

How temporary interventions create welcoming places with a strong identity

MEANWHILE CITY

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Researched and Written by
Petra Marko
Radim Lisa

Interviews by
Petra Marko
Zuzana Kvetková
Radim Lisa

Edited by
Zuzana Kvetková

Sub-edited by
Jonathan Todd

Supervised by
Martin Jenča

Designed by
Terézia Denková
Dominik Fodora

Illustrated by
Matej Mihályi

Production
Katarína Jančovičová
Martin Péchy
Oliver Méres

Sounding board
Gábor Bindics
Co-founder, Aliancia Stará tržnica
Stephanie Mills
Director, Cité Design
Milota Sidorová
feminist, urbanist and author
Steven Smith
Director, Urban Narrative

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designers, visual artists and visual
storytellers.

Palisády 59
811 06 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
www.milk.sk

hey@milk.sk

Milk Places Team
Petra Marko
Martin Jenča
Katarína Jančovičová
Oliver Méres
Martin Péchy
Kristína Šebejová

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This publication offers actionable lessons, best practices and inspiration for city leaders, urban practitioners and private developers, who aim to effectively use temporary interventions to communicate with the public, shape the identity of places and build active communities around them.

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MAKE SPACE FOR GREAT STORIES

Foreword by

Martin Jenča



A group of activists, including Milk founder Martin Jenča, who came together to revive the Old Market Hall in Bratislava.

Too many places in our cities are unused, neglected and fenced off. In Bratislava's historic centre, that was the case with the Old Market Hall. Built in 1908 and owned by the city, it was closed for years. When I got the chance to be a part of an interdisciplinary group of city enthusiasts who wanted to bring it back to life, I didn't hesitate for a second. Alongside the experts on markets, food, waste, events, law, architecture, energy, finance and culture, I was responsible for communication. I had to figure out how to convince the local authorities to approve our plans, how to get the public excited about them and how to set the expectations just right when nothing was certain yet. There was one thing we all agreed on at the beginning — we wanted to create a place where people meet. This shared goal became the basis of our communication strategy and visual identity.

It was clear that the Old Market Hall needed repairs before it could open to the public, but keeping it closed was exactly what we were fighting against. This is where temporary use showed us its true power. It let us bring life to the place, communicate our intentions and ambitions with people, and help us figure out what works so well it should become a permanent part of the place. And, most importantly for my role in the project, the temporary activities allowed us to talk about the value we were already bringing — and avoid vague promises of something that may or may not come true. People's experiences gave substance to our

narrative and made the Old Market Hall a favourite place to come back to, even before the repair works were finished.

Closing off a place until it is finished is, frankly, counterproductive. It makes people walk by a fence for months, if not years. And even if that fence mentions the hopes for the area's future, what it really communicates is — don't come here, there is nothing for you, just noise, dust and disruption. By the time a communications agency is usually involved, the place has been successfully erased from people's mental maps. No marketing campaign can make a place great, but it can let people know about a great place. We believe that a multidisciplinary communication team should be involved right from the start. Let designers, writers, artists and event curators help you make space for great stories. These real, lived stories will make your space great in return. How? In this report, we've collected some of the world's best examples and distilled 10 important tips for making a win-win meanwhile use. And if you don't feel like reading, you can always just talk to us.



HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is for everyone who enjoys visiting and creating good places. It is here to change your perspective on the untapped potential of your city and give you useful tips on how temporary interventions can bring life to and create a new identity for neglected places. As you flick through, you will find articles on what makes meanwhile use so valuable, various approaches in our case studies, a wide range of examples, and interviews with different actors in the process of temporary urbanism. Feel free to read what catches your attention and inspires you in any order. Have an open mind, read between the lines, take what you like, copy, remix, make unusual combinations and invent completely new things that make sense for your special places. Just don't put this guide on your shelf. It belongs on the table, where you can return to it again and again and again.

WHAT ARE MEANWHILE PROJECTS?

Temporary interventions can be an effective way to activate spaces, trial different programmes and engage people in the process of creating welcoming places. Whether as part of large-scale regeneration projects, as a strategy to bring more life and human scale into the city, or to test and expand a city’s green mobility network, they can be a useful tactical tool in creating places with a recognisable identity.

Who initiates meanwhile projects and why?

Successful meanwhile projects are often a result of a collaborative effort of several ‘actors’ in the city — citizens, city authorities, private investors, designers, consumer brands or cultural institutions. The initiator of the project needs to develop good communication from the start of the project to push ahead with their vision — often improving the idea by engaging others in the process. The table below summarises some of the reasons these different actors get involved in meanwhile initiatives, and what the key benefits are for them.

CITY AUTHORITIES	DEVELOPERS AND INVESTORS	CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES
To engage citizens in urban change proposals	To engage citizens in urban change proposals	Protest and campaigning
Test uses and ideas before committing major capital	Test uses and ideas before committing major capital	Personal and group celebration and memorials
Low-cost ‘quick wins’ in addressing pressing social or environmental issues	Low-cost activation of underused assets including buildings and land	Low-cost ‘quick wins’ in addressing pressing social or environmental issues
Providing space or facilities required by local people	Activation of places to bring footfall	Community self-help
Civic celebrations, memorials, etc.	Changing perceptions	Community building by active and engaged citizens
Creating an identity for a place		

WHAT WE MEAN, WHEN WE SAY...

Meanwhile

Meanwhile is a term used to describe temporary and flexible uses within empty buildings or on land that is awaiting development. Our report includes a wide range of case studies, from temporary bridge closures lasting a few weeks through to temporary occupation of public buildings lasting several years. Their commonality is in addressing urban challenges through meanwhile solutions, opening up opportunities for experimentation, testing and in some cases looser regulatory frameworks, which enable quicker implementation.

According to Centre for London’s report,¹ meanwhile is a “loose designation for activities that occupy empty space, while waiting for another activity on site”. The report further points out that meanwhile uses “can be as diverse as permanent uses: London has pop-up shops, bars, allotments, art galleries, football pitches; as well as housing or workspace on a meanwhile basis.”

1 Bosetti, N., Colthorpe, T. (2019) ‘Meanwhile, in London: Making use of London’s empty spaces’ [Online].

Placemaking

Placemaking is a process that facilitates the connection and relationship between people and a place, and strengthens the identity of a street, neighbourhood or city quarter. The origins of the placemaking movement go back to New York City in the 1960s, when the American activist and urbanist Jane Jacobs promoted the idea of citizens taking ownership of the streets through active participation in a vibrant public life² based on the idea that “a strong sense of place can influence the physical, social, emotional, and ecological health of individuals and communities everywhere”.³

Jane Jacobs at a press conference in New York City as chairman of the community to save the West Village, 1961.



2 Jacobs, J. (1961) The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Random House: New York.
3 Project for Public Spaces [Online]. Available at: <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>.

MEANWHILE USE MAKES CITIES RESILIENT AND LIVELY



Southwark Lido animated an empty site on Union Street in London during the summer of 2008. Created by EXYZT and Sara Muzio, it was one of a series of meanwhile interventions curated by The Architecture Foundation.

A city is a continuously evolving organism, a dynamic model where change is constant. Formed of various interconnected and inter-dependable parts, it adapts and transforms in response to changing conditions and different pressures. Temporary interventions are an integral part of the daily ritual of the city — the active layer, which propels, redirects or focuses people's movements and activities.

The agile nature of meanwhile uses is also an important part of resilience in cities — enhancing their ability to adapt, recover or spring back when hit by unexpected events. During the global financial crisis in 2008, many developments were stalled due to the economic downturn. Architects, cultural activists and urban practitioners explored self-initiated projects on abandoned sites. Empty public buildings were repurposed as affordable workspaces, and struggling shopping streets and town centres bolstered retail with temporary and seasonal street markets, impromptu events and pop-ups. Focused on local and artisan products, they reflected the changing consumer behaviours and ethical concerns about the sources of food and consumer goods. For example, the Southbank Centre in London has brought to life its 1960s concrete architecture through graphics, wayfinding and a series of pop-up uses and interventions that revealed a series of hidden roof gardens and vacant undercrofts.

The COVID-19 pandemic uncovered vast inequalities in housing, access to public space and local services — particularly in densely populated cities. Temporary trials helped advance ideas such as the 15-minute city concept⁴ of compact, walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods championed by the mayor of Paris. More temporary cycle paths sprang up with accelerated improvements to public spaces, fuelled by the requirements for social distancing. In London, for instance, the city has built 100 km of temporary cycle paths during the pandemic — at twice the speed compared to the previous period.⁵

The younger generations harbour growing concerns about safety, social equality and environmental sustainability.⁶ City leaders and the carbon-intensive building industry have been called to radically rethink the old models and improve quality of life and wellbeing in cities. Whether in the context of high street regeneration, sustainable urban mobility, the existential pressures of climate emergency or growing mental health crises, meanwhile projects can foster young people’s agency to express their identity and help shape more inclusive communities. Green mobility initiatives have been particularly well served by temporary interventions as cities across the world strive to reverse the 20th-century planning centred

around dependence on private cars. For instance, Pearl Street Plaza in New York City — a transformation of a road junction with car parking into a pedestrian square in 2007 — became the first of 60 plazas installed city-wide by the New York City Department of Transportation — and required only paint and space in the first temporary trial, which triggered the long-term shift.⁷

Once considered as experimental and niche solutions and activities by a handful of activists, artists and architects, the range of projects we studied for this publication show that meanwhile uses became an integral part of successful placemaking. They help cities think more entrepreneurially about the ways to achieve long-term visions, to use meanwhile trials for testing ideas, build support for large-scale regeneration projects or encourage more active citizen participation. Importantly, as public-sector finances are under increasing pressure, temporary interventions offer inexpensive solutions that not only address immediate problems but also help build political support and scalability for sustainable agendas in the long run. In the best examples, users become the greatest ambassadors for the activity or place itself. Meanwhile projects engage people directly through activities, rather than empty slogans about what the future will look like.

4 Willsher, K. (2020) 'Paris mayor unveils '15-minute city' plan in re-election campaign' The Guardian [Online].
5 Mayor of London (2021) 'Record-breaking growth in London's cycle network continues' [Online].

6 (2022) 'Striving for balance, advocating for change' The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z & Millennial Survey [Online].
7 Sadik-Khan, J., Solomonow, S. (2017) Street Fight. Reprint edition. New York City: Penguin Books.