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Cultural initiatives in urban transformation:

an urban anthropological perspective on independent projects in Vienna

Zornitza Draganova

Bulgarian academy of sciences,
Institute of philosophy and sociology
zornitza.draganova@ips.bas.bg

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Introduction

Understanding the social practices embedded in urban spaces, as anthropologist Gary Bridge notes, is essential for grasping the complexities of modern urban life (Bridge, 2006). Furthermore, Espinosa writes that, fueled by the “spatial turn”, the research focus radically shifts to a concept of the “urban, which would never again be seen as a simple setting for social relations but instead as a series of processes in which the social, the material, and the spatial are interwoven” (Espinosa, 2024, p. 462). The intersection of anthropology and urban studies is vital in recognizing how cultural actors—often art-

ists, managers, and entrepreneurs—navigate the interplay between the historical heritage of urban spaces and their potential for future development. These cultural mediators operate with the available resources, often scarce or not easily accessible converging community aspirations and cultural expressions to create a sense of belonging and identity. Urban anthropological research also sheds light on the

The study investigates the impact of independent cultural initiatives on urban development and the transformation of city spaces in Vienna, offering an urban-anthropological perspective. Through a series of case studies, the research demonstrates how these grassroots initiatives have revitalized underutilized areas, playing a key role in reshaping the city's cultural landscape. The study also highlights how these initiatives serve as platforms for the cultural inclusion of underrepresented

groups, amplifying diverse voices and fostering social cohesion.

The data obtained from interviews are organized into three key categories, thus forming a threefold framework for comprehension of the investigated processes and practices: Urban development and urban infrastructure, which explores how these initiatives contribute to the physical and cultural revitalization of urban spaces; Economic challenges and partnership building, which reflects the financial obstacles and collaborative opportunities faced by the actors in the sphere; and Inclusivity and participation, which focuses on whether and how the scrutinized initiatives create opportunities for underrepresented communities to get involved in the cultural life of the city.

The research underscores the critical role that independent cultural movements play in driving urban regeneration, promoting social integration, and enhancing Vienna's cultural fabric. The study focuses on the following case studies: Naija Akatarians II, Brunnenpassage, Shizzle (Kulturcafé Max), Vienna Art Markt, Zwischendecke Galerie, Semmelweisklinik, FLUCC, and Commonroom.

diverse processes and dynamics that foster community solidarity and resilience.

Grounded in the need for an urban anthropological perspective on the interactions between communities, artists, and cultural actors, this article examines the operations and challenges faced by several independent cultural initiatives in Vienna. It is based on a two-month field inquiry in Austria's capital and draws on qualitative data collected through interviews and observations by the end of June 2024. The article explores how cultural initiatives contribute to urban development and how they navigate issues of gentrification and participation as dynamic processes. Ultimately, this research aims at presenting the intersections between the contributions of cultural initiatives and spaces to urban development on the one hand; and the ambiguities of gentrification and participation as complex processes rather than results of one-way policies.

To avoid ambiguity, several terms used throughout the text are clarified below:

Independent initiatives, independent culture sector. These refer to cultural and artistic initiatives that fall outside the scope of state-run or large institutional bodies like national theatres, museums, or municipal cultural centers. They often include NGOs, collectives, and infor-

mal cultural hubs. While they may receive public or private funding (from local, national, European schemes, or foundations), many operate with precarious financial structures or on an entrepreneurial basis. Scholars emphasize different features and functions of the independent cultural initiatives/sector. In relevant sources, these overlapping terms refer to artistic and cultural activities outside state, institutional, or commercial frameworks, often characterized by autonomy, grassroots organization, and critical engagement with societal issues. These initiatives frequently emerge in response to gaps in mainstream cultural production or as resistance to dominant political and economic narratives (Szreder, 2017). Scholars like Bonet and Donato (2011) highlight their role in fostering creativity and inclusivity by providing platforms for marginalized voices and experimental practices. While the independent cultural sector thrives on its flexibility and freedom, its reliance on precarious funding and volunteer labor poses significant challenges (Graziano, 2014). This independence allows for innovative, critical, and community-oriented cultural expressions, but it also raises questions about sustainability and institutional support.

Cultural agents or cultural actors. These terms, along with “actors in the field of culture and the arts,” as well as “cultural operators” and “cultur-

al service providers,” are used interchangeably in policy and academic discourse, though they carry different connotations. Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural agents” emphasizes structural influence and cultural capital, while “cultural actors” focuses on performative and participatory roles. In practice, individuals often embody multiple roles – artist, manager, facilitator – especially in the independent scene. Giddens’ theory of agency also supports the idea that these roles overlap and should be seen within a continuum of social action and participation. People engaged in or initiating cultural or artistic initiatives and collectives are often multidisciplinary by education. The distinction or overlap between “cultural agents” and “cultural actors” in the cultural sphere often hinges on their conceptual framing and use in academic discourse. Bourdieu (1993) defines cultural agents as individuals or groups who possess cultural capital and actively influence cultural production and dissemination, often aligning their roles with larger structures of power and fields of production. Cultural actors, on the other hand, are more frequently associated with the performance of roles within specific cultural contexts, emphasizing their active participation in cultural practices rather than their structural influence (Ortner, 2006). However, the lines between the two may be blurred, for instance in the fundamental work of Giddens

(1984), arguing that agency is inherent to all actors in the social sphere, making the distinction less definitive. Both terms highlight participation in cultural systems, but the difference lies in whether the focus is on structural influence (“agents”) or localized, performative participation (“actors”).

Theoretical notes

Urban transformation refers to the process by which urban spaces are reshaped and redefined through social, economic, and cultural activities. Cultural initiatives often play a key role in this transformation by repurposing underused or neglected spaces, contributing to what Henri Lefebvre described as the “production of space.” Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of spatial production emphasizes how space is socially constructed and continuously redefined by human activity. This concept is essential for understanding how cultural operators and independent initiatives engage with the urban landscape. The role of independent cultural initiatives in shaping urban identities should not be overlooked. Michel de Certeau (1984) discusses how individuals and collectives “appropriate” urban spaces through everyday practices, including cultural activities. For independent cultural operators, this appropriation often involves reimagining and redefining the urban environment to create inclu-

sive spaces that reflect the diversity of the city’s population. This process is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and community in an increasingly fragmented urban landscape.

The transformation of urban spaces through cultural activities can also lead to gentrification, a process in which low-income residents are displaced as an area becomes more attractive to wealthier groups. This issue is particularly relevant for independent cultural spaces, which, while promoting social inclusion and diversity, may unintentionally contribute to rising property values and the displacement of the very communities they seek to support. David Harvey (2003) describes this phenomenon as the “urbanization of capital,” where cultural regeneration projects are co-opted by capitalist interests, leading to the commodification of culture and space. In his work on “territorial stigmatization,” Loïc Wacquant (2007) explores how certain urban spaces are labeled as problematic or undesirable, only to be transformed through cultural and economic interventions that cater to more affluent populations. This process often results in the exclusion of long-term residents and the erasure of local identities. For independent cultural operators, navigating the fine line between urban revitalization and gentrification is a constant challenge. The inclusion and participation of different social groups are increasingly an important topic

when discussing the role of cultural initiatives in urban spaces. Scholars such as Iris Marion Young (1990) have explored the politics of inclusion, arguing that democratic urban spaces must accommodate diverse voices and experiences, particularly those from marginalized communities. In the context of urban cultural activities, this means providing access not only to artistic expression but also to decision-making processes. Participation, therefore, is not merely about attendance or representation but about fostering a sense of agency within these communities.

From an urban anthropological perspective, Setha Low (1996) highlights how the inclusion of different social groups in cultural spaces is often tied to questions of social justice and spatial equity. Low's ethnographic research demonstrates that while cultural spaces may claim to be inclusive, they often replicate existing power structures and inequalities. This aligns with Nancy Fraser's critique of the "public sphere" (1990), where she argues that genuine inclusion requires addressing both cultural representation and material inequalities. The challenge for independent cultural operators is to create spaces that truly empower underrepresented groups, moving beyond symbolic gestures toward meaningful participation. Doreen Massey (2005) further explores the relation-

ship between space, place, and identity, arguing that urban spaces are sites of power struggles and contestation. For independent cultural initiatives, creating inclusive spaces means negotiating these power dynamics and working to ensure that all groups have access to and ownership of the cultural life of the city. This is particularly important in multicultural cities like Vienna, where independent cultural spaces serve as platforms for marginalized communities to assert their presence and engage in the cultural and political discourse of the city.

While independent cultural initiatives can drive urban regeneration, they can also accelerate processes of gentrification and social displacement, as explored by Sharon Zukin. Zukin's work on "Naked City" (2010) illustrates the tension between cultural renewal and the exclusion of long-term residents as spaces become commercialized and commodified. Independent cultural initiatives can serve as powerful agents of urban change, but their effectiveness depends on their ability to adapt to and navigate the complex socio-political and economic landscape of the city. Bianchini and Parkinson (1993) argue that cultural operators must develop strategic partnerships with local governments, businesses, and community organizations to ensure the sustainability of their projects. These partnerships are essential for securing funding,

gaining access to spaces, and building networks of support. However, as Maria Gravari-Barbas (2016) points out, these collaborations can also lead to tensions between grassroots cultural movements and institutionalized cultural policies, where the latter may impose bureaucratic constraints that limit the autonomy of cultural operators. Independent cultural initiatives are often at the forefront of social and urban innovation. As Anne Querrien (2007) argues, cultural collectives are vital in experimenting with new forms of urban living and social interaction. These collectives, through their use of public spaces, create what Querrien describes as “micro-utopias”—small, temporary spaces of social innovation that challenge the dominant narratives of urban life. However, the challenge remains in maintaining these spaces in the face of economic pressures, legal constraints, and social tensions.

The precarious nature of independent cultural spaces is another critical issue. Many cultural operators face unstable funding, short-term leases, and uncertain futures, making long-term planning difficult. Scholars like Guy Standing (2011), who introduced the concept of the “precariat,” have examined how precarious working conditions affect individuals and collectives operating outside formalized institutions. In the cultural sector, this instability is

further exacerbated by the reliance on temporary spaces, fluctuating support from public or private institutions, and the constant pressure to secure financial sustainability. In the context of precarious space usage, Claire Bishop (2012) critiques the temporary nature of many cultural interventions in urban environments, arguing that while they may offer immediate aesthetic or social value, they often fail to create lasting change. Bishop suggests that cultural projects must consider sustainability from the outset, recognizing the need for long-term impact beyond temporary installations or events. Steven Miles and Ronan Paddison (2003) have made contributions to the study of urban regeneration, particularly in relation to cultural policy and governance. Steven Miles has focused on culture-led urban regeneration, investigating how cultural strategies are used to drive economic growth and urban renewal. His findings suggest that cities often rely on culture to attract investment and enhance their global standing. However, he critiques this approach, noting that it can lead to the commodification of culture and the marginalization of local communities, who may not benefit equally from such strategies. Ronan Paddison, frequently in collaboration with Miles, has explored the role of cultural activities in urban regeneration, particularly in global cities. His research high-

lights the potential of cultural initiatives to foster economic revitalization, but he also identifies challenges, particularly regarding cultural diversity. Paddison argues that while global cities may promote diversity as a cultural asset, these efforts can sometimes obscure deeper inequalities and tensions related to inclusion and representation.

Monika Mokre's (2010) work delves into the intersections of social inclusion, civic rights, and urban contexts, highlighting how cultural policies and intercultural dialogues often shift the focus away from deeper socio-economic inequalities. In her writings, such as "On the Culturalization of Inequality in Capitalist Democracies," Mokre argues that cultural differences are frequently used to explain and justify socio-economic disparities, especially within capitalist frameworks. Rather than addressing the structural causes of inequality, she suggests that efforts at intercultural dialogue or social inclusion often act as superficial remedies that do not challenge the underlying economic and political systems. In urban contexts, Mokre emphasizes that while cultural initiatives, especially in cities, promote inclusivity and diversity, they often fail to fully dismantle entrenched inequalities. These efforts sometimes prioritize market-based approaches that can commodify culture without addressing the lack of

resources, access, or civic rights for marginalized groups, such as immigrants and precarious workers. She is critical of the tendency to see cultural projects as a solution to systemic inequalities without the necessary economic or political reforms to support real social justice. Furthermore, Mokre touches on the contradiction inherent in European cultural policies, which aim to promote a creative, knowledge-based economy while still relying on low-cost, precarious labor. This duality is particularly evident in cities, where urban regeneration often brings cultural and creative projects into marginalized areas, but without the necessary resources to sustain long-term inclusion and support for vulnerable communities. Through these critiques, Mokre highlights the need for a more comprehensive and critical approach to inclusion that goes beyond symbolic gestures to address structural inequalities.

Methodology, fieldwork and proposed framework

The research used in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews and field observation. These methods, widely used in urban anthropology, allow for a nuanced understanding of how cultural initiatives are shaped by and, in turn, shape the urban environment. As Setha Low (1996) argues, ethnographic methods such as

participant observation are essential in revealing the lived experiences of urban dwellers and the social production of space. Similarly, Didier Fassin (2013) emphasizes the importance of using qualitative methods to engage with the multifaceted realities of urban communities, particularly in understanding their responses to socio-political and economic transformations.

The inquiry and selection of case studies aimed at delving into diverse types of spaces, stories and views that somehow represent the independent culture sector in Vienna. The anthropological approach provides a comprehensive regard to the constellation of spatial, social and human factors that shape the wholeness of cultural initiatives and spaces in the city. The findings allowed us to elaborate and propose here a threefold framework for the anthropological approach to urban cultural initiatives with the collected data categorized under three key aspects: *Urban development and urban infrastructure*, which addresses the two-directional interrelationship between independent cultural initiatives and the urban environment;

Economic challenges and partnership building, which examines the financial sustainability of these projects and their collaborations with public and private stakeholders;

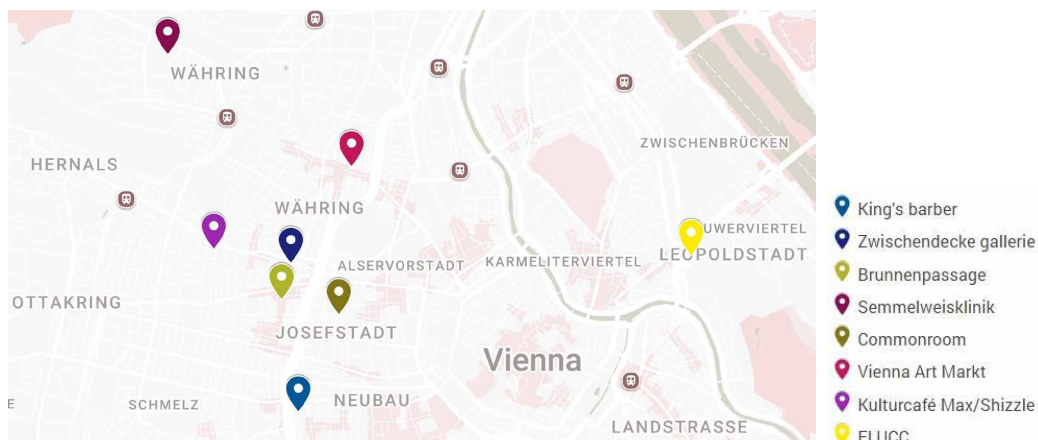
Inclusivity and participation, which highlights how cultural initiatives foster social cohesion

and engage underrepresented communities.

This framework provides a lens through which to analyze the transformative potential of independent cultural projects in shaping Vienna's urban landscape. A list of semistructured and unstructured interviews, the role of the respondent in the initiative or space, as well as date and place of the interactions can be found in Annex 1. In the following parts of the article, quotations of the conducted interviews will be marked in the text with their corresponding number in the list. Interviewees have been anonymized to protect their privacy and to account for the sensitivity of certain shared insights. This approach ensures ethical handling of data and reflects common anthropological standards.

While this article touches on the intersections of culture, urban regeneration, and innovation, it does not directly engage with Charles Landry's *The Creative City* framework (2008). This omission reflects an intentional focus on bottom-up, community-driven practices rather than top-down policy paradigms. Nonetheless, Landry's work could offer valuable context on how creativity is strategically used in urban development. The following case studies form the empirical base of this article are presented on the accompanying map (Fig. 1):

- Naija Akatarians II (King's Barber): Located on Neulerchenfelder Straße in the 16th district,



Map of the case studies in Vienna, presented in the article

Fig.1

this initiative uses graphic art and storytelling in a barbershop frequented by the Nigerian diaspora to foster cultural dialogue.

- **Zwischendecke Galerie:** Based in Hernalds (17th district), this visual arts gallery focuses on contemporary practices and serves as a hub for the local art community.
- **Brunnenpassage:** Found in the heart of the Brunnenmarkt area, this inclusive, multidisciplinary venue organizes over 400 annual events in theater, dance, and music, specifically targeting diverse communities.
- **Semmelweisklinik:** An independent arts center located in a repurposed historical clinic in the 18th district. It hosts workshops, performances, and interdisciplinary events.
- **Commonroom:** A cozy café and creative hub in the 8th district, run by women from the Turkish diaspora, offering community workshops and exhibitions with a focus on inclusivity.
- **Vienna Art Markt:** A gallery and marketplace on Gentzgasse in the 18th district, designed to enable direct artist-audience interactions and affordable access to visual art.
- **Kulturcafé Max (Shizzle):** A music and arts venue operated by the Shizzle collective, also

in the Hernalds district, engaged in community-building through cultural activities.

- **FLUCC:** A hybrid art venue built in and around a former underground passage near Praterstern. Known for its experimental ethos, it blends nightlife, music, and contemporary art.

Urban development and urban infrastructure

A significant theme raised by many respondents was the decentralization of artistic events and cultural activities – moving beyond Vienna's traditional art institutions and well-trodden cultural paths is seen as an essential step, though it demands considerable effort and adaptation. For instance, *Vienna Art Markt*, in the 18th district, located in a non-touristic and somewhat hidden space, contributes to artistic decentralization by repurposing a passage between buildings for an art venue. The passage, which is described as being outside of major tourist pathways, has been converted into a gallery and market, making art accessible to the local community and contributing to the cultural decentralization in this less commercialized part of the city. The use of space in a way that fosters creative expression aligns with broader ur-

ban strategies of regeneration, where underutilized areas are transformed into cultural hubs that serve local populations and offer alternative spaces for artistic production (Int. 1)

In the dynamic landscape of Vienna's independent cultural sphere, many initiatives have emerged in unconventional urban spaces, reflecting both the potential and the challenges of these overlooked areas. One such example is *Flucc*, an ensemble of under- and overground space between the Praterstern station and the recreation park. Previously an underground passage which the local municipality intended to demolish and close, it was transformed by an art collective into a cultural space and club, which has evolved significantly over its now more than 20 years of existence. Through this period, it has undergone significant changes. Originally an experimental, temporary initiative to "bring art to unusual places", it evolved into a concert club space with ongoing renovations. The respondents there mentioned the place as a "forever ongoing construction site," emphasizing its continual transformation (Int. 2) Recently, there has been a focus on being a climate-friendly space, with plans to install solar panels on the

roof. The site's original structure (building containers, forming a versatile and changing structure) was not built to last 20 years, which has necessitated consistent renovations. The space now also includes a terrace and garden area to create a more approachable and open environment for the public.

Another space in progress in the 18th district is the *Semmelweislinik* where a collective of approximately ten people with core jobs and about a hundred involved in the association "*Kunst- und Kulturzentrum Semmelweislinik*" particularly through the repurposing of an unused hospital complex into a cultural and artistic hub. The project has been evolving in the past two years, initially starting with a lot of construction and now growing into a community space. The building itself is 110 years old, requiring maintenance and future renovation, which the collective hopes the city of Vienna will eventually fund. This highlights the challenges of working in an aging infrastructure while striving to maintain and regenerate the space. The building had been abandoned and left in a deteriorating state. Respondents discussed the process of revitalizing the infra-

structure, including replacing fire safety doors, removing tiles, and restoring the space for public events, while respecting the building's history, including its former use as an orphanage and technical facility in the 20th century (Int. 3) Such initiatives exemplify how disused urban infrastructure can be reimagined to serve contemporary community needs.

An important stakeholder in Vienna's independent cultural scene, is the association around the *Brunnenpassage*, formerly a commercial hall, located at the longest market street in Europe – Brunnenmarkt, in the 16th Viennese district. *Brunnenpassage's* location within a former market hall in the Brunnenmarkt area of Vienna plays a pivotal role in its function as a cultural space. It was repurposed for artistic and cultural activities, fostering urban regeneration. A respondent there emphasized the importance of the building's architecture, describing it as a form of “urban acupuncture,” a symbolic intervention in the city cultural scene that induces renewal in the surrounding area (Int. 4) The Brunnenmarkt is described as “the longest street market in Europe,” with approximately 85,000 weekly visitors from various cultural backgrounds, demonstrating how the urban infrastructure of markets plays an interesting role in community life and cultural engagement. This illustrates the close ties between urban spaces and

culture-driven regeneration efforts, particularly in multicultural environments.

The narrative surrounding Hernals, Vienna's 17th district, provides a compelling case of urban transformation rooted in both cultural and socio-political shifts. Historically conservative, the district underwent significant changes over the past century, particularly in its cultural landscape. Hernals' proximity to the more open and diverse 16th district, Ottakring, led to the diffusion of cultural and creative practices from one district to the other. A respondent, founder of the important *Kulturnetz Hernals* association and co-owner of the *Zwischendecke gallerie* described the gradual expansion of cultural events, like the renowned “Soho Festival” as crucial elements for the shifting of the boundaries of artistic expression and community engagement across district lines (Int. 5) Urban infrastructures, such as temporary-use spaces (“Prekarium”) provided by property owners, played a key role in facilitating cultural interventions in Hernals, transforming underutilized properties into hubs for artistic and community-led activities. Within the umbrella-association of the *Kulturnetz Hernals*, now exists and inherits the partnership and experience of the bigger legal entity, the collective *Shizzle* and its “infrastructure” - the cultural and concert space *Kulturcafé Max und Studiohaus*, located not far from the *Zwischendecke gallerie* in Hernals. The re-

spondent discusses the use of a precarious rental system (Prekarium) in Vienna, describing it as a form of borrowing rather than a traditional rental agreement. This arrangement has been used in creative spaces like the café they operate, but it has also created a sense of instability. They mention how the area they are located in has been affected by urban developments, particularly the construction of the U5 metro line, which has led to rising property values and increased gentrification. A dominant topic in the moment of the inquiry in May-June 2024 was the unstable status of the space. The respondent pointed out that the lack of investment in infrastructure by the property owner is a significant challenge, as they are still operating under a 1960s concession with outdated facilities. The owners were, at the time, reluctant to enter long-term contracts because they supposedly anticipated a significant rise in property value once the metro was completed, making it difficult for cultural initiatives to secure stable spaces for their activities. This issue reflects the broader urban regeneration trends and their impact on affordability and access to infrastructure for small cultural organizations (Int. 6) *Kulturcafé Max*, with its focus on cultural and musical events, has carved out a space for artistic expression in Hernals, yet faces the typical challenges of maintaining such venues in traditional districts.

Economic challenges and partnership building

The financial structures supporting the arts in Vienna reflect the broader tensions between state-subsidized culture and market-driven art economies. Many independent art spaces receive modest public funding, as reported by respondents, by the local district institution, which is often insufficient to fully develop cultural agents' potential. Nevertheless, in Vienna the financial sustainability of galleries, for instance, is less dependent on direct sales and more on a combination of institutional support and community engagement.

A major theme is how interdisciplinary and inclusive projects are supported through public funding: one artist mentions the "cultural funding from the city of Vienna" for interdisciplinary projects that include a wide range of actors and artistic expressions. This reflects a broader effort to democratize culture, and the funding conditions are seen as promoting inclusivity and diversity: "Projects in art and culture, but thinking in innovative, interdisciplinary, multilingual, inclusive aspects and new audiences and new cultural producers who are excluded, etc. and these are the conditions." (Int. 7) State-sponsored festivals with significant budgets, such as Wiener Festwochen and Wienwochen, were discussed, highlighting the significant public financial investment in cultural events. However, the interviewee also critiques how decisions

about these projects are made, questioning the distribution of funds and cultural production control: "In this sense, different committees from different actors in society, invited by neighborhoods, by NGOs, by cultural producers, curators, and activists, debate how the curation and opening of this festival should be reorganized for the coming years." (Int. 7) Additionally, smaller cultural projects struggle with limited funding, which forces participants to balance between financial constraints and creative freedom. This echoes common critiques in urban cultural studies, where small, grassroots cultural initiatives often face underfunding, in contrast to more prestigious, state-backed events. In this context, some artists apply flexible models to fund their ideas. In *Vienna Art Markt*, participating artists are required to pay a small rent (initially €100, now increased to €125 per month) for their exhibition space. The *Art Markt* operates on a modest budget, with the rent barely covering operational costs such as rent and electricity. The project does not generate significant profit, with those involved often working for very little compensation, essentially out of passion for the art. Revenue is supplemented by a commission on sales, but the financial model is more about sustaining the space and allowing artists to showcase their work rather than generating profit. The founders emphasize that they wish they didn't have to charge rent but are

compelled to due to financial constraints (Int. 1) The narrative of an artist, participating in the exhibitions organized at the *Vienna Art Markt*, reflects multiple aspects in the cultural scene in Europe. The painter's path reflects the continual search for financial sustainability that is typical of many urban artists. Early in his career, he supported himself through various jobs in galleries and educational institutions, such as the Tate Gallery, the Hayward Gallery, and the National Gallery in London. He stresses that the majority of his earnings went towards rent, a common urban issue where the high cost of living competes with the need for time and space to create. At a pivotal point, the artist's work was purchased by wealthy parents of students at a private school, enabling him to fund a creative retreat to Italy and then move to Vienna due to personal reasons (Int. 8) Despite his success in selling works internationally, notably to a gallery in China, the artist underscores the lack of a commercial gallery representing him and suggests that the gallery system is "in flux." This points to the precarious nature of artistic economies, where networks of contacts, occasional sales, and fluctuating gallery support are critical to survival.

The inquiry of cases with various profiles and goals showed that sometimes, even if financial resources are available, there may be other variables which put a cultural collective in an

unstable position. During the time when the spaces in Vienna were studied, the *Shizzle* collective was in a crucial moment, waiting for a decision of the owner whether the group will secure a long-term contract for the space it operates or will they remain in their “Prekarium” agreement position, that is – using the space with only maintenance costs but not really being certain for how long will be able to organize activities. It was a moment of tension and uncertainty and the respondent at the *Shizzle/Kulturcafé Max* noted that while they receive funding from the city and district, the funds are often earmarked for specific projects, such as events, rather than long-term infrastructure or label work. This restriction limits their ability to invest in stable, permanent spaces. Additionally, the organization has been involved in crowdfunding to secure rental agreements, but even this has been insufficient for long-term contracts. The respondent described the stress of saving €30,000 annually for a contract that never materializes, leading to a precarious situation where they must continually reinvest project money or return unused funds (Int. 6)

The financial limitations experienced by *Kulturnetz Hernals* also highlight the challenges of grassroots urban renewal efforts. Initial funding for cultural activities was modest, with early festivals like *Tatort Hernals* receiving €5,000 from the local government. This constrained

budget necessitated innovative solutions, such as utilizing non-monetary resources, volunteer labor, and minimal overhead costs to execute large-scale events. The reliance on temporary spaces with low or no rental costs further exemplifies how cultural actors navigate financial constraints in urban cultural regeneration. The founders of the association worked closely with real estate owners and the local government to secure spaces at minimal costs, ensuring that cultural activities could be sustained despite limited financial resources. Building partnerships was essential for the success of the cultural regeneration efforts in Hernals. The collaboration between *Kulturnetz Hernals*, real estate agents, local businesses, and government officials enabled the creation of temporary cultural spaces and festivals. These partnerships were not only instrumental in acquiring physical spaces but also in pooling resources and organizing large-scale cultural events. Additionally, the formation of the association itself, which served as a legal and organizational entity for these activities, was a critical step in formalizing these partnerships and enabling sustained cultural interventions in the district. The respondent reported that burnout was experienced by many members, including himself (Int. 5). The precariousness of funding led to the eventual dissolution of the association, with members pursuing personal and professional lives outside the cul-

tural work. In more recent years, however, financial opportunities expanded due to government support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed cultural associations to apply for and receive increased funding for projects, enabling them to acquire necessary equipment such as cameras for virtual performances.

For instance, during the pandemic, the funding allowed the collective of *Flucc* to cover costs and continue operations when many other cultural venues faced challenges, such as delayed payments or insufficient COVID-related financial relief. *Flucc* has benefited from municipal funding, particularly as one of Vienna's seven officially funded cultural centers. This financial support was crucial, especially during the pandemic, allowing *Flucc* to stay afloat despite being forced to close. However, the respondent at *Flucc* also highlights that funding remains a bureaucratic challenge, with the need to constantly balance costs and provide affordable entry and rental prices (Int. 2) The organization recognizes its privilege of having this funding, allowing it to work without immense pressure for profit, unlike other cultural spaces with tighter timelines. In *Semmelweisklinik*, the project faced significant financial constraints, especially during its inception. Crowdfunding raised €16,000, which was spent primarily on essential infrastructure like fire safety doors. Despite this, the respondents emphasized how they operated on mini-

mal resources, using the funds generated from renting studio spaces to cover the basic running costs of the building. Financial management was critical, as many of the members had additional jobs to support themselves while investing unpaid labor into the initiative. There is significant discussion around the difficulty of obtaining funding for structural and administrative work, as opposed to project-based funding (e.g., for concerts or exhibitions). This has been a core issue for the group, as they struggle with both limited public financial support and the legal gray zones of operating interim spaces. The team also highlights the disparity between funding for established disciplines like music and theatre and the difficulty of securing funds for interdisciplinary or hybrid projects. Local political support has provided some limited funding, such as the district grant for the "Freitag sind der Klinik" event. However, more consistent financial backing is needed, particularly for maintaining and improving the space itself (Int. 3)

Whether for a huge building such as the *Semmelweisklinik* or a small café functioning as an educational and community place such as *Commonroom*, respondents point out the uneasy process of getting to project-based activity. In *Commonroom*, the founder highlighted the challenges when securing financial support for the organization, indicating that obtain-

ing grants for community projects is difficult. While expressing a desire to apply for funding, she noted the bureaucratic hurdles, particularly for NGOs focused on educational initiatives. The practitioner has attempted crowdfunding as a means of generating resources, though it requires substantial effort and is not guaranteed to succeed. She also articulated a desire for professional support rather than relying on volunteers, which could enhance the sustainability of the organization (Int. 9)

Inclusivity and participation

Inclusivity is often interpreted in different ways by various actors and practitioners in the cultural field. While many art collectives genuinely aspire to be inclusive, welcoming diverse groups and emphasizing accessibility, the reality is more complex. A nuanced approach, comprising multiple narratives allows for a deeper exploration of how different groups navigate the sensitivities and realities of inclusion in their cultural practices. Each collective and each artist may have its understanding of what inclusion entails, influenced by its specific goals, resources, and the communities it engages with. Notions of inclusivity may comprise the intersection between institutional policies and bottom-up practices, the difficulties to promote effective participation of diverse social groups together, or rather personal understanding of what does

it mean to simply “feel” included. “Here in Vienna I feel like I’m being a part of something,” as one of the respondents shared (Int. 8), which indicates the city’s welcoming atmosphere in comparison, according to the respondent, to megalopolis cities. This insight indicates the “human-sized” scale of Vienna, the accessibility to recreation zones which could serve as an infrastructure for an artist’s need of contemplation and inspiration but also highlights the different perspectives on “being/feeling included”. In *Semmelweislinik* the project was conceptually designed to be disciplinary inclusive, welcoming a wide variety of artistic practices and social groups. The collective was founded by individuals from diverse fields like art therapy, architecture, performance, and visual arts. Their goal was to make the space accessible to as many people as possible, not just those within the core group of founders. By offering affordable studio rentals and hosting public events, the group sought to ensure that the space was not exclusive, but participatory. The participatory model included requiring those who rented space to engage with the community, rather than merely consuming the space’s resources. They now host an LGBTQ+ presence, thanks to specific efforts to create a hospitable environment for that community. Accessibility improvements, such as the installation of a wheelchair ramp, show efforts to include people with

disabilities, although much more infrastructure work is needed in order to adapt a bigger part of the site to their need of access. The respondents describe the desire to involve the neighborhood and broader Viennese community through workshops and open programs, although some events have struggled with visibility and attendance due to lack of marketing resources and sometimes initial fear from the part of the locals (Int. 3)

The cultural hub *Flucc* aims to be a safe space for marginalized groups, including the queer and LGBTQ+ community, and offers programming geared toward these communities. There are also workshops for people with disabilities and while *Flucc* has made strides in attracting diverse groups, the respondent there identified gaps that still exist in reaching certain communities, particularly those with language barriers or less familiarity with the space. The collective recognizes the need for more effort in outreach, multilingual publicity, and creating more accessible spaces (Int. 2)

The inclusion of diverse social groups was broadly present component in the conversation with the founder of *Kulturnetz Hernals*. Drawing from the multicultural influence of neighboring Ottakring, *Hernals'* cultural initiatives sought to integrate various social communities into its cultural framework. This approach is evident in the collaboration with international artists, such

as the Polish and Venezuelan art exhibitions, which provided a platform for underrepresented voices within the district. *Kulturnetz Hernals* also made efforts to engage local schools and children in artistic activities, fostering a sense of community inclusion and cultural education. When *Kulturnetz Hernals* passed on its activities to the next generation, it involved new, younger audiences, highlighting the continuity of cultural production across generations. The association also sought to foster connections with various social groups, such as through the festival that included historical discussions about *Hernals'* once-thriving cinema scene. However, despite these efforts, the respondent reflected on the difficulty of maintaining cohesion among diverse groups, noting that individuals tended to pursue their own interests (Int. 5)

In neighbouring Ottakring, *Brunnenpassage*, both because of the multiethnic character of the district but mainly because of the initial experience of the working team, at first invited by the Caritas foundation and later developing as independent and diverse organization, has as its central mission of to foster inclusion, especially among Vienna's diverse populations. The project works within the highly multicultural neighborhood with residents from former Yugoslavia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey and more. The respondent emphasized that *Brunnenpassage* is likely the most diverse cultural institu-

tion in Vienna, with diversity reflected not only in participation but also in decision-making, curatorial roles, and leadership. Specific formats, such as the “grab and grow” participatory programs, are designed to be inclusive of all, from long-term workshops to informal “touch and go” events, which require no registration. The organization has also worked with refugees, including young women, enhancing their local language skills, over multi-year projects. The goal, as described by the respondent, is to build confidence and give voice to marginalized groups, particularly refugees and displaced artists (Int. 4) *Brunnenpassage*’s activities aim to contribute to the re-narration of what “Europe means today,” particularly in terms of social cohesion and human rights, while fostering a sense of local belonging. Participation in art activities is a central concern in the project *Naija Akatarians II*, where the respondent and main artistic concept author discussed how specific artistic projects and initiatives aim to involve marginalized or underrepresented communities. The project, implementing interdisciplinary approach involves documenting the lives of Nigerian immigrants in Vienna, visualizing them in the form of images in the space of a barbershop and including fragments of the stories of the participants; it also exists as an illustrated booklet aesthetically referencing to the traditions of the classic comics book. The exhibition was held in a bar-

bershop, a space frequented by Black minorities, rather than a traditional gallery, as a way of democratizing the access to culture: “It is a project showing the lives of these minorities who are part of this society, what people from different generations tell.” (Int. 7) This reflects an effort to make cultural participation more accessible to communities that are typically excluded from mainstream cultural spaces or do not feel necessarily comfortable in traditional places for culture that tend to have a certain code, expectations and a reputation of “elite” space. The respondent also addresses the interactions between the Black community and the institutions, noting the mistrust that exists due to excessive control, but also how hosting cultural events in these minority-dominated spaces repositions the cultural capital of the location: “But with this exhibition and this attendance by the white public, it actually marks the place for the police in a new way, gives capital in a new way.” An extensive effort to highlight the importance of visibility for underrepresented groups, both in terms of representing their stories and using art as a tool for political and social recognition: “It is in a place where access to different places is mixed... opening access to the community... democratizing access to culture.” (Int. 7) A different approach has been adopted by *Commonroom* – a space dedicated to cultural events, discussions, educational and craft courses. It is

run by two women from the Turkish diaspora in Vienna and it illustrates the complexities of building inclusive, supportive communities in a rapidly changing urban landscape. The respondent from *Commonroom* emphasized the challenges associated with managing a community space in a desirable location in Vienna, which inherently involves high costs. This indicates the difficulties in sustaining community initiatives, particularly when the organization is operated with limited human resources. The establishment of *Commonroom* began with a private ceramic studio but evolved into a multifunctional community space as a response to the needs of the social groups composing the audience frequenting the space. *Commonroom's* programming and community events aren't targeted at specific groups, even though an audience who feels more at ease speaking English rather than German has clearly visible presence. The respondent highlights several initiatives aimed at fostering cultural inclusivity, such as events organized in partnership with NGOs working with immigrant communities. This includes collaborations with organizations that focus on children from immigrant backgrounds and efforts to integrate diverse social groups into Vienna's urban life through creative activities. The respondent emphasizes the importance of focusing on human "sameness" to foster social cohesion across cultural, religious, and linguistic divides (Int. 9)

Discussion and conclusion

The independent cultural sector is often portrayed as a driver of urban creativity, social inclusivity, and cultural innovation. However, a closer examination of its operational realities reveals a series of deep contradictions embedded within the structures of urban regeneration, cultural funding, and social policy. While cultural initiatives successfully animate underutilized spaces, facilitate artistic production, and create networks of collaboration, they are simultaneously shaped by precarious conditions, shifting interests, and market-driven urban development. The empirical findings from this research, supported by theoretical perspectives on cultural policy and urban anthropology, proposed a perspective to the structural challenges these initiatives face, particularly in their struggles against gentrification, the ambiguous and not often clarified question of participation and inclusivity, and the limitations of temporary urbanism.

Between visibility and structural uncertainty

Independent cultural spaces in Vienna often balance precariously between visibility and vulnerability. Venues like Flucc, once informal occupations of unused infrastructure, are now recognized cultural landmarks—yet still operate under unstable conditions. As De Solà-Morales (1995) suggests, these spaces function in urban interstices, where creative occupation

constantly risks being instrumentalized by real estate interests or policy agendas. *Flucc*'s trajectory exemplifies how cultural actors strategically occupy and revitalize spaces, yet remain vulnerable to shifting municipal policies and commercial interests.

Similarly, initiatives like Kulturnetz Hernals illustrate how the ripple effects of gentrification spillovers can turn previously affordable areas into contested spaces. As Novy and Colomb (2013) point out, the cultural fringe is frequently co-opted by urban development narratives that marginalize its original actors. The expansion of cultural districts, while appearing to support decentralization, frequently reproduces cycles of displacement, reinforcing rather than mitigating urban inequalities.

The limits of cultural decentralization

Vienna's push to decentralize culture is evident in projects like Vienna Art Markt, which intentionally situate art beyond the traditional center, a strategy aligned with broader European trends in cultural planning (Evans, 2009). Bianchini and Parkinson (1993) have praised such decentralization for its potential to democratize access. However, this research reveals that without long-term investment or policy protection, such efforts may remain symbolic. Many initiatives still face funding limitations, bureaucratic inertia, and competition for resources, particularly those operating in less established districts.

The case of *Brunnenpassage* in Ottakring highlights the contradictions inherent in cultural decentralization. Once a marginalized neighborhood, Ottakring has transformed into a highly desirable cultural hub. As Zukin (1989) notes, these cycles are difficult to interrupt once cultural capital becomes a tool of urban speculation. While *Brunnenpassage* has created an inclusive cultural space, the broader socio-economic shift in the district suggests that such initiatives can inadvertently contribute to the very inequalities they aim to challenge.

Is there an "illusion of inclusion"?

While many cultural spaces emphasize social inclusivity, the reality is often far more complex. As Kester (2004) argues, inclusion can become an aesthetic or political goal rather than a genuinely transformative process. The initiatives studied in this research frequently engage underrepresented communities, but structural barriers persist in ensuring equitable participation in decision-making processes. These barriers align with Yúdice's (2003) observation that cultural projects often serve policy optics more than transformative social goals.

Respondents across projects like Commonroom and Kulturcafé Max expressed the difficulty of sustaining deep, long-term community bonds under financial stress and short-term funding schemes. The difficulties faced by *Commonroom*, for instance, reflect broader concerns

about community and identity in contemporary urban environments, as explored by Delanty (2010) The inclusion of marginalized groups is often limited to symbolic gestures, with real power remaining concentrated within established cultural networks. This struggle mirrors Wates' (2000) observations on the barriers to sustainable community-building in gentrifying urban areas, where social inclusion initiatives frequently fail to counteract deeper structural exclusions. The problem is not only one of representation but also of economic sustainability. Inclusion requires financial and infrastructural resources that many independent initiatives lack. Programs targeting migrant and refugee communities, for instance, often operate on short-term funding cycles, making long-term integration efforts difficult. Additionally, as noted in interviews, language barriers and institutional bureaucracy further alienate those who might benefit most from cultural participation.

The political economy of independent culture: creativity as a commodity

The independent cultural sector is often framed as a space of resistance against neoliberal urban development, yet it remains deeply entangled with the very economic forces it seeks to oppose. The financial survival of these spaces depends on their ability to secure grants, sponsorships, and alternative revenue streams. The

"Prekarium" model – seen across multiple case studies – exemplifies this paradox. While it allows cultural initiatives to temporarily occupy spaces, it prevents them from establishing long-term financial and operational security. This model reflects a broader shift in urban governance, where cultural actors are expected to function as entrepreneurs, constantly negotiating for legitimacy and resources.

At the same time, the expectation that cultural spaces contribute to economic revitalization aligns with the logic of cultural-led gentrification. As described by Zukin (2010), artists and creative practitioners are often the first wave of urban redevelopment, their presence signaling an area's future commercial potential. Many of the initiatives studied in this research illustrate this cycle: they emerge in neglected spaces, gain cultural capital, and eventually attract market-driven investments that lead to rising rents and displacement.

Conclusion: The structural constraints of cultural urbanism

The findings of this study show that the independent initiatives and spaces for arts and culture are vital agents in shaping urban life – they animate forgotten spaces, foster cross-cultural connection, and challenge dominant narratives. Yet they remain structurally precarious, reliant on unstable funding, and need constantly

to balance on the edges of urban commodification. The emphasis on inclusivity, decentralization, and cultural regeneration often cannot resolve deeper inequalities, as cultural spaces struggle to balance their social missions with economic survival.

The cases analyzed in this research illustrate that while cultural initiatives can temporarily reclaim urban spaces, they do not necessarily

disrupt the logic of urban capital. Instead, they often function as intermediaries in a longer process of gentrification and spatial reconfiguration. Future research could further interrogate how these dynamics play out in other urban contexts and examine how independent cultural spaces can build coalitions to shift the structural conditions of their existence.

Annex of interviews cited in the article

Interview number for reference in the text	Cultural initiative/ space	Date of the interview	Role of the respondent(s) in the organization/collective
1.	Vienna Art Markt	26.05.2024	Co-founders, artists
2.	Flucc	24.06.2024	Musical programming, event management
3.	Semmelweisklinik	07.06.2024	Core team of organizers and programmers, artists
4.	Brunnenpassage	06.06.2024	Artistic programming and directing
5.	Kulturnetz Hernals/ Zwischendecke gallerie	17.06.2024	Co-founder, curator
6.	Kulturcafé Max/ Shizzle	23.05.2024	Co-founder, programming
7.	Naija Akatarians II (King's barber salon)	18.05.2024	Organizer, researcher, artist
8	Personal art practice	26.05.2024	Artist, participant at Vienna Art Markt
9.	Commonroom	24.06.2024	Co-founder, artist

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