

Living. Thinking. Shaping the City Centre: Considerations from Frankfurt am Main

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Abstract

The (inner) city is a living and working space. It is the stage on which diverse lifestyles unfold. For this reason, urban planning must reflect economic, political, and cultural issues. Over the last decade, the city centre has suffered from a decline in visitor numbers. In particular, the expansion of online retail has led to many vacancies in central locations. This trend has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. We can note: On the one hand, we love the city centre since it creates a common identity. Its history is stored in buildings and collective memories. On the other hand, we ignore it out of convenience. After all, this is a rather sporadic love that is only exhibited on occasion, when it fits into the time budget of our lifestyle programme and there is an event to celebrate.

Living the city centre means thinking and shaping the city centre under current conditions. This is a pragmatic shift in perspective, as shown in this paper by the case of Frankfurt am Main. The city centre must finally open up to residents, who are more than just consumers. It must provide offers for everyday life: spaces for the appropriation of individuals and groups which serve to promote identification through participation. Participation has at least as strong an effect as the identity-forming power of historical icons. Therefore, in addition to the material foundations of the built city, greater emphasis must be placed on the non-material skills of those who live the city centre. It would be an illusion to think that there is a way back to the old town centre as we know it from history. This belongs to the past. Today's shaping of the city centre must be conceptualised within the framework of current possibilities. For this reason, the aspect of participation must be rethought. Cities must create an economic and political openness for this. The space of the city centre must once again belong to everyone.

Keywords: city centre; inner city; urban planning; urban transformation; experience society; participation; Frankfurt am Main

1. Introduction: The Crisis of the City Centre

The (inner) city is a place to live and work. It can be a place of identification and shared interests. At the same time, it provides a stage on which diverse lifestyles can unfold. Urban planning must thus be open to multiple issues that affect the specific design of our city centres and their functions, as well as political and cultural expectations. Living the city centre therefore means, first, thinking about the city centre under the current conditions and then shaping it accordingly.

Even before the corona pandemic, city centres were suffering from a decline in visitor numbers. In particular, expanding online retail led to vacant premises. This development has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Since then, parcels delivered by delivery services have been piling up in the entrances of residential buildings throughout the city, containing goods that would previously have been purchased in the city centre or in large retail outlets on the outskirts. This competition has been around for a long time. Consumer behaviour geared towards the global market and a primarily event-oriented society have further intensified the crisis.

On the one hand, we appreciate and love the city centre because it serves as a symbol of common identity. The history of the city is stored there in buildings and collective memories. On the other hand, we ignore it for the sake of convenience. After all, it is a rather sporadic love that is only exhibited on occasion, when it fits into the time budget of our lifestyle programming and there is an event to celebrate.

However, consumers are hardly the only ones to blame for this flightiness. For decades, the development of city centres has been dominated by the economic interests of retailers. This has led to increasing alienation, which has unfortunately been met with far too slow a response from politicians and planners. The potential of city centres is still not being given enough attention (Giddings, Rogerson, 2023). Instead of making a virtue out of necessity, we are chasing after the competitors in the greenfield locations.

Only pragmatic approaches can help. However, this does not mean continuing to focus solely on consumer needs without involving the people who live in and with the city centre. It is their city that is being discussed. Therefore, if we ultimately want to take a step towards a democratic and inclusive city centre, we need to shift our focus towards a political city, in the sense of enabling all stakeholders to participate. Perhaps this is the only way to save the city centre.

2. Methodology

The following study begins with an analysis of the current state and crisis of our city centres against the backdrop of their increasing economisation, unrestrained consumer behaviour and the changing lifestyles of an event-oriented society primarily interested in fast-paced excitements. This part is literature-based, investigating and evaluating established academic publications on the role of the city centre, of urban lifestyle and urban society, today and in the past.

Using the case of the city centre of Frankfurt am Main in Germany, relevant current programmes and projects are then presented in the second part of this paper. They are characterised by a range of innovative offerings and activities that go beyond mere consumption, as well as by the participation and open discourse of a broad civil society. The methods applied here include a comprehensive analysis of reports and publications by the Frankfurt City Planning Department and the German National Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, project documentations, articles from the daily press,

and finally embedded personal observation, which provided in-depth insight, but also required analytical distance in order to obtain a solid and balanced understanding of the local processes.

Finally, the combining of these mixed methodological approaches allowed to identify and synthesise prospects for a future sustainable development of the city centre as not only an iconic but also a practical centre of our everyday community life that inspires our creativity and intellectual participation.

3. Results and Discussion 1: Current State of the City Centre

3.1. What is the City Centre?

In a geographical sense, at first glance, European cities allow to give a simple answer to this question. Google Maps displays the CITY CENTRE in capital letters. So, you cannot miss it. But what does this term mean? And what do we expect from the city centre? A few preliminary thoughts should help to outline the situation.

Usually, the city centre occupies the area of the historic city core within the medieval or baroque fortifications (Fig. 1). Since these were demolished, the city centre has been opened up and accessed via a ring road or a green promenade ring, as it is the case, for example, in Frankfurt am Main, but also in many other cities, like Cologne, Cracow, etc.

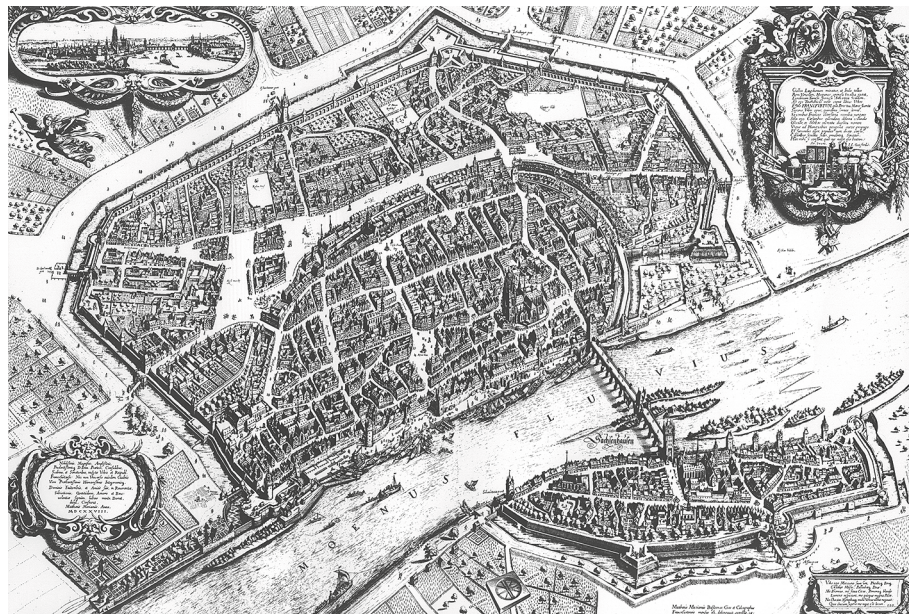


Fig. 1. Baroque fortifications around the city centre of Frankfurt am Main. Merian Plan 1628. Wikimedia Commons

In the city centre, we encounter the places that give a city its special character. Significant buildings such as the town hall (Fig. 2) or the churches, provide the collective memory with a shared identity (Rossi, 1982). Next to them, there is usually the market square and, of course, there are shops. Thus, Marc Augé has coined the term ‘anthropological places’, referring to medium-sized French towns, where people stroll among the market stalls at the weekend and meet acquaintances together with whom they go to the nearby coffee house (Augé, 1992). This refers to places where people can get personally involved. Behind this lies the concept of the bourgeois, who (at least potentially) can claim economic and political participation. Accordingly, so-called ‘non-places’ tend to be found outside on the periphery, where it is very difficult to personally identify with the spatial environment (Augé, 1992).



Fig. 2. The Römer, the historic town hall in Frankfurt am Main. © The authors

There is obviously a distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in our perception, but also in the distribution of urban functions, which we consider as significant. Even 80 years after the destructions caused by the Second World War, the city centre – as is the case in Frankfurt am Main, for example – is still the presumed expression of spatial and social cohesion, as articulated in



Fig. 3. Frankfurt's new Old Town completed in 2018. © The authors

Walter Siebel's five-point definition of the 'European city' where he specifies: the presence of history, the city as a place of hope, the city as a special place, the welfare state-regulated city, and its physical form (Siebel, 2004:11-50). Hence, the partial reconstruction of a fragment of Frankfurt's old town, which has been realised only a few years ago (2012–2018), suggests that these aspects continue to be important for many citizens, standing for the persistent symbolic importance of the centre – even if it has become just an external façade (Fig. 3).

It is obvious that such an attempt at reconstruction can only superficially recall what the old town, the city centre, used to be. It is precisely the artificiality of today, which is contrary to a permanence of a built urban environment evolved over decades and centuries, that turns all visitors – including the residents of Frankfurt – into 'tourists' in their own city. Something has changed decisively, and this is not only due to the destructions of the war, but above all to our current way of life.

3.2. The Lightness of Our Modern Being

We are all futurists¹. In other words, we have succumbed to the thrill of speed in many parts of the world. This does not refer only to driving fast on motorways, but in general to the possibility of covering even long distances in a very short time. The 20th century promised to fulfil a dream that was several thousand years old. People who, according to ancient and medieval diction, were imprisoned in the cage of their bodies, now saw themselves faced with the possibility of becoming completely light. It was no longer mystical promises of salvation that were supposed to enable escape from the heaviness and inertia of the body. This hope now lay in new technological developments. With the train, the automobile, and the aeroplane, it was possible to emancipate oneself from one's place of stay at any time.

However, people were quick to forget that this light-hearted way of life comes at a price, with consequences that are felt both at a local and global level. Even today, we still sometimes succumb to this illusion. We tend to forget that smart IT worlds and the convenience of unlimited simultaneous digital communication require enormous effort in terms of data processing and storage, as well as energy provision, in unknown and forgotten places (Easterling, 2005:99-122; Moreau, 2025). The same applies to parcel services, which deliver our orders to us as if they were roasted pigeons.

Of course, the spatial, energetic and social consequences of the enormous logistics centres have been widely published in the media. However, the paradise of these monstrosities has us all firmly in its grip by presenting the easily consumable, the pleasant and the superficially appealing as unrivalled trendsetters. In this context, Paul Virilio speaks of the 'accident' of reality, of space, time, speed and the material substance and of a 'pollution of distances' (Virilio, 2005). The reduction in space, and the simultaneity of global action leads to consequences for planning and politics, which have to provide the respective social, financial and organisational framework conditions.

3.3. City Centre and Periphery

The achieved lightness of being has long since led to a reconsideration of the city centre on the one hand and the urban periphery on the other. Today, the centre is just one functional module among many others that can be found in the wider settlement area of a city and its surroundings. With the term 'Zwischenstadt', Thomas Sieverts explained as early as the 1990s how people's

¹ The term can be traced back to the Futurist movement led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. On 20 February 1909, he published the 'Manifesto of Futurism' in *Le Figaro*, which contains some misogynistic statements. However, so-called Western societies have incorporated certain aspects of this thinking.

routes and activities in the surroundings of historic city cores were diversifying (Sieverts, 1998). 'Zwischen' or 'in between' refers to the spatial aspect of the scattering of functional and experiential hotspots across an expanded urban territory. The routes to the formerly dominant centre have been replaced by journeys through sprawling areas on the outskirts. Marc Augé's 'central locations' are then just possible stops on our daily travels through cities – on the daily courses (parcours) as Michel de Certeau put it in a different context in his writings on the invention of the everyday life (1990:139-194). They are no longer destinations visited out of necessity. Thus, 'in between' also refers to the time (which has increased over recent decades) that we spend on these journeys.

Material and immaterial factors of this kind fundamentally change our perception of the city. Terms such as CITY CENTRE may continue to be an indicator of a centre where administrative and economic services are concentrated. However, the city centre has long since lost its exclusivity and will not regain it under the conditions of (neo-)liberal economics. In Frankfurt am Main the cathedral still stands there, which is generally regarded as a central monument of the city. And the town hall, where the mayor resides, is also located nearby. But the relationship between the inside and the outside has changed. Today, the periphery attracts with offers that simulate the centre in terms of design, services and organisation. Profit is being made from their location in the vastness of the urban agglomeration and easy accessibility by private transport outside the cramped city cores.

As early as the 1960s, for example, the Main-Taunus-Zentrum (MTZ) was built in the style of North American malls in the west of Frankfurt (Bürklin, Peterek, 2006:98-111). To this day, it appears from the outside as a collection of unattractive functional boxes. At the beginning of the millennium, however, its interior was 'urbanised' based on motifs from European cities: a central square with fountains, antique-style statues, a Southern European-inspired 'corso' with ice cream parlours, bars and restaurants, as well as a cinema, doctors and other services located on the square and along the corso, simulating the city centre here at the periphery, and thus rendering it obsolete in a sense (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Antique-style statues along the 'corso' of the Main-Taunus shopping mall at the city outskirts. © The authors

At the same time, inner-city shopping areas are attempting to separate themselves from the surrounding urban space by closing off to the outside world – and accordingly only offering retail space that is oriented inwards – to

such an extent that physical (and temporal) contact with the surrounding area is reduced to a necessary minimum. In the MyZeil shopping mall in the centre of Frankfurt (Fig. 5) the culinary offerings, the so-called food court, have been moved to the top floor. The idea is that you should not have to leave the building at all. An underground parking ensures that you can drive in and, ideally, do all your shopping indoors (Bürklin, Peterek, 2014:347-348).



Fig. 5. The completely introverted MyZeil shopping mall in the city centre of Frankfurt.
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As a result, city centres are also taking on characteristics of the periphery: like shopping centres on the outskirts of towns, they are becoming ephemeral places of consumption and events. The concept of what they should and could be, has changed. In publications from 2010 and 2016, the term ‘cyclo-region’ was coined in this context (Bürklin, Peterek, 2010; Bürklin, Peterek, 2016). In a sense, the centre and the periphery have become interchangeable – in organisational, functional, design and conceptual terms. The city centre is now just one place among many.

3.4. The Lost Beauty of the City Centre

The city centre has also suffered in terms of its design. Many centres have degenerated into places of cheap junk and blind consumerism. The indifference towards architectural space is often striking. It is no surprise that this has led to a downward spiral in terms of functions and economy. Where streets and squares are crammed with uninspiring street furniture and advertising, further additions of equally bleak design are quickly found. Accordingly, public space in the city centre is not seen as something valuable and worth preserving, but merely as another economic factor that can be used and exploited.

Instead, in the interests of resilient inner-city development, a more careful attention should be paid to physical design. The spatial environment gives direction to people’s actions. In this respect, the spatial environment is part of a city’s cultural treasure, which also influences the consciousness and behaviour of its residents and visitors. In earlier times, before the radical individualisation of perception people were well aware of this. As a matter of course, architectural space was also understood as a reflection of a community that understood itself as a cultural whole.

The ‘experience society’ (Schulze, 2008) has left only a faint glimmer and superficial image of this awareness. Instead, various levels of marketing strategies have been produced, which architects and planners have willingly

engaged with. On the one hand, we find the trivial cheap-junk city, where run-of-the-mill goods are marketed. The only guiding principle here seems to be unrestricted consumption. On the other hand, there is the high-end and extensively staged urban ‘experience’, which basically shares the same motivation. As much as architects and planners have strived for good design in recent decades, ultimately it has usually been about creating worlds of events and consumption. The obvious consensus was that there was no escape from this. The sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful search for ‘beauty’ has a common horizon that, as it seems, cannot be escaped from, or even be questioned.

3.5. Marketing the City Centre

The city centre has always been a marketplace. The development of cities would be impossible to imagine without the function of trade. Cities flourished because they bought and sold goods, produced locally or in other regions, at transport hubs. However, the city centre was also home to the political and spiritual institutions. In the Middle Ages, the city was still the very opposite of the countryside and the nature beyond its walls, because a culturally significant bourgeoisie had developed there since at least the 12th century. This did not happen without tensions and internal feuds, as the chronicles amply report. Despite – or perhaps because of – the huge leap in time to the present day, it is clear something has radically changed in relation to the (inner) city: “Today, city life is consumerism,” says Walter Siebel (2004). We obviously perceive the city centre primarily as an opportunity for shopping, even though the town hall and other public institutions are still located there.

The shopping experience dominates our perception of the city centre. This is how it has been staged over the last few decades (Chung-Klatte, Mirazon-Hahn, 2014). The logistics behind the displays had to disappear as far as possible. According to Schulze (2008), in our experience-oriented society, the inward-focused individual is directed on fulfilling a new imperative: “Experience your life!”. Therefore, individuals engaged in the ‘project of a beautiful life’ (Schulze, 2008) want to come across a functioning ‘user interface’. That is why you see the same shops in almost every city centre. The market power of the big retail brands takes advantage of customers’ desire to avoid coming across anything new, unfamiliar, surprising, or even disturbing. (This freedom may eventually be enjoyed during a two-week summer holiday in a foreign country).

This makes the shopping experience bland, but controllable. On the one hand, visitors arrive with expectations that, from a personal point of view, should not be disappointed. On the other hand, this desire is welcomed even more because it fits in with the economic premise of cheap mass production. Especially in our times of supposed individualisation, advertising and social media create enormous pressure to conform to tastes and needs. The uniformity of city centres is the physical, architectural symptom of this very development. Only a few local monuments rescued from the past still dare to resist.

3.6. ‘I prefer it beautiful’

In response to the faceless, anti-urban settlements of modernism, postmodern urban planning called for a return to the urban models of the past. Urban streets and squares with mixed functions, density of buildings and people, but also the image of the traditional city became central concerns, at the latest in the wake of the European Year of Cultural Heritage in 1975.

As a result, aesthetic upgrades, particularly in the city centre, became a key tool in city marketing. ‘I prefer it beautiful’ not only serves the interests of homeowners, who are reminded by home staging adverts to increase the value of their property through cosmetic measures (Augustin, 2026). Rather, it merely replicates in private home ownership what has been practised in urban centres

for decades. The aesthetic transformation of the city centre serves a lifestyle urbanism that views the city – as mentioned above – primarily from the dual but inseparable perspective of consumers and service providers. In the experience-oriented society, what survives is the beautiful, the catchy, the non-resistant. And even where the not-so-smooth is allowed to appear, its resistance has long been broken by the calculus of marketing.

Of course, city centres should be beautiful. We want to enjoy going there. Yet, the ‘toolkits’ of postmodern (international) cities competition show where the emphasis should be placed by city management. Charles Landry put it clearly in his book *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* at the beginning of the 2000s:

“In a period of attention deficit when people have little mental space, urban leaders need to know how to orchestrate ‘the iconic’ to keep their city in the forefront. Cities now compete by projecting themselves ‘iconically’ and success can depend upon how their ‘iconics’ are orchestrated. Icons are projects or initiatives that are powerfully self-explanatory, jolt the imagination, surprise, challenge and raise expectations.” (Landry, 2008).

There is no emancipated citizenry here. That had already disappeared the moment it transformed into consumers. Consequently, the so-called icons are no longer places where participation in public life can be jointly shaped. They are merely images and illusions of urbanity, which city management provides as surrogate experiences.

3.7. Inside and Outside: The Imperial Mode of Living

The city centre as it is now, is only supposedly for everyone. As the term suggests, the inner city stands in contrast to the outside world. At first glance, it is part of a dualism: an inside and an outside. During the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed as if the city centre was to be forgotten in the wake of large-scale urban extension and sprawl. It was able to recover thanks to the so-called urban renaissance. Nowadays, it draws its strength from the historical, symbolic and design features of the inside on the one hand, and from the outside on the other, from which resources are drawn to be consumed in the inside. The outside for its part is oriented towards the inside out of a desire for the experience of urban density that promises functional, physical and inter-personal diversity.

All accessible resources are made available for the development of the (inner) city. The city has always lived off its surrounding area, which in times of globalisation extends almost limitlessly across the globe. Eventually, the waste – what the city leaves behind – is returned to these surrounding areas. The interdependence and high mobility of people and goods have blurred physical and infrastructural boundaries. Nevertheless, there remains a difference between inside and outside, which is responsible for the attitude to life, but also for the material conditions of existence of the city centre.

The city centre reflects people’s aspirations. From the desire to experience history to living in abundance, it is a projection screen that aims to satisfy everyone as much as possible. What is usually ignored is what lies beyond this ‘imperial mode of living’ (Brand, Wissen, 2017). The origin and destination of the material substance of the consumers experience are not addressed. Personal responsibility for the exploitation of the planet must be successfully suppressed. Otherwise, the concept of city life as consumerism would not work (Siebel, 2004:15-16). Of course, it is not only the city centre that is responsible for the Global North’s economy and its excessive use of resources at the expense of the Global South. Above all, every individual must face these questions in times of climate crisis. However, the (inner) city, as an icon of our collective projections of a beautiful life, has a particularly important role to play in this regard.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations list the following under Goal 12: ‘Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns’ (UNDP, n.d.). Concerning this matter, the (inner) city can and should be a source of inspiration. Due to the creative potencies and symbolic significance of the city centre, it is primarily from there that the impetus for implementing the SDGs can come. Who, if not the city centre with its iconic and creative features, would have the power to take on a pioneering role? This is a political matter. That is precisely why planners must go beyond questions of beauty and finally turn their attention – collectively – to ethical and climatic issues.

3.8. Inside and Outside: Segregation

Charles Landry’s statements on the creative city do not refer exclusively to the city centre. However, it is precisely the ‘iconic’ centre in its physical constitution that plays a central role in the competition between cities – as demonstrated in Frankfurt am Main in recent decades by the development of the impressive museum embankment (Museumsufer), the image-enhancing skyline, the tower of the European Central Bank (Fig. 6), but also the simultaneous reconstruction of the ‘new’ Old Town.



Fig. 6. The iconic tower of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. © The authors

The same applies to the intangible values. These, too, are concentrated in the city centre. For it is there, in the historical and cultural centre of the city, that the present will add further layers of cultural activity to what the collective consciousness already contains. Landry’s remarks apply here as well:

“Cultural resources are the raw materials of the city and its value base; its assets replacing coal, steel or gold. Creativity is the method of exploiting these resources and helping them grow.” (Landry, 2008:7).

This view is now widely accepted, as can be seen from the coalition agreement of the city government formed in Frankfurt am Main after the elections in March 2021:

“Frankfurt’s cultural landscape makes our city a great place to live [...]. It is a place of diverse debate and helps to shape the identity of Frankfurt’s residents. The cultural institutions also contribute significantly to Frankfurt’s global reputation, are a major reason for tourists to visit and an important economic factor for the city” (Ein neues Frankfurt gestalten, 2021).

Again, the (inner) city is drawing on a globally available resource, at least potentially. At the same time, new boundaries are being erected, once again creating an inside and an outside in a social and, consequently, economic sense. As Landry's toolkit for urban innovation demands, city marketing in recent decades has mainly targeted the hypermobile, well-educated 'urbanauts'. These are individuals who, thanks to their financial and intellectual resources, find it easy to compare urban offerings and take advantage of those that appear beneficial. On the other hand, those who lack these abilities fall behind. Little money has been available for social measures in recent decades. Social and affordable housing construction has practically come to a standstill². Urban development in recent decades has accelerated social segregation, especially in city centres.

At the same time, cities in competition with each other must act as flexible as possible in view of the nature of the 'urbanauts', i.e., their high degree of volatility. Cultural offerings must always keep pace with the times. In Frankfurt, this includes the project planned for the coming decade to build a new Opera House and a new Theatre along the so-called 'Culture Mile', i.e., the western segment of the green park ring surrounding the city centre. As a replacement for the existing opera and theatre buildings, which are no longer functionally nor economically viable for renovation, the challenge is to make these new cultural buildings open, flexible and inclusive in their use, even outside performance times, meeting the demands and expectations of the entire urban community (Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt, n.d.). A good reference example of this is the *Foyer Public* of the theatre in Basel (Regitz, 2023).

3.9. The (A)political City

The city centre is suffering from the withdrawal of politics in numerous areas of public life. The misery ranges from the use of public space to the loss of subsidised affordable housing. In Frankfurt's new Old Town, for example, where



Fig. 7. Tourists in Frankfurt's new Old Town.
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² For example, the number of affordable social housing units in Frankfurt am Main is steadily declining. While there were still almost 68,000 in 1990, this figure fell to 32,000 by 2010 and to just under 28,000 by 2024 (Manus, 2026).

a mix of trade and housing for different social classes was located until its destruction in World War II, only the image of the old city remains. International and local tourists alike take advantage of the one-sided offerings, which are mainly geared toward leisure consumption (Fig. 7).

Under these conditions, the city no longer exists as a community of those who live and work there. Living is possible only in the luxury sector. It is a solipsistic way of living, where one is on one's own and stays among one's own kind – there is no urban community that one even could want to encounter. Frankfurt's old town has long since become disneyfied. This development has begun back in the 1980s, when the medieval façade scenery on the central square, the Römerberg, was rebuilt (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Reconstruction from 1981 to 1984 of the historical frontages of the Römerberg.
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The question that arises here is of fundamental importance for cities and public spaces: is the city a museum of its past that can be visited, or is it a place of encounter and interaction in a relevant present?

The (inner) city must become political again. This is meant in the much-cited Aristotelian sense that every city dweller is a *zoon politikon*, i.e., a political being, and thus, part of a community. The decline of city centres cannot continue to be addressed with the same methods that have been promoting this very decline for decades. In addition to commercialisation, the festivalisation of city centres has ultimately hollowed out the urban community. We increasingly want to spend time and move around in the streets and squares. Pubs and restaurants offer tables on the pavements almost all year round, which fill up as soon as the sun comes out. But this observation is accompanied by another aspect of contemporary lifestyle: the high mobility of a large proportion of city dwellers reduces their physical and emotional connection to a specific lived environment.

These highly mobile city dwellers – the mentioned urbanauts – which most of us belong to, are not citizens in the Aristotelian sense. These no longer exist. Instead, urbanauts do not take responsibility for a specific public space. They are everywhere and nowhere. Wherever they arrive – and consume – things must work, otherwise they will meet elsewhere. In general, cities must adapt more and more to their needs without being able to expect much in return. The urbanauts economy uses and exploits the city and its spaces and relies on specialists – shop and restaurant owners, concert promoters and sports organisers – who repeatedly provide daily events.

4. Results and Discussion 2: Perspectives for the City Centre of Frankfurt am Main

4.1. More Participation, Less Economics

The city does not belong to everyone, or at least not to everyone equally. As well-known as the saying ‘city air makes you free’ (original in German: *Stadtluft macht frei*) may be, there have always been differences in citizenship, throughout the medieval period – the era in which most of today’s European cities developed and consolidated – and beyond. Only permanent residents had civil rights. Political participation was limited to economically ‘autonomous’ individuals. Socially marginalised groups were kept under control in ghettos. Those who lived just outside the city walls often no longer enjoyed the protection and privileges of the urban community. Even the polis of ancient Greece, which we regard as the origin of democratically constituted communities, was a place of inclusion and exclusion. Only adult males were considered responsible citizens. Women remained excluded, and slaves were arbitrarily dependent. Social divisions have always existed in cities. Public space is the place where those who are authorised to do so can participate in economic and political decision-making.

Participation in city life should be taken seriously again. If one wishes to revitalise the (inner) city, one will have to strengthen political thinking and reduce the dominance of economic considerations. This is not easy and cannot be achieved overnight. The most difficult issue is that the primacy of economics has led to the disappearance of city residents who take responsibility, get involved and actively participate.

However, this statement is only partially true: creative people, those who develop new ideas for urban communities, still exist. Therefore, cities must ensure that internal resistance – such as inflexible city marketing or outdated administrative reflexes – does not prevent new ideas and innovative concepts from emerging.

In Frankfurt am Main some parties, for example, want to fight the decline of the inner-city railway station district by removing homeless people and drug addicts from the streets. However, this approach by the urbanists economy only distracts from the real problems. A city that is apolitical in the sense mentioned above, focusing solely on economic issues, will not address the problems that it itself has created.

In 1951, the philosopher Martin Heidegger gave a lecture entitled *Building Dwelling Thinking (Bauen Wohnen Denken)* as part of the renowned ‘Darmstadt Discussions’, in which he spoke about the housing shortage in the post-war period. The topic remains relevant today – and not only on the superficial level of the again pressing housing shortage and the neglect of affordable housing construction in recent decades. Heidegger’s analysis goes deeper. The housing shortage, as he understood it, was a consequence of the fact that in modern times (and one might add, up to the present day) we no longer know how to dwell. Accordingly, in his diction, dwelling means more than just having a place to stay within one’s own four walls. Dwelling means ‘staying’ and ‘being present’. This occurs in a place that, in the best-case scenario, has been designed by planners and architects in such a way that one can engage in the manifold facets of human existence there. For Heidegger, dwelling as an intellectual concept, but also as an architectural implementation, goes beyond the actual lodging. We dwell in the city centre insofar as it forms the cultural and intellectual environment in which we find something like home (in Heidegger’s terms: *Heimat*). This is why Heidegger links thinking so closely to dwelling and ultimately to building, in which thinking and dwelling, culture, the intellectual, but also the fulfilment of people’s physical needs are reflected. If we want to strengthen the city (centre), we must finally start thinking about dwelling in broader social and cultural terms.

The ‘Wohnzimmer Hauptwache’ (Living Room Hauptwache) project in downtown Frankfurt, initiated by the national funding program ‘Post-Corona-Innenstadt’ and curated by the German Architecture Museum (DAM), follows, in a sense, this Heideggerian concept of dwelling when it promotes cooperative and dialogue-oriented processes. Through participatory offerings in public space (Fig. 9) the urban community can try out new forms of appropriation and transformation of urban space in an experimental laboratory at one of the most important places and public transport hubs in the city centre. Since 2022, these have included music and sports events, discussion formats, and artistic interventions that invite people to develop perspectives and visions for the future of the Hauptwache (Bundesministerium für Wohnen, Stadtentwicklung und Bauwesen, n.d., a).



Fig. 9. A long public lunch table for the opening of the ‘Wohnzimmer Hauptwache’ project in 2022. © Moritz Bernouilly

These initiatives ultimately gave rise to the ‘Lange Bank’ (Long Bench) in 2023 (DAM, 2023; DAM, 2025). This modular, approximately 60-metre-long piece of street furniture is a co-creative, multifunctional artistic intervention that can be placed flexibly in different locations. It serves as a stage for discussions, cultural and artistic events, as well as for individual or small group uses, or

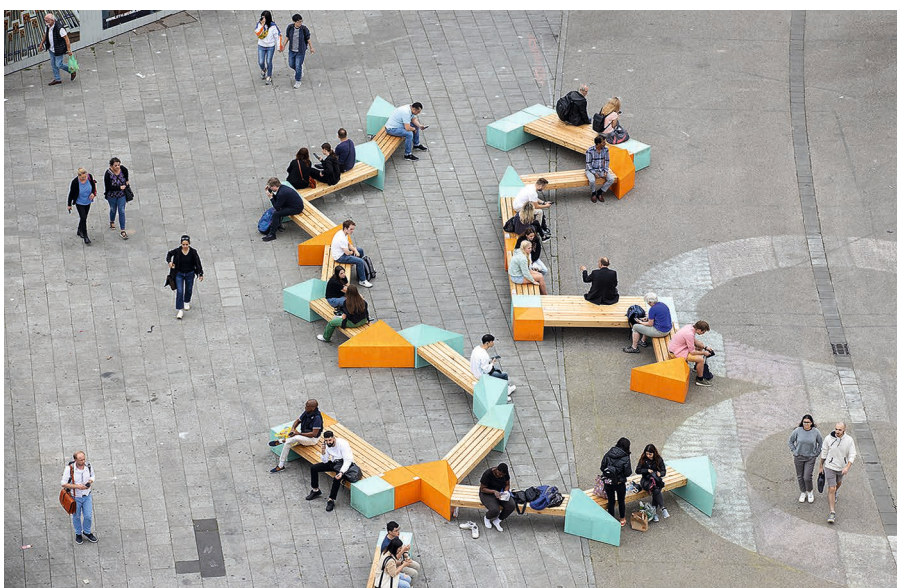


Fig. 10. The ‘Lange Bank’ at Hauptwache. © Felix Krumbholz

simply for rest and relaxation amid the hustle and bustle of the city centre (Fig. 10). In addition to the Hauptwache, the 'Long Bench' has meanwhile been temporarily installed in numerous other locations in the city centre, including the Opernplatz, the piazza in front of St. Paul's Church, the Willy-Brandt-Platz, spaces along the river embankment, as well as in the railway station district. At the end of each phase, the location for the next installation is determined by a vote in a 'public' plenary session on site.

4.2. Engagement and Diversity

The city centre needs to be rethought politically. It must become more diverse. This step is more than necessary. Giving absolute priority to the economic aspects will not lead us out of the crisis that began long before the pandemic. The mere aesthetisation, festivalisation and partial privatisation of the inner city had already led to barren public spaces and a uniformity of uses. In addition, online commerce is a cause for great concern today. In this situation, thinking about the city centre in political terms would mean taking engagement and participation seriously. This is what has always defined the city, at least as an ideal. Economy remains an important issue, but then other, likewise important players play a part.

For these urban actors, locations must be made accessible in buildings and public places. City officials, stakeholders, and inhabitants complain about vacant shops and buildings. This could be the opportunity to provide room for new, innovative projects. The city centre needs engagement and participation, but also greater diversity. The current one-dimensionality of most city centres must be broken down to create more diverse locations for communication, culture and gastronomy, urban production, but also different forms of inner-city living.

This is already happening in some places. In Frankfurt am Main in the middle of the Zeil, i.e., the central shopping mile and pedestrian zone, a former department store, parts of which are vacant, will be converted into a 'multi-use centre' in a pilot project. The design is by Renzo Piano and the result of an international competition (Piñeiro, 2025; Claßen, 2024). Before the decision was made, all projects were presented and discussed in public. In the future, shopping, co-working, leisure activities, cafés and restaurants, sports, culture, and education will come together on eleven floors under one roof. The project also integrates a primary school for the residents of the surrounding area. A public terrace with a skyline view is planned at the top. This shows how urban spaces can be transformed and revitalised through innovative and flexible concepts.

4.3. The Promise of Democracy

A democratic urban society needs the economy but cannot be reduced to it. That is precisely why it is a common political task to ensure that places are kept free for projects that are organised and run by the community itself. The promise of democracy is not just about consumption. 'Dwelling', as Heidegger puts it, is a way of living that includes the actual act of dwelling, working, and interacting with other people, as well as with the spatial environment. 'Thinking' and 'building' can create the spaces in which that kind of dwelling can take place. Only a city that is political in this sense can fulfil the promise of democratic participation. To do so, it must develop forces of integration.

In the 'Mitte Frankfurt' (Central Frankfurt) project, all relevant stakeholders, from the city administration to politics, business and culture, work together with the wider urban community to develop visions for a sustainable transformation of the city centre – cooperatively and participatively. The aim is a city centre where everyone enjoys spending time and feels safe, a city centre which offers a wide range of uses and activities in the long term, and which, at the same

time, is climate-friendly and promotes the shift to sustainable mobility (Mitte Frankfurt, n.d., a).

The project is based in the ‘Agentur des Städtischen Wandels’ (Agency for Urban Change), a central contact point that opened in March 2024 in a former retail workshop (Fig. 11). It is a place where all Frankfurt residents can exchange ideas for transforming the city and contribute to their implementation, a place for networking and initiating joint projects, with a wide variety of activities ranging from informal lunches to thematic forums, discussion groups and exhibitions (Mitte Frankfurt, n.d., b).



Fig. 11. ‘Agentur des städtischen Wandels’, a meeting point for debating on the future of Frankfurt’s inner city. © Stefanie Kösling

Moreover, since September 2024, as part of the process to decide on the future of Frankfurt’s ‘Hauptwache’, the city planning office has invited the public to participate in a multi-stage consultation process. Together with civil society, the aim is to establish comprehensible planning objectives for the future redesign of this central urban location. Today, the site of the Hauptwache is a large, relatively empty, and disorganised area that serves many purposes, such as markets, concerts, and demonstrations. However, these activities often compete with other demands for leisure and recreation. For this reason, temporary offerings as well as long-term redesign guidelines are to be conceived as part of a public participation process. Until 2026, to that end, public forums, idea platforms, artistic events, and various forms of participation can be attended on-site and online. The intention is to develop a sustainable mission statement as the basis for further planning (Stadtplanungsamt Frankfurt am Main, n.d., a).

The debate and open competition for a future ‘Haus der Demokratie’ (House of Democracy) in the immediate vicinity to the historic monument of St. Paul’s Church, the seat of the first all-German parliament in 1848, is also linked to a comprehensive participation process involving Frankfurt’s urban community. The ten designs selected by a jury were publicly exhibited and put up for discussion in August and September 2025 on Paulsplatz, in the centre of the city (Fig. 12). Supplementary information events, workshops, various discussions, and surveys were offered, so that the final citizens’ vote may have a substantial influence on the decision – to be taken presumably in 2026 – about the future design of this central place in the city (Haus der Demokratie, n.d.).

Such projects not only allow to develop and test different forms of process ownership, project management, and public engagement, but also promote new ideas and activities, thereby strengthening civil society, its participation, and its cohesion. Commercial interests are not excluded but integrated into other activities. Even though a city centre cannot live off such initiatives alone, it now



Fig. 12. Open-air exhibition of the projects for the 'Haus der Demokratie' at Paulsplatz.
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depends on them. The retail sector in particular needs this revitalisation to survive in the centre. This does not in any way limit the attractive events already on offer but rather promotes additional public involvement. In this sense, it can help to counteract the emergence of ever more anonymous city centres. Through active participation, residents and visitors can once again play a role in shaping the heart of the city.

4.4. Resilient and Diverse (Inner) City

Nowadays, there is increasing discourse regarding the resilient city as an objective of urban planning. City centres should also be resilient, robust, and thus resistant to crises. The pandemic developments of recent years have highlighted the importance of diverse and 'comprehensive' neighbourhoods as the spaces of everyday life (Bürklin, Peterek, 2021:6-7). Social neighbourhoods, spatial proximity, functional diversity, architectural variety, and green infrastructure are all important issues in social and climatic resilience that now need to be strengthened in our cities. Only within the framework of a city or neighbourhood of 'short distances' (*Stadt der kurzen Wege*) can spaces be created that offer individual and collective opportunities for all residents.

Such demands for compactness, diversity and integration do not only concern the development of new city extensions on greenfield sites or the physical, social, and ecological transformation of the large settlements and housing stocks of post-war modernism, but also the revitalisation of our inner cities. The current one-dimensionality of city centres must be broken down to create new spaces of blended uses for communication, culture and education, co-working, and urban production, as well as different forms of inner-city living.

Until now, for example, the banking district has been a particularly one-dimensional area within Frankfurt's city centre. As a classical central business district, its use has been limited to traditional office work for decades. In the evenings and at weekends the district remains deserted and unattractive to this day. According to an update of the High-rise Development Plan in 2024 (Stadtplanungsamt Frankfurt am Main, n.d., b), this area is set to become more diverse in the future, with a larger proportion of residential units, revitalised public spaces, and various amenities on the ground floor and also at

the top – such as restaurants, spaces for retail and leisure, as well as cultural and educational facilities. The goal is to enhance the overall urbanity of the city centre.

The first step is to create a high-density, multifunctional neighbourhood with the FOUR FRANKFURT high-rise cluster on a formerly monofunctional office site (FOUR FRANKFURT, n.d.; Stadtplanungsamt Frankfurt am Main, n.d., c). This is the result of an urban planning competition won by UN Studio/Ben van Berkel. Thirty per cent of the total 600 residential units are being built as affordable social housing, based on a corresponding political resolution by the City Council to promote social diversity in the city centre. In addition, the planning provides cultural facilities, restaurants, a hotel, a kindergarten, shops, office workspaces, co-working spaces, as well as new public spaces and passageways, including green areas, to connect with the neighbourhood. The project is supposed to be completed end of 2026. It will then be crucial to critically examine the extent to which the high standards and expectations for diversity and integration will be met – just as with the mentioned project for a multi-use centre by Renzo Piano along the Zeil.

4.5. Beyond the Wording

The city centre can no longer be solely left to consumerism. One-sided economic demands cannot create a resilient city centre. Therefore, we should also take a critical look at the many beautiful neologisms used to promote the transformation of the city today and ask ourselves what is really happening behind the dazzling terminologies, which usually tend to just follow the principles of city marketing.

The city centre will not be improved simply by announcing something allegedly new with fancy wording: *Mix Merge Share* (Bundesministerium für Wohnen, Stadtentwicklung und Bauwesen, n.d., b), *MakerSpace*, *Stadtretter* ('City-Saver'), *Morgenstadt*, *#Elasticity* (Vrhovac, Ruess & Schaufler, 2021) or even *FOUR FRANKFURT* (see above). These are just initial codes for a promise of future life that has yet to be fulfilled.

Ensuring a public discourse on this issue is the task of a political city, which is no easy matter. In the past, we have all left the development of city centres too much to the laws of the market, becoming consumers fascinated by fast-paced events. As architects and planners, we cannot exempt ourselves from this. It is probably less complicated and usually more lucrative to create the setting for an experience society (Schulze, 2008) than to design spaces for a democratic urban community. Moreover, it is easy to surrender to the prevailing *Zeitgeist*.

In 1999, a paper on design as a forward-looking practise of architectural space ("Das Entwerfen – ein vorausschauendes Bespielen des architektonischen Raumes", Bürklin, 1999) could still focus on the experience of space, i.e., on a primarily phenomenological view of public space. Today, however, such limitation to the mere experiential aspects of urban design is no longer possible. In view of the social, climatic, and economic situation, new topics have emerged that require our collective attention. In this regard, in a report on the future (inner) city, the Fraunhofer Institute highlights three general scenarios as the basis for a guiding future concept: 1. the Political/Democratic City; 2. the Colourful City; and 3. the Green City (Vrhovac, Ruess, Schaufler, 2021). These are the issues that must be negotiated by the urban community in a democratic process.

5. Conclusion: The City Centre as a Common Space and a Source of Inspiration

The ideas expressed here are not idealistic. They are, in fact, highly pragmatic. However, they reflect a pragmatic shift in perspective. City centres must reopen themselves to residents, who are more than just consumers. They must provide amenities for everyday life. Spaces that can be appropriated by individuals and groups serve to foster identification through joint commitment, which has at least as strong an effect on communities as the identity-forming power of historical icons. In addition to the material assets, greater emphasis must be placed on the non-material skills of those who live in the city centre. Instead of a 'content management' that continues to tell stories intended to boost sales, what is needed is a content management that listens to the stories on the ground. The forward-looking practise of architectural space can then once again find legitimacy for the design of the city centre.

As its name suggests, the city of Frankfurt am Main was, for centuries, primarily turned towards the river. As late as the 1920s, people still bathed in the river. Cafés, and sports facilities enlivened the riverside promenade. It was only with the advent of the automobile and urban planning prioritising this development that the city was cut off from the stream by a major traffic route built for more than 12,000 vehicles a day. Since then, Frankfurt's city centre has turned its back on the Main. However, in recent years, the city and its citizens have finally returned to their history as a 'city on the river.' Initial studies show the potential for transforming the Mainkai street into a public and inclusive space for cultural and social activities, for green and blue infrastructure, and for a renewed linkage between the river and the city centre (ULI, 2023).

With a large political majority (and some opposition from the motorist lobby), initial closures were decided and implemented on a temporary basis during the summer months of 2022 and 2023. Through civic engagement and the 'Making Frankfurt' initiative, a comprehensive, pilot urban space experiment was carried out with the so-called 'Sommer am Main' (Summer on the Main), testing public and community-oriented activities—such as sports, dance, as well as cultural, participatory and workshop activities – in areas otherwise reserved for car traffic (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Sports event on the closed Mainkai street during 'Sommer am Main' 2022.
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As a role model, 'Sommer am Main' was given national funding within the call for 'Sustainable Inner Cities and Town Centres' and included as an example of best practice in the 'stadtpulse' database of the National Urban Development

Policy (Bundesministerium für Wohnen, Stadtentwicklung und Bauwesen, n.d., c). The current city government aims to implement a permanent closure of the Main quay in the future. This is a quite ambitious goal given the regular political resistance to such innovations, but such step would be a catalyst for all city centre revitalisation in the long term.

Through projects of this kind, the city centre can perhaps play to its greatest strength. As an iconic, inspirational, and practical centre of everyday urban life, it can serve as a platform and catalyst for so many issues that are currently of pressing relevance: questions of social interaction; democracy in urban society; the aging population; the needs of commerce, culture, and education; climate protection; digitisation – the city centre has the potential to put them all on its agenda. What a benefit for everyone!

The city is an organism. It develops within the context of material and social changes. As with cybernetic processes, new information is absorbed as ‘disturbances’ and then processed and possibly integrated. Therefore, the (inner) city will always be in a state of constant change. It would be silly to think that there is a way back to the ‘old’ civic community, before the consumers and event city. That is past and gone. Instead, today’s situation must be addressed within the framework of current possibilities. For this reason, the engagement in participation needs to be rethought. Cities must create the political and economic conditions for an open dialogue. Then, the city centre may finally once again belong to everyone.

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