schönbrunner Straße," said Boeckle, "mixing charity and social housing with the artist studios. It's about community building. There are limitless variations."

HIGH-RISE ART

Over at Vienna's first skyscraper, the art deco Hochhaus Herrngasse, Gerald Matt and Kasia Uszynska of the Neuer Kunstverein Wien (NKW) work with curators like



Iconic but currently unused locations like the landmark protected Alte Post (Old Post Office) in the first district host various events, such as the weekly gourmet food emporium Marktere.

Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein to present provocative exhibitions in its empty apartments and cellars. “With its flexible structure and focus on interdisciplinarity, NKW is in constant movement,” noted Uszynska, “exploring the building and architecture of the house by using changing free spaces within it.” The 1930s wooden elevator served as a bar for the *Letzte Lockerung* show, the artist Rita Nowak pouring perfect martinis for guests gliding up to the pop-up exhibition. The walls of the flats retain ghostly reminders of the residents’ past – their 1950s kitchens, brittle 80-year-old floors and hand-printed 1940s wallpaper – that now serve as backdrops for fresh contemporary art.

With no admission charge, NKW is financed with funds from private sponsors, friends and the public sector. Setting up for the Albert Mayr exhibition in May, Uszynska was enthusiastic about future plans: “We still have so many places to discover in the Hochhaus. There are the amazing former machine and technical rooms which look like an abandoned stage for an expressionist Fritz Lang movie – which I would like to use for a performance event.”

TRANSITIONAL VALUES

At The Birdhouse, the Nest Agency’s HQ behind the Parliament, cooperation and the cross-pollination of ideas rule. Photography and recording studios rub shoulders with filmmakers and artists. Stefan Yazzie Herbert from “The Paranormal Unicorn,” a designer of innovative stage lighting for large events such as the Freakwave Festival, passed by on his way to set up a

drum-and-bass event in the basement’s former theater. “We have an office on the outskirts for our corporate clients,” he said, “but the Birdhouse is closer to the younger scene. There’s all this synergy, creative collaboration going on. It’s totally worth it.”

Unlike traditional co-working spaces, these temporary “pop-up” spaces offer little beyond electricity and toilets: a *tabula rasa*, Boeckle says. “I am interested in this whole bottom-up process – not top-down from someone demanding 1500 m² for a clean, designer kitchen. We see what we can get second hand, some wood here and there. It’s fun, like a giant sandbox for *Halberwachsene* (adolescents).”

As a next step, Nest has submitted a proposal for the former Bundesrechenzentrum (Federal Electronic Data Processing Center), a 120,000 m² building across the road from the Birdhouse – making it the largest temporary creative working space in the city. For Boeckle, his work solves real urban problems:

“I don’t know why no one’s done this before,” he shrugged. With what his professor termed “a healthy dose of naivety,” what Boeckle started on Schönbrunner Straße – without insurance, permissions, a commercial license – has now taken on a life of its own. He grinned: “For me, it was a yearlong party.”

A party with a lot of side benefits: Future creative spaces facilitated by the proposed Kreative Räume Agentur could well produce a more vital and harmonious urban environment. “Cooperation knits a group together,” he says. Uszynska at the NKW shares his optimism.

“There are still a lot of interesting, undiscovered spaces in the city. Let us surprise ourselves.” ^M

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Lukas Boeckle