

# **MEANWHILE. RECOVER INACTIVE COMMERCIAL MARKETS FOR COMMUNITY USES**

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The **effects of the crisis** on the built spaces of the city are beginning to be more than visible. Among them, one has a special impact on urban life, the progressive closure of **commercial premises at street level**. Businesses that have not been able to withstand the drop in consumption or the difficulties in accessing credit to maintain their activity have been closing their doors and lowering their blinds. Undoubtedly, the first effect is that the merchant or promoter of the business sees their business plans disrupted and the workers lose their jobs. Secondly, the owner of the premises sees how the income from his lease disappears. And, thirdly, the abandonment of the activity adds another point of loss of vitality in the street or square where the premises are located.



It is a situation that, I fear, is spreading little by little, with greater incidence in certain urban environments. In this blog, other correspondents have already been working a lot on [urban voids](#) and others [derived effects](#) of the crisis but, making a play on words, we find ourselves with a constant increase in **urban empties**, spaces for commercial use that stop fulfilling -temporarily, in principle- a function within the city and pass to new ones [urban obsolescence](#). Empty of the activity for which they were intended, will they ever have it again? Will they have the same type of business again? Can they have a transitory use while we weather the crisis?

I am going to point out some experiences that address this problem with imaginative solutions that seek to rethink these spaces with another logic, a logic of resistance to the crisis and creation of opportunities:

### **ART IN UNUSUAL SPACES (LEEDS)**

[Art in Unusual Places](#) is an initiative Leeds-based company looking to convert vacant premises into temporary art galleries. Launched last December, it is a collaborative program between Leeds City Council, the business community (owners or managers of premises) and the cultural sector, which allows artists to display their work in the windows of vacant premises.

The initiative offers these spaces free of charge for project promoters or artists to hold temporary exhibitions in various venues that have already been incorporated into the initiative, and along with this, it has also set up another venue for three-week resident artists to carry out their works and can expose them.

### **MEANWHILE PROJECT**

The [Meanwhile Project](#) is an action program promoted by the British government with the aim of promote the recovery of historic urban centers that have seen their commercial attractiveness diminish in the current economic crisis. Through a public-private collaboration system and an intervention fund, the aim is to generate transitory activity for inactive spaces and commercial premises while their owners do not activate them again or do not have recognized uses.

With this, it focuses on keeping the value of the city's real estate assets in [community benefit](#), avoiding the feeling of abandonment of the historic center, reactivating urban and social life and offering opportunities for the installation of economic and emerging civics. The initiative is led by the [Development Trusts Association](#) under the [Advancing Assets for Communities](#) powered by the *Communities and Local Government* (CLG). Different local acts have emerged under the programme, such as the [Noiselab](#) (Manchester), [The Old Still](#) (Peterborough), [Nomad](#) (Hastings) or [Market Estate Project](#) (London).

### **CHANGING SPACES (CAMBRIDGE)**

[This is a joint initiative of the Cambridge City Council and the city's public-private agency to promote collaborative and development projects. The project seeks to activate spaces in disuse due to the economic crisis for transitory uses of exhibition and cultural creation, with the aim of boosting the expression capacity of local artists, attracting creators from other environments and generating a greater climate of social trust. In a short time they will have seven locations "liberated" and has so far used 15 venues to outlet the activities of forty local artists and groups.](#)

### **EMPTY SHOPS**

[Empty shops Network](#) is a network of performances seeking, just like the previous ones, activate and

reuse premises without current use to provide them with cultural and leisure activities that can serve as foci for social reactivation of the streets that may be suffering the most from the crisis at a commercial level. Under the umbrella of this initiative, more than seventy stores have been reactivated throughout the United Kingdom, although in this case, the network goes beyond acting solely on commercial premises and has also carried out interventions on public spaces and abandoned lots.

They are all projects in the **United Kingdom**, where it is estimated that almost 13% of urban commercial premises today do not have any activity and remain closed - more than 18,000 premises - and it is estimated that one fifth do not it will reopen. It is a dynamic that, initially raised by social groups as an alternative to the crisis and the need to create new opportunities for cultural and community expression, has become part of the promotion and promotion strategy of the municipalities from the government department in charge of municipal governments, a strategy known as **Looking after our town centres**. This state support has materialized in a system of aid that has so far reached 107 town councils, each of which has received 52,000 pounds to carry out this type of action, which is why which have spread throughout the territory.

In **Murcia** an initiative is underway that broadly follows these parameters. **Art District** is a recently launched project:

*(...) arises from the collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Association of Real Estate Developers in order to give activity to those premises that due to the crisis are without activity.*

'Artistic District' makes available to Murcian artists ten venues in the city of Murcia so that they can develop artistic production, exhibition and self-management projects, with the aim of fostering artistic and creative self-management, promoting artistic projects and emerging experiences, disseminating the art and culture in open public spaces for daily use, as well as promoting citizen participation in cultural projects, their knowledge of the arts and contributing to revitalizing urban centers with innovative proposals.

The second phase of the project includes ten premises that will house 40 artists for three months and will use these commercial markets as a studio, following the contest bases called (second call) to obtain the assignment of the space. Surely the formula is not new and **there have been initiatives for a long time of this type of real estate transfer** to create new distributed spaces of a cultural nature, but perhaps it is more novel that they are linked to a tactic to fight the crisis and its effects on urban life. Surely the formula can also find **"insurmountable" administrative obstacles** in local ordinances and regulations on activity and opening licenses, on minimum conditions of use,... but I suspect that they are salvageable if they exist a real interest and are properly managed. Regarding their **cost**, I also have the impression that they are a more than reasonable alternative; In the case of Murcia, I only have news of the cost through a news and the data should be well investigated but, in principle, he states that the cost of the project is around €60,000. A figure that is not unreasonable, taking into account that the project can be scalable by initially reducing the number of premises, and that the **dividend of the project** implies the revitalization of local cultural production, the diffusion on foot of street of new cultural proposals, the creation of a distributed network of spaces, the putting into use of premises without activity, etc.

**There are no comments yet.**