

# Collective Use as a Way for Spatial Transformation. Observation and description of spatial practices in the European cultural projects Mercato Sonato, Plantage Dok, and Kunstverein Wagenhallen

Roberto Juan Cardini

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.20868/cpa.2025.15.5601>

Throughout history, the relationship between space and use has played a key role in shaping new architectures. However, in the current context of expanding virtuality and the focus on technologies such as parametricism (AI) and augmented reality, there is an accelerating detachment between architectural representation and human experience.

This separation directly affects processes that are traditionally rooted in lived and embodied experience. Instead of viewing space as an evolving, integral organism shaped by the interactions of its participants, resources are increasingly concentrated in external systems that promote predictability, automation and standardisation in design processes. The result is architectural responses that are more superficial, rigid and generic, and that are increasingly incapable of addressing the complex and unpredictable demands of contemporary society.

In order to reconnect spatial tools with social dynamics, this article proposes revaluing an essential underlying resource: the active use of space as a mechanism for transformation. The aim is to observe, recognise and enhance the social practices that emerge from use, and to understand these practices as constitutive forms of spatial production.

To this end, the article presents empirical evidence based on an analysis of three contemporary European case studies: Mercato Sonato in Italy, Plantage Dok in the Netherlands, and Kunstverein Wagenhallen in Germany. Initially conceived as institutional buildings, these spaces were modified and re-signified by their new occupants, becoming significant references for cultural reprogramming through the collective use of disused spaces. This demonstrates that spatial production is not limited to standardised architecture or morphological transformations.

Although processes of transformation can be observed when newly built structures with defined uses<sup>1</sup> are occupied, such processes are

more intense and freedom-filled when a building is disused and lacks 'instructions' on how to be inhabited. The absence of an established function creates an area of uncertainty that allows for more open and diverse interventions, in which the occupants' practices redefine the space in ways that were not anticipated in the original project.

Within this framework, the article combines empirical analysis with the approach of the interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman, who offers an insight into understanding space as a stage for situated negotiation. Here, meaning is constructed through interaction and transformed through use rather than external determination.

The spatial transformations that emerge from these occupation processes are important factors in the re-signification of space. These transformations must be integrated as active components of the design process, enabling these practices to influence architectural methodologies rather than vice versa. This approach introduces an interactionist perspective, making the social dimension of spatial practices visible and incorporating temporality into architecture. It shifts the discipline's traditionally static (and illusorily adaptive)<sup>2</sup> focus towards a processual and dynamic understanding of space.

In this context, the analysed experiences challenge the discipline's self-referential paradigm and emphasise the importance of broadening the design perspective to encompass the appropriation, adaptation and activation of space driven by social action. This approach overcomes the limitations imposed by the discipline's endogamous development.

## Methodology

This article uses a qualitative, multiple-case study methodology<sup>3</sup> to describe and compare processes of spatial transformation driven by collective use. The cases were selected from an analytical matrix that organised fifty European experiences into a Cartesian dual-entry scheme. The X-axis – Social/Architectural Factor – classifies the degree of technical-architectural intervention and presence, while the Y-axis – Form/Planning – distinguishes between spontaneous (bottom-up) and programmed (top-down) occupations depending on their origin, which can be either community-based or institutional [Fig. 02]. This model enabled clusters with similar logics to be identified, from which the three cases under study were selected. The final selection prioritised morphological and organisational variability, transformations attributable to use, cultural relevance and the impact of reprogramming. Each case represents a distinct cluster within the matrix, ensuring diversity in the study and its potential for replication.

In terms of evidence, the research relied on qualitative fieldwork, which involved direct observation, interviews, documentary analysis, and the collection of statistical, photographic, and video data. Fourteen interviews were conducted with key figures from the three spaces, 210 documents were reviewed (including photographs, plans, articles and press interviews), and 40 hours of on-site observation were carried out. This was supplemented by the graphic records that make up the figures in the article.

## Context

Following the political and social events of May 1968, new forms of spatial activism emerged across Europe as a way of expressing resistance. The questioning of capitalism, authoritarianism, and urban conditions led to a critique of modern architecture, challenging not only its function and aesthetics, but also its role in perpetuating social discipline<sup>4</sup>. Within this framework, a new approach to interpreting space emerged, challenging the concept of predetermined function and encouraging the occupation and appropriation of disused buildings and urban spaces for community use.

As a critical response to modern architecture and an increasingly exclusionary and superficial system, radical concepts such as Cedric Price's anti-building<sup>5</sup>, Bernard Tschumi's transgression of use<sup>6</sup> and Henri Lefebvre's *détournement*<sup>7</sup> arose in parallel. These notions shifted the disciplinary focus towards action, use, and social practice as drivers of spatial transformation. At the same time, Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman's work introduced an interactionist interpretation of everyday life<sup>8</sup> as a theatrical performance in which individuals act, negotiate, and alter normative frameworks through their behaviour. This perspective provides a way of thinking about space as a stage for symbolic negotiation, where action can subvert previously established structures.

By the late 1970s, the *Squatting* movement had established itself across Europe as a way of directly reclaiming unused buildings. This led to the creation of self-managed social centres that challenged the traditional ways in which spaces were used and transformed<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, during the 1980s and 1990s, countercultural artistic and architectural practices evolved, incorporating participatory processes and the repurposing of abandoned spaces, redefining the interplay between art, space, and community. Collectives such as Platform (1983), which combined art, activism, and political ecology<sup>10</sup>, and the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative (1981–1994), which incorporated feminist and participatory methodologies into architectural design<sup>11</sup>, built upon the institutional critique pioneered by Group Material (1979)<sup>12</sup> in the United States. Stalker (1995)<sup>13</sup> took this experimental field to new levels through its collective exploration of residual urban territories, while Hakim Bey's notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (1991) provided a theoretical framework that conceptualised the use of temporary spaces as a form of cultural and political resistance<sup>14</sup>.

The occupations analysed in this article took place from 1998 onwards within a context in which architecture began to be conceived as a political arena and field of confrontation. From this perspective, Jane Rendell introduced the notion of *critical spatial practice*<sup>15</sup>, articulating architecture, art and theory and situating the everyday and the domestic as territories of intervention. More recently, Jill Stoner has proposed *'minor architecture'*<sup>16</sup> as a political practice operating from below. Rather than responding to programmes, it arises opportunistically from desires for transformation. The political dimension of minor architecture is inscribed in the relationship between space and time. For example, Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till address *spatial agency*<sup>17</sup> as a form

of situated action that destabilises disciplinary logics. These contemporary positions lay the groundwork for re-evaluating social and political actions as producers of space — a framework within which the cases presented in this article are situated and analysed.

## Evidence

While the three analysed cases differ in their modes of execution and results, they share parameters that facilitate comparison, such as cultural purpose and geographical context. This research's main contribution lies in its potential for replication: analysing transformative practices provides significant data for identifying patterns in spatial re-signification and appropriation through use.

This section is organised around the contextual and morphological description of the selected cases, presenting evidence of how collective interactions complement existing architectural conditions to produce new spatialities organically.

The first case study is Mercato Sonato in Bologna. Its occupation in 2015 was the outcome of a competition promoted by the municipality to reactivate the former San Donato market, which was built in 1957 [Fig. 03].

The building consists of a rectangular hall covered by a double-pitched concrete slab that is supported by trusses. The central space differs from the lower peripheral ring, creating a height difference. Windows provide diffuse light and double the height of the main area. The winning collective, *Senzaspine*, a local orchestra, proposed minimal interventions supported by an architecture studio. They detailed financing strategies in exchange for maintaining and improving the rent-free building granted by the municipality.

Once the transformations were awarded, the musicians executed them with occasional technical assistance. This assistance was limited to perimeter partitions, technical upgrades, and stage installation [Fig. 04]. The organizational structure of the orchestra influenced the spatial transformations. The division into instrumental sections and the role of the conductor as coordinator were transposed into intervention practices, shaping the group's identity.

The second case is Plantage Dok in Amsterdam, which was occupied in 1998. It is a concrete building that preserves the original nave of a church and has three façade levels with a structural system of perpendicular beams. The ground floor has a wide-span structure with a roof of longitudinal skylights that provide constant overhead lighting. Originally inaugurated in 1872, the building underwent multiple uses (church, school, printing house, and vocational training center)<sup>18</sup> before its appropriation. Unlike the other two examples, its occupation was carried out in an improvised manner without political or legal consent. In its early stages, there was no intervention plan, disciplinary advice, or technical surveys. The transformation was undertaken through artisanal construction solutions and the use of recycled materials, such as wooden panels, glass, and fabrics that subdivide the large classrooms into more manageable spaces [Fig. 05].

These operations reflect practical knowledge linked to craftsmanship and artistic expression, rather than architectural expertise. The group's collective stance sustains a horizontal, assembly-based system without hierarchies or directives. This means the transformations are collective, reversible, and dependent on the occupants' availability [Fig. 06].

The third case is the *Kunstverein Wagenhallen* in Stuttgart. This former train workshop was occupied in several stages. The building consists of four gabled naves with a modular steel structure and perpendicular skylights that provide natural lighting. The brick enclosures accentuate the structural rhythm of the frames and transverse rail entrances. In 2003, local artists informally occupied the naves and used them as workshops and studios [Fig. 07]. In the second half of that year, the municipality acquired the building and authorized its temporary cultural use. A decade later, the project's impact spurred the building's restoration. During the restoration, the artists, together with *Malta Studio*, an architectural firm recognized for its critical intervention approach and adaptive strategies, constructed a provisional space with containers and recycled materials. Supported by workshops, public consultations, and an extensive volunteer network, the process turned the artists into co-authors of the place.

Three years later, after the restored building reopened, the collective reoccupied the interior. They integrated their accumulated experience with the municipality's architectural office. The organization adopted the form of an association with a board and administrative hierarchy while maintaining direct relations with the municipality. This structure aligned the project with the top-down cluster, while preserving transformations stemming from everyday practices and its informal, improvised origin [Fig. 08].

In all three cases, large-span structures produced interiors of considerable volume, an architectural feature that enabled their reuse. While this flexibility may be an initial variable, it does not explain the observed spatial transformations. These transformations are sustained by practices of occupation that produce and re-signify space in complement to its initial configuration. Rather than emerging from prior plans, generic models, or an intentionally open plan, the transformations originated from the repetition and ritualization of specific actions. In every case, spatial boundaries first appeared as symbolic marks indicating who occupies and where before later becoming material boundaries as those divisions consolidated into partitions or panels. Erving Goffman's interactionist theory is particularly pertinent here: boundaries function as social structures that regulate access and visibility within a given region, establishing who participates in interactions and who is excluded<sup>19</sup>.

Moreover, a large space was preserved and re-signified as the hierarchical nucleus of collective life in each building. In Plantage Dok, for example, the former church nave was transformed into a community hall for workshops, performances, and assemblies. In Mercato Sonato, the central area functioned as a covered plaza and concert hall. In Wagenhallen, one of the main naves was used for workshops, exhibitions, and public events. These spaces complemented their scale and morphology by operating as frameworks of

interaction that sustained group cohesion and articulated the secondary sectors. In this process, social actors deployed settings, which Goffman defines as material and symbolic resources, such as objects, roles, norms, and shared understandings, that enable the practical organization of collective action and consolidate these spaces as centers of community life<sup>20</sup>.

Finally, it was observed that the internal organization of each project was crucial to the transformations. In Wagenhallen, the artists produced general sketches to divide the space. However, the size of the naves favored progressive growth. Each new member added a workshop to the ensemble [Fig. 05]. From the beginning, they had a hierarchical structure and administrative order that required allocating specific areas to project management and administration. In contrast, Plantage Dok has maintained a purely assembly-based model since 1998, without boards of directors or hierarchies. Each member holds one vote in the assembly, and there are no rental relationships. The organization is structured into working groups, such as those for maintenance and construction. These groups collaborate on new interventions and do not have fixed operational spaces [Fig. 07]. Instead, they use available areas for assemblies or tasks.

Mercato Sonato is a hybrid. The *Senzaspine* orchestra incorporated its organizational structure into the building. A conductor ensured overall coordination, and the sections had relative autonomy in managing their activities. This approach ordered interventions and distributed responsibilities while maintaining unity. Spatial allocation responded to functional needs and cooperative logic, granting each group decision-making autonomy within a shared framework. Unlike Wagenhallen and Plantage Dok, this model combines hierarchy and horizontality, generating a hybrid system that articulates centralized planning with collective participation in the building's transformations. Unlike the other cases, there were no areas for individual use. The peripheral enclosures were allocated for collective functions, such as instrument storage, dressing rooms, and technical areas. These were built with plasterboard, OSB panels, and metal curtains [Fig. 08]. In contrast, the delimited spaces in Wagenhallen and Plantage Dok were for exclusive use. Although they were designed collectively, each workshop or dwelling was adapted according to the needs of its occupant. Members frequently collaborated and assumed the costs.

## Conclusions

Through the analysis of three cases and evidence obtained via participant observation and documentary analysis, a common pattern emerges that transcends contextual, morphological, and organizational differences. Occupation is not limited to reusing disused buildings. Rather, it activates and reveals a continuous process of interaction between materiality and practice. This process operates as dynamic reciprocity, in which buildings influence social activity, and collective practices subsequently reconfigure the buildings. Spaces mediate, resist, and orient ways of inhabiting, all while undergoing continuous transformation by social practices—even

directly and spontaneously, without technical mediation. This approach makes it possible to understand occupation as a continuous process of delimitation, one that redefines the physical space, its practices of use, and the power and belonging dynamics that traverse it, consolidating shared agency among the building, architecture, and social practice.

In this sense, the analysis provides a deeper understanding of how communities negotiate their relationship with built space and how, through the appropriation and transformation of places, social relations and practices are redefined. The production of settings and their boundaries sustains fluidity and adaptability while challenging traditional notions of property, hierarchy, and use. This demonstrates that material and morphological conditions merely function as initial variables that are continuously affected by frameworks constituted through relational dynamics.

From a sociological perspective, Goffman describes *frames* as cognitive and social structures that influence how we interpret and act in a given situation. Groups act in relation to these *frames*, modifying space through their practices. This transformed space can be read as a *setting or stage*. The analyzed cases show how ways of inhabiting spaces define their uses, generate transformations, and establish boundaries, first symbolic and then material. For example, partitions produce a backstage area (workshops, dressing rooms, dwellings, and rehearsal rooms) and a frontstage area (collective spaces and public zones) [Fig. 09]. These practices constitute acts of delimitation, rendering certain activities visible (concerts or exhibitions), while reserving others (workshops, classrooms, and dressing rooms). This demonstrates that transformations do not emerge from above, but rather from everyday practices, continuously negotiated between occupants and their immediate environment.

Furthermore, these dynamic and situated transformations extend beyond the buildings themselves, reaching a regional dimension. They leave an imprint understood in relation to social processes that strongly resonate and impact neighborhood or district identity. These processes not only foster the consolidation of active, recognized cultural spaces, but also encourage the generation of other surrounding spatialities. These experiences demonstrate the ability of reprogramming and re-signification to create new social and cultural dynamics within a territory.

For example, Plantage Dok began as a self-managed, non-institutional occupation, representing the most spontaneous case of occupation. In this case, the collective's appropriation confirms that group interaction has the potential to create self-organizing structures that produce small-scale spatial transformations determined by the occupants themselves [Fig. 10]. Through this dynamic, the initially improvised and informal occupation, after two years of interventions and local impact, succeeded in reaching an agreement with the municipality that facilitated an official loan for the purchase of the building. Since then, the space has been transformed to allow for the coexistence of cultural and residential functions, challenging preconfigured standards. This case demonstrates how informal and

endogenous processes can consolidate active cultural spaces that redefine collective practices and social organization.

The Kunstverein Wagenhallen case began with an agreement with the municipality after a group of artists occupied the sheds to use them as workshops and prevent demolition. The occupation and repurposing of Wagenhallen [Fig. 11] not only halted the demolition, but twelve years later, it also led the municipality to recognize the project's development and invest 33 million euros in its restoration as a regional cultural project<sup>21</sup>. By 2025, twenty-two years after the initial occupation, the site is expected to house the temporary headquarters of the Stuttgart Opera in addition to the original cultural project. This trajectory illustrates how collective practices of occupation can become engines of institutional projects with metropolitan reach, reactivating degraded areas outside the urban core.

Finally, Mercato Sonato is a paradigmatic example of an agreed-upon occupation. After reactivating the market through a competition and witnessing the project's social and cultural impact over the course of a decade, the municipality decided to halt the organic process of transformation. They then commissioned an architectural firm to design a new cultural center dedicated to music. Financed through a program created after the Covid-19 pandemic, the executive project was justified by energy efficiency and structural safety criteria, disregarding the sustainability of reusing disused buildings. Furthermore, the design process disregarded the practices and knowledge gained during the occupation, reducing the experience to a symbolic capitalization exercise. The resulting building does not meet the needs of the orchestra that had animated the space. This case reaffirms the transformative capacity and impact of occupations and appropriations for cultural use. It also exemplifies the strategic and speculative deployment of these practices as catalysts of activity, cultural development, and urban regeneration.

As this research has shown, reusing a building designed for a specific purpose involves breaking with its original purpose, resulting in a practical transformation that gives rise to new spatialities produced through collective interactions, identity processes, and organizational models. The studied cases demonstrate how these dynamics, sustained over time through circumstantial and adaptive actions, incorporate temporality as a key factor in producing space. Within this framework, it is important to consider the role of transformation through use in configuring new architectures.

One of the challenges ahead will be determining how to observe and integrate such processes into a broader, dynamic, multidisciplinary, and bottom-up architectural vision. In the meantime, this article aims to demonstrate that the occupation and appropriation of disused buildings respond to urgent spatial needs and constitute an alternative architectural production mechanism that is organic, effective, and sustainable. In this mechanism, social and symbolic transformation complement and articulate with material transformation.

1. Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built*, (New York, Ny: Phoenix Illustrated, 1997): 12 - 71 (Antecedente de POE; Post Occupation Evaluation).
2. Although computational design, especially parametric design, simulates adaptability, it actually operates under an anticipatory regime in which variation is already prefigured within the algorithm's margins. Rather than responding to the environment, the environment is codified within the limits of the system. See Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013): 102-124.
3. Robert Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (SAGE Publications, 2017): 90-125
4. Conception of architecture and urbanism as instruments of social order, promoting functionality and harmony in urban life through rational planning and standardization. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse: Éléments d'une doctrine d'urbanisme pour l'équipement de la civilisation machiniste* (Vincent Fréal, 1964).
5. Cedric Price, *Cedric Price Works 1952-2003: A Forward-Minded Retrospective*, ed. Samantha Hardingham (Architectural Association, 2016), 107-110 and 233-236.
6. Bernard Tschumi, "The Architecture of Events," in *Architecture and Disjunction* (The MIT Press, 1994).
7. Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville*, trans. Trad. Ion Martínez Lorea and J. González-Pueyo (Madrid: Capitán Swing Libros, 2017).
8. Erving Goffman, *Presentación de la persona en la vida cotidiana* (Amorrortu Editores, 1999): 12-34.
9. Marina Verzier and Katia Truijer, *Architecture of Appropriation: On Squatting as Spatial Practice* (Idea Books, Raddraaier BV, Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2019): 1-24.
10. Gavin Grindon, "Curating with Counterpowers: Activist Curating, Museum Protest, and Institutional Liberation." *Social Text* 41, no. 2 (155) (2023): 19-44.
11. Janie Grote, "Matrix: A Radical Approach to Architecture." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 158-168.
12. Julie Ault, *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010): 10-127.
13. Francesco Careri and Lorenzo Romito, "Stalker and the Big Game of Campo Boario," in *Architecture and Participation*, ed. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (Spon Press, 2007): 249-256.
14. Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991): 4-30 and 88-118.
15. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006): 139-180.
16. Jill Stoner, *Toward a Minor Architecture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012): 1-45.
17. Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011): 22-87.
18. For a more detailed account of the building's history, see Marina Verzier and Katia Truijer, *Architecture of Appropriation: On Squatting as Spatial Practice* (Idea Books, Raddraaier BV, Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2019).
19. Erving Goffman, *Presentación de la persona en la vida cotidiana* (Amorrortu Editores, 1999): 117-151.
20. Interpretation of Goffman's term "setting" as discussed in the work of Matias I. Zarlena, *Lugar y creatividad: Hacia una sociología de los procesos de creatividad cultural urbana* (PhD diss., University of Barcelona, 2015): 7-12 and 22-31.
21. City of Stuttgart. "Wagenhallen-Umbau." stuttgart.de. Accessed June 25, 2025. <https://www.stuttgart.de/leben/bauen/bauprojekte/wagenhallen-umbau>

Occupation  
Spatial Appropriation  
Temporary Urbanism  
Transformative Practices  
Interactionism