



Rethinking urban communities: transforming vacant spaces into vibrant places

Researchers are exploring how short-term accommodation projects can bring new life to empty buildings while inspiring more inclusive and sustainable city living.

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Italian architect and researcher Dr Chiara Mazzarella has long been captivated by the idea of finding better ways to use empty buildings. Across Europe, millions of homes and commercial buildings lie vacant, even as housing shortages and rising rents leave many people in precarious living situations.

“We talk a lot about the circular economy, but the social circular economy – how we reuse spaces for people – receives far less attention,” said Mazzarella.

Based at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands, Mazzarella concluded a two-year EU-funded research initiative called NOMAD in September 2025. Her work explored how short-term and community-led accommodation projects can add value to places, revitalise urban areas, foster social connections and inspire more sustainable city planning.

Her focus was on case studies from experimental projects in Rotterdam and Delft, Brussels and Paris.

Temporary solutions built on community

One initiative studied by Mazzarella was the Vlaardingen Commons, an experimental living community near Rotterdam. Here, the now 33-year-old Laura van Driel found an unexpected home and a new way of life.

After struggling to find affordable housing in Amsterdam, van Driel began what she describes as a “semi-forced, semi-adventurous” lifestyle, moving between eco-communities in the Netherlands, Portugal and France.

In 2021, she discovered Vlaardingen Commons, managed by the foundation [Stad in de Maak](#) (City in the Making). This organisation oversees temporarily vacant urban properties and offers them to residents at little or no rent in exchange for maintaining and revitalising them.

Van Driel moved into a small house set for demolition, sharing the space with a stranger. She soon found herself part of a vibrant, self-organising community. Residents tended gardens, ran workshops, cooked together, and even had a communal sauna.

“We had different ‘circles’, which were like committees for each task,” she recalled. “I led the garden circle, helping design and build vegetable plots and hangout spaces. Every week, we’d have a communal dinner – often soup made from leftover market food. It was a very sociable place with lots going on.”

Reclaiming unused space

According to Mazzarella, projects like Vlaardingen Commons show how temporarily unused buildings can become social and environmental assets, reducing waste, allowing people to experiment with new ways of living together and improving urban quality of life.

Across Europe, more than 47 million homes and many commercial properties stand empty, according to an EU-funded [report](#) on the housing crisis, while over a million people face [homelessness](#) and many more grapple with rising rents.

At the same time, demand for flexible, short-term accommodation is increasing among digital nomads and transient workers.

By studying bottom-up initiatives – from co-living spaces to community hubs – Mazzarella aims to show how they could inform more circular, inclusive urban policies.

“Cities are eager to be more sustainable, but that conversation rarely includes social reuse of empty spaces,” she said. “Temporary projects like these show what’s possible.”

Weighing the benefits

At present, Mazzarella explained, the long-term value of such projects remains unclear. Through direct observations, interviews with residents and neighbours, and literature research, she developed a framework for evaluating the social and economic value of temporary use projects.

“NOMAD’s framework is a tool that municipalities, developers and community groups can use to weigh the benefits of different temporary uses and plan new ones,” said Mazzarella. “Our aim is to help decision-makers improve the social and environmental sustainability of our cities, starting from people’s needs.”

Yet projects like Vlaardingen Commons also reveal challenges, especially initial scepticism from neighbours.

“At first, people thought we were squatters or hippies,” said van Driel. “But complaints to the police actually dropped, and neighbours became much friendlier once they saw how we cared for the area.”

Lasting impact

By late 2024, Vlaardingen Commons residents had moved out to make way for redevelopment, but their impact on the area remained. Piet Vollaard, co-founder of Stad in de Maak, noted that leaving a lasting legacy is central to the foundation’s model.

In the case of Vlaardingen Commons, a decision to remove fences and create a shared garden was so well received that the local housing corporation incorporated it into redevelopment plans. “It saw that collective gardens can work, so now they’re part of the design,” he said.

Other successes included shared social spaces open to the public, such as the launderette, which promoted interaction with neighbours. Temporary uses also allow experimentation, sparking ideas for creating social, cultural and environmental benefits.

Stad in de Maak’s earlier project, Pension Almonde in Rotterdam, had a similar impact. The building became a hub for cultural and social activities, with Moroccan women learning Dutch, Cape Verdean women making carnival costumes and Syrian refugees organising a film festival. “They even turned one flat into a Bedouin tent,” said Vollaard.

The strength of such communities was evident when COVID-19 hit in 2020. “Immediately, this community that was used to sharing and solving problems together could quickly organise food, cooking and shopping for each other, and share food with the wider community,” said Vollaard.

Today, the foundation is continuing the model in nearby Zwijndrecht, where van Driel has also moved, with the hope of showing how temporary living arrangements can spark regeneration and social ties that outlast the buildings themselves.

Regeneration from the bottom up

Meanwhile, Mazzarella has compared findings from different locations to identify common patterns and benefits, helping local authorities and developers make better use of empty buildings.

She believes that recognising the social value of collective temporary uses can legitimise grassroots initiatives and support the [New European Bauhaus](#) push towards a more inclusive green transition.

“Already 25 years ago, researchers and planners started to recognise the power of bottom-up temporary uses to regenerate buildings and urban areas,” said Mazzarella. “I hope the work carried out through NOMAD will highlight those benefits and help create tools that increase trust in innovative, collective and unconventional projects.”

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