

Case study ID

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VERVE NEUBECKUM

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

Authors

Negin Amiri
Frank Othengrafen

Name of the institution

TU Dortmund University

Street Address
City, ST ZIP Code

August-Schmidt-Str. 10
44227 Dortmund, Germany

VERVE IN NEUBECKUM

Case Study at a Glance

VERVE is a non-profit organization located in the Neubeckum district of Beckum, dedicated to fostering community engagement and promoting urban development. Established as an initiative in 2020, VERVE emerged from informal gatherings of local residents who sought to address the lack of meeting places and cultural activities in their neighborhood. The initiators aimed to enhance the attractiveness and livability of Neubeckum by creating central locations for interaction, specifically a "neighborhood living room" that serves as a multifunctional space for social exchange and collaboration on community projects.

The organization's objectives include strengthening social ties among residents, particularly newcomers, and cultivating a sense of belonging within the community. Through various cultural events, workshops, and initiatives, VERVE encourages active participation from citizens while providing opportunities for personal connections. VERVE has further successfully engaged with local government and other civil society actors to implement its vision. It plays a pivotal role in the development of public spaces and cultural offerings in Neubeckum. The organization has benefited significantly from public funding, which has enabled it to transform vacant properties into vibrant community hubs.

By fostering collaboration among different stakeholders – including local associations like Heimatverein and Bahnhofsretter – VERVE exemplifies how grassroots efforts can contribute to urban resilience and revitalization. Its approach highlights the importance of civic engagement as a means to empower citizens, promote inclusivity, and ensure that local voices are heard in decision-making processes affecting their neighborhoods. Overall, VERVE stands as a testament to the power of community-driven initiatives in shaping urban environments while enhancing the quality of life for residents in Neubeckum.

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Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☒ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☒ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☒ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☒ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☐ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☒ Block scale
- ☒ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☐ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☒ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☒ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☒ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☒ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☒ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☒ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☒ Private sector
- ☐ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☒ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☒ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☒ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☐ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☐ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☒ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☒ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

VERVE is a neighborhood and cultural association located in the Neubeckum district of Beckum, dedicated to fostering ‘momentum’ within the community and promoting urban and community development. The initiative began as a grassroots effort by local residents who sought to connect interested citizens in their area – the inner city of Neubeckum – aiming to enhance the neighborhood's attractiveness and livability while contributing positively to the community. As such, the beneficiaries of VERVE's efforts include all residents and users of the inner city, encompassing both property owners and local traders.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of eight interviews, distributed as follows:

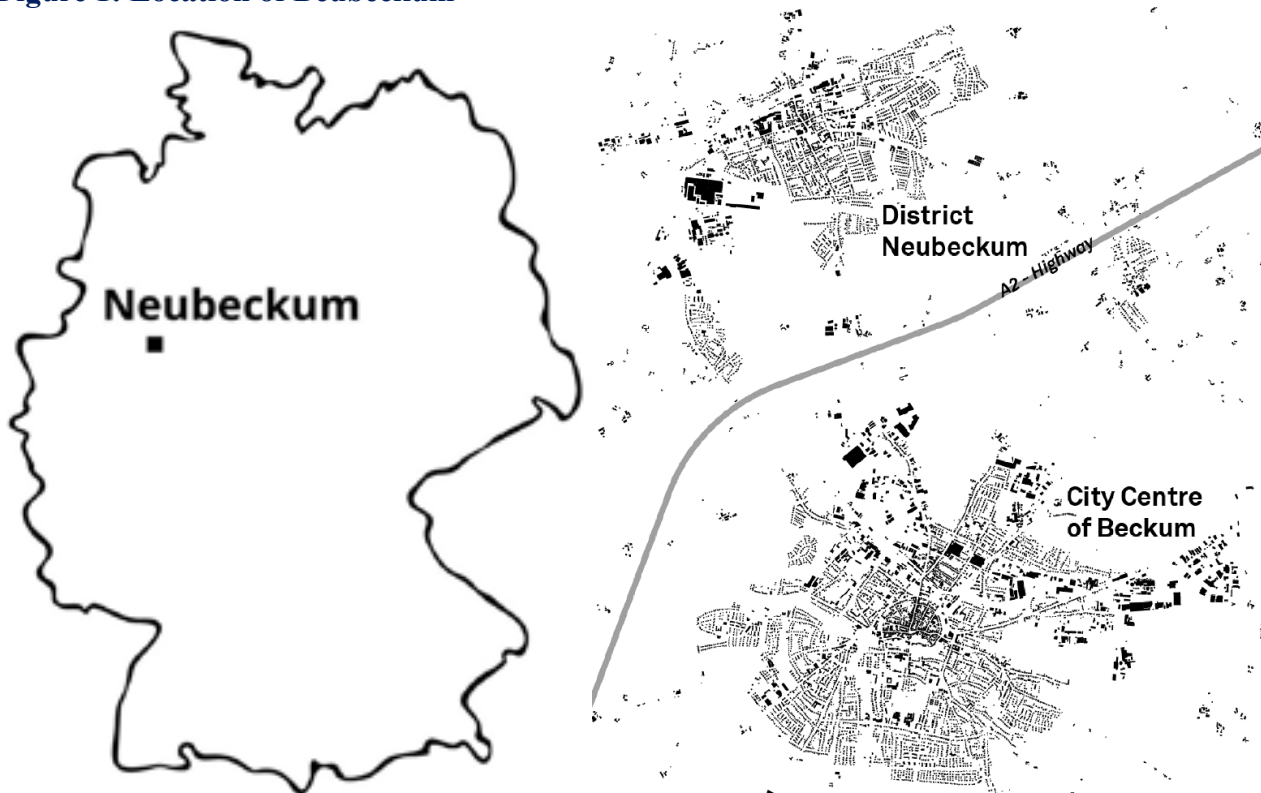
- **2 interviews with representatives from VERVE**, a non-profit organization. One interview was with the main initiator of VERVE, who is also one of its active members and, at the time of the interviews, one of the two chairpersons of the organization. The other interview was held with the second chairperson, who joined VERVE at a significantly later date but has since been very active. Both interview partners volunteer for VERVE; however, at the time of the interviews, they were also employed by VERVE because it had secured public funding for establishing a ‘third space’ (as part of a competition announced by the Ministry of Culture and Science of Northrhine-Westphalia).
- **2 interviews with representatives from the city of Beckum**. Since VERVE engages in cultural projects while also addressing aspects of urban development, we conducted one interview with an employee from the Department of Social Affairs, Education, and Culture and another interview with an employee from the Department of Urban Planning and Economic Development.
- **1 interview with a representative from the inner-city neighborhood management**. The city of Beckum has developed an integrated urban development concept for the Neubeckum district and has applied for public funding (urban development subsidies as a joint task of federal, state, and municipal governments) to implement this concept in the inner-city of Neubeckum. Part of the approved funds is allocated to neighborhood management, which is handled by an external planning office.
- **3 interviews with other community-organized associations**. In all interviews, it was expressed that Neubeckum is characterized by an exceptional structure and activity among its associations. At the time of our discussions, VERVE was still a relatively new organization; therefore, in addition to conversations with representatives from VERVE, we also conducted interviews with other associations. This was done both to understand VERVE from their perspective and to better comprehend and trace the connections between different civic associations.

Compendious summary

1. Introduction

VERVE is situated in Neubeckum, which was an independent city until its incorporation into the municipality of Beckum in 1975, despite significant protests from its residents (Kreisverwaltung Warendorf 2023). Today, approximately 11,000 people reside in the district of Neubeckum, while the total population of Beckum is around 32,000. Geographically, Neubeckum is located in the northern part of Beckum and is physically separated from the urban core by the A2 motorway (see figure 1). Neubeckum's historical independence until 1975 partly accounts for its amenities such as a public outdoor swimming pool and a library, as well as its unique role in urban development matters. The presence of the train station further enhances the district's accessibility via public transport. Additionally, the incorporation in 1975 may have spurred the establishment of numerous local associations over the past three to four decades (e.g. Heimatverein, City Cleaner, Bahnhofsretter, Gewerbeverein), which remain highly active and engaged within Neubeckum.

Figure 1: Location of Beubeckum



(© Reinecke et al. 2024, 165 and 170)

VERVE, as one of these associations, is a citizen-driven initiative dedicated to enhancing the quality of life and fostering community engagement in Neubeckum. Established as an association in 2020, it originated from regular meetings that began in 2018 among residents eager to connect with one another and engage with the broader urban community. At that time, the city center faced significant challenges, including vacant buildings, unattractive public spaces, and a scarcity of venues for cultural activities and leisure events. The founders of VERVE sought to address these issues by merging their personal

aspirations for their neighborhood's development with broader urban planning concerns. They recognized a lack of opportunities for involvement outside established associations (such as sports clubs or local groups), which limited residents' ability to take responsibility for their neighborhood in a project-based, community-oriented manner.

Initially, the initiators focused on garnering support and launched public activities – such as participating in district festivals through open-air living rooms and organizing planting campaigns – to raise awareness about VERVE and implement initial measures aimed at improving the quality of life. As these temporary activities progressed, the desire grew for a permanent space where Neubeckum residents could gather, exchange ideas, and participate in cultural events. In response, VERVE established the ‘neighborhood living room’ as a multifunctional space in a former vacant store that includes a café welcoming all without mandatory consumption, serving both as a community hub and an income source for the initiative.

In summary, VERVE seeks to enhance livability in Neubeckum by creating central locations for interaction – a ‘third place’ where diverse individuals can meet and collaborate on community projects. Through various culinary events, art exhibitions, concerts, and other cultural offerings organized by VERVE members, social cohesion among inhabitants is strengthened. The initiative particularly appeals to newcomers in Neubeckum who find like-minded individuals and develop a sense of belonging within the community. Participants report improved personal well-being through their engagement while contributing to the overall attractiveness of the city center.

2. Actors and Collaboration

Neubeckum is characterized by a vibrant array of associations organized by civil society, highlighting the central role that civic involvement plays for many residents. VERVE was founded a few years ago as an initiative within this active civil society landscape. Below, we describe VERVE and its connections with other relevant actors, along with their objectives.

- » VERVE is a non-profit organization located in the Neubeckum district of Beckum, dedicated to fostering "momentum" within the community and promoting urban and community development. The initiative began as a grassroots effort by local residents who aimed to connect interested citizens in their area – the inner city of Neubeckum – with the goal of enhancing the neighborhood's attractiveness and livability while making positive contributions to the community. This vision is realized through the creation of central locations for interaction – specifically a "third place" in the form of a “neighborhood living room” and an open café where diverse individuals can meet and collaborate on community projects.
- » The city of Beckum is responsible for providing public services in general, ensuring an attractive and functional city center, and developing corresponding plans and concepts as well as cultural and educational offerings in particular. In addition to creating strategic frameworks and initiating public discourse (such as during the development of the inner city concept), the public sector plays a significant role in implementing the "neighborhood living room" and its planned cultural uses. This involvement is especially crucial when it comes to obtaining building permits, securing permissions for public cultural events, and meeting other regulatory requirements. The Department of Social Affairs, Education, and Culture, along with the Department of Urban Planning and Economic Development, are particularly active in these efforts. The administration also views community

commitment as a means of alleviating some burdens on the municipality (even if this is not openly articulated). Without volunteer contributions, certain services – such as library opening hours or the planning and execution of cultural events – would not be feasible. Local politicians have shifted from initial skepticism to generally supporting VERVE's initiatives.

- » The inner-city neighborhood management plays a crucial role in the development and implementation of the integrated urban development concept for the Neubeckum district, which has been initiated by the city of Beckum. The city has applied for public funding – specifically for urban development subsidies as part of a joint effort by federal, state, and municipal governments – to realize this concept in Neubeckum's inner city. A portion of the approved funds is allocated to neighborhood management, which is managed by an external planning office. The inner-city neighborhood management positions itself as an enabler, aiming to encourage property owners, initiatives, and citizens to pursue the goals and measures outlined in the development concept. It provides advice to stakeholders with ideas and has successfully facilitated the implementation of VERVE's vision by securing funding for street furniture through a disposition fund. Notably, the inner-city neighborhood management does not maintain its own office; instead, it utilizes the premises of VERVE to operate effectively within the community.
- » In addition to Verve, Neubeckum is home to a remarkable number of individual initiatives in which citizens engage on a voluntary basis, such as the Bahnhofsretter, the Heimatverein, and Gewerbeverein. The Bahnhofsretter are dedicated to preserving the old railroad station building as an identity-forming structure and aim to utilize it for cultural events, among other purposes. The Heimatverein focuses on maintaining and promoting awareness of Neubeckum's historical development while also striving to connect residents with one another and create opportunities for personal exchange (in form of a café). The Gewerbeverein is an association comprised of store owners and proprietors who seek to strengthen and develop the city center. It is noteworthy that many activities from all associations and initiatives are concentrated in the city center, reflecting a vibrant community spirit. Additionally, numerous individuals are members of multiple associations, fostering collaboration and synergy among various efforts aimed at enhancing life in Neubeckum.

3. Project Design and Approach: Initiating Mechanisms for Civic Engagement

VERVE began as an informal network, bringing together individuals and neighbors who connected for various personal reasons and shared a common desire to effect change. On one hand, this initiative was driven by the personal need for integration and networking within the community, particularly among newcomers. On the other hand, all initiators recognized a significant lack of meeting places and opportunities for informal exchange in Neubeckum, especially regarding the quantity and quality of cultural events. Against this backdrop, a small group started meeting regularly; however, through active promotion and targeted outreach to others, the network expanded. The cooperative structures of VERVE were further solidified when it transitioned from a network initiative to an official association. In Germany, becoming an association is essential for applying for public funding. Currently, VERVE has about 25 permanent members aged between 25 and 65. Consequently, it has established a decision-making committee; membership in this committee requires individuals to have been part of VERVE for at least four years. The group meets regularly to discuss actions and projects; however, the selection of which actions and projects are implemented largely depends on the individual interests of those involved. Despite this hierarchical organization, committed members affirm that everyone at VERVE can contribute and share responsibility in a collaborative manner.

From the very beginning, the initiators of VERVE engaged in dialogue with the city of Beckum. In 2018 and 2019, Beckum undertook a planning process aimed at developing an integrated urban development concept for Neubeckum's inner city. The goal was—and remains—to maintain and enhance the district as an attractive place to live and work; this is particularly relevant for Neubeckum's city center, which houses various essential services (such as retail and medical services) for surrounding neighborhoods. VERVE was already actively involved in this development process and maintained close coordination with the city, particularly concerning cultural offerings (including plans for converting the old station building), redesigning public spaces, etc. This involvement illustrates VERVE's strategic networking with other relevant actors to achieve its objectives; it also highlights that key civil society actors often participate in multiple initiatives (e.g., person involved in VERVE and the Bahnhofsretter initiative, people involved in the Heimatverein and the Gewerbeverein etc.) which enables them to influence urban and cultural policy.

The different levels and mechanisms of civic engagement through VERVE can be summarized as follows:

- » **Recognition and Networking:** This refers to establishing and expanding both personal networks as well as connections with other civil society actors. It also describes early interactions with municipal representatives – particularly administrative staff – for advice or permit applications while strategically positioning itself as a civil society actor.
- » **Implementation of Small (Spatial) Interventions:** These include beautifying the city center through tactical urbanism approaches (e.g., installing tree grates or enhancing traffic islands; see also figure 2). The aim was not only to raise awareness about VERVE but also to implement urban design measures while intensifying networking efforts.
- » **Realization of the "Neighbourhood Living Room":** VERVE successfully implemented this idea through participation in the 'Third Places - Houses for Culture and Encounter in Rural Areas' program funded by North Rhine-Westphalia's Ministry of Science and Culture. This program supports citizen initiatives and registered social associations in developing cultural venues in rural areas. With funding secured (from 2021-2026), Verve took over a vacant store in the city center transforming it into a 'neighborhood living room.' Additionally, these funds cover rent costs while furnishing the space; subsequent municipal funding facilitated facade redesigns as well. Moreover, these resources were used to employ several volunteers (part-time) who carry out key coordination activities within VERVE (such as managing volunteer work or organizing events). Currently, VERVE is focused on establishing permanent sustainable structures supported by this funding.
- » **Further Networking with Other Stakeholders:** On one hand, this involves strengthening personal connections; on the other hand, VERVE offers its premises – available at a nominal rent – to other associations and civil society initiatives in Neubeckum so they can host their own events. This arrangement also applies to a temporary office that the inner-city neighborhood management occupies once a week within the neighborhood living room to implement aspects of the inner-city concept.

Figure 2: Committed people in Neubeckum in tactical urbanism settings



(© Mathias Kolta 2021)

This comprehensive approach allows VERVE not only to enhance its own initiatives but also fosters collaboration within Neubeckum's broader civic landscape. At the same time, this effort reflects the attempt to establish VERVE as an indispensable entity within the city – both in terms of politics and administration as well as urban society – through strategic networking and the expansion of the “neighborhood living room.” This initiative aims to ensure that VERVE's contributions are recognized and valued, thereby solidifying its role as a vital player in community development and urban engagement.

4. Findings: VERVE's Contribution to Urban Development and Social Resilience

VERVE provides an opportunity for individuals who have felt overlooked by existing organizations to engage with their community. Through its ‘neighborhood living room,’ VERVE has established a casual meeting point in Neubeckum that has quickly become a cornerstone of inner-city development, both physically and socially (see figures 3 and 4). This space allows residents to meet informally and hosts cultural events every Friday and Saturday evening, including readings and concerts. Additionally, various activities cater to different age groups throughout the week, alongside a communal lunch table. The impact of VERVE cannot be overstated, as it fosters active exchange and participation among residents, encourages them to identify with their city center and district, and contributes significantly to community development and cohesion.

Figure 3: Impressions of the neighbourhood living room and the cafe



https://www.verve-neubeckum.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IMG_20220708_190749_200.jpg; <https://www.verve-neubeckum.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/pixelsaint-fotografie-verve-65-1536x1024.jpg>

By renting a previously vacant space on Neubeckum's main street, Verve has revitalized an empty shop property. The opening of the café not only breathes life into the main street but also serves as a gathering place for locals and visitors alike (see figures 3 and 4). Furthermore, Verve has enhanced public spaces and green areas in the city center through various temporary actions and events (see figure 2). These efforts include beautifying tree strips and traffic islands as well as equipping public spaces with appropriate urban furniture like benches.

In addition, committed members of Verve are working towards establishing permanent use of the vacant railway station building in Neubeckum. They regularly organize art, culture, and music events at or around the former station building to showcase its potential for enhancing the city's development. Collaboration with members of the 'Bahnhofsretter' initiative underscores this effort, as both groups share similar goals. Another positive outcome of Verve's work is the (re)activation of other initiatives and associations such as Bahnhofsretter, City Cleaners, and Heimatverein. These different groups frequently collaborate on joint projects; however, success often depends on individual involvement levels – some associations work more effectively together than others.

Overall, Verve plays a crucial role in Neubeckum as an initiator and supporter of neighborhood coexistence and urban development while promoting sustainable practices through participatory planning. The initiative successfully meets both spatial and social objectives by demonstrating that urban transformation can be community-led – fostering resilience within neighborhoods through collective participation. The city administration recognizes Verve as an important stakeholder in Neubeckum and commends their outstanding commitment to the district. However, this situation presents challenges; civic initiatives like Verve often assume responsibilities for community development that could partially be addressed by municipal authorities themselves.

Figure 4: Further Impressions of the neighbourhood living room and the café



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5. The Active Networking of VERVE as a Continuation Strategy

The networking of VERVE with the city administration and other civil society actors was and is a central strategy for increasing visibility and attracting public attention. This was one of the key strategies and activities at the outset of VERVE, as the initiators participated in events (e.g., city festivals) to connect with others and raise awareness about the initiative. Simultaneously, VERVE actively sought out other civil society partners, initiating network meetings every two months. The goal was to create connections, identify synergies, and make VERVE 'irreplaceable' within both the association's structure and Neubeckum's urban society. This aspiration is linked to establishing the initiative permanently in Neubeckum through its café and the 'neighbourhood living room, which manifests this structurally and spatially. Additionally, VERVE has also purposefully engaged with local administration to recognize needs early on and explore potential support from the municipality. This strategic approach aims to involve all stakeholders in implementing key ideas.

So far, networking with other civil society actors has been largely successful. Verve actively participates in a local network that includes associations, initiatives, schools, churches, libraries, and other relevant organizations in Neubeckum. This collaboration holds potential for jointly implementing district-wide offers and events while promoting cohesion within Neubeckum. Evidence of this can be seen in joint events (e.g., skateboarding events with the Freizeitzentrum (center with activities especially for youth) and developing offerings that complement those of other initiatives (e.g. the lunch services at VERVE Café which takes place alternately with the Freizeitzentrum). Despite the positive outcomes of VERVE's work, conflicts have arisen in the past; some individuals left due to internal disagreements. Some founding members of VERVE opposed funding from the Ministry because it necessitated a shift in direction for VERVE's ambitions and activities. These former members are now engaged in other

associations such as the Heimatverein or have created similar offerings like weekly gatherings at a newly established café at the Heimatverein.

Participation in the ‘Third Places’ competition significantly raised awareness of Verve among politicians and city administrators, leading them to view it as a serious actor regarding community development. Early coordination with the municipality demonstrated that Verve's ideas complemented municipal responsibilities without infringing upon essential public service duties. The appreciation from both politics and administration is palpable; VERVE's commitment to revitalizing the inner city, including ideas for reactivating vacant railway station buildings and enhancing public spaces, is highly valued by local authorities who recognize they cannot tackle these challenges alone. In this context, Verve also developed the idea of working with students from Dortmund University of Applied Sciences to design street furniture for public spaces and applied for funding from the inner city discretionary fund, which is managed by district management, to implement the project.

This dynamic illustrates how city administration and VERVE as a citizens' initiative complement each other. VERVE takes on certain public tasks related to upgrading Neubeckum's inner city and community development. The municipality acknowledges this potential by supporting VERVE during applications for programs like ‘Third Places,’ which required official backing from the city. Additionally, networking is reflected in VERVE offering its ‘neighborhood living room’ space to an external district management office responsible for implementing integrated development concepts while facilitating citizen participation once a week. In this capacity, VERVE acts as a mediator between the city administration, district management, and residents of Neubeckum. This also serves as a conscious signal to both the city government and political representatives that VERVE is ready to provide support – demonstrating active networking efforts aimed at establishing itself as a pivotal player within this interconnected framework (with potential aspirations potentially including managing tasks such as neighborhood management through VERVE). In any case, by setting up the ‘neighborhood living room’, the publicly accessible café, the regular events, the development and implementation of new ideas (e.g. street furniture in public spaces) and networking with other initiatives, VERVE is helping to strengthen community development and significantly increase the resilience (socially and spatially) of the city center.

6. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

VERVE highlights the following features with regard to promising factors:

- » **Volunteerism Enhances Community Resilience:** Volunteering plays a crucial role in sustaining civic initiatives; however, there is often a need for better coordination and support for volunteers to maximize their impact on community projects.
- » **Civic Engagement as a Catalyst for Change:** Engaging citizens in the planning and implementation processes empowers them to take ownership of their environment. This participatory approach fosters a sense of responsibility and encourages individuals to contribute actively to their community.
- » **Importance of Networking and Collaboration:** The success of VERVE and other initiatives in Neubeckum highlights the critical role of networking among various stakeholders, including local government, civil society organizations, and residents. Collaborative efforts lead to shared resources, knowledge exchange, and a unified approach to community challenges.

- » **Creating Spaces for Interaction:** Establishing central locations such as the "neighborhood living room" provides vital spaces for social interaction, cultural events, and community activities. These spaces help strengthen social ties and enhance the overall livability of the area.
- » **Fostering a Sense of Belonging:** Initiatives like VERVE cultivate a strong sense of belonging among residents, particularly newcomers. By providing opportunities for connection and participation, these projects help individuals identify with Neubeckum and foster community pride.
- » **Public Funding as a Success Factor:** Access to public funding has been instrumental in realizing various projects within Neubeckum. Financial support from municipal, state, or federal sources enables initiatives to develop sustainably while enhancing their capacity to meet community needs.
- » **Ongoing Dialogue with Local Government:** Maintaining an open line of communication between civil society actors and local government is essential for aligning goals, sharing resources effectively, and ensuring that citizen voices are heard in decision-making processes.

By focusing on these lessons learned and future directions, Neubeckum can continue evolving into an inclusive space where residents feel empowered to participate actively in shaping their neighborhoods while fostering strong communal ties. With regard to Neubeckum, we could identify the following **future directions**:

- » **Utilization of Municipal Properties:** There is an opportunity for greater use of publicly owned properties (such as the land housing the library or leisure center) to strengthen civil society initiatives like VERVE. By collaborating with the city on these assets' use or management, communities can enhance their engagement while ensuring that public spaces serve diverse purposes.
- » **Promotion of Spaces for the Communities:** Citizens and their concerns should be taken seriously, and civic engagement should not be viewed as a disruptive factor. It is essential for local governments and administrations to actively listen to residents and involve them in decisions that impact their neighborhoods or communities. To facilitate this process, politics and administration should promote the establishment of meeting spaces – such as the “neighborhood living room” – where community members can gather, share ideas, and collaborate on initiatives. By creating inclusive environments for dialogue, authorities can strengthen community ties, enhance trust between citizens and government, and ensure that local voices play a significant role in shaping the future of their surroundings.
- » **Support for Volunteer Coordination:** To enable effective volunteering within Neubeckum's initiatives, it would be beneficial to provide dedicated resources – such as part-time employees – to coordinate volunteer activities. This support could facilitate training sessions, organize events more efficiently, and improve overall volunteer engagement.
- » **Strengthening Partnerships Across Initiatives:** Encouraging collaboration between existing associations can amplify their collective impact on urban development efforts in Neubeckum by pooling resources and expertise while fostering joint projects that benefit the entire community.

Attachments

References

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