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Economies of Collective Temporary Occupations in Brussels

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Abstract

In European cities, strengthening local grassroots initiatives is trending. Citizen groups often find space only by temporarily occupying unused buildings, which, in turn, creates value through diverse activities and economies. While temporary uses are acknowledged for their capacity to generate social and cultural value, the diverse economies they activate remain undefined. This article investigates the economies generated by collective temporary occupations (CTOs) in the reuse of vacant real estate in the Brussels-Capital Region. Based on the hypothesis that CTOs contribute to post-growth urban development, this article explores economic activation, spatial characteristics, and temporal dimension in 10 cases. Results show that CTOs enhance place quality by combining artistic creation, sports facilities, circular production, welfare services, and sharing practices. From small neighbourhood infrastructure to large metropolitan hubs, temporality ranges from 1 to 10 years, with longer-lasting initiatives functioning as commons despite their temporary status. By recognising the diverse dimensions of value creation and the role of CTOs as generators of new economies, this research contributes to the study of temporary uses in post-growth urban planning.

Keywords

Brussels; new economies; post-growth; temporary urbanism; temporary uses; value creation

1. Introduction

Cities are evaluated by what they attract, sell, or grow, though the places their residents value most often do none of these things. This capacity to attract capital and compete globally has long been central to urban studies, reflecting entrepreneurial governance and neoliberal planning rationalities (Brenner et al., 2012; Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1997). Within this paradigm, place quality has been tied primarily to growth-led urban governance, yet emerging frameworks challenge this alignment, proposing social, ecological, and equity-based criteria for defining quality beyond economic performance (Rydin, 2013, 2025).

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Carmona (2019) identified place quality as strongly associated with design quality in the built environment and with the processes and outcomes of development, regeneration, and long-term management of places. In a place-shaping process (Carmona, 2014), the quality of a place generates value for society, health, the economy, and the environment. Place quality can be described through measurable parameters as identified by Carmona and de Magalhães (2009)—cleanliness, accessibility, attractiveness, comfort, inclusiveness, vitality, and safety—which are constitutive of local environmental quality. However, wealth and economic growth remain the primary measures of urban development, and market-driven logic continues to shape most real estate development and urban transformation (Brenner et al., 2012; Harvey, 1989).

Recent research in urban studies criticises growth-centric development (Rydin, 2025; Savini et al., 2022) and proposes post-growth as an alternative framework for designing places beyond economic performance. Post-growth planning calls for decoupling urban development from growth imperatives and promoting sufficiency, resilience, and degrowth principles in city-making (Rydin, 2025; Savini et al., 2022). Rydin (2025) proposed that national and local policies promote a diverse economy that supports the small and medium-sized enterprise sector and a social economy grounded in civil society. Within the post-growth paradigm, bottom-up and community-based initiatives have emerged as an increasingly relevant field of inquiry. Grassroots initiatives, cooperative housing, community land trusts, and commoning projects demonstrate that real estate can function as a collective infrastructure for living, working, and sharing places (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Gorenflo et al., 2018). Rydin (2025) stressed the relevance of the hybridity of organisations, the importance of small businesses and the social economy sector, the need to provide secure landownership and common ownership, and the need to circulate knowledge of effective and viable business models within diverse economies.

Post-growth temporal urbanism treats time as a constitutive element of urban life and calls for values that prioritise craft over capital, people over products, and collective well-being over expansion and economic return (Chang & Wunderlich, 2025). In this trajectory, research has revealed the importance of bottom-up initiatives at both the local scale, through temporary uses (Oswalt et al., 2013), and the urban scale, in the context of temporary urbanism (Madanipour, 2018). Bottom-up temporary uses have been gradually integrated into urban regeneration strategies (Kim, 2019; Martelloni et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2019; Martínez, 2017; Zhang, 2020). Likewise, community-led adaptive reuse of vacant buildings is recognised as playing a role in neighbourhood revitalisation and heritage conservation (Kip & Oevermann, 2022). Yet Ferreri (2021) highlighted that the prefigurative power of temporary uses, as the potential to prototype alternative futures, is becoming instrumentalised, neglecting users' vulnerability, and Bragaglia and Caruso (2022) discussed the risk of instrumentalising temporality for neoliberal policies. Nevertheless, cultural entrepreneurship developing in temporary spaces suggests the possibility of reimagining the urban economy from the bottom up (Mens et al., 2023).

Community-based temporary use involves repurposing underused buildings for multiple purposes, giving new life to abandoned spaces. However, despite long-standing interest in temporary use and temporary urbanism, specific knowledge on value creation and new economies is scattered. To address this gap, this study asks which economies emerge from the community-based temporary use of vacant buildings and what value they add to places.

This article is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews the literature on temporary use and value creation and identifies related economies. Section 3 situates the study within the context of the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR). Section 4 describes the methodology and analytical framework and presents the case studies. Section 5 presents the findings, and Section 6 discusses the results and implications for post-growth planning.

2. Economies and Value of Temporary Real Estate Reuse in the Literature

The literature on temporary use in real estate and the built environment suggests that value creation is linked to diverse economies. A selection of 77 papers was conducted and analysed adopting the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Page et al., 2021) and included scientific articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published in English, French, and Spanish from 2000 to 2025 using the strings: "temporary urbanism"; "temporary uses" AND "urban"; "temporary use" AND "building"; "temporary use" AND "real estate"; "temporary uses" AND "vacant spaces"; "temporary reuse"; "temporary uses" AND "commons"; "temporary uses" AND "collective." The analysis focused on real estate, dimensions of value, and economies. The link between economies and value in the selected articles is the result of coding based on the terms "economy" and "value" (Figure 1).

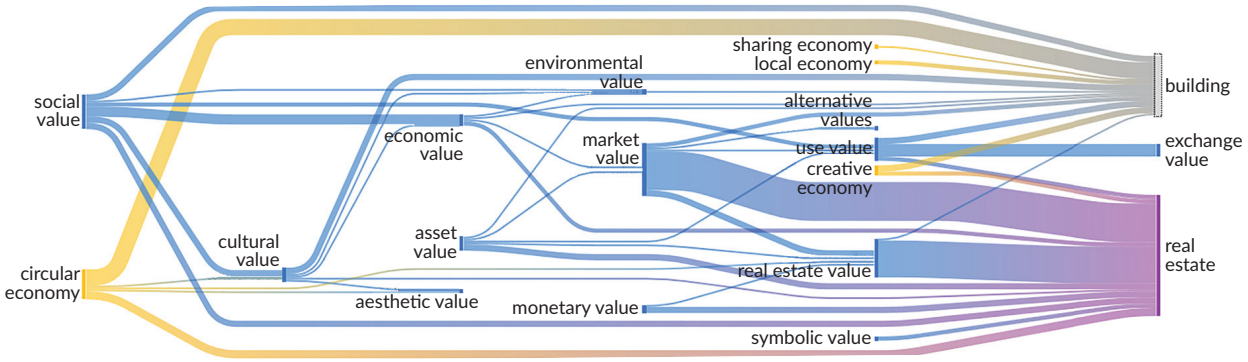


Figure 1. Economies and value of temporary use in vacant real estate in scientific literature. Elaboration by the authors based on the systematic literature review in Atlas.ti.

The concept of non-market value is used here to describe benefits that are not fully reflected in prices, rents, transaction volumes, or asset appreciation. Klamer's value-based approach is useful in this respect because it shifts attention from quantities alone to the qualities that people and communities consider important, including shared and common goods (Klamer, 2020; Petrova et al., 2022). The work of Throsby (1999, 2000) on cultural capital shows that assets may embody cultural value and economic value, which is particularly relevant when temporary occupations create cultural value, memory, identity, or public access that cannot be reduced to market price alone. For this article, non-market value therefore refers to social, cultural, ecological, and collaborative outcomes that contribute to place quality, even when they are only weakly captured by conventional real estate valuation.

Results show that circular, creative, local, and sharing economies (Table 1) emerge and overlap in temporary spaces. This understanding aligns with the heterogeneity of economic practices beyond a single market-centred model (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). In the context of the circular economy,

temporary uses have been recognised to generate aesthetic, cultural, material, and financial value through the reuse of buildings, waste reduction, and resource efficiency (Calzati et al., 2022; Fatigato & Capaldo, 2024; Kawa et al., 2024; Mangialardo & Micelli, 2017a; Meslec & Haase, 2024; Pinard, 2020; Roversi et al., 2021). Kawa et al. (2024) explored the material value of temporary makers' spaces, addressing their capacity for material reuse and resource minimisation. Through different lenses, Fatigato and Capaldo (2024) examined the socio-economic impacts of transitory third places, Meslec and Haase (2024) highlighted temporary occupations as incubators for new business models that repurpose underused space at multiple scales, and Roversi et al. (2021) examined the role of cultural heritage as a catalyst for circular urban processes.

The creative economy dimension emphasises social and use value generated through cultural production, artistic experimentation, and participatory activities (Colomb, 2012; Debrunner & Gerber, 2021; Honeck, 2017; Mangialardo & Micelli, 2017b; Martínez, 2017; Munzner & Shaw, 2015; Seldin, 2020). Creative temporary use provides affordable spaces, enabling artistic work, events, and other activities that would be unviable in market-priced real estate. The value generated here circulates through affordable access to production space, public programming, artistic experimentation, cultural employment, and network creation. These mechanisms produce indirect economic effects, but their primary contribution lies in cultural and use value as inaccessible spaces become available for collective expression, learning, and public encounter.

Temporary uses connect to local economic circuits, too, by supporting neighbourhood entrepreneurship, strengthening short supply chains, providing services, and, in some cases, proximity-based employment (Andres, 2011; Carruthers & Tretter, 2022; Crump, 2020; Kostaki et al., 2024; Mangialardo & Micelli, 2018; Martin et al., 2019; Naghibi & Faizi, 2022). Local economies remain connected to the market economy but differ from extractive market logics in the way value is redistributed within the neighbourhood. Their contribution to place quality manifests in local employment generation, street-level activation, micro-investment initiatives, the provision of everyday services, and the relationships between temporary users and local communities.

Furthermore, the literature on temporary use identifies the sharing economy as an opportunity for value creation. Temporary uses contribute to collaborative, network, and environmental value, rooted in collective resource use, shared governance, and peer-to-peer exchange (Carlton & Vallance, 2017; Fagnoni et al., 2017; Mangialardo & Micelli, 2021), frequently establishing shared community activities, open-access spaces, or co-governed infrastructures. Sharing-economy practices matter not because they create market platforms, but because they organise access, stewardship, and collective use around spaces and resources that would otherwise remain underused. Keller et al. (2026) highlighted that non-commercial sharing is largely disconnected from commercialised practices and primarily centres on intangible goods. Relying on personal contacts for organisation and motivation, it is embedded within the neighbourhood as a primary site of exchange, depending on specific actors' influence, motives, and alliances.

Across these four economic paradigms, temporary uses have been recognised as mechanisms for creating multiple forms of value. Based on this, a framework of the economy, temporary uses, and value (Table 1) is presented to guide this study.

Table 1. Economy, temporary uses, and value from the literature on temporary use in real estate.

Economy and temporary uses	Authors	Value	Indicators
A. Circular economy	Calzati et al. (2022); Fatigato and Capaldo (2024); Kawa et al. (2024); Mangialardo and Micelli (2017a); Meslec and Haase (2024); Pinard (2020); Roversi et al. (2021)	Aesthetic value Cultural value Real estate value Material value	A1. Reuse and adaptation of existing buildings A2. Reduction of construction waste A3. Increased lifespan of materials
B. Creative economy	Colomb (2012); Debrunner and Gerber (2021); Honeck (2017); Mangialardo and Micelli (2017b); Martínez (2017); Munzner and Shaw (2015); Seldin et al. (2020)	Social value Use value	B1. Community engagement B2. Production of cultural goods B3. Innovation and experimentation B4. New employment in creative sectors
C. Local economy	Andres (2011); Carruthers and Tretter (2022); Crump (2020); Kostaki et al. (2024); Mangialardo and Micelli (2018); Martin et al. (2019); Naghibi and Faizi (2022)	Economic value Community value	C1. Support for local businesses C2. Short supply chains C3. Local job creation C4. Neighbourhood revitalisation C5. Increased local investment
D. Sharing economy	Carlton and Vallance (2017); Fagnoni et al. (2017); Mangialardo and Micelli (2021)	Collaborative value Network value Environmental value	D1. Shared use of urban spaces D2. Resource efficiency D3. Collective ownership models D4. Peer-to-peer exchange D5. Strengthened social networks

3. Research and Policies for Temporary Occupations in the BCR

The spatial planning of the BCR has long been shaped by fragmented and conflicting policies across government agencies, institutional complexity arising from the regional border, and a tendency to prioritise market interests in planning decisions (Romańczyk, 2012).

In the post-war period, the city underwent massive urban transformations and fragmentation, rooted in the reforms that produced Belgium's multi-level governance system. The city lacked a coherent regional planning instrument until the 1960s (Kesteloot & Saey, 2002). Real estate development, the rapid expansion of European institutional functions, and weak planning regulation fragmented neighbourhoods, displaced communities, and entrenched socio-spatial inequality, particularly in inner suburban areas (Heydari, 2022). These conditions of legal uncertainty have historically been exploited by temporary occupations. Squatting movements began occupying vacant buildings from the 1970s onwards, and these practices evolved in the 1990s and 2000s, reorienting them as opportunities for experimentation outside market circuits (De Smet, 2013; Ferreri, 2021). The introduction of neighbourhood contracts in 1994, following the creation of the BCR in 1989, gave residents new tools to shape urban development (Romańczyk, 2015). By the 2010s, civic

actions in vacancy occupation had consolidated into structured non-profit organisations that mediated between property owners, public bodies, and communities, developing a model of temporary urbanism as a socially grounded alternative to both commercial vacancy management and squatting (Calzati et al., 2022).

In recent years, the BCR has become one of the most emblematic European cases of the institutionalisation of temporary uses. The establishment of the public office Guichet des Occupation Temporaire (Temporary Occupation Desk; temporary.brussels, n.d.) has formalised temporary occupations as a recognised planning and policy tool for vacant properties, coordinating property owners, project operators, and public administrations.

A study on temporary uses in the Brussels region (Rouet et al., 2026) identified 126 temporary use projects across the BCR. It recognised that Brussels has two policy instruments that are relevant for temporary use planning:

1. Sustainable Neighbourhood Contracts: Contrats de Quartiers Durables, created in 1994, which respond to local needs and integrate temporary projects into localised social and environmental regeneration efforts;
2. Master Development Plans: Plans d'Aménagement Directeur, which have a strategic and regulatory component, to allow temporary use to be included in long-term planning scenarios.

The mapping reveals a high concentration of temporary use in the inner suburbs. Overall, projects are distributed across 17 of the region's 19 municipalities. The study included projects larger than 100 m² (built or unbuilt), lasting more than one year, and managed by a designated operator, regardless of their specific purpose. Spatially, half of the identified projects are located within "urban regeneration zones," which cover 30 km² out of the BCR 162 km². From an organisational perspective, the report found that 77% of the operators surveyed belong to the non-profit sector. In terms of economic model, the survey distinguished between commercial resources (derived from sales of goods and services) and non-commercial resources (including public subsidies and other external support): 69% of operators combine both, indicating hybrid resource structures that blend market and solidarity-based logics, while 31% rely solely on commercial revenues.

Thus, in functional terms, temporary use serves different purposes, responding to urban emergencies, supporting civic engagement, enabling cultural production, and fostering new ways of living in the BCR.

4. Materials and Methods

Because the Guichet des Occupation Temporaire names the temporary use of vacant buildings as "temporary occupations," this article adopts this terminology. Focusing on community-based temporary uses, the article scopes its analysis to cases termed collective temporary occupations (CTOs). A cross-case comparison (Yin, 2018) examined 10 CTOs in Brussels. Qualitative methods are appropriate here because the research questions concern the conditions of value creation, requiring interpretive analysis of activities, governance arrangements, and spatial configurations.

4.1. Case Studies of CTOs

The dataset is drawn from the Guichet des Occupation Temporaire inventory (temporary.brussels, n.d.), which lists more than 200 temporary uses across the BCR. From this pool, 10 cases were selected based on hosting (a) temporary non-housing uses and (b) multipurpose social spaces with diverse social aims and functions, such as *third places* (Jeffres et al., 2009; Oldenburg, 1999). Secondary selection criteria were based on data availability and the diversity of real estate, activities, and locations (Table 2).

The case selection did not aim for statistical representativeness. Rather, the goal was to show diverse cases of CTOs in the BCR (Figure 2); thus, the cases differ in surface area, spatial configuration, and management structure (Table 2).



LEGEND					
ACTIVITIES (by main focus)					
Social, Sportive, Educational	1	**MONA** Jette	2022 – To date (2026)	6	**Circle Park** Anderlecht	2021 – To date (2026)
Cultural / Artistic	2	**Park Ouest** Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	2022 – To date (2026)	7	**Circularium** Anderlecht	2020 – To date (2026)
Productive / Entrepreneurial	3	**Espace Lessines** Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	2022 – 2024	8	**Grand Hospice** Brussels (City Centre)	2021 – To date (2026)
Mixed uses (multi-activities)	4	**La Crèche** Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	2024 – April 2026	9	**Bûûmparck van Praet** Laken (City of Brussels)	2022 – April 2026
	5	**La Serre** Ixelles	2017 – 2024	10	**Reset Brussels** Brussels (City Centre)	2021 – 2025

Figure 2. Map of collective temporary occupation project cases in the BCR.

Table 2. Case studies in Brussels.

Place name	Municipality	Surface (m^2)	Activities	Organisation managing the CTOs	Building owner	Spatial typology	Years
MONA	Jette	4,600	Social	Toestand (non-profit)	Private	Building	2022–2026 (to date)
Park Ouest	Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	30,000	Social, Cultural	Toestand (non-profit), Bruxelles Environnment (Brussels Environment) (regional agency)	Public	Open land	2022–2026 (to date)
Espace Lessines	Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	600	Social, Sportive, Educational	Commune de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean (public authority)	Public	Open land	2022–2024
La Serre	Ixelles	850	Cultural, Social, Artistic, Housing, Food, Repair	Communa (non-profit)	Public	Building	2017–2024
Circle Park	Anderlecht	18,000	Cultural, Social, Sportive	Entrakt – Act Urban (transitional real estate manager)	Public	Former industrial site	2021–2026 (to date)
Circularium	Anderlecht	20,000	Productive, Entrepreneurial, Social	Makettt (transitional real estate manager)	Private	Former industrial site	2020–2026 (to date)
Grand Hospice	Bruxelles	16,000	Cultural, Social, Artistic	Pali Pali (transitional real estate manager)	Public	Building	2021–2026 (to date)
Bûûmparck Van Praet	Oorlogskruisenlaan	5,000	Social, Artistic, Park, Gardening	Buumplanter/NoWayBack (non-profit)	Public	Open land	2022–2026 (to date)
Reset Brussels	Bruxelles	30,000	Cultural and event-related activities, Industry, Services	Arty Farty Brussels (non-profit)	Public	Building	2021–2025
La Crèche	Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	2,130	Creative and artisanal productive activities, Commerce, Storage	Pali Pali (transitional real estate manager)	Public	Building	2024–April 2026

Notes: Source: Data selected from the Guichet des Occupation Temporaire dataset and integrated by the authors.

Each case was studied individually, then compared with others to reveal differences and similarities.

4.2. Data Collection

Primary data consisted of publicly accessible project documentation, including websites, internal descriptions, and programme details. For La Serre, direct observations and in-depth interviews were conducted. Additional information was obtained from secondary sources, including projects' reports, press articles, prior academic studies, and social media data. Social media data were collected from Instagram and Facebook to understand place popularity. Social media data could be biased, as they lack representativeness, access is unequal, and information is difficult to filter and validate, but they provide large-scale, fast insights into people's activities, experiences, and perceptions of urban spaces (Martí et al., 2019) and have been widely used in urban studies (Chen et al., 2019).

4.3. Economy, Space, and Time: Analytical Framework

Analysis of the qualitative data collected followed a coding process (Table 3) based on three dimensions identified as relevant from the literature:

- Economic activation, based on activity types, programming, organisation type, and uses;
- Spatial characteristics, including property type, urban contexts, and real estate typologies;
- Temporal dimension, ranging from short-term uses to long-term temporary infrastructure.

Table 3. Analytical framework: value creation in CTOs through economy, space, and time.

Dimension	Analytical focus	Criteria (codes)
Economic activation	Economy mobilised by the activities of a CTO (What do CTOs do? What kind of organisations have been involved?)	Kind of activities Kind of programming Organisation type Temporary use practices
Spatial characteristics	How activities materialise spatially (What kind of real estate hosts the activities? In what kind of neighbourhood?)	Property type Urban context Real estate typology (industrial, office, heritage, green) Role in urban transformation
Temporal dimension	Duration and relation to future (re)developments (How long has the CTO operated? How is it related to future redevelopment?)	<2 years: pre-redevelopment 2–5 years: transitional phase >5 years: long temporary infrastructure

5. Results

The case comparison results are organised around three dimensions: economies, space, and time (Table 3).

5.1. Economic Activation

The CTO activities (Table 2) reveal that the 10 cases function as third places where socio-cultural activities produce value through multiple economies simultaneously: social, creative, circular, and sharing practices. Hybrid uses produce multiple values, such as material reuse, cultural production, community engagement, welfare provision, and shared resources. However, each CTO serves a specific use case. Circular economies are central in Circularium (2025a, 2025b, 2025c) and La Crèche (2025; Pali Pali, 2025b), where workspaces for fabrication, repair, recycling, and short supply chains are combined with cultural and social functions, managed by two socially oriented companies: respectively, Pali Pali and Makett. They brought together artisans, start-ups, and fablabs with people, implementing small-scale job creation, neighbourhood services, and active engagement with local communities.

Creative and cultural economies emerge in Reset Brussels, Grand Hospice (2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Pali Pali, 2025a), and Circle Park (2025; Entrakt, 2025), hosting exhibitions, events, concerts, performances, and debate events combined with collective artistic production.

The local welfare and social economies of Espace Lessines (Quartiers1080Wijken, 2025), MONA (2025; Toestand, 2025a), La Serre (Communa, 2025; La Serre, 2025), and Bûûmparck Van Praet (Bûûmplanters, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c) have provided everyday support infrastructures, including food distribution, homework schools, therapeutic workshops, community gardening, and volunteering. Here, the primary outputs are community value and social inclusion. The public authority manages Espace Lessines under the "Autour du Parc de l'Ouest" Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract. MONA is managed by Toestand, a non-profit organisationspecialising in the temporary use of vacant urban spaces for social and cultural purposes. La Serre was coordinated by Communa, a non-profit organisation that occupies empty buildings as living, playing, working, and creating spaces, with a community-based approach. The aggregative power of CTOs is particularly evident during special occasions, such as the closing celebration of each place. As at the Dernier Service at La Serre (Figure 3), a sense of belonging to a place and its community confronts the prospect of leaving the space, while the community faces an uncertain future.

Sharing and community-based practices recur across cases. Co-governance models are explicit at La Serre, Grand Hospice, and Park Ouest (Toestand, 2025b), while Bûûmparck Van Praet and MONA emphasise open access and cooperative stewardship, with shared use of space, socio-cultural events, and informal mutual aid networks.

In the 10 cases, CTOs activate sharing economies as social infrastructure. They make spaces accessible with open initiatives, social support, and opportunities to collaborate in placemaking. Commercial activities are small and complementary to socio-cultural objectives and relational dynamics. Thus, their value is place-based, rooted in the connections among users, places, neighbourhoods, and local practices.



Figure 3. Dernier Service: Closing event of La Serre, featuring a CTO of the space, extending from the interior into the street Rue Gray. Photos by C. Mazzarella, June 2024.

5.2. Spatial Characteristics

Observing the spaces and activities of the 10 CTOs, three main clusters can be distinguished, which are described in the following sections.

5.2.1. Neighbourhood-Scale Infrastructures (600–2,600 m²)

Espace Lessines, MONA, La Serre, and La Crèche provide everyday infrastructure (kitchens, workshops, gardens, and social services) and serve as accessible open spaces in residential neighbourhoods. Their impact is strongly local, strengthening social cohesion and access to amenities. Espace Lessines occupies a

municipal building in Molenbeek, and MONA a former convent in Jette La Serre occupied a former covered car park and two adjacent buildings in Ixelles. The Municipality of Ixelles acquired the vacant hangar and adjacent buildings through a right of pre-emption under the Maelbeek Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract and designated Communa as operator. Eventually, in 2023, the municipality sold the building to Community Land Trust Brussels, which will create housing and a collective ground floor as a community space, continuing the social programming developed during the temporary phase. La Crèche is a former municipal nursery (Crèche Reine Fabiola) in Molenbeek. The former *crèche* has been transformed into a temporary occupation space hosting cultural and social projects managed by Pali Pali.

5.2.2. Large Metropolitan Hubs (15,000–30,000 m²)

Reset Brussels, Grand Hospice, Circularium, and Circle Park host high-visibility cultural, sporting, or productive programs and attract regional visitors. Reset Brussels (2025a, 2025b) was a large-scale cultural and events space. In the former Dexia building, a bank headquarters in Brussels, a 33,000 m² structure was in transition from a bank to a future police centre. The non-profit organisation Arty Farty managed it since 2021 but closed it in November 2025. Grand Hospice is a cultural and civic hub in the classified neoclassical former hospice Pacheco Institute in central Brussels, owned by the Public Centre of Social Action (Centre Public d'Action Sociale). While major renovation work for housing and collective services is underway, the Centre made the site available for an innovative socio-cultural project. The planned redevelopment includes approximately 50 mid-range housing units, serviced residences, and student accommodation. Circularium is a circular production and entrepreneurial hub in a former D'Ieteren car factory and showroom complex in the Cureghem district of Anderlecht. D'Ieteren decided to wait to see how the rapidly changing neighbourhood would develop before committing to permanent plans, resulting in a temporary circular-economy project. Future plans include possible residential development.

5.2.3. Urban Laboratories for Future Development

Park Ouest, Bûûmparck Van Praet, and Grand Hospice work as prefigurative spatial tools, testing uses and governance models that inform longer-term redevelopment plans (future park and future housing/services). Park Ouest is a social and cultural programme on a former railway wasteland of approximately three hectares in Molenbeek, managed by Toestand since 2022. The site formerly served as a point of passage for livestock and coal and stood largely unused for 30 years, marked by overgrown, dilapidated warehouses. The temporary occupation is explicitly designed as a participatory planning tool. The site is subject to a master development plan envisaging housing, commerce, and a recreational park, with citydev.brussels (the BCR public urban development agency) mandated to coordinate the overall redevelopment. In a recent development, the park has been confirmed as permanent. Authorities have announced plans to transform it into a large urban park. Bûûmparck Van Praet is a community gardening and ecological activation project on vacant public land in Neder-Over-Heembeek, managed by NoWayBack/Bûûmplanters since 2022. The site is the future heart of a planned new neighbourhood, where a fully new district will be built, including a large park, school, housing, a nursery, local businesses, and a marshland forest. The temporary occupation prefigures this transformation, testing uses and building community ownership ahead of permanent development.

5.3. Temporality of Occupation

CTOs vary significantly in duration and stability, and three temporal regimes emerge (Table 4).

Table 4. The duration of the cases of CTOs.

Type of temporality	Cases	Characteristics
Short-term activation (<2 years)	Espace Lessines, La Crèche Fabiola (initial phase), MONA (early stage)	High intensity but precarious; often pre-demolition or awaiting redevelopment; strong but time-sensitive local benefit
Medium-term experimentation (2–5 years)	Reset Brussels, Grand Hospice, Bûûmparck Van Praet, Circle Park, Park Ouest, Circularium	Enough time to consolidate networks, routines, and public identity; often linked to future transformation processes
Long-term temporary infrastructures (>5 years)	La Serre, Circularium (if extended)	Operate as stable neighbourhood places; symbolic and social identity

Duration is the most sensitive characteristic of CTOs because, in both short-term activations, medium-term experimentation, and long-term infrastructures, when the place works well and communities get used to it, closing the space challenges the endurance of the social value created. Interviews at La Serre in 2024 showed concern about the future of the communities that constituted that third place.

Analysis of popularity in 2025 in relation to CTOs' duration shows that the longest-running occupation is also the most followed on social media—La Serre (≈7 years, 11,245 followers)—indicating that digital visibility accumulates over time as places and communities consolidate. Recently activated sites, such as La Crèche (≈1.5 years, 698 followers) and Espace Lessines (≈2 years, 1,251 followers), demonstrate lower popularity and visibility on social media. Space dimension plays a similar but less linear role. Larger sites, such as Reset Brussels (30,000 m², 4,053 followers) and Circle Park (18,000 m², 11,073 followers), tend to attract more users and produce more visually shareable content, while small-scale neighbourhood infrastructures, such as Espace Lessines (600 m²) and La Serre (850 m²), only achieve similar visibility when paired with high cultural output. Activity type is the strongest differentiator, with spaces rooted in creative or sporting programming showing the highest number of followers (Circle Park: 11,073; La Serre: 11,245). Welfare-oriented or circular production projects cluster significantly lower (Circularium: 4,990; MONA: 2,329; Espace Lessines: 1,251). This suggests that external recognition, as measured through social media visibility, reflects aesthetic and experiential appeal rather than the depth of social or environmental value produced. Thus, CTOs may generate significant local impact while remaining digitally invisible, a gap with implications for how policy legitimises, funds, or renews temporary occupations.

5.4. Cross-Case Comparison

Table 5 synthesises the cross-case findings across the analytical framework (Table 3).

Table 5. Synthesis of cross-case findings by analytical dimension.

Dimension	Analytical focus	Criteria (codes)	Synthesis of findings across the 10 cases
Economic activation	Economy mobilised by the activities of a CTO	Kind of activities	CTOs show a combination of at least two of circular, creative, local/welfare, and sharing activities. Circular economy is central in Circularium, La Crèche, and (alongside creative/social) La Serre. Creative/cultural economy is central in Reset Brussels, Grand Hospice, and Circle Park. Welfare/local economy is central in MONA, Espace Lessines, and Bûûmparck Van Praet.
		Kind of programming	Programming ranges from everyday welfare services (medical support, food distribution, and homework schools) to high-visibility cultural events (exhibitions, concerts, and performances) to productive/fabrication activities (repair and short supply chains). Programming intensity and visibility do not correlate with depth of social value produced.
		Organisation type	Three organisation types emerge: non-profit organisations (Toestand, Communa, Arty Farty, and Buumplanters), transitional real estate management companies (Entrakt, Makettt, and Pali Pali), and public authorities (Commune de Molenbeek for Espace Lessines).
		Temporary use practices	Sharing-economy practices (co-governance, open access, and cooperative stewardship) cut across nearly all cases regardless of primary economic activation, rather than defining a separate subgroup. Co-governance is explicit at La Serre, Grand Hospice, and Park Ouest; open-volunteer stewardship at MONA and Bûûmparck Van Praet.
Spatial characteristics	How activities materialise spatially	Property type	Sites range from 600 m^2 (Espace Lessines) to 33,000 m^2 (Reset Brussels), spanning municipal buildings, former convents, industrial complexes, and vacant open land.
		Real estate typology	Four typologies recur: heritage/religious buildings (MONA and Grand Hospice), industrial/infrastructure sites (Park Ouest, La Serre, and Circularium), institutional buildings (Espace Lessines and La Crèche), and open land (Bûûmparck Van Praet). Office typology appears once (Reset Brussels, a former bank).
		Role in urban transformation	Three spatial clusters emerge: neighbourhood-scale infrastructures (600–2,600 m^2: Espace Lessines, MONA, La Serre, La Crèche, and Bûûmparck Van Praet) with strong local impact, large metropolitan hubs (15,000–30,000 m^2: Reset Brussels, Grand Hospice, Circularium, and Circle Park) with regional draw but reduced neighbourhood openness, and urban laboratories (Park Ouest, Bûûmparck Van Praet, and Grand Hospice) functioning as prefigurative planning tools.

Table 5. Synthesis of cross-case findings by analytical dimension.

Dimension	Analytical focus	Criteria (codes)	Synthesis of findings across the 10 cases
Temporal dimension	Duration and relation to future (re)developments	<2 years 2–5 years >5 years	Short-term (<2 years): Espace Lessines, La Crèche, Bûûmparck Van Praet (initial phase), and MONA (early stage) present high intensity but precarious conditions. Medium-term (2–5 years): Reset Brussels, Grand Hospice, Circle Park, Park Ouest, and Circularium have sufficient time to consolidate networks and public identity. Long-term (>5 years): La Serre (~7 years) and Circularium (if extended) function as stable, symbolically significant neighbourhood infrastructures.
		Pre-redevelopment/ transitional phase/long temporary infrastructure	Duration correlates with governance and eventual outcome. The two cases with the most developed co-governance/commons-oriented arrangements (La Serre and Park Ouest) are also the only two with confirmed structured transitions to permanent status (Community Land Trust and a permanent urban park, respectively). Shorter-lived, less co-governed cases (Espace Lessines and La Crèche) remain exposed to redevelopment uncertainty without a clear transition pathway.

6. Discussion

The CTOs examined in this study show that vacant real estate generates value through hybrid economies. Results (Table 5) illustrate place quality fostered through non-profit and community-based practices. Analysis shows that diverse economies (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020)—i.e., circular, creative, local, and sharing—overlap in outcomes of mixed activities in third places. Thus, CTOs combine all four economies identified in the literature on temporary use and temporary urbanism, producing diverse dimensions of value (Table 1).

The non-market value generated by CTOs takes forms that Klamer (2020) and Throsby (1999, 2000) theorised: access to affordable space, cultural participation, social care, environmental repair, mutual aid, and community capacity. Circularium, La Serre, and La Crèche generate material and environmental value through fabrication, repair, and short supply chains (indicators A1–A3 in Table 1). Reset Brussels and Grand Hospice deliver cultural and civic value through events and public programming (indicators B1–B4). MONA, Espace Lessines, and Bûûmparck Van Praet base value in everyday welfare infrastructures (indicators C1–C4). The challenge is to make these value dimensions visible to inform planning decisions as post-growth frameworks require (Chang & Wunderlich, 2025).

Another consideration concerns governance. Co-management arrangements in La Serre, Reset Brussels, and Grand Hospice; open participation in MONA and Park Ouest; and volunteer-based stewardship in Bûûmparck Van Praet show collective production and maintenance of shared resources outside both market and state

provision. Hence, CTOs reveal the value of vacant buildings as potential laboratories of democracy when governance structures are designed around the local community.

Critically, the reviewed literature frames creative and cultural economies as core drivers of urban vibrancy (Colomb, 2012; Honeck, 2017), but the Brussels cases reveal that the CTOs generating the deepest social and solidarity-based value are less visible and less institutionally supported than culturally spectacular hubs, such as Reset Brussels and Circle Park. Social media metrics, used as a proxy for external recognition, privilege creative economy indicators (B1–B4) over welfare indicators (C1–C5). Creative economies may accrue legitimacy through popularity, while care-based economies risk remaining under-recognised despite producing deep local value. In post-growth terms, this reveals a contradiction: The most socially necessary occupations may not automatically gain recognition.

Finally, temporality emerges as both a resource and a risk. As Ferreri (2021) and Bragaglia and Caruso (2022) highlighted, the ambivalence of temporary use enables experimentation while exposing users to precarity and instrumentalisation. From a post-growth perspective, Chang and Wunderlich (2025) argued that time is a constitutive dimension of urban life rather than a neutral background condition. The Brussels cases reflect this duality: Short-term occupations rapidly activate vacant spaces but remain vulnerable to redevelopment, whereas longer-term occupations consolidate communities, identities, and social value. The transition of La Serre to Community Land Trust Brussels and the permanence of Park Ouest as an urban park suggest that the greatest potential of CTOs lies not in extending temporariness but in creating pathways from temporary uses to permanent urban infrastructures.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how CTOs generate value beyond the market-based economy in Brussels. The literature on temporary use demonstrates that reusing vacant buildings relates to the circular, creative, local, and sharing economies. The 10 CTO cases show how they function as productive socio-spatial infrastructures, redistributing access to space, tools, knowledge, and cultural resources and enabling forms of value rooted in cooperation, reciprocity, care, and repair.

The circular, creative, sharing, and local economies are rooted in long-standing social initiatives, bottom-up practices, and collective projects. This study shows how, within temporary real estate reuse, such economies can be identified, compared, and related to specific forms of new place value. Hence, CTOs matter because they produce multiple value dimensions that market-oriented real estate development tends to overlook.

A key finding concerns the relationship between CTOs and their neighbourhoods. Some CTOs (MONA, Espace Lessines, and Bûûmparck Van Praet) are strongly embedded in local social life, providing learning, food, and social support. In contrast, metropolitan hubs (Reset Brussels and Circularium) operate at a larger scale and attract a wider public but are less open to the neighbourhood. This suggests that temporary use does not automatically generate local value; it does so when governance, programming, and accessibility are structured around community presence. Furthermore, CTOs mask inequalities because they do not address underlying drivers, such as speculative landholding and precarity. Moreover, the prominence of cultural and event-driven projects risks reinforcing a bias that values spectacular work over slow, care-based work.

This comparative analysis has limitations. Secondary data are uneven in depth. Only the case of La Serre was studied through direct observations and interviews, while the other nine cases relied on project documentation, websites, and social media. The sample of 10, while diverse, is not statistically representative of the 200+ occupations catalogued by the Guichet d'Occupation Temporaire. Finally, social media followers serve as a proxy for external recognition, but this conflates visibility with legitimacy and may reflect factors such as marketing, platform algorithms, and audience demographics unrelated to the value produced.

Despite its limitations, this study provides a scientific framework to investigate the added value of CTOs across multiple practices. As urban policies seek to address urban inequality, CTOs demonstrate that community-based temporary uses can generate place quality and multiple dimensions of value through hybrid economies. Empowering such practices can have direct implications for post-growth-oriented urban planning.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Libera Amenta (University of Naples Federico II).

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 5.1 and Grammarly to improve the clarity of the English writing. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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