



GUIDEBOOK

How to Reactivate vacant residential buildings following the ALT/BAU approach

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The URBACT transfer network ALT/BAU unites seven European cities in their effort to support the reactivation and reuse of vacant residential buildings and flats in their cities by transferring and adapting the good practice model of Chemnitz's 'Housing agency.' In order to achieve this, they have met at transnational meetings to learn and exchange about the transfer and adaptation of Chemnitz's good practice as well as other good practices from the seven partner cities. Based on this exchange, the partners have developed their own "housing agencies" adapted to their local situations.

This guidebook provides an overview and guidance for interested cities and professionals how to apply the ALT/BAU approach: The set up and tasks of an "ALternative Building Activation Unit" to actively become engaged in the reactivation of vacant residential buildings and flats in need of refurbishment for the benefit of the urban development.



WHAT MAKES THE ALT/BAU APPROACH HELPFUL FOR REACTIVATING VACANT RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS?



“ We have seen how different cities transfer the ALT/BAU approach, which has stimulated our initiative; especially re-thinking public-private cooperation and opening vacant buildings for temporary use before refurbishing them.”

- **Jordi Cuyàs Soler, ULG coordinator**
City of Vilafranca del Penedes

“The ALT/BAU approach has offered Riga proof of new tools. These have inspired us to see a clearer way how city administration can work together with social partners to achieve more integrated and successful actions for reactivating vacant properties.”

-**Mārcis Rubenis, Free Riga**

“Applying the ALT/BAU approach has helped us to find new solutions to give our vacant buildings a second chance.”

- **Diana Lepādatu, technical expert**
City of Constanta

“Transferring the ALT/BAU approach pushed us to wake up a “sleeping problem.” It forced us to gather around the table with other stakeholders to think about resources and possible solutions to the problem of housing vacancy.”

- **Bénédicte Borckmans, ERIGES,**
Seraing

“Thanks to the ALT/BAU approach, we have also found a concept for the reactivation of empty buildings in Rybnik – after years of stagnation things are moving forward.”

- **Szymon Kiełkowski, project team**
City of Rybnik

“Transferring the ALT/BAU approach has given us the opportunity to delve into methodologies and approaches to tackle the issue of vacant buildings and to strengthen existing relationships with local stakeholders interested in urban regeneration.”

- **Giulietta Fassino, Torino Urban Lab**



WHAT MAKES THE ALT/BAU APPROACH HELPFUL FOR REACTIVATING VACANT RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS?



“The city of Seraing has been trying for several years to motivate owners to renovate their vacant buildings with moderate success. The idea of a specific service dedicated to that problem has been boosted through transferring the ALT/BAU approach, its method and tools. A new dynamic is being put on the spot.”

– **Bénédicte Borckmans, ERIGES, Seraing**

“We have managed to draw the attention of the citizens of Rybnik to the problem of empty buildings. Most were not aware of the depopulation and the scale of empty buildings and flats in the city centre.”

– **Szymon Kiełkowski, project team City of Rybnik**

“Thanks to transferring the ALT/BAU approach, Torino Urban Lab has been able to confirm its role as communication hub for all of the stakeholders, promoting new initiatives and topics to discuss.”

– **Giulietta Fassino, Torino Urban Lab**

“Particularly focusing on mapping and inventory has been one of the key moments of our transfer process of the ALT/BAU approach, because it highlighted the power of creating maps to gather the interests and knowledge of urban processes.”

– **Giulietta Fassino, Torino Urban Lab**

“Our Housing Agency based on the ALT/BAU approach will soon be open to provide people with the information they need to improve their housing. We hope, thanks to this service, to promote the existing real estate opportunities in Seraing and to attract new inhabitants to come and settle in districts under regeneration.”

– **Bénédicte Borckmans, ERIGES, Seraing**

“Thanks to the ALT/BAU approach, we found the necessary stimulation to take action by using proper tools as methods for surveying and analysing vacant buildings; finding out other cities’ methods of action transferable to Seraing and applying them in a few first pilot operations in partnership with local housing stakeholders; also identifying public leverage to stimulate the renovation and occupation of vacant buildings.”

– **Valérie Depaye, director of ERIGES, Seraing**



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Why bother with vacant residential buildings?	6
What is the ALT/BAU approach about?	10
How to implement the ALT/BAU approach?	14
Setting up a responsible unit	16
Inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings	21
Activating and supporting owners	29
Activating and supporting potential buyers and investors	35
Connecting and coordinating public and private stakeholders	40
Publication and communication activities	45



Why bother with vacant residential buildings?





Why bother with vacant residential buildings?

- Negative impacts, but also opportunities!

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Many cities in Europe face the problem of vacant residential buildings within their city limits. They have lost their function and start to deteriorate, also in inner city locations! Such neglected buildings often become an increasing problem on a number of levels, including:

- **Loss of usable space** through degradation of the building.
- Negative impact on surrounding properties, **decreasing property values**.
- Negative impact on neighbourhood image, intensifying **downturn cycle / depopulation, and de-investments** in affected neighbourhoods.
- **Public security hazard** due to poor building condition.
- **Loss of identity and cultural heritage** values through neglect and demolition of buildings with heritage values.
- **Loss of historically grown urban structures and historic cityscape** through demolition.
- **Loss of revenue** for the city and potential need for the administration to act.

“When you lose a building, you lose a story and part of your identity.”

- **Martin Neubert, WGS/ Agentur StadtWohnen Chemnitz**

“Vacant buildings and flats can deprive a neighbourhood of its soul. Torino knows it very well, several of its working-class districts which were so crowded in the ‘60s and ‘70s today struggle to survive with high numbers of vacant flats.”

- **Erica Albarello, Torino Urban Lab**

“If nothing is done, vacant buildings degrade even more and become a source of public danger, negatively affecting the urban image and attractiveness of the neighbourhood, also decreasing the value of the buildings and those in the neighbouring area.”

- **Diana Țenea, deputy executive director of Urbanism department, Constanta**

“A significant number of empty buildings and flats in the city centre has a negative impact on the city's image and brings losses to both the city and its residents, and leads to losses in the urban tissue.”

- **Piotr Maślowski, Deputy Mayor of Rybnik**



BUT ALSO OPPORTUNITIES!

However, vacant residential buildings present also opportunities, which – if recognised by cities – can be used for the sustainable urban development. The rehabilitation and reuse of vacant buildings can serve several ecological, economic, social and cultural benefits.

Ecological benefits

- Reuse and provision of space without using up further unbuilt space.
- Preserving a compact settlement structure.
- Improved energy efficiency of the housing stock.
- Preserved energy and physical resources ('grey energy') in contrast to new developments.

Economic benefits

- Providing local employment in the construction and skilled handiwork sector.
- Increased utilisation of public infrastructure.
- Providing work space for local employment.
- Raising property values.
- Creating revenues for owners through rental income, improving their economic viability to maintain the building.
- Avoiding further costs for the city administration.
- Channelling funds to buildings that need it most.

Social and cultural benefits

- Modernising building space to today's standard.
- Diversifying the housing offer for different levels of income in particular for affordable housing.
- Providing space for temporary, cultural and community use.
- Safeguarding the cultural heritage values and the historically grown urban structure and townscape.
- Preserving the local identity.

Neighbourhood development benefits

- Improving the image and attractiveness of the neighbourhood and creating incentives for further investments.
- Incentivising neighbourhood renewal by creating new spaces for experimentation and prototyping.
- Providing needed space for housing, social, cultural and economic activities with added value for the neighbourhood.
- Developing new cooperation forms between city administration, citizens, NGOs and economic operators.



“A city should concern itself with the reactivation of vacant buildings and flats for several reasons: providing affordable housing for people who do not have it, reducing CO₂ emissions by energetically refurbishing them and improving the city image as empty buildings create an unpleasant environment.”

- Jordi Cuyàs Soler, ULG coordinator city of Vilafranca del Penedes

“The reactivation of vacant properties from the city's built heritage is a fruitful opportunity to respond to new housing needs and related service demands.

- Giuletta Fassino, Torino Urban Lab

“Vacant buildings are usually seen as a problem. However, it is more beneficial to see them as a resource to create new open space for experimentation and prototyping of new, more integrated city planning that helps to achieve urban development goals, such as preventing degradation and preservation of cultural heritage, creation of new social spaces, or integrated bottom-up planning in cooperation with civil society. Those are just a few goals that can be achieved by working with vacant buildings as a resource.”

- Mārcis Rubenis, Free Riga

TAKE AN ACTIVE AND STRATEGIC APPROACH!

The opportunities outweigh the challenges of reactivating vacant residential buildings by far if the reactivation process is used strategically. Thus, it is worthwhile for a city to become active and use the reactivation and reuse of vacant buildings for their sustainable urban development. And this approach is also in line with the [New Leipzig Charter](#) and the concept of the European City.

THE GOOD PRACTICE OF CHEMNITZ'S 'HOUSING AGENCY'

The city of Chemnitz decided to address its vacant housing stock in 2006, when its housing agency '[Agentur StadtWohnen Chemnitz](#)' emerged from a research project for the cost-effective renovation of old buildings through user-owner cooperation – and this with success!

In June 2017, the 'Housing agency' was awarded as "URBACT Good Practice" under the title "[Housing agency for shrinking cities.](#)" The URBACT programme justified this as follows:

Many cities face the problem of deteriorating built heritage with vacancies and functional loss. The 'Housing agency' as a public project carried out by a private company offers a flexible and proactive approach to connect owners, potential investors or users and public authorities for the revitalisation of those buildings. Positive effects are the activation of owners or the change of ownership and the channelling of public grants to places where they can be used most effectively.
- Assessment Panel for the URBACT Good Practice Award 2017

This Good Practice represents therefore not only a topical improvement for cities which are suffering from inner-city vacancies, but also a good example of new forms of cooperation and intermediate structures between government bodies, civil society and

business which can be transferred to a variety of contexts.

In short, the housing agency acts as a coordination hub between the different actors relevant for the reactivation of historic inner-city tenement buildings from the late 19th/early 20th century. It pro-actively connects the different public and private stakeholders, supports owners interested in a rehabilitation, and facilitates changes of ownership.



Achievements

Since 2012, Chemnitz's 'Housing agency' has contributed to:

- cooperation with more than 95 different owners or owner groups
- more than 6,000 individual communications with owners, investors and other stakeholders, including 260 site visits (2014-2020)
- 71 buildings with changes in ownership
- 43 rehabilitated vacant buildings
- 20 additional buildings currently in the renovation process, mostly through and with public support
- more than 50 million € of private investments in Chemnitz's housing stock supported and/or initiated by 5.2 million € of public urban renewal grants

And the numbers are steadily increasing.

But it is not only about the numbers. The 'Housing agency' has helped to reduce speculation by trying to identify investors who are seriously interested in the timely development of the building concerned and who are not looking for a speculative resale.

Furthermore, the agency has helped to channel grant money to the vacant buildings where it can be used most effectively. Thus, it helped to avoid future costs not only for the owners of decaying buildings but also for the municipal government. The rehabilitation of vacant buildings has also helped to overcome the negative image of the affected neighbourhoods. And with the first successful reactivation examples accompanied by the agency, a successful path was shown for further investors.

How did they do it? Find the answer in the next chapters!



What is the ALT/BAU approach about?



What is the ALT/BAU approach about?

The ALT/BAU approach was developed based on the Chemnitz's 'Housing agency' good practice, which was awarded the title "[URBACT Good Practice City](#)" in 2017. ALT/BAU stands for "ALternative Building Activation Unit."

Chemnitz's 'Housing agency' is the blueprint for the ALT/BAU approach. For further information about the agency take a look at the [transferability study](#) or the [ALT/BAU good-practice compilation](#).

ESTABLISH A "UNIT" FOR THE REACTIVATION

The ALT/BAU approach is about actively becoming engaged in the reactivation of vacant residential buildings and flats in need of refurbishment and modernisation. Do this by establishing a "unit" in charge for it providing free-of-charge consulting services.



KEY TASKS OF THE "UNIT"

Key tasks of the "unit" are:



Inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings



Activating and supporting owners



Activating and supporting potential buyers and investors



Connecting and coordinating public and private stakeholders



Publication and communication to attract 'investors' and users



IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS OF THE “UNIT”

With these tasks, the “unit” fulfils important functions for the reactivation of vacant residential buildings, including:

- Being the central collector and distributor of information and a central contact point on vacant residential buildings in need of rehabilitation.
- Pro-actively collecting all relevant information about the vacant residential buildings in need of refurbishment to understand as thoroughly as possible the current situation and potentials of the building and the owner’s interest.
- Pro-actively approaching owners of vacant buildings as well as potential investors and users to provide them with free-of-charge consulting services to steer them through the process of buying, rehabilitating and reusing the vacant building.
- Connecting owners, potential users, investors and local authorities to facilitate the sale and/or rehabilitation of a vacant building.

- Contact the owner to take action;
- Information of responsible institutions to take action or contact the owner;
- Taking security measures on behalf of and at the expense of the owner.

HUB



- Inventory;
- Inspection;
- Monitoring.

- Contact, activate and support owners;
- Identify, contact and support potential users, buyers and investors;
- Inform / communicate about investment and financing opportunities (grants and loans from local to EU level);
- Inform / communicate about different refurbishment solutions and good examples;

- Show case reactivation / refurbishment examples;
- Implement pilot projects to show case;
- Point potential users and investors from the beginning to the end of the reactivation / Rehabilitation process (what kind of services are useful?).

- Activate public and private stakeholders to consult / support owners;
- Activate supported owners / stakeholders to become voluntary advisors for others;
- Connect and coordinate relevant stakeholders / public departments; ensure long-term cooperation between them;
- Ensure long-term cooperation with owners.

USE THE “UNIT” TO ACTIVELY SUPPORT THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In order to make the “unit” as valuable as possible for the city, it is important to purposefully use the unit to achieve the city’s urban development goals and to link its tasks to them.

How can we implement the ALT/BAU approach? What are the key tasks about?

Find answers and guidelines in the next chapter!



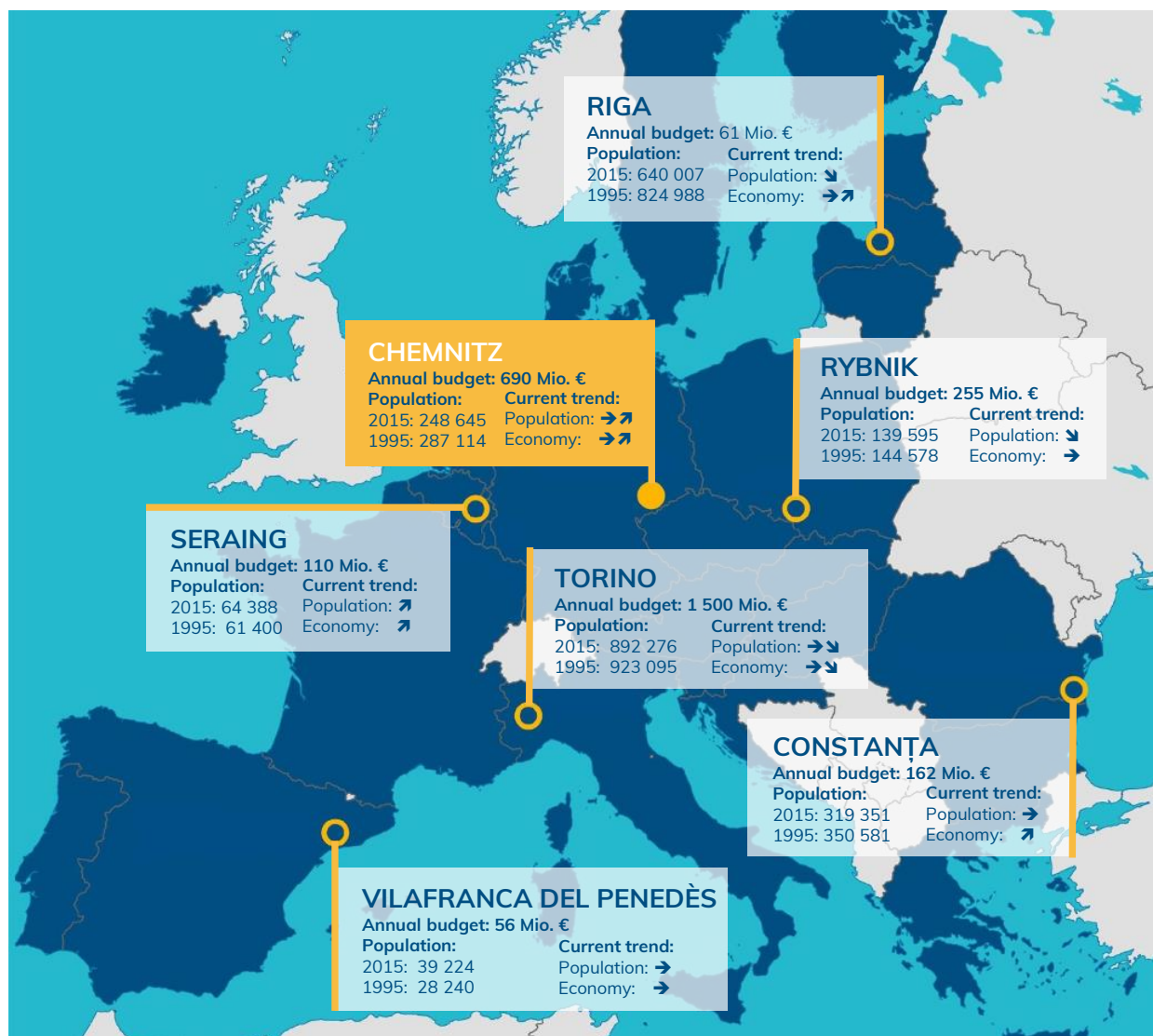


How to implement the ALT/BAU approach?



How to implement the ALT/BAU approach?

Between 2019-2020, six European cities between 40,000 and 900,000 inhabitants with growing as well as shrinking populations joined forces. With no or little experience with the ALT/BAU approach, they studied, adapted and transferred Chemnitz's good-practice, the 'Housing agency.' The following chapters explain how the key tasks of the ALT/BAU approach can be applied in cities across Europe, providing templates, checklists and recommendations based on their experiences.





Setting up a responsible unit



Setting up a responsible unit

GOAL

When buildings stand vacant and fall into disrepair, there are reasons for this. One major reason is that owners have "lost sight" of their building, lack financial means or are overwhelmed by the task of rehabilitation. Activating and supporting structures are needed to get these owners interested in their building again and to activate them to become active in refurbishing and reusing the building.

Thus, the goal of the ALT/BAU approach is to **establish a "unit" that:**

- pro-actively supports the reactivation of vacant residential buildings and flats in need of refurbishment and modernisation and
- is available as a main contact and access point (one-stop-agency) for the different stakeholders involved in the reactivation of vacant buildings and flats, especially owners.

The experience of the city of Chemnitz has shown that by setting up such a "unit", the reactivation of vacant buildings can be significantly advanced and not left to chance. Through such a "unit," the reactivation of vacant buildings can also be better directed towards the urban development goals of the city.

TASK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Define mission, tasks, needed resources.
2. Find a suitable organisational model.
3. Install or pre-test the "unit."

MAIN TASKS OF ...

Chemnitz's 'Housing agency'

- 1 🏠 Identification and monitoring of buildings
- 2 📊 Data collection
- 3 📞 Owner contact
- 4 📄 Online publication
- 5 🔍 Visit of building with interested people
- 6 💬 Connecting owners and potential buyers
- 7 ⚙️ Liaison of stakeholders

Seraing's 'Housing agency'

Phase 1

- Assistance and advice to owners in all administrative procedures necessary for the sale, rental, renovation, and maintenance of their building: Planning permit, rental management, financial solutions, regulations and procedures
- Information reception and distribution
- Documentation and guidance of the process
- Linking with partners active in the housing sector to direct owners to the appropriate contacts and to answer their questions

Phase 2

Extending the services to any person needing information related to housing: owners, tenants, buyers, sellers, investors, etc.

Define mission and tasks

The mission and tasks of the unit may differ depending on the local situation and which tasks are already provided by another organisation (avoid duplication - go for cooperation!). Based on the experience of Chemnitz's 'Housing agency,' it is definitely recommended to address the tasks described in this guidebook. But ensure that the tasks are based on and address real needs for the reactivation of vacant buildings and flats!

In order to achieve this, discuss and define the mission and tasks of your Building Activation Unit in cooperation with relevant stakeholders (i.e., decision-makers, city departments, target groups of the "unit," experts). If a similar institution or structures already exist, expand them instead of "reinventing the wheel" or building parallel structures. If possible, visit good examples in other cities and exchange with people in charge. If you tender out the "unit" to a private company or NGO, as part of the offer ask tenderers to sketch a brief concept how they would fulfil the work of the "unit" and which tasks they see as relevant parts of the offer.

The personnel and financial resources required for the "unit" may vary greatly depending on the defined tasks and existing structures. In Chemnitz, a staff of two persons with a working time together of two days per week is in charge of Chemnitz's 'Housing agency.' The city of Vilafranca plans with one person one day per week. The city of Rybnik starts with one person with 16 hours per week. The city of Seraing plans to start with one person 2-3 days a week and scale up to a full-time position shared by different specialists. Besides the personnel resources, additional workspace might be needed.

For services of the "unit" directed at owners see [p.32](#), for investors see [p.39](#).

Define the organisational model

There are three basic organisational models that the ALT/BAU partners are experimenting with for their Building Activation Unit:

- Unit within the city administration
- Public owned private/social company
- Commissioned private/social company / NGO

There are pros and cons for each of the different models (see table at the end of this chapter). It is recommended to check and discuss which model best fits your local situation, in particular with regard to credibility and acceptance by the target groups (decision makers and in particular owners and investors).

When you have decided on the organisational model, think about what to do about the "cons" related to your choice: i.e., if you opt for a unit within the city administration, but there is a lack of trust in public institutions, think about what you can do to establish the necessary trust in the "unit."

In general, it is crucial that the organisational model promotes acceptance by expressing credibility, professionalism, creativity, efficiency and public benefits. To this end, the "unit" must be provided with sufficient financial and qualified human resources and staff who are genuinely interested in their task.



Going "On Air"

In the process of developing the "unit," ensure the involvement of decision makers (politicians, department heads) from the very beginning. Because you will definitely need a public resolution for the "unit" as financial resources will be involved. That is also why it is important to align the "unit" and its tasks with the urban development goals of the city and to use it to promote and support these goals.

If the topic of reactivating vacant buildings is new in the city and there is little or no experience, it is recommended to have a test phase of the "unit" and its tasks, i.e. define a small area or identify 5 to 10 vacant buildings to which you apply the tasks of the "unit." With the experience from the pilot, you can "fine tune" the "unit" and its tasks before going officially "on air" to ensure that everything works as planned. In general, be open to adapt the "unit" and its tasks over the time based on experience, needs and changing framework conditions.



Location

Some partners have decided to physically locate the “unit” in one of the focus areas of vacant buildings, separated from the town hall / city administration. This is to be closer to the “crime scene” and to be more visible and provide the target groups with easy, low-threshold access to the "unit." This is particularly important when there is a lack of trust in public institutions and people are hesitant to contact public institutions. In Seraing for example, they will locate the housing agency in a commercial ground floor of a renovated public building on the main square.

CITY EXAMPLES

The city of **Vilafranca** has already set up its '[Municipal Housing Agency](#).' Also, in January 2021 the city of Rybnik established a social housing company 100 % owned by the city. It will be in charge of providing new social housing and reactivating the private empty tenant buildings and flats in the city.

The other ALT/BAU partners are currently in the process of setting up their units. However, they have experience with housing institutions:

- **Seraing** employs the autonomous municipality-controlled company ERIGES and the social real estate agency – AI[S](https://conciergerieasbl.be/) (<https://conciergerieasbl.be/>)
- **Riga** has a municipal Commission of Inspection of Degraded Buildings and
- **Chemnitz** has commissioned their Housing Agency to the private company WGS.



ORGANISATIONAL MODEL FOR THE “UNIT” – PROS AND CONS

	Possible pro	Possible contra
Unit within the city administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger proximity to public institutions and decision-making structures • Better controllability • Easier access to necessary information and less problems with data security issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owners do not trust / have little confidence in municipal institutions • Owners are reluctant to talk to city officials • Owners understand “official language” less well • The right contact persons in large structures are more difficult to find • Danger of losing creativity and proactive approach through the administrative procedures and working ethics
Public owned private/social company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier to train and/or hire qualified personnel • Can be allowed to make profit • Less restricted than public administration in their work culture and structures • Better control possible than with a commissioned private company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owners may not trust / have less confidence in municipal institutions • Shutting down public-owned company might be complicated in case it does not work as expected
Commissioned private / social company / NGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owners have more confidence in private than in public institutions • If company does not meet the expectations, you can hire another one • When hired, company must already have demonstrated that it has suitable personnel • External partners bring additional know-how not available within administrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People rumour why this company was hired • There might be no suitable company in the region • Data security issues • Less direct control of the personnel and working structures





Inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings



Inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings

GOAL

Many municipalities are aware of when vacant buildings become a problem, but usually not before these problems become severe. Often, relevant information needed to take targeted and efficient action is missing; e.g., cities do not know exactly where the vacant buildings are located. They do not know why the owners do not reactivate their vacant buildings. Such information needs to be identified for effective and efficient action.

Thus, the goal of the ALT/BAU approach is to **set up an inventory and monitoring system.**

The inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings and flats in need of refurbishment aims to:

1. Gain an overview about vacancy and decay in order to be able to:
 - identify focus areas that are particularly affected and should be acted on;
 - identify priority buildings and their conditions to act on (priority list).
2. Understand the reasons for the vacancy of the respective building in order to be able to support the owner in a more targeted way to reactivate the building.

Thus, the inventory and monitoring system is not just about technical inventory and monitoring. The system serves to provide you with an overview and understanding of vacancies and decay to guide you where and how to act! This is of particular importance when you have more vacant buildings or flats than you can act on immediately and you need to focus the work of the “unit”.

The experience of Chemnitz ‘Housing agency’ has shown that inventory and monitoring helps create a common ground for the municipality and the ‘Housing Agency’ to decide where to channel their efforts strategically and most effectively.

TASK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Decide on the method(s) for the inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings and test it.
2. Define your focus areas and priority buildings to act on.
3. Define the data you (really) need.
4. Develop a digital database (if not already in place) in which the data is stored, updated and made available to relevant stakeholders.

Decide on method(s) for inventory and monitoring of vacancy.

In order to be able to reactivate vacant buildings in need of rehabilitation and to define which ones should be supported by the unit, you need to know where and in what condition they are.

So, first of all define what you (and other stakeholders) understand as a “vacant building” and how you define the “current condition” of a building. Align your criteria for the inventory and monitoring to your definition.



Categories for current building condition

Seraing uses four categories based on the outside condition of the facade, roof, windows and door of a building (good, medium, bad):

A: State of ruin / public safety hazard;

B: Heavy renovation need;

C: Maintenance need;

D: Good condition.

A variety of methods are available for inventory and monitoring: data analysis of existing data in the city administration, newspaper and internet analyses, site visits and vacant property counts, community mapping or survey and interviews with owners, property managers and tenants. Take a look at the table at the end of the chapter for further information about these methods. For practical examples, see the city examples at the end of the chapter.

When deciding about the method(s) to be applied, it is important to check which method(s) are most suitable and practical for your local situation and can be implemented with the resources available. Some ALT/BAU partners have had good experience with contracting students for the field inventory of vacant buildings, providing them with a digital inventory form which stores the data directly into the digital urban database. In Riga and Rybnik the method of 'Community mapping' through a public website was also applied. For further city examples see further below.

Other city departments (e.g., property, tax/finance, urban development/planning, housing, statistics department) might be interested in the results of the inventory and monitoring of the vacant buildings and flats, they might already apply similar methods, as described in the table below. Therefore, based on the experiences of the ALT/BAU partners, it is important to communicate with other city departments to find out if they have already gathered data relevant for your "unit.". If so, try to get hold of the data you need for the inventory and monitoring of the vacant buildings from them and avoid duplication of work. You might even access additional helpful information for the inventory and monitoring of the vacant buildings.

! An important lesson learnt by the ALT/BAU partners is that an inventory of vacant buildings and flats is never complete and completely correct and that a perfect database is not necessary for the "unit" to work successfully. The inventory "only" has to provide you with a reliable overview about the vacancy situation that allows you to define focus areas and, based on this, define priority buildings to act on with the "unit". Also, an up-to-date knowledge base always facilitates an informed exchange with owners, investors and other stakeholders.

Test your method(s).

Before applying the methods to the whole city area or several focus areas, it is recommended to test them on a reference area. The experience gained can be used to improve the methods and their application.

Define focus areas and priority buildings to act on.

The time and staff resources of the "unit" will be limited, so the reactivation of all the vacant buildings in the whole city cannot normally be carried out at the same time. In order to use the resources efficiently and in the perspective of the urban development objectives and the reactivation need of individual vacant buildings, the approach of the ALT/BAU cities is to concentrate the work of the "unit" on focus areas and/or priority buildings.

To identify and determine these, the following criteria can be used.



CRITERIA TO DEFINE FOCUS AREAS

- areas with a high amount or rate of vacant buildings and flats
- areas of public interest (i.e., city centre, deprived neighbourhoods, focus areas in urban development concepts)

CRITERIA TO DEFINE PRIORITY BUILDINGS

- structural condition / degree of rehabilitation need
- urban / neighbourhood significance
- age and heritage value
- typology and size of the building
- Location
- duration of vacancy
- interest of private investor / owner
- development opportunities

For examples which indicators can be used for the criteria, take a look at the [GIS ALT/BAU study, annex II](#).

It is also recommended to monitor the work and achievements of the “unit.” On the one hand, if the work is successful, the information can be used to convince decision makers to continue the support of the “unit” on the basis of facts. On the other hand, the information can be used to identify the need for adaptation and change of both the “unit” and its tasks to improve its performance.

! You will become the most knowledgeable person in the city about vacant buildings and flats in need of refurbishment through the implementation of all these tasks!

Define the data you (really) need.

At the beginning it is important to consider what information is needed at all (What do

I need to know?) and where or how the data can be obtained. Avoid a data graveyard that only costs you time! For this purpose, try to answer the following questions:

- What information is needed to be able to fulfil the tasks of the “unit?”
- What do I need to know about vacant buildings to support their reactivation?
- How or from which sources can I get the information / data?

Involve other stakeholders who might also benefit from this information in answering these questions.

For a more substantial insight and examples of which data the ALT/BAU partners are collecting and from which sources, take a look at the [GIS ALT/BAU study, annex I](#). For inventory and monitoring methods, take a look at the table further below.

Much information will be available from public sources, site visits or from city departments (property, tax/finance, urban development/planning, housing, statistics department, etc.). So ask the departments what they have and request that they share this information. Other information may only be available through the owners (see [p.33](#) “Questionnaires”) or at great expense.

In order to use the available resources efficiently, consider what information you really need for all vacant buildings at the beginning. Additional information may become available for individual buildings in the course of the work of the “unit,” for example when contacting owners. Over the time, check which information you really need for the successful work of the “unit” and which other information might be needed. Adapt your database accordingly.



! Keep in mind the GDPR for a sound processing of personal data.

Develop a database to store, update and make available the data.

In order to be able to work with and use the data, an important experience of the ALT/BAU partners is to record and store the data digitally in a database.

POSSIBLE RELEVANT DATA

Building information

- Plot: number, size, land value
- Building: size, number of flats/commercial units
- Building typology, year of construction
- Technical condition and rehabilitation needs (outside / inside)
- Monument status / historical information
- Floor plans and pictures
- Administrative information e.g., property tax paid, current legal procedures, other departmental information
- Restrictions i.e., debts, private contracts (inside and outside of land registry)

Owner information

- Contact details
- Owner perspective, called price
- Reasons for vacancy

Real estate and neighbourhood information

- Expectable rents, selling and construction prices
- Context/location i.e., neighbouring buildings, character of neighbourhood/streets; urban development objectives
- Location in a development area

Develop an integrated database!

Check whether a database already exists that can be used by and further enhanced through the use of the "unit." This way you avoid duplication of work and structures and you can access existing data! Also having a joint database eases the exchange and harmonisation of data.

Visualise the data!

Use a database that helps you to visualise the information. Visualisation is, according to the experience of the ALT/BAU partners, of particular importance for the successful work of the "unit" as well as for getting support from other stakeholders such as decision-makers. Visualisations through maps (i.e., using GIS applications, [Google Maps](#), [Maps.me](#)) work particularly well to understand, present, raise awareness and have a shared basis for policies and actions.

In this regard, organise a meeting with stakeholders who might have an interest in such a database. Discuss and coordinate the form and set up of a database that allows an exchange of information, a common handling of the database, the visualisation of the information and potential restrictions (i.e., who has access to what data).

The preferred tools for the database by the ALT/BAU partners are GIS-based applications such as [ArcGIS](#) or [QGIS](#). Such systems also allow one to easily geolocate vacant buildings on a map and to select them according to predefined criteria. If technical and financial resources are missing, an excel-based database which can be linked to mapping tools might also work.

! For further information about application areas of GIS for the inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings and how to use it for identifying vacant buildings, identifying focus areas, defining priority buildings and implementing focused marketing of the buildings, check the [GIS ALT/BAU study](#).

If field visits are used to collect data, the data should be recorded digitally immediately to avoid the time-consuming transcription of handwritten records into the database. For this purpose, apps such as [INPUT](#), [Collector](#) or [ArcGis Collector](#) allow the direct synchronisation of the data with the GIS database via smartphones or tablets. For further information, click this [link](#).



Develop a plan to update the data at regular intervals!

A major challenge of databases is to keep the data up to date. This should be considered from the beginning when building the inventory and monitoring database.

Set up procedures and automatism, who, at what intervals and with which tools/methods is updating the data (i.e., periodic site visits and correlating data of local utility companies with municipal census data). Preferably, the department that is collecting or changing the data updates it immediately in the database. It is helpful when an (annual) reminder is sent out by one responsible institution. Alternately you can provide a template for the data transfer and the responsible institution inserts the data into the database.



CITY EXAMPLES

The ALT/BAU partners have applied different monitoring systems and methods, which you can find in the ALT/BAU [good-practice compilation](#).

Vilafranca correlates data from their municipal registry of inhabitants with data from the water supply company to detect and monitor empty flats. The results are verified through site inspections.

Constanta uses its geographical information system (ArcGIS urban planning database) with the support of the local police department to inventory and monitor (vacant) buildings in their historic centre. The GIS database is also used to communicate with the owners via GIS questionnaires ([RO](#)) ([EN](#)) to receive further information about the building and the owners' needs and interests. The GIS [urban database](#) is open to the public via a web application.

Riga uses the website grausti.riga.lv to allow citizens to map vacant and degraded buildings and vote on which building the city should act on urgently. Further information is collected from other city departments and the information is stored in GIS.

Seraing systematically prioritised intervention streets, mapping the vacant buildings through site visits with the support of students and categorising the buildings based on their technical conditions to deduce intervention needs. Thus, 350 vacant buildings were inventoried and further information was collected through other city departments.

Further interesting examples in the area of "Inventory and monitoring" in the ALT/BAU network are:

Chemnitz uses 'focus areas' and 'building' profile sheets. It has developed a building database and result list and applies owner questionnaires. Chemnitz does site visits in its focus areas and collects information from external sources. Click [here](#) for further information. Also, Chemnitz focuses on only one specific building typology: historic tenement houses.

Turin has asked the '[Future Urban Legacy Lab](#)' from Politecnico di Torino to provide the data collection and mapping of the municipal vacant properties in Torino together with the description and definition of their potential transformation.



METHODS OF INVENTORY AND MONITORING OF VACANT BUILDINGS

Tool	Explanation	Advice
<p>Community Mapping</p>	<p>Community Mapping is about involving citizens in the identification of vacant buildings and flats.</p> <p>Citizens can submit empty buildings via a website or smartphone app and upload information and images.</p> <p>Community mapping websites can also be used to raise the awareness about vacant and decaying properties, to advertise these properties, to organize sales or incite actions and communication about the reuse of vacant properties.</p>	<p>If the city has a geographic information system (GIS), data entered by citizens should – when verified – be transferred to the GIS.</p> <p>If a community mapping website is used to advertise vacant buildings, invite owners and property managers to enter their vacant properties too.</p> <p>Inform people why you want to monitor vacant buildings and what you will do with the information received.</p> <p>Make the tool known i.e. via a competition: who reports most verified vacant buildings wins ...</p> <p>Verify the entries and be transparent about how you handle the information!</p>
<p>Data analysis</p>	<p>Existing data is analysed, allowing conclusions to be drawn as to whether a building or flat is empty.</p> <p>Data from resident registration office, tax departments and local utility companies (water and electric companies) can be used and crossed to check whether a building / flat might not be in use.</p>	<p>Data analysis is a resource saving tool, but it might be difficult to receive data from companies, in particular if they are private ones. Data protection and utility interests might prevent data sharing.</p> <p>Confidentiality statements that clarify what the data is used for and when it will be deleted can be helpful to get the information.</p>
<p>Site visits and vacant property counts</p>	<p>Site visits to visually check if a building is vacant. Indications that a building is vacant may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empty windows (no plants, curtains) • Letter boxes are empty or full of advertisements • Empty trash bins • No name on the door bell (one might even consider ringing the bell) 	<p>For city-wide site visits, the resources are normally lacking. Therefore, this method should be limited to previously-defined focus areas.</p> <p>In order to reduce the time required for data processing, during the site visit smartphone apps can be used that upload the information and pictures directly into the building database. With the apps 'Collector' and maps.me (https://maps.me), for example, data can be automatically stored in GIS.</p> <p>Site visits should be repeated on a regular basis to update the information.</p> <p>The visual check for vacancy should not be the only tool as the results are conditionally reliable, but they can verify the results of other tools used.</p> <p>Before the site visit, the criteria to estimate if a building is vacant should be applied to some examples to ensure that different people performing the site visits come to the same conclusions.</p>

Tool	Explanation	Advice
Surveys and interviews	Implementation of surveys and interviews with owners, property managers, tenants and neighbours to receive information about vacant buildings and flats.	For a city-wide survey and evaluation, the resources are normally lacking. Therefore, this method should be limited to previously-defined focus areas and used to obtain further missing information. Since the response rate is often not high, a comprehensive result cannot usually be achieved. Interviews will usually vary between different stakeholders.
Newspaper and internet analysis	Newspapers and property market websites are checked if certain buildings are repeatedly advertised.	Many vacant buildings are not advertised. Therefore, the use of this method should be complementary.
Obligatory notification of owners	Owners have an obligation to inform the municipality about vacancies. If they do not, they will be fined. With the notification, further information can be requested.	The tool needs a local law that requires the notification of vacant properties of owners. Compliance with the law must be verified at least on a random basis. Owners can be informed about the law with the yearly tax property information.

RECOMMENDATION

None of the methods is sufficient on its own. It is recommended to use them in combination to verify and receive best results. At the beginning, it is necessary to define what is understood under “Vacant building/flat” and what is to be monitored so that the criteria can be aligned. In general, a building can be considered vacant when it has been abandoned, unoccupied, or empty for a certain amount of time. Relevant criteria are: For which time period does the building have to be empty to be called vacant? 1 month, 1 year? And does a building have to be entirely vacant or is it sufficient when the majority of the flats are not in use?





Activating and supporting owners



Activating and supporting owners

GOAL

Owners are crucial when it comes to the reactivation of vacant buildings and flats. They have the power of disposal and are often strongly protected by law to do whatever they want with their property. In case of vacant buildings, owners often do not take care of their property for multiple reasons. In some cases, the owners of vacant properties are even unknown.

So the goal is to

- “reactivate” the owner’s interest in rehabilitating and reusing their property and
- support them in this endeavour.

Alternatively, in the event that the owner is not interested or capable of reactivating their property, to convince them to sell it to a person interested in investing or to co-develop the property.

The experience of Chemnitz’s ‘Housing agency’ has shown that, through the pro-active approach of systematic communication and directly working with owners, even some of the most difficult cases have started to move. The number of reactivated vacant tenant buildings could be significantly increased through the direct and personal approach.

TASK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Identify owners: Acquire ownership information.
2. Contact and activate owners to act.
3. Support owners in their reactivation attempts.

4. Obtain relevant information about the building.

Acquire ownership information

To be able to contact the owner, you have to know who the owner is and you need the contact details. There are three main sources to obtain this information: city administration, digital world and third parties.

SOURCES OF OWNERSHIP INFORMATION

City administration

- Land registry / real estate cadastre
- Property, tax / finance, urban development / planning, housing department
- Public utility companies

Digital world

- Internet i.e. sales advertisement, owner’s website
- Social media

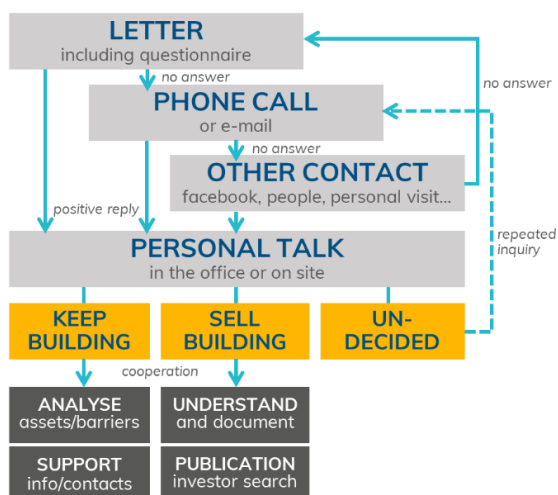
Third parties

- Owners of neighbouring buildings
- Residents of neighbouring buildings
- Former tenants
- In case of multiple owners, ask other owners
- Putting posters on buildings rewarding people for providing ownership information
- Company register to check for present or former companies at the address of the building, asking them about the owner

Add the information to your database (see [p.24](#)). If you do not have a database, set up a spreadsheet with the building and ownership information.

Contact owners pro-actively

In order to progress with the reactivation of vacant buildings, it is important to contact the owners on your own initiative and not to wait for them to make the first step. There is a reason why the building has been vacant for longer!



Send a personal, inviting letter!

A common approach of the ALT/BAU partners when first contacting owners is to send a personal letter (post, email). The aim of the letter is to spark the interest in their property and in wanting to get in touch with the “unit.” In this regard, the letter has to be informative, mobilising, trustworthy and professional, using direct speech and simple wording. The wording and content might differ according to the owner type (i.e. single private owner vs. housing company). Think about what might be the interest of a single private owner, of a professional owner (project developer, housing company), of a community of heirs who collectively own a building, or flats in a building which each belong to a different owner. This should be reflected in the letter.

! Contacting professional owners
 When contacting professional owners like housing companies and project developers, first find out who is responsible for the property in the organisation by calling the organisation. Having identified the person, send the personal letter to them or call them directly.

CONTENT OF FIRST CONTACT LETTER

max. 2 pages

- Clear headline what the letter is about, making the owner interested to read further
- Why you are contacting the owner
- Advantages for the owner to get in touch with you and how the “unit” can be of support for the owner
- Opportunities for the owner to rehabilitate and reuse the building (they should be reasonable from the owner’s point of view)
- Reference to the common goal
- (Financial) Risks of keeping the building vacant
- Brief information about the “unit”
- Invitation to get in touch with you for personal meeting (on site) or a telephone call to get to know each other and talk about the owner’s interest, perspectives and situation with regards to the vacant building.

You can find examples of letters [here](#).

You can enclose further information about the “unit” and its services (flyer or link to your website/social media account). You can also add a short (online) questionnaire, which the owner can voluntarily fill in. Filling in the questionnaire should take only a few minutes (i.e. multiple choice) and should focus on understanding the owner’s situation, problems, and expectations better. You can also ask further information you might need to be able to prepare a meaningful first meeting. Be sure to mention why you are interested in this information.

! Do not:
 In your first letter / attached questionnaire do not ask for too much information. Do not ask about all the information you lack about the building or about the owner. This could deter the owner. First build up a level of trust. Then you can request further information.



Follow up!

Do not be surprised if the response rate to letters is not high. This is often the case. That is why you must follow up (cyclical attempts to contact the owners). If you have a phone number, call them and re-explain your intention of contacting them. Experience shows that owners' interests can change, so keep on trying and stay in touch.

When you have received a negative response, write back a friendly letter or call, offering to stay in touch and that you will contact them again in a year's time. Build up the communication.

Have a first personal meeting

If the owner has agreed to a meeting, meet at the vacant building or in the "unit's" office. The subject of the meeting should be the owner – not the building! You need the owner to become active, not the building.

Thus, concentrate the first meeting on getting to know one another and understanding the owner's current situation, problems and interests (if they want or can rehabilitate the building or if they might be interested in selling it) and why the building has become vacant from their point of view. You should clearly state to the owner that you want to help find a solution to their problems together with the intention to reactivate the building. Of course the meeting is also about making the owner aware of the current situation of the building and the financial risks of letting the building deteriorate further.

An alternative to a personal meeting can also be the invitation to an information evening or webinar with other owners.

Support the owner in their reactivation attempt

Reactivating a building, in particular a derelict one, is not an easy task and especially not an everyday task. You have to plan the rehabilitation, finance it, obtain permits, etc. Many owners are inexperienced in this and these tasks discourage owners from refurbishing their buildings. The "unit" can provide support in many ways once the owner has decided and agreed to take steps to rehabilitate, co-develop or sell their property.

POSSIBLE SUPPORTING SERVICES

Advice on building options

- Discussing options for the property based on both the real estate and building situation and the situation / interest of the owner
- Informing about the real estate market and housing needs (i.e. demand for flat sizes and amenities)
- Informing about the rehabilitation or selling process (what needs to be done at what time, who to talk to for which issue, who can provide which support)
- Advice for building permits
- Advice on rental regulations and rental contracts
- Developing building sheets and building diagnosis
- Information about the steps for a sale or disposal of the building

Indications on financing options

- Informing about funding opportunities
- Feedback on financial plan
- Guidance on grant / funding applications

Connecting with relevant stakeholders

- City administration for permissions and consultations and discussing the project
- Potential investors or users for selling or co-development
- Financing programmes and institutions
- Owners who have successfully renovated a building
- Other owners of the same building (in case of multiple ownership), moderating to find a common solution for the building
- Trusted entities (i.e. architects, assessors, consultants)

When defining the services of the "unit", have two issues in mind:

- Available resources: staff time and knowledge
- Owners' support needs



Ensure that the services reflect and respond to these issues. Take a look at [“what owners want”](#) and [“what a unit can offer”](#) based on Chemnitz’s ‘Housing agency’ experience (p.4-6).

Test your services: Get feedback from owners!

It is recommended to have a test phase with a limited number of owners to figure out what the typical owner’s support needs are and which services respond best to these needs. Also be flexible to adapt, fine-tune or extend the services of the “unit” based on this experience. Thus, after having supported an owner, get their feedback about which services were particularly helpful and which others they think would be helpful. In this way, the “unit’s” services can be improved over the time.

Establish cooperation in support of “unit’s” services!

As resources are limited, not all services that would be desirable can be provided by the “unit”. Therefore, cooperation with other stakeholders should be established in order to bring in their knowledge and skills in supporting the owner in the reactivation process. For this, see chapter “Connecting and coordinating public and private stakeholders” ([p.41](#)).

Seek funding support!

If funding programmes supporting the refurbishment of buildings exist in your local context, check if certain vacant buildings qualify for it according to the funding criteria. If possible, discuss your short list with the funding agency. For buildings in question, contact the owners and offer your support in applying for subsidies and loans.

Obtain relevant information about the building

Being in touch with the owners provides the “unit” with the unique opportunity to receive further information about the building and to better understand the reasons for the vacancy, the state of the building, and the interest and situation of the owners. This information will help you in the provision of the “unit’s” services.

Send questionnaires!

To achieve this, the ALT/BAU partners have sent questionnaires to owners, asking about contact details, information about the

property (number and size of flats and commercial units, structural damages, pictures and floor plans), intentions of the owner, etc. This information serves to outline development goals for the building and to support the owner to find a solution.

The response rate is not always high, so think about incentives to fill in the questionnaire. For example, when owners fill in it they receive an extra free-of-charge consultation or a building diagnosis, or a winner will be drawn from all returned questionnaires who will receive a coupon for a good restaurant. When sending the questionnaire explain briefly why it is beneficial for the owner to provide the information and what you will do with it.

Examples of questionnaires can be downloaded [here](#). The city of Constanta also elaborated an [online questionnaire](#), in which the data (after verification) is transferred directly into the digital urban database.

Develop building sheets or building diagnoses

The ALT/BAU partners have also developed building sheets and building diagnoses in order to support of the reactivation of vacant buildings.

Building sheets can be used to inform relevant stakeholders, in particular potential investors, buyers and users, about the building. For an example of a building sheet take a look at [Rybnik’s presentation](#), p.6-14. You can find further examples [here](#).

Building diagnoses help owners or interested investors gain an understanding of the rehabilitation work necessary and estimate the potential costs. For an example of a building diagnosis take a look at [Seraing’s presentation](#) or Nils Scheffler’s (lead expert of the ALT/BAU network) presentation about [Feasibility studies](#). The development could be financed via the “unit” or by the owner. Also, the sharing of costs could be an option or, in case the building is going to be sold, that the new owner has to pay for the diagnosis (regulated in the sales contract). Also an agreement can be signed that the “unit” finances the diagnosis if the building is rehabilitated and reused within a given time

and the re-use serves the public interest (i.e. flats are barrier-free, apartments will have an affordable rent or the city can decide who will be the tenant). In case the building is not rehabilitated in time, the owner has to pay for the diagnosis.



ACTIVATING AND SUPPORTING “PUSH AND PULL” TOOLS

The activation of owners through the “unit” can be significantly supported through further “push and pull” tools in interaction with other organisations. The ALT/BAU partners have following tools at hand (see table below). In the ALT/BAU [good-practice compilation](#) you will also find additional examples of supporting legal and financial tools.

Pull	Push
<p>Inform about incentives / supporting services for rehabilitation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property tax reduction and tax incentives • Grants and funding programmes • Income that can be generated by reusing the building • Public investment plans for the neighbourhood • Free counselling services (basic legal advice, checking construction services, etc.) • Service to check construction documents before requesting the building permit • Supporting the elaboration of feasibility studies and condition appraisals • “Checklists”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ necessary steps for rehabilitation (planning, financing, construction) ○ necessary permissions, how to apply and documents to prepare ○ list of (recommended) architects and template for architecture contract ○ how to calculate rehabilitation costs and how to finance the rehabilitation ○ how to determine property value and potential rental rates • Good practices of rehabilitated buildings in the neighbourhood (use local media) • Good practice tours of rehabilitated buildings with owner talks • Thematic owner workshops to inform about specific issues • Owners’ exchange meetings and forum (support groups) • Support to find tenants and template for rent contract • Support to find buyers, creation of building profile and template for sales contract • Information on temporary use as a tool to maintain and improve the building condition (i.e. “guardian houses”) 	<p>Inform which costs / actions might occur if the owner does nothing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property tax increase • Fines (i.e. for failure to carry out maintenance; endangerment of public safety, neglect of building) • Substitution measures at the owner's expense by the municipality in the event of failure to maintain / endanger public safety • Public management in the event the owner allows the building to lapse • Expropriation as ultimo ratio



Activating and supporting potential buyers and investors



Activating and supporting potential buyers and investors

GOAL

Often municipalities do not have the right tools or sufficient financial capacity to renovate the buildings themselves or via funding programmes. Therefore, investors who are willing to invest in these buildings in the interest of urban development goals are an important player in the reactivation of vacant buildings. But these are not easy to find!

Thus, the goal is to

- draw the attention of (the right) potential investors and users to vacant buildings and
- support them in the buying and rehabilitation process.

The experience of Chemnitz's 'Housing agency' has shown that, through the pro-active approach of systematic communication and directly working with owners, even some of the most difficult cases have started to move. The number of reactivated vacant tenant buildings could be significantly increased through the direct and personal approach.

TASK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Clarify what kind of "investors" you are looking for.
2. Prepare information for investors.
3. Contact and activate the investors.
4. Support the investors in the process of acquisition.

Clarify the investor type you are looking for

When one thinks of "investors," one often thinks of large, anonymous housing companies and project developers. In fact, there are various "investor types" (see text box) that not only seek their own profit but also invest for the benefit of the neighbourhood. Each of them brings specific strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, it is important for the "unit" to identify which investors are well suited for the reactivation of vacant buildings (interested in corresponding objects and financially capable) and would develop the buildings in the interest of the urban development goals.

INVESTOR TYPE

Owner-occupiers

- Private single investors
- Co-housing groups
- Young people and families seeking home ownership
- Former inhabitants coming back to the city

Renters and landlords

- Private single investors
- Financial companies: banks, real estate funds
- Housing companies: for-profit, non-profit oriented
- Housing cooperatives
- Social organizations and foundations providing housing or supplementary facilities
- Universities providing student housing

Seller after rehabilitation

- Profit-driven project developers
- Financial companies: banks, real estate funds

In order to determine "fitting" investors, it is helpful to be clear about the following aspects:

- **Your vacant buildings portfolio:** type, size, general condition. Check which investor type could be interested in the vacant buildings you have available.
- **Development priorities based on your urban development objectives:** What kind of (housing) space do you want to have developed i.e. high standard housing to attract skilled workers, affordable housing, housing for self-user groups, tenant housing, preservation of cultural heritage values, high energy standard housing, etc.?
- **Demand in your local real estate and housing market:** What kind of flats, size, quality and price range are in demand? Rent or ownership? What sales and rental prices can be achieved? This information helps to inform investors about market demand and what can be financed.

Based on this mix, you can identify investors that most closely match the housing demand, the urban development goals and the vacant building portfolio.

For example, the city of [Vilafranca del Penedes](#) has started a collaboration with [HABITAT 3](#), a social housing foundation, to refurbish newly detected vacant buildings and rent them for an affordable price.

In most cases, different investor types emerge which can be assigned to a certain vacancy type. For example, smaller investors are more likely to be overwhelmed by the task of refurbishing larger buildings that are in great need of refurbishment. Here, investors with the corresponding experience and financial capacity are more suitable. Local investors are more firmly anchored in the city and are more likely to act in the interest of urban development goals. Alternative user groups do not have large financial capacities and are often slower to act, but are more likely to provide alternative housing models.

It was very interesting to discuss which investors we want.
- Katharina Richter, WGS Chemnitz

Prepare relevant information for the investors

When you know which investor type(s) you aim for, prepare information that they might be interested in and that might grasp their interest in the vacant building in question.

Relevant information could be about:

- Local real estate market: demand, rent and sales prices
- Vacant buildings on sale: building sheet with price, size, condition, etc. or building diagnosis (see p.33)
- Potentials of the vacant building based on the interest of the investor.
- Information about neighbourhood, where the vacant building is situated: location, accessibility, facilities, qualities, planned public investments
- Financial incentives: tax incentives, grants, funding programmes

Identify investors to be contacted

Unlike owners, investors are often not directly known as individuals or individual companies at the beginning. If this is the case, ask in your circle for recommendations for suitable investors. Conduct research to find out which suitable investors are already active in the region or are looking for corresponding opportunities (e.g. forums for co-housing). When doing research, try to find information about the investor (interests, trustworthiness, references, etc.).

At the same time, you can draw attention to the "unit" and vacant buildings in your portfolio through your PR and publication activities (see "Develop target-group specific publication and communication tools," p.48), so that interested investors contact you.

Contact investors actively

As with owners, contact the investors you have identified actively. Send personal letters, call them, etc. Here similar recommendations apply as written in chapter "Sending a personal inviting letter!", p.31.

In general, communicate in the investor's "language" and keep a professional relationship, stay away from deals, bribes, gifts, etc. Document your communication with the investor and be wise which information

you pass on to them (especially personal data of the owner). Be patient with owner-occupier groups; their decision-making process takes longer.

Another possibility to reach investors is via PR, multipliers or events. These opportunities can be used at the same time to inform about the services of the “unit”.

ALTERNATIVE CONTACT POSSIBILITIES

Public relations

- Publish vacant buildings for sale on property market websites, city and “unit” website, local newspapers, social media
- Publish posters and building sheets on vacant buildings for sale (incl. who to contact)
- Display building diagnoses / summaries at locations which potential investors will visit: banks, estate agent offices, town hall, at the vacant building

Events

- Conduct individual site visits
- Participate at housing and real estate fairs
- Webinars to inform about investment opportunities in vacant buildings
- Organise investors' lunch with visits to vacant buildings for sale and/or good-practice tour of rehabilitated buildings, meeting the owners
- Information workshop for self-users and co-housing groups, presenting vacant buildings (site visit)
- Vacant buildings street festival, drawing the attention to vacant buildings on sale

Multipliers

- Inform umbrella organisations of developers, housing companies, property owners, local estate agents, tax consultants, etc. about the work of the “unit” and properties for sale

No investor is usually better than the wrong investor!

- Martin Neubert, WGS Chemnitz

I was astonished about the variety how investors can be ‘activated.’

- Frank Feuerbach, City of Chemnitz

Being in contact with investors, try to understand what kind of investments they are looking for:

- Definition of search profile: building type, location, size, etc.
- Plans and objectives: self-use, rent, re-sale etc.
- Financial capacities and financing schemes
- Support and information needs

! Over time, the team of the “unit” will acquire soft skills to distinguish between speculators and trustworthy investors. Personal talks, research on reference projects and site visits are often very helpful to learn about an investor’s background and capabilities and to filter which investor is likely to deliver desirable results.

Support investors

Investors receive the same support as owners as soon as they have become an owner (see “Supporting owners,” [p.32](#)). Before the sale is completed, additional services are recommended.



SERVICES FOR INVESTORS

- Information and suggestions about vacant buildings for sale
- Site visits to vacant buildings for sale
- Information about funding opportunities
- Connecting with owners, city administration, experts, grant and financial institutions to discuss the potential project
- Guidance through the purchase procedure
- Information on legal and administrative procedures

Particular services for owner-occupier / co-housing groups

- Support to get organized and funding
- Advice on financial and legal possibilities
- Guiding them through the administrative procedure
- Informing and connecting them with good examples

When defining the services of the “unit,” have two issues in mind:

- Available resources: staff time and expertise
- Supporting needs of investors

Ensure that the services reflect and respond to these issues. If needed, bring in partners with relevant complementary expertise.

Test your services: Get feedback from investors!

It is likely that you will only have a limited number of investors at the beginning. Use this phase to test your services. Be flexible to adapt, fine-tune or extend the services of the “unit” and the information you provide based on these experiences. After having supported an investor, get their feedback about which information and services were particularly helpful and which others they think are still needed/missing. In this way, the “unit's” services can be improved over time.





Connecting and coordinating public and private stakeholders



Connecting and coordinating public and private stakeholders

GOAL

Owners and investors are not the only people relevant for the reactivation of vacant buildings - other public and private institutions are involved in this process. They have to make decisions or can support the reactivation. In order for this process to take place efficiently and in a targeted manner, the “unit” aims to **inform, exchange, engage and coordinate these stakeholders** in support of the reactivation of vacant buildings.

The experience of Chemnitz’s ‘Housing agency’ has shown that through the cooperation and exchange with relevant public and private stakeholders, Chemnitz’s “Building Activation Unit” has become recognised and is valued by the stakeholders as the central collector and distributor of information on problematic buildings with a clear focus on solutions for the common benefit.

TASK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Define what needs to be coordinated and exchanged with which stakeholder(s) to support the reactivation of vacant buildings.
2. Define and implement structures and procedures to ensure cooperation and exchange.

Brainstorm necessary steps and stakeholders involved in the reactivation of vacant buildings

- Brainstorm necessary steps to reactivate a vacant building and what needs to be coordinated with whom along these steps.

- Sketch the different stakeholders’ stakes and responsibilities and the existing links and procedures between them.
- Think about how the process could be simplified for the owner by coordinating the stakeholders involved in the process.
- Generate ideas about how the “unit” could be supported and complemented in their reactivation services and vice versa.

Get other stakeholders involved in the brainstorming. Ask them how they could support the individual steps and how they could contribute to the reactivation of vacant buildings in general. But also inquire which support and information from your activities can help them to fulfil their tasks so the cooperation and exchange will be a win-win situation.

POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS TO BE INVOLVED

Local administration (city departments and public housing and development organisations)

The goal is to actively and continuously exchange with these stakeholders about the reactivation of vacant buildings as they are important decision makers and contributors of information and guidance. They also have certain administrative powers at hand to influence development (planning regulations, taxes and fines, building code). This exchange can be achieved through regular coordination meetings and site visits.

Financing institutions (local banks, foundations, regional and state funding institutions)

The goal is to check funding opportunities as well as to develop support and credit programmes for the purchase and rehabilitation of vacant buildings.



Experts (architects, real estate agents, assessors, construction companies, owner associations)

The goal is to access their expertise and make them aware of the (investment) opportunities that vacant buildings provide to their clients. Since money or commissions may be involved, be transparent about your “unit’s” activities.

NGOs and local interest groups (in the field of reactivation of vacant buildings, preservation of heritage buildings, revitalisation of neighbourhoods, temporary uses, social and cultural activities)

The goal is to activate them to support the reactivation of vacant buildings and their social and cultural use or even co-development. In the ALT/BAU [good-practice compilation](#) you can find interesting examples how vacant buildings and flats are used to provide affordable housing and space for financially weaker tenants.

Research institutions (universities)

The goal is to access their expertise and student support i.e. identifying reasons for vacancies, supporting the monitoring or elaboration of building diagnosis.

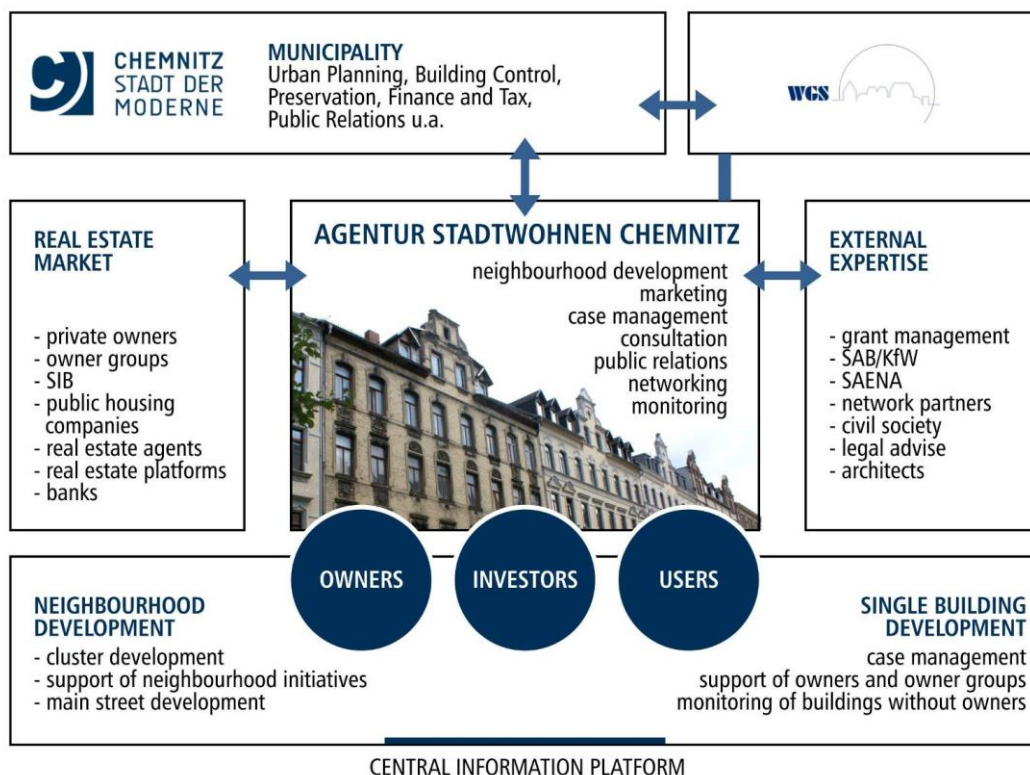
Take a look at the table at the end of this chapter for coordination topics that the ALT/BAU partners have defined.

Define and implement coordination and exchange structures and procedures

Based on your brainstorming, define coordination and exchange structures and procedures in consultation with the stakeholders to be involved. You also may come up with new tools and instruments to apply in your city.

It may also be that structures and activities for reactivating vacant buildings already exist. Integrate and streamline these structures and processes. Avoid duplication! Consider together with the stakeholders how their activities can be improved or supported.

Many ALT/BAU partners intend to set up coordination and exchange groups or periodical thematic meetings to address particular issues of the stakeholders involved. Even a housing council with public and private stakeholders has been founded. Others want to use digital platforms to exchange information and to communicate about vacant buildings and relevant activities and services.

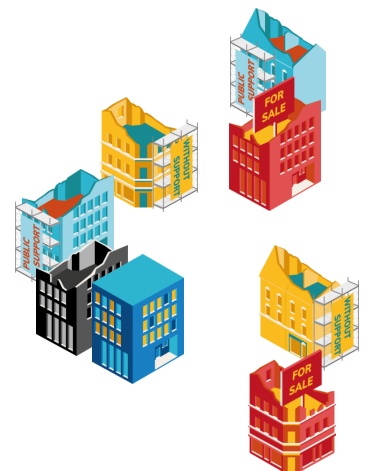


For an overview what and how Chemnitz's Housing agency is coordinating and with which stakeholders, take a look at this [presentation](#), slides 7-18. They also have biannual steering committee meetings to monitor the "unit's" results and goals.

! **Be aware:** Coordination and information flow is not one way! The other stakeholders have to benefit from activities and structures, too. So take their interests in consideration when defining the structures and procedures.

Test your procedures and structures!

As with the other tasks, test the structures and procedures. Adapt them based on experience so that over time they become more and more helpful for all the stakeholders involved.



COORDINATION TOPICS IN THE REACTIVATION OF VACANT BUILDINGS

Coordination topic	Institution to involve / inform	Tool
General policy issues	City council, planning and other relevant departments	Thematic meetings
Ownership (change) Exchange on ownership information	Land registry Building control Tax department	Email Shared property database
Current situation and need for action regarding priority buildings Tracking reactivation progress; discussing difficult cases; update on recent developments; owner and investor plans; definition of tasks and legal actions i.e. safety measures, tax fines, foreclosure, public grants, next steps	Building control Urban development Preservation authority Tax department	Regular meetings of steering committee or working group Shared result database
Information about vacant buildings i.e. to apply tax fines, to define new buildings to act on	Tax department Building control Preservation authority	Email, phone call Shared property database
Rehabilitation / building permits So that different permits do not contradict each other and can be obtained without major efforts by the owners; To ensure procedures which make it "easy" for the owner to receive necessary permits for the rehabilitation of the building	Building control Preservation authority Urban development department Owner	Steering committee meeting Ad-hoc meetings One-stop-agency / central contact person for owner
Construction works on technical infrastructure and public space So that they do not interfere with rehabilitation actions of vacant buildings	Civil engineering office	Ad-hoc meetings Steering committee meeting
Housing market developments and resulting requirements for reactivation of vacant buildings	Real estate experts Urban development and Housing department	One-to-one meetings with experts Analysis of real estate platforms
Entry of relevant data / information into property database / GIS Defining who collects, inserts, updates and who has accesses to which information.	IT department Relevant city departments	Central information and exchange platform: GIS; shared property database; shared archive
Problems and resident ideas for vacant buildings and flats i.e. discussing their social / cultural / temporary reuse or handling problems resulting from their vacancy.	Citizens NGO Local initiatives User groups	Neighbourhood meetings Official contact person Internet forums and social media



Publication and communication activities



Publication and communication activities

GOAL

If the “unit’s” services are not known and relevant information about vacant buildings is not available to owners and investors, it will be difficult to reactivate them with the help of the “unit.”

That is why it is important to develop and implement publication and communication activities that pursue two goals

- to publish vacant buildings in need of refurbishment and their opportunities in order to attract potential buyers and users (investors) to invest in the vacant buildings and
- to make the services and support of the “unit” known to its target groups (owners and investors).

The experience of Chemnitz’s ‘Housing agency’ has shown that through the publication and communication activities, the information on the buildings can be spread to the world to gain wider interest or be targeted to specific audiences according to the city’s or the owner’s preferred strategy.

TASK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Define the target groups of your promotion and communication activities and what you aim to achieve with them.
2. Develop target-group specific publication and communication tools and activities.
3. Implement and test your publication and communication tools and activities.

Define target groups and target group objectives for the publication and communication activities.

A very important element is to understand that different groups have different information needs and are reached by different media and approaches. Therefore, it is important for the work of the “unit” to know who the target groups are, their information needs and how to reach them best. This will form the basis for the publication and communication work.

Define your target groups!

At the beginning, define the target groups of the “unit’s” work. These will mainly be owners and potential investors and users of the vacant buildings, but there can also be others. Take a look at the table further below.

Define what you want to achieve with your target groups through the communication activities!

When you have defined the target groups, think about what you want to achieve with your publication and communication activities towards them. For example, you might want to motivate owners to invest in their vacant buildings and flats or inspire investors and user groups to do so. Examples of which objectives can be pursued with which target groups can be found in the table below.

Identify the information needs and communication channels of your target groups!

To make the services of your “unit” attractive, think about which information your target groups might be interested in and which information channels they might use to retrieve them.

! **Be aware:** Different target groups
= different information interests
= different communication channels
= different communication activities!

All of these answers will help you to prepare useful and target-group-oriented publication and communication materials for the work of your “unit”. The recognition of the “unit’s” work will affect its effectiveness in reaching owners and potential investors!

Other institutions may also be interested in communicating with your target groups. Check for cooperation and support for joint communication activities to increase your resources for this activity.

TARGET GROUPS AND OBJECTIVES FOR PUBLICATION AND COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

Objective/ intention of Marketing and Communication activities	Target groups of Marketing and Communication activities						
	Owner	Investor / buyer	User / housing initiative	Regional financing institution	Real estate agency	City administration	Media
To motivate them to provide needed housing space	x	x	x				
To connect people to jointly invest (rehabilitate / reuse) or self-use			x				
To get their interest to invest (rehabilitate / reuse) or self-use	x	x	x				
To provide information about vacant buildings and their opportunities		x	x				x
To provide information about funding/financing and other support (of the "unit" and other institutions)	x	x	x				x
To inform them about and develop trust in the work of the "unit"	x	x	x			x	x
To learn about their intentions with the property	x						
To convey the advantages of a sale when not investing	x						
To attract users for vacant premises			x				x
To activate to support the "cause" with their means			x	x	x	x	x
To have a better perspective of the areas affected by vacant buildings and be more open to finance projects there				x			
To convey a better image of the area affected by vacant buildings	x	x	x			x	x

For further information about target groups, their information needs and communication channels, download this [paper](#).



Develop your target group specific publication and communication tools and activities.

Once you know the information needs and communication channels of your target groups and what you want to achieve with your publication and communication activities, develop target-group-oriented publication and communication materials and publish them via the identified communication channels.

WHAT TO PUBLISH?

The ALT/BAU partners recommend:

- Tasks and services of the “unit”
- Success stories and showcases of buildings rehabilitated and reused with support of the “unit”
- Vacant buildings for sale (with the permission of the owner; see also the ‘building sheets’ and ‘building diagnosis’ on [p.33](#))
- [Profile sheets of the focus areas](#) where the vacant buildings are located: prospects, urban plans, etc.
- Brokering space connecting owners with support mechanisms and potential investors and users for co-development of vacant buildings
- Funding sources for the rehabilitation
- Guide how to successfully rehabilitate a building in need of refurbishment: step-by-step explanation, hints on handling heritage values, increasing energy efficiency, etc.

Be creative when developing your communication tools! It is important that, no matter which communication channel or material you use, your materials should underpin the professionalism of the “unit” and promote trust in its services.

A website has to look official and provide clear, transparent and easy-to-understand information: what the agency is about, whom and how it can help with its services, who the team behind the “unit” is, first helpful information for the rehabilitation of a vacant building, FAQ, etc. Use visuals to transmit information.

HOW TO PUBLISH

Nowadays, especially under COVID-19 conditions, the use of digital media is of particular importance and reach. Digital media are well suited for target-group-oriented communication and can be tailored well according to the target audience and message you wish to convey. Classically, websites and social media can be used. Also professional real estate portals can be handy to reach an informed audience.

- But it is also about other “communication channels” such as
- Direct contact via telephone call, letter, e-mail and even personal visits!
- Information stands at housing and real estate fairs
- Press releases and articles in owner association and real estate magazines and local newspapers
- Flyers and leaflets i.e. displayed in banks
- Posters in public spaces and public transport
- Large banners on vacant buildings with information whom to contact when wanting to rehabilitate or reuse the building.
- Guided tours and events to highlight successful local projects or vacant buildings for sale
- Thematic webinars with experts for interested owners, investors and user groups
- Peer-to-peer talks with owners and investors / users that have successfully rehabilitated a building with the support of the “unit”

Information campaign when opening the “unit”!

Make the “unit” and its support services known! So when opening the “unit”, accompany it with a PR campaign about the “unit” and its services as well as the opportunities the reactivation of vacant buildings can provide. Publish first success stories from the pilot phase in relation to the unit’s work. Give the “unit” a sound title and use it in the communication, so it becomes a known brand.

! **Be aware:** There is a variety of publication and communication activities. Use them in combination and be target group specific!

Test your publication and communication tools and activities.

Publication and communication can require a lot of effort and resources. Therefore, it is helpful to test information materials and tools with a peer group first. Based on the feedback, these can be further developed and expanded.

Also start publication and communication activities on a selected sample of buildings as part of a pilot phase.

Promote the work of the “unit” constantly i.e. via small success stories. Over time, this will increase the trust and reach of the “unit” and also generate interest, especially if the building is of general interest in your city.

! **Be aware:** Publication and communication should not be underestimated. It needs a certain level of experience and professionalism to do it well. Find partners if you don't have the skillset within your team.

CITY EXAMPLES

Constanta has launched a [website](#) dedicated to the historic centre and the reactivation of its vacant buildings. The city also organises events around this topic.

Riga is going to develop an online matchmaking platform to promote the social temporary use and the co-development of vacant buildings. The online platform will contain an interactive map and additional useful information about the sites and buildings to facilitate matchmaking.

Rybnik organised a PR campaign "I'm waiting for a change". Residents were provided with stickers they could stick on vacant buildings to show that they require actions. They could do

the same online as well: they could put virtual pins on buildings in need of refurbishment on a public map. This called the public's and the media's attention to this topic. For further information, take a look at Rybnik's [Facebook site](#).

Vilafranca and **Seraing** use cultural and family events to draw residents' attention (as potential investors) to vacant buildings and flats in the city. Both practices are presented in the ALT/BAU [good-practice compilation](#).

Chemnitz's 'Housing agency' and **Turin's** Urban Lab also have sophisticated local marketing and communication approaches. Chemnitz started a local media campaign "New life for old buildings" highlighting interesting stories from the agency's work and notable projects in the city.

! Over the years, Chemnitz has had very positive experiences with site visits both as communication opportunities with owners, investors and stakeholders and also as a measure to generate interest in a building. Often, owners even provide keys to the 'Housing agency' for easy access.





LAST, BUT NOT LEAST...

Reactivating vacant residential buildings and flats in need of refurbishment is not “only” about establishing a “unit” with comparable tasks as described in this guidebook. More can be done, for example applying financial and legal tools as a “stick and carrot” to activate owners to rehabilitate and reuse their vacant buildings. For more inspiration, take a look at the ALT/BAU [good-practice compilation](#)! You can find city cases about

- Inventory and monitoring of vacant buildings and flats,
- Marketing activities to attract people to vacant buildings,
- Legal tools to reactivate vacant buildings and flats,
- Matching vacant flats with financially weaker tenants, and
- Using vacant buildings and flats to provide affordable housing.

AND ONE LAST RECOMMENDATION

When developing the “unit” and its tasks, don't do it alone at your desk. Involve interested stakeholders who can support the endeavour of reactivating vacant buildings and flats. The benefits you can gain from it are expressed well in the following statements of two people involved at local level of the ALT/BAU project.

“There are plenty of resources and active people around us for the reactivation of vacant buildings, but most of the time we don't know them because of a lack of communication, contact, and collaboration between people, institutions and their services. Through the ALT/BAU work, we had the opportunity to meet and talk to people active in the real estate, renovation or vacancy sectors, who we probably would not have met or talked to otherwise. We found out about initiatives and what is already being done in the field. With have joined forces with them and now work together. There is never enough communication!”

- **Bénédicte Borckmans, Seraing's ALT/BAU project coordinator**

“Being a member of the ALT/BAU working group in Torino has been a good opportunity for us: a place to discuss common issues, ideas and needs with other bodies and organisations dealing with the housing issue in Torino. The added value of this project is the idea of gathering a variety of actors working on the territory around the same table: investors in social housing like us, the beneficiaries of housing projects, third sector organisations, and researchers. It seems banal, but it's not, as it is quite difficult to organize such moments of confrontation with so many stakeholders. The project of the “housing services map” was born from this confrontation, an output of the transfer process which we intend to follow up and develop further.”

- **Bianca Viarizzo, Fondazione Sviluppo e Crescita CRT, member of Turin's ALT/BAU working group**



ALT/BAU network

The URBACT transfer network ALT/BAU unites seven European cities in their effort to support the reactivation and reuse of vacant residential buildings and flats in their cities by transferring and adapting the good practice model of Chemnitz's 'Housing agency.' In order to achieve this, they have met at transnational

meetings to learn and exchange about the transfer and adaptation of Chemnitz's good practice as well as other good practices from the seven partner cities. Based on this exchange, the partners have developed their own "housing agencies" adapted to their local situations.



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This guidebook provides an overview and guidance for interested cities and professionals how to apply the ALT/BAU approach: The set up and tasks of an "ALternative Building Activation Unit" to actively become engaged in the reactivation of vacant residential buildings and flats in need of refurbishment for the benefit of the urban development.