

# This house is our creative space: Case Study of “La Ruche à Projets”, a repurposed residence and its relationship with third places and citizen empowerment.

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<https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.XXX> LEAVE BLANK FOR INITIAL SUBMISSION

**Abstract:** Through qualitative inquiry, this research underlines some of the architectural properties of a residential terraced home that was repurposed as a temporary creative space. Findings were compared against existing theory on third places (particularly creative spaces) and their relationship with citizen participation, empowerment, and social change. Overall, the “homey” character creates a greater sense of belonging and occupants seem eager to decorate and furnish with personal effects. Findings reveal tensions between large open spaces and smaller closed ones to reflect on how flow, accessibility, occupancy and intimacy are affected. Occupant behaviors also lead to wonder about the tensions between community, codesign, empowerment, and ownership. Findings help question how temporary third places could play a role in the design of new creative spaces. Further insights could lead to explore beyond the architectural properties within a space and consider how the outer shell and location of a building influence community participation, or how successful recruitment is impacted by the community’s personal social networks.

**Keywords:** Third places; Empowerment; Citizen participation; Co-design

## 1. Introduction

Creative spaces like fablabs, accelerators, and libraries can provide citizens with resources needed to develop new ideas and projects (Capdevila, 2017). They allow everyday people to improve the world around them and even support social change by providing expert advice, and production workshops (Diaz et al., 2021). They can be considered “Third Places” which are often associated with citizen participation and empowerment since occupants can - for



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instance - develop their own initiatives, gain new knowledge or build a community (Diaz et al., 2021; Jaehun Joo, 2018). As such, these spaces are often designed with specific spatial qualities that optimize occupancy and the use of resources (Tukmakova et al., 2024). Paradoxically, these curated spaces are often characterized by their flexibility and openness (Beson, 2018; Brown, 2017). Yet, there is little research into how the architectural properties of these creative spaces can restrict or foster citizen activities, participation, and empowerment (Baer et al., 2020). So, what happens when a local government has the opportunity and responsibility to provide a creative hub as part of its endeavors to promote social change, but hasn't yet broken ground on the construction of their space?

In Seraing, a city in the French-speaking part of Belgium, a European initiative provided funds to initiate several creative spaces including the *Ruche à Projets* (Here after: *La Ruche*, translation: "Project Hive"). *La Ruche* is a temporary third space provided to citizens willing to test and develop socio-cultural or entrepreneurial activities. To help inhabit the space, a project manager was on-hand to meet with visitors who could ask questions and apply to develop their project within the new space. Occupancy was then conditional to a few criteria: activities were open to the citizens of Seraing and were compatible or open to interact with other projects on site. Thus, *La Ruche* intent as a participatory space was - at least - twofold: as a space to empower citizens to carry out their own initiatives, and as a space to meet and collaborate with others.

Today, a new purpose-built space, *La Maison du Peuple* (translation: "House of the people") is operational and houses 7 projects. Yet, between September 2021 and May 2023, organizers and users were provided with a residential home to conduct their activities until the new space was constructed. This 3-story end-of-row terraced house had never been designed or conceived to house the activities of a third place – or specifically a community space to meet and work together on local initiatives. This presents an opportunity to learn more about user experiences to better understand how the architectural properties of such a space can influence our ability to:

- (i) create effectively within this type of space,
- (ii) create in comparison to other purpose-built spaces, and
- (iii) connect with the community and conduct work with them to foster social change and empowerment.

Since there is little research about the architectural properties of creative spaces and their relationship with citizen participation, this paper explores the experiences of the different actors who managed, used, and retrofitted *La Ruche*.

## 2. Theoretical Background

According to Oldenburg, "The phrase "third places" derives from considering our homes to be the "first" places in our lives, and our work places the "second." (Oldenburg, 1996, p.6). The

term Third Place seems to be introduced to propose an alternative place between the two main daily poles (work and home) in order to recreate a community life, develop participatory opportunities and host pure social activities, without any additional purpose (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Third places can include coffee shops, churches, community centers, and parks, among others. Despite the variety of places considered “Third”, Oldenburg proposes that they share in the following common threads:

(1) people can easily join or depart on another's company; (2) it is an inclusive place without reference to positions or ranks; (3) conversation is the main activity; (4) the place is accessible where one can go alone and is most welcome at any time of the day; (5) people see regular customers; (6) the place is visually plain or has a low profile physical structure; (7) the place has a playful mood or highly spirited; and (8) it exudes a “home away from home” feeling (Oldenburg, 1999 [first published in 1989, cited by Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012, p. 530]).

Here, third places can also be defined as coworking spaces, fab labs, incubators, hackerspaces, startup accelerators, libraries, coffee shops, hubs, etc. (Akhavan, 2021; Waxman, 2022). *La Ruche* relates more closely to coworking spaces, incubators, and accelerators, yet focuses more so on social initiatives than generating financial and entrepreneurial value. These specific spaces can provide everyday citizens with tools, resources, supplies, and knowledge to innovate and create solutions designed to improve their everyday, to create connections with others, foster a sense of community, or drive change within the community and its social landscape (Burret, 2013). By overlaying concerns for citizen participation and social change, third places have been described as catalysts to enable change through their ability to intersect different actors, profiles, and resources (Besson, 2018). Pols (2016) goes further to synonymize these forms of third places with “participatory spaces” that support the development of citizenship and various social skills, particularly for people in marginalized conditions. Overall, the shared objectives between *La Ruche* and these creative spaces can be summarized as “public innovation [that] aims at an affirmative social objective, around issues of society, citizen participation, and public action” (Besson, 2018, p. 5).

To support their social endeavors, researchers have already provided some descriptions to characterise architectural properties that resonate across these spaces. Namely, Besson (2018) describes them as open, hybrid spaces that facilitate encounters between actors with diverse profiles and resources. Burret (2013) adds that these kind of third spaces are open, partition-free spaces – a feature devised to encourage open exchanges. Third places are not inherently associated with specific architectural properties or unique functionalities, but usually combine good accessibility, a welcoming atmosphere, and comfortable spaces to support and develop social activities (Dudek, 2019). While some third places dedicated to collaborative innovation are associated with professional office spaces (computers, machines, desks...) (Capdevila, 2017), other third places use casual decoration to emanate a home-like ambiance said to improve users’ experience (Campbell, 2023).

These properties can naturally align concepts and goals set around citizen participation, social change, and user (citizen) empowerment. According to (Meshram & O’Cass, 2013), both citizen participation and third places can be used to empower inhabitants to act on their direct environment. The action-based qualities of creative spaces can also overcome some of the cautionary tales associated with participatory design. For instance, some forms of traditional community engagement – wherein citizens are invited to work together on a given subject and are guided by facilitators - can appear tokenistic (Rose et al., 2003). Sanoff (2010) warns that participants can become quickly disenchanted by projects when their outcomes, processes, and frameworks are breached or compromised. It’s easy to draw the conclusion that as disenchantment grows, a willingness to contribute wanes. Yet, creative spaces introduce citizen participation through one’s own willingness to create and take part rather than a framed invitation and participation. This leads to wonder whether creative spaces could challenge “top-down” bias - associated with facilitator driven codesign (Lee, 2008) - and instead mostly depend on whether citizens use the space, the ways they make it their own, and the outcomes they produce. This style of participation resonates deeply with some of participatory design’s strongest critics, wherein such approaches should have a “central and abiding concern for direct and continuous interaction with those who are the ultimate arbiters of system adequacy; Namely, those who will use the technology in their everyday lives” (Suchman, 2011, p. vii). Continued interaction, investment and intervention with the space and between actors can suggest that they have a greater sense of control over their affairs which, according to Rapoport (1977), fosters an improved sense of community and empowerment.

Together, it seems that creative spaces and citizen participation can better foster social change. Yet, while the architectural properties of a space can influence users’ experiences, it’s unclear how creative spaces should be constructed and characterized. The widespread design of creative spaces as open plateaus with hybrid layouts and characteristics like flexible, resilient, and agile (Besson 2018b) could lead architects to assume it as ideal or dogmatic, yet the theoretical landscape provides little research into the benefits of these properties as best suited to the citizens themselves. This case study therefore follows different actors who took part as citizens, stakeholders, and organizers in *La Ruche* - an intermediary space with peculiar architectural properties that can seem out of norm from conventional creative spaces.

### 3. Methodology

*La Ruche* provides new grounds to explore and discover the relationship between citizens, the architectural properties of an atypical creative space, and fostering a sense of community. Specifically, this paper is driven to learn more about how the architectural properties of such a space can influence our ability to (i) create effectively within this type of space, (ii) create in comparison to other purpose-built spaces, and (iii) connect with the community and conduct work with them. This leads to perform an exploratory case study with qualita-

tive inquiries into the perceptions of different actors at different moments in their occupancy of the space. As suited, Yin encourages the use of case studies to “investigate a contemporary phenomenon [of citizen empowerment through creative spaces like *La Ruche*] within their real-life context (Yin, 2014, p. 97). The case study offers a first-hand opportunity to understand and evaluate the impact of architectural properties of the temporary place over the participatory project and their users over the course of 11 months. We had the opportunity through all the study to meet and work with several actors gravitating around the project (participants, managers, NPOs, city’s employees, visitors,..).

To collect data, the following research methods are selected:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** 15 semi-structured interviews with various actors. Interviews lasted about one hour and took place within the space (apart from one online due to COVID restrictions). They were all recorded, and transcribed.
  - 3 Citizen-Participants who joined in activities organized at *La Ruche*,
  - 4 Citizen-Occupants selected to develop their projects. They were interviewed twice, at the beginning and end of the study,
  - 1 on-site manager, there to support day-to-day activities,
  - 1 city planner, and
  - 2 project managers from the European initiative.
- **Direct Observations:** Notes and photos were taken during different activities that took place in *La Ruche*, including workshops where citizens were invited to complete and submit a project proposal, social events organized inside *La Ruche*, and follow-up meetings held between citizen-occupants and support staff. Observations lasted the whole of the study – about 10 months. This includes ad hoc visits and formal meetings. In total, there were about 50 hours of observations. Notes were taken either directly on-site or that same evening.
- **Informal Discussions:** Continued observations also enabled unstructured short conversation with different actors, for instance when preparing a coffee or as a short friendly chat. These were recorded in the same way as direct observations.
- **Documentation:** Thanks to the collaboration with the multiple managerial cells, documentation about the project, architectural plans of the space, and management reports were provided.

Next, data analysis was defined according to each of the three main research goals. First, to (i) create effectively within this type of space, the interviews were subjected to an open coding procedure and thematic clustering to identify key attributes distinct to the context of study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Three main characteristics are later explored. Second, to

(ii) create in comparison to other purpose-built spaces, this paper compares the architectural properties outlined in the theoretical landscape against those discovered in the case study. Third, findings from the case study fuel a critical reflection on how architectural properties in general, and creative spaces, specifically, can influence how stakeholders (iii) connect with the community and conduct work with them to foster social change and empowerment.



Figure 1 & 2: Photos of the spaces of La Ruche (LEMA, 2021, p.4).

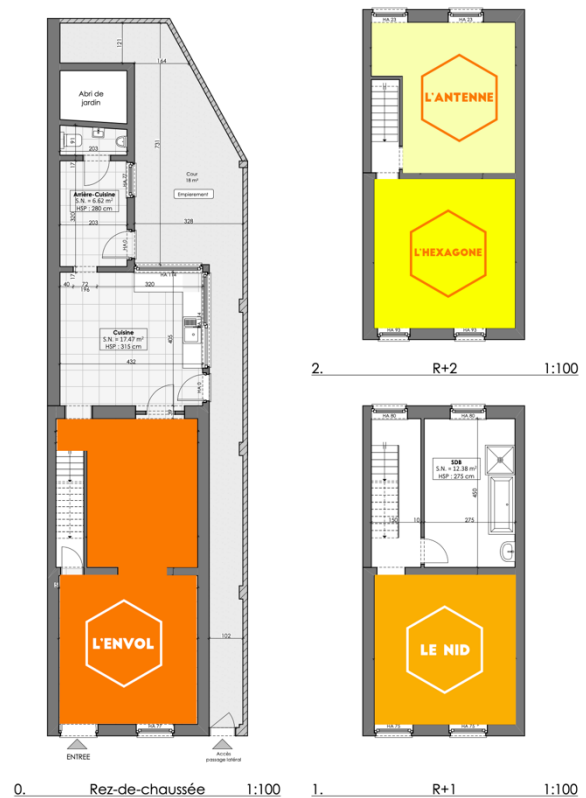


Figure 3: Building plans of "La Ruche à Projets" (LEMA, 2021, p.4).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 General Context of the study

Since 2005, the city of Seraing in the Walloon region of Belgium has attempted and implemented various projects to rebuild and revitalize its territory following their post-industrial crisis. Several actions have been developed such as the introduction of green spaces for public use, new forms of management for public spaces, and *La Ruche*. This project is an integral part of a larger scale initiative called "A Place to Be-Come", included in the "Urban Innovative Actions" program. The program is funded by the European Commission and subsidized by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for a 4-year period, from 2019 to 2023.

*La Ruche* is dedicated to the citizens of Seraing. The primary goal is to generate added cultural, social and economic value to the neighborhood and its inhabitants, as well as support them to (re)gain their power of action. The space welcomes citizens to share their ideas and supports them in the proposal and development of socially dynamic activities or experiments, including those with an entrepreneurial flare. Although, recruitment did not come without its challenges and several means of communication were used to raise awareness about the project and entice citizens to take part. The project used different channels to reach out to different segments of the community with continued engagement, information sharing, and community activities. This includes (i) flyers distributed during popular social events in the neighborhood, (ii) communication through social media message boards, and local newsletters, (iii) permanent and continued open-door policy visiting hours, and (iv) conversations during workshops and events held in the space once the project was beginning to gain traction. Several newcomers also reported that they heard of the space and the opportunities provided from their friends and neighbors in the community.

Organizers hope that the projects help to revitalize the neighborhood and create ripple effects beyond their borders and into the city at large. To occupy the space, organizers launched an open call to provide 3.5 months of free use of the space and resources for the selected laureates to complete or begin the development of their respective activities. Throughout the case study, direct observations and documentation were able to record several events that span from citizen-occupant led activities with 8 or so members of the community to 30+ citizen social gatherings organized by the *La Ruche* manager. Activities also varied in frequency from punctual events a few times a week to monthly or bi-weekly workshops organized by different citizen-occupants.

Yet, while organizers and stakeholders had the funding, project outlines, and most of the resources needed to launch the projects, they did not have a dedicated and built-for-purpose creative space ready. While this new Third place was planned as part of the overall project, *La Ruche* ran in a temporary and intermediary space until the different actors therein would be transferred into their new permanent space.

As a temporary solution, the city of Seraing provided the organizer with a three-story end-of-row terraced house. It was unclear how long the space had been unoccupied, but when the organizers arrived there was no heat, the walls were a bit dirty, and the space was only ever used by local municipal gardeners who used it to eat their lunch if it rained. Following a debate on access and use of the space, a key box was installed that could be opened by anyone who signed an agreement to use the space responsibly.

#### *4.2 First Impressions of the Space*

Upon first arrival, the new occupants seemed particularly concerned by the size of each space and its influence on their ability to conduct different activities: “Yes, it could work, but then the rooms might sometimes be a bit small if you want to do big activities”, or “if we had bigger rooms downstairs, we could have bigger activities”.

The were also concerned by the staircase and reported that it was too steep and narrow to be used by anyone with mobility issues: "It's an old house and there are dangerous stairs". This led some occupants to reflect on how the stair could exclude some individuals: "And then if there are people with reduced mobility, that's a problem! If I think of my little old ladies and the stairs. It touches on the principle of inclusion". The stairs also seemed to complicate the organization and flow of some activities. In one case, women were invited to discuss more intimate topics. They were invited to the most private space – upstairs – although some women were unable to access the space due to the staircase. In the end, they were forced to compromise either on the privacy of the space, or the participation of some community members.

The occupants also commented on the outside of the building and drew attention to its similarity with other terraced homes: « It doesn't feel like there's anything there! ». They seemed to criticize that the building would not draw enough attention and was instead assimilated into its surroundings as “just another terraced workhouse”. Still the residential characteristics were also celebrated: « As soon as I walked in I felt at home! I could live there all my life. {...} It was sunny. In fact, it's like a house with a bathroom and everything. There's a big kitchen. {...} It's really nice, you can go outside and there are little planters”. The space seemed to create a home-away-from-home that was welcoming, engaging, and inviting: think the space is very suitable and friendly. I like this direct entrance where you don't lose the space of the corridor {...} so that's nice and it's quite large".

According to the managers, the ground floor was best suited for larger group activities as they could accommodate larger groups. However, some organizers reported that they were sometimes disturbed by other occupants or park workers who would cut through the space to access the kitchen. While some say this created more opportunities to cross paths and exchange with one another, “sometimes it still cuts the thread and prevents that room from being more fully occupied". While there was a side access that directly connected the kitchen and outside garden to allow undisturbed use of the main ground floor rooms, it was never exploited. Observations could suggest that there would have been issues with keys, or that workers were already in the habit of cutting through the space.

### 4.3 *The space in Use*

Once occupants were more familiar with the space, they began to introduce their own adaptations. Namely, they repainted some of the walls and brought in their own furnishings. At first this included a sofa, carpet, and vacuum. Over time, more furniture, decorations, and traditionally household items were added, such as tablecloths, paintings, and photos or notes from past activities and new friends. One member organized a furniture-making workshop using wood pallets to fill the space with a few more small tables, a coat rack, and outdoor benches and planters.

At first, managers decided to limit occupancy to the ground and first floor. After a few months, one occupant decided to repaint and furnish the otherwise unused attic space and occupy it as their own small office.



Over time, although occupants were at first concerned by the restrictive size of the spaces, they no longer seemed bothered and instead reported that they enjoyed the intimacy that the spaces provided and didn't seem to require anything larger. Yet, they also found that the main activity space on the ground floor was more restrictive than expected due to the dividing archway between the two rooms. Although it is presented as a single room, some activities were divided or adapted to accommodate the division.

#### *4.4 Transition into the new space*

After 14 months in the terraced home, *La Ruche* was moved to *La Maison du Peuple*. The new purpose-built space boasted architectural properties associated with traditional public creative spaces. It was explained that the new layouts were “bigger”, “open”, and “modern”. Through informal discussions with the occupants, there were concerns that the new space would compromise their intimacy, and some were reluctant to transition. They also seemed to struggle with leaving the place they had created. Through a short conversation with the former project manager (who launched the project and has supported the citizens and occupants since *La Ruche*), it seems that the sense of community and the shared experiences at *La Ruche* not only supported their complicated transition into the new space but continues to bind the group together. While some left during the transition, they eventually returned to *La Maison*.



*Figure 4: Photos of a workshop at La Ruche.*



*Figure 5: Photos of an event at La Maison du Peuple (Zarbo, 2023).*

## **5. Findings**

Through data collection and analysis, this paper outlines architectural properties that support a deeper understanding of the relationship between creative spaces and users' experiences. Findings are organized into three sections.

- i. Architectural Properties of the Case

The domestic character of *La Ruche* produced varied and sometimes contradictory perspectives across the different actors within it. The citizen-occupants boasted of the homey character as welcoming and a source of well-being. This includes the effect of a “residential” kitchen and bathroom as well as the addition of their own personal furniture and decorations – such as sofas, carpets, and cutlery - taken from their own homes. Within its walls, several found the spaces intimate and easy to use to conduct small or private meetings. Still, even though all stakeholder testimonials report that the spaces were large enough for most of their activities, some criticized that the floorplans could constrain. In some cases, a single group activity would be conducted across two separate spaces. This complicates and challenges the ability to interact and work with the whole group both as an individual and organizer. It’s clear that the dimensions of former working-class homes are indeed limiting for larger scale interactions. It was also observed that an intermediate dividing wall on the ground floor reshaped the “main room” into two smaller spaces. While the spaces themselves could foster close interaction, the flow of the home sometimes forced disruptions. For instance, municipal park workers would often come through the main meeting spaces to access and use the kitchen. It was reported that these disruptions “cut the thread” of conversation and limited the ability to fully occupy a space as to provide access towards the kitchen. This reality comes despite the underuse and ability to access into the kitchen through a side-entry. On the other hand, everyone agreed that these interactions encouraged a level of interaction and dynamism within the space that catalyzed a participatory spirit ripe for social bonds. Finally, accessibility was also compromised by the staircase which was both quite steep and narrow. Participants found it difficult to use and exclusionary. Finally, despite the positive impressions of the space’s “homey” character, some criticized that it blended too well with the neighboring homes. It was difficult to dissimulate and compromised its ability to be well promoted, seen, and identified by citizens who may not be aware of the space. While this is criticized by the occupants, they also took it upon themselves to add to the space and make it their own – namely by introducing additional furniture and decoration that holds a heavily residential visual language.

## ii. Comparing Existing Literature Against the Case

It’s no surprise that several architectural properties proposed in *La Ruche* align with those related to the general ethos of Third Places (Oldenburg, 1999). Citizens can come and go as they please, foster conversations, exchange without the complications of hierarchical borders and access (most of) the space freely. Other architectural properties associated with residential homes do impede its “ideal” use without debate – namely issues around staircases and the exclusionary effects of limited accessibility. Yet, this paper highlights some of the added values of a residential space that in turn challenge some of the proposed characteristics of an ideal Third place. While it’s suggested that Third places should be visually plain, actors celebrated some of the distinct characteristics within the residential space; The bedrooms as intimate meetings spaces, the furniture brought in from the citizen-occupants’ own personal residences, as well as the kitchen, bathroom, and garden reinforced a feeling of “being at home”. (Purnell, 2015) criticizes Oldenburg’s exclusion of residential homes as

third places, and shares in the idea that a sense of connection between users is reinforced by architectural properties associated with the home. They go on to say that it is more about how we use and experience a space and not its original intended purpose that drives our relationship and use of it as a Third Place.

### iii. *La Ruche*, Participation, and Citizen Empowerment

The distinctions and overlaps between architectural properties defined in theory and those reported in the case study provide grounds for further reflections on how *La Ruche* influences citizen empowerment. Most notably, the unfinished character of the space and their ability to rethink, repaint, and rework the space as they pleased seemed to have a positive effect on the occupants. This aligns with Rapoport (1987) who connects this with a reinforced sense of community and citizen empowerment. It was unclear whether they were “allowed” to repaint the space or even introduce their own furniture (fire risks and safety standards), but once a first person began to make changes, others happily followed and contributed in their own ways. Although it wasn’t initially included, one person decided to refit the attic paint, furniture, and fittings. They made use of an otherwise neglected and unused space. While this shows a great deal of power and ownership, the space was not shared by or with others. Although it was not a “locked” space, there seemed to be an understanding that it was designed more so as a small personal office than a hot desk within a coworking space. Yet, no one seemed bothered by this newfound ownership, perhaps since the space was otherwise unused. The architectural properties of the exterior and surroundings of the space also seemed to affect participation. While the space was not particularly visible, those who transferred to the new space (*La Maison du Peuple*) found it much easier to involve citizens and their local community when the space was closer to home and set within a deeply residential environment. The new space, as they report, is indeed bigger, more visible, and newer, but there are still concerns about how to appropriate the space. It seems the occupants are looking for ways to reappropriate the space as they did at *La Ruche*.

Further questions around how architectural properties can influence participation are also revealed. First, it’s difficult to reconcile the tensions between open and closed spaces. While one supports privacy, encourages more intimate conversations and fosters more meaningful connections, the other enables exchanges – particularly ad hoc – and can generate unexpected interactions or overlaps between conversations that can catalyze new interactions. Yet, if spaces are too “open”, individuals may not feel comfortable using the space; they may feel exposed. Open spaces could also compromise interaction since individuals may no longer cross paths: the open space either forces a flow of traffic that does not cut across different spaces, or the spaces loses a flow altogether and individuals simply trace their own paths choosing to overlap others – or not. Inversely, spaces that are too “closed” - and in this case “small” - can compromise an ability to conduct group activities as a single group. This leads to complications during facilitation and decisions around who interacts with whom. For instance, facilitators had to sometimes divide groups according to ability; i.e. whomever was able to climb the stairs. These kinds of strategies can influence the outcomes and dynamics of the session as well as leave citizens feeling a loss of control over their own

decisions. This also seems to suggest that the type of space can influence an ability or effectiveness to codesign, but that – despite some of the accessibility issues - the “homey”, unfinished, and self-directed properties of *La Ruche* can better empower over the “traditional” design of creative spaces. Indeed, these assumptions are corroborated through a short follow-up with some of the original users and organizers of *La Ruche* who transferred to the new space.

## 6. Conclusions

The research provided a renewed understanding of creative spaces that leads to a few critical reflections about existing theory, the added value of *La Ruche*, and the issues surrounding recruitment and citizen participation.

First, although Oldenburg (1999) suggests the value of “playfulness” to help characterize Third Places, it was unclear how this could be assessed in practice. Although our initial framework did not account for “playfulness” or “seriousness” as a marker, there doesn’t seem to be a clear way to quantify or qualify it that supports the assessment of an effective Third Place. This leads to wonder how “playfulness” is assessed, identified, and collected as either data about the architectural properties of a space, or the people who use it.

Second, although the positive experiences at *La Ruche* complicated the transition into a new space whereby occupants became attached to its architectural properties and their own interventions, the idea of an intermediary creative space provided rich grounds for study and exploration that make the endeavor worthwhile. It seems that the ephemeral and unfinished qualities of the space amplified a sense of ownership, empowerment, and community. Unfortunately, *La Ruche* was not devised to support the design of their new creative space, but this research firmly highlights the novel and bespoke experiences of the occupants at *La Ruche* to suggest that temporary spaces can help guide architects to create Third Places that better suit their users. While *La Ruche* may not have helped create the new space, but it did help build and empower a community.

**Acknowledgements:** This section is optional. You can use this section to acknowledge support you have had for your research from your colleagues, students’ participation, internal or external partners’ contribution or funding bodies, etc. [Leave blank for initial submission] [X Acknowledgments]

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