

ZOMBIE ISLAND

The revitalisation of zombie spaces: Integrating urban development processes with creative and cultural industries

Nerea Díaz

The contemporary urban landscape faces numerous challenges, not least among them zombie spaces, urban planning and the promotion of creative and cultural industries. These three elements are intrinsically interconnected and addressing them together is essential for the sustainable development of our cities.

Zombie spaces are abandoned, decaying and underutilised urban areas that have lost their appeal and activity. They are characterised by property devaluation, lack of basic services, deteriorating infrastructure and the presence of crime. These spaces represent a challenge for urban planning, as they negatively impact the quality of life of residents and can become focal points for social and environmental problems. At the same time, they have a great deal of potential for transformation, and urban planning processes can play a crucial role in revitalising them. A key element of urban planning in this context is the creation of mixed development projects which combine different land uses, such as affordable housing, commercial space, recreational and cultural areas. The integration of diversified activities creates a dynamic environment that attracts residents and visitors, generating economic and social momentum in the area.

At the meeting in Zorrotzaurre, Urbanbat and [Azkuna Zentroa](#) proposed the idea of zombie spaces based on Idensitat's definition of "spaces defined by speculative logic, public management conditioned by private interests, stoppage of work in progress... vast urban landscapes that continue to function with the disfigurement caused by the will of many people or institutions. People who wanted to give it a life conceived from interests alien to the dynamics of the territory."

In short, the idea of zombie spaces as described in the context of Zorrotzaurre emphasises the disjointedness and lack of coherence between urban planning decisions, development expectations and the real needs of the community. Recognising and tackling these spaces from a critical and proactive perspective is fundamental in order to achieve a positive and sustainable transformation of the space.

The regeneration of these spaces requires a holistic approach that combines urban, social and cultural measures. Integration of creative and cultural industries in urban processes to achieve the regeneration of these zombie spaces, transforming them into living and active areas that enrich the life of urban communities, is fundamental for the cities of the future. It is also essential to ensure community participation in the decision-making process, so that cultural agents and residents feel involved and are direct beneficiaries of the transformation of their environment. Just as they have played a leading role in the past and present of the neighbourhood, they must continue to do so in the future.

The creative and cultural industries play a major role in the process of transforming spaces that are underused, deteriorated or forgotten by urban planning, offering opportunities to revitalise them.

Firstly, CCIs bring significant economic value to cities. These industries create jobs, attract investment and contribute to local economic growth, creating an ecosystem conducive to entrepreneurship and innovation, fostering the development of new enterprises and business opportunities. Opening cultural centres, design studios or theatres in zombie spaces generates renewed interest in the area, which in turn can attract other players as well as tourism and local

economic development. This ties in with Andrés Jaque's¹ idea of how neither the Ps1² project nor any architectural project for that matter can make the problem disappear or provide a final solution to any of the challenges our societies face. But this does not mean that alliances cannot be established, aimed at offering alternative possibilities or substantially changing the way these issues are addressed on a day-to-day basis.

The importance of CCI lies in their focus on innovation, originality and experimentation. These industries are often driven by creative and entrepreneurial individuals who seek to break with convention and have an impact through fresh and novel approaches. By integrating these perspectives into the transformation of zombie spaces, unique and engaging solutions can be found that resonate with the community and attract new audiences.

Secondly, CCIs have a transformative effect on the social fabric of a community. By creating spaces where people can gather, share and participate, they foster social cohesion and strengthen people's sense of identity and belonging. Not only do cultural events, festivals, exhibitions and artistic activities attract visitors but they also promote interactions and collaboration between different social agents, building greater cohesion and a stronger community fabric. When urban planning processes are combined with the promotion of creative and cultural industries, synergies emerge that amplify the benefits for the community and the urban environment as a whole. These synergies and mutual benefits must be established in permanent logics rather than temporary uses.

Regenerating zombie spaces by introducing mixed uses and promoting cultural and creative activities improves the quality of life of residents while attracting inhabitants from other parts of the city as well as tourists. The result is a virtuous circle of economic and social development that is essential for the sustainable development of our cities. By addressing these aspects holistically, we can transform derelict areas into living, thriving places. Moreover, the creation of cultural and creative spaces in these areas provides the opportunity to preserve the local identity, rescue the historical heritage and promote cultural diversity. A long-term vision and the collaboration of the different stakeholders involved is what is needed to build inclusive, dynamic and culturally rich cities.

In conclusion, CCIs can serve as catalysts for urban regeneration by turning these places into centres of cultural and creative activity, enriching the lives of citizens. Moreover, creative industries have the potential to create jobs and attract other stakeholders, thus contributing to a more resilient economic development of cities faced with a variety of crises. The creation of a favourable ecosystem for these industries implies promoting education in the arts, training cultural entrepreneurs and collaboration between the public and private sectors.

¹ Architecture as a political instrument: Andrés Jaque and Enrique Walker
<https://www.scielo.cl/pdf/arq/n96/0717-6996-arq-96-00016.pdf>

² MoMA PS1 is the space affiliated with Museum of Modern Art in New York, focused on the latest trends in contemporary art. It is located in the Long Island City neighbourhood of Queens in New York City.

T-Factor, good practices for other urban development models

The European T-Factor project focuses on exploring the potential of temporary uses of space for more inclusive, sustainable and vibrant urban environments. As explained at the project kick-off meeting by Emanuela De Menna, T-Factor advisor from the EC Directorate General for Research and Innovation, the European Commission is paying attention to new approaches to urban regeneration with the T-Factor project, an innovation action funded by the Horizon 2020 programme that seeks to “promote the temporary uses of underused urban spaces to experiment with cultural, social and entrepreneurial innovations that generate shared public value.” The island of Zorrotzaurre is one of the in-depth case studies.

Cities are among the greatest inventions of humankind. They act as the canvas of life, the place where we live, work and play, the place where so many move with the promise of a better future. In the beginning, it was mainly about natural resources, access to food, water and security. With the industrial revolution came the myth of progress and humans began to move from rural to urban environments, believing that life was better elsewhere. Unfortunately, the ladder of progress seems to be broken today. The recognition of global challenges such as climate change, inequality and labour disruption adds layers of complexity to the development of cities.

The European Commission plays a decisive role in the future of cities. Whether funding cutting-edge research that expands the field of what is possible in our urban environments or large-scale infrastructure and renovations, European institutions are actively supporting the emergence of innovative solutions to address key challenges in urban regeneration. In this regard, the Commission is using some of its most important R&D funding mechanisms to explore new approaches to urban generation that can help cities deliver on the promise of a better future for which they were originally created. It also does so by actively supporting strategic synergies and collaborations between different projects.

In these approaches, the customary urban regeneration concept based purely on “hard” infrastructure and top-down decision-making is supplemented by a set of solutions in which emerging cultural initiatives such as fab labs, the maker movement and other innovation communities that use the whole city as a canvas for open, participatory and distributed design play an important role. Skateparks in former tobacco factories, food labs, community gardens and other nature-based solutions, art production centres that dare to ask the critical questions no one else is asking and digital fabrication labs where the circular economy is fully integrated into the production process are only a few examples of the many valuable uses that a distributed and inclusive approach to city-making can foster.

This new approach to urban regeneration actions based on civic participation and bottom-up models complements top-down strategies to create true public-private partnerships across the European Union.

T-Factor's mission is to find ways to preserve the heritage of historic buildings and areas with interventions that go beyond façade restoration and include the cultural component as a strategic asset to transform decaying areas into vibrant centres that foster concrete solutions to today's problems. Through research and implementation of temporary urbanism prototypes, T-Factor's international consortium has created a coalition of municipalities, universities, businesses and grassroots organisations committed to developing knowledge, tools and resources based on temporary urbanism to move towards more participatory, inclusive and sustainable cities of the future.

Overly rigid top-down approaches to urban planning have left huge scars on our urban landscapes: unfinished neighbourhoods, empty new buildings and soulless districts that become monuments to the paradox of urban regeneration.

Years, and often decades, can elapse between the time a master plan aimed at regenerating an urban area is approved and its actual implementation. In these times of transition, a new generation of spaces to foster cultural, social and entrepreneurial activities has become a decisive asset in adapting cities to the unknown.

The project team researches, creates and implements a set of tools, guidelines and local pilots to expand and explore the use of temporary urbanism in all EU cities. T-Factor's cutting-edge research looks at some of the most innovative, effective and forward-looking examples of temporary use in Europe, the US and China to transform their stories into practical knowledge for public officials, private developers and grassroots communities. The local T-Factor pilots are the proof of concept of the project, where the team puts the results of the cutting-edge research into practice in six areas of early development in the European Union.

T-Factor shares the vision of Europe as a place to test ideas that can work on different scales in small, medium and large urban settings to foster new models that recompose the vision of a shared future.

This can pave the way for a new era in city-making, expanding the possibilities of what it means to be human in an urban environment.



Figure 1. Zorrotzaurre Island, Bilbao. Google Earth image showing the vacant buildings and empty lots. June 2023. Photo: Google Earth



Figure 2. Zorrotzaurre Island, Bilbao. 3D image of the urban regeneration project designed by Zaha Hadid for Zorrotzaurre. Photo: Zorrotzaurre Management Commission.

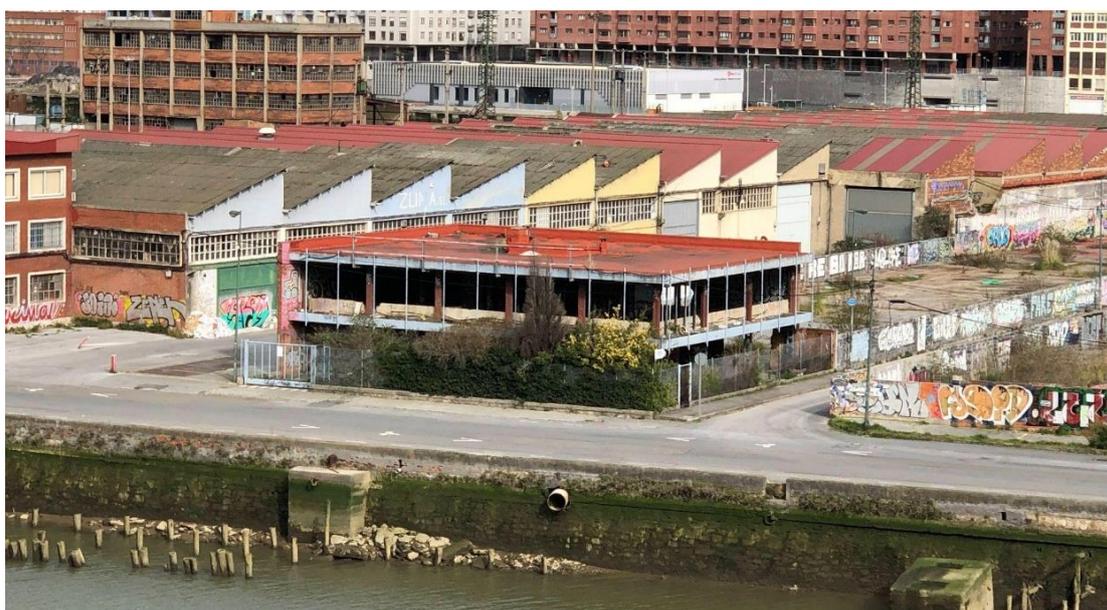


Figure 3. Former Cromoduro factory recognised as industrial heritage, now in ruins. Zorrotzaurre Island. 2018. Photo: Private archive.



Figure 4. Former Mefesa factory, recognised as industrial heritage, now in ruins. Zorrotzaurre Island. 2017. Photo: Private archive.



Figure 5. "Isolation Zone" mural on the façade of Marmoleria Ercor Stone at Ribera de Deusto 73, Bilbao. 2019. Photo: Private archive.



Figure 6. The old Artiach biscuit factory in Bilbao, recognised as industrial heritage, at Ribera de Deusto 70, Zorrotzaurre Island, Bilbao. It is currently a fertile ecosystem where traditional industries coexist with creative and cultural industries. 2021. Photo: Private archive. <https://espacioopen.com/nosotros/>



Figure 7. Urban walks through industrial ruins. Open Aroma Lab workshop with Frank Bloem at the Creative Technologies International Festival, Maker Faire Bilbao, held at the old Artiach factory in the Espacio Open installations. Zorrotzaurre Island. 2021. Photograph: Private archive. <https://espacioopen.com/workshop-open-aromalah/>



Figure 8. Space for public use created by the residents of Ribera de Zorrotzaurre nº4, Bilbao. 2020. Photo: Private archive.



Figure 9. European cultural agents visiting the unused/dormant spaces inside the old Artiach factory. 2022. <https://espacioopen.com/visitas/> Photo: Private archive.



Figure 10. Exploratory workshop on new forms of learning and co-creation, bringing together higher education in the neighbourhood and the communities that inhabit the island to promote new creative practices. Meetings with students from IED Kunsthal as part of the T-Factor project. 2022. Photo: Private archive. <https://zorrotzaurre.t-factor.eu/2022/09/21/nuevas-formas-aprendizaje-cocreacion/>



Figure 11. Photos of the Open Your Ganbara market organised by Espacio Open from 2009 to 2019, which drew thousands of people to the island every Sunday. Photo: Private archive. <https://espacioopen.com/open-your-ganbara/>



Figure 12. Workshop on creative technologies and 3D printing in the arts at Maker Faire Bilboa, the Creative Technologies International Festival held at the Espacio Open installations in the old Artiach Factory. 2021. Photo: Private archive. <https://espacioopen.com/ceramics-3d-printing-bootcamp/>



Figure 13. Poster for the Time Manifesto meeting in Brussels: What if temporary uses can accelerate just transitions in European cities? T-Factor. April 2023. Photo: Private archive. <https://www.t-factor.eu/time-manifesto-just-transitions/>

NEREA DÍAZ



Nerea Díaz, a cultural manager with a Master's Degree in Innovation and Knowledge Management, has worked as a socio-cultural manager of projects in the private and public sectors. She is the founder and director of Espacio Open, an organisation with fourteen years of experience in the intersection of cultural projects, technology and social issues in Ribera de Deusto, Zorrotzaurre Island, in Bilbao.

In recent years she has participated in various international networking events such as the Maker Faire creative technology festivals (San Francisco, New York, Shenzhen, Rome, Zurich), annual Fab Lab Conferences (Shenzhen, Boston, Toulouse), or social experimentation events such as Burning Man in Nevada, USA, and other European editions such as Nowhere in Spain or Borderland in Sweden, among others. She collaborates and works as a volunteer with numerous organisations in the field of cohesion, getting them off the ground or introducing innovative management tools.