The Power of Maps on Urban Development
Crowdsourcing, bottom-up Web 2.0 and Critical Web Mapping of inner-city Vacancies

Gregor Arnold (g.arnold@geo.uni-mainz.de)
Institute of Geography, Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Johann-Joachim-Becher-Weg 21, 55099 Mainz, Germany

Fig. 1: 29 cities of the crowdsourcing platform Leerstandsmelder.de in Germany, Swiss and Austria

1 Introduction and Research Question

In Germany, people are increasingly migrating to cities and metropolitan areas. Parallel to this current reurbanization trend there can be found plenty of vacant and unused buildings in the city-centers. As a result of these contrasting developments people have joined together in initiatives and organisations to draw the public attention to the paradox and deplorable situation of spatial-economic pressure and high rents on one hand and empty, unused buildings on the other.

I examine the procedure and strategies of urban collectives demonstrating against rising rents and making vacancies available for public use. Therefore I follow the questions of how crowdsourcing, bottom-up web 2.0 and critical web mapping of inner-city vacancies are strategically used and in which way these maps are exploited to influence the acquisition of urban space?

2 Methods

Geography is a profoundly empirical science. ESCHER and BECKER (2013) define the term field research as "an empirical method to collect cultural and social science data *on-the-spot and in its everyday life context"*. I ascribe a great significance to geographical field research which is why the participation and the active involvement in *Right to the City* movements play a great significance in the fact-finding process to derive a theory by means of induction. Additionally, I did 13 qualitative interviews in these cities, with members of urban movements and with the administrators of *Leerstandsmelder.de, too*. Furthermore, it is of relevance that I administrate the crowdsourcing and online platform *Leerstandsmelder.de* for the city of Mainz. By this means, I am part of a local, regional and (inter-)national network which is why I state that my findings derived from explorative as well as qualitative and ethnographic methods of field research.

3 Theoretical Framework and Interview Insights

Peer-to-peer networks, crowdsourcing platforms and web 2.0 maps have become important tools of urban intervention, they are the result of strategic considerations to influence, act against or prevent certain social urban developments or economic and political inequalities in cities. Thus, they provide and push forward alternative perspectives on urban space and they have the ability to shape and to achieve urban change. These maps can be understood as "the medium which 'represents' urban phenomena by turning it into an image" (McQUIRE 2008). In more detail, and as GEORGIOU (2013) discusses, "social actors are markers of meanings of the city and of the media [because] protesters use social media to gain local and global presence". For her (ibid.) "the visibility offered by the physical space of the city is no longer enough". Following this argument, such local, bottom-up activist struggles and protests become much more visible and represented in and through media. The idea of *Leerstandsmelder.de* derived from this perspective, it is a subversive mapping tool.

"On my daily way to work I pass two residential houses that have been vacant for years and right next to them, revaluation at its best is taking place. I find it important to visualise exactly this process because hardly any one deals with these kind of problems. It is a scandal when people have to move out of a house because it has become too expensive and right next to this house, other houses are empty. This is crazy! It is therefore also a matter of drawing the public attention to these processes, and that's why every now and then I listed these vacancies to know, which ones might be available for a reasonable utilisation. By this means, I also wanted to get an overview, since there are no officials who feel responsible for this topic. It is problematic if no one else, not even the city councils or local political leader, know where vacancies are located and more importantly, how many of them there really are."

With the usage of media as communication tool the demand for affordable space can be heard on a wider scale and thereby the call for a 'right to the city' becomes simultaneously lived-experience in-between media and the urban space and urban society: "The urban street is revived and extended to the global mediated street. It is in the continuity of the physical and mediated urban street that presence, as a strategy, as a tactic (...) makes sense" (GEORGIOU 2013). *Leerstandsmelder.de* is on one hand the mediated image of the struggles of the grounded physicality of protests. On the other hand the crowdsourcing platform is a critical tool of web 2.0 maps for urban intervention.

"The 'Leerstandmelder' serves as an important component in public relations, in times of increased urban spatial pressure, vacancy needs a greater attention. Not only residents will become more aware, but the topic can generally be carried into the social urban or political discourse. And when a city council doesn't have the vacancies on screen, then the platform can take an alarm function. Basically, it is a mapping tool but also a vehicle to provide arguments. Just think about on which basis decisions are taken, mostly on figures, data, and facts and those are collected by the crowd and then presented to the city officials. Of course, the 'Leerstandsmelder' as a map alone can't make much of a difference but it can definitely make a difference when used appropriately, politically and for the right purpose."
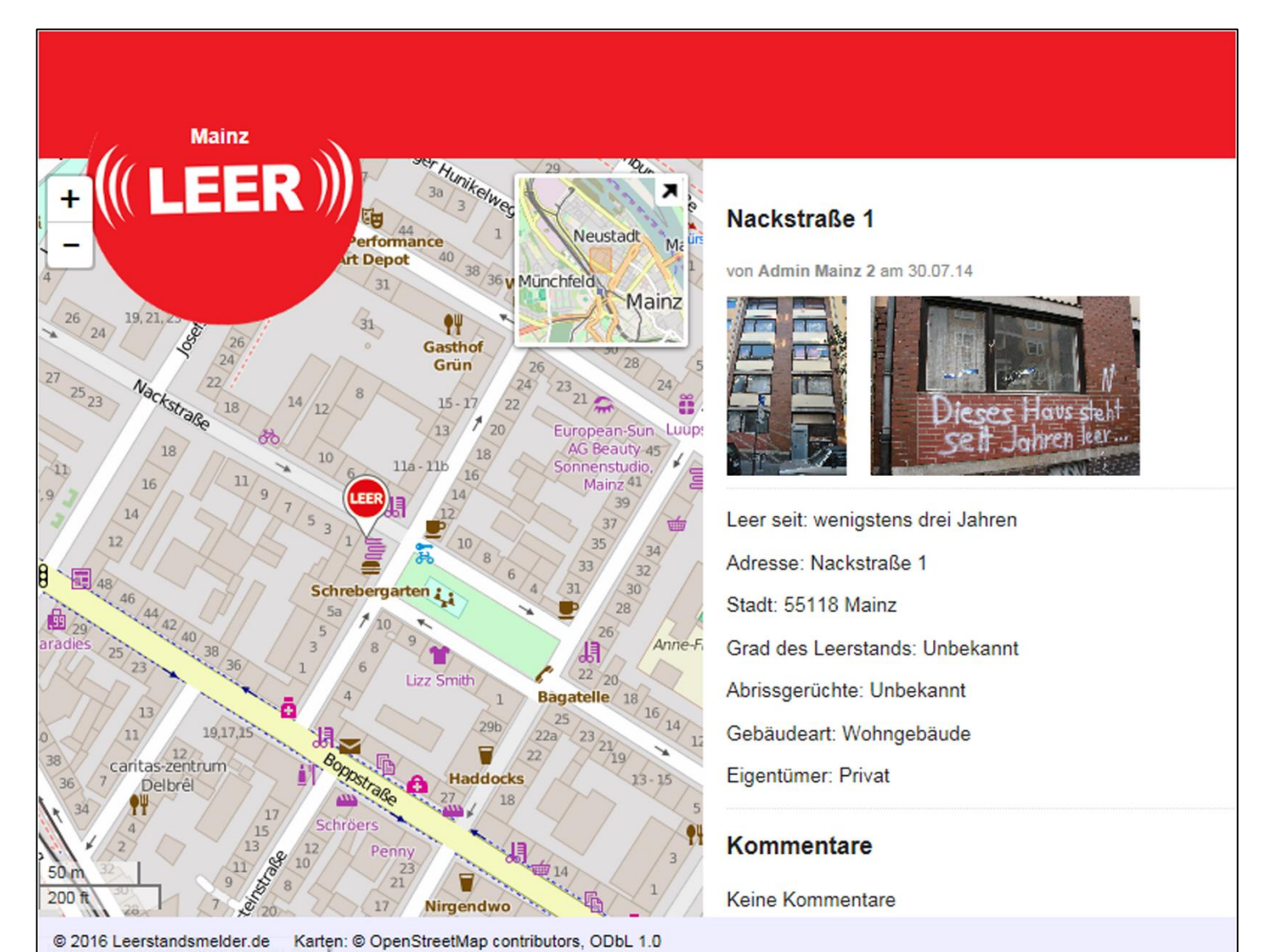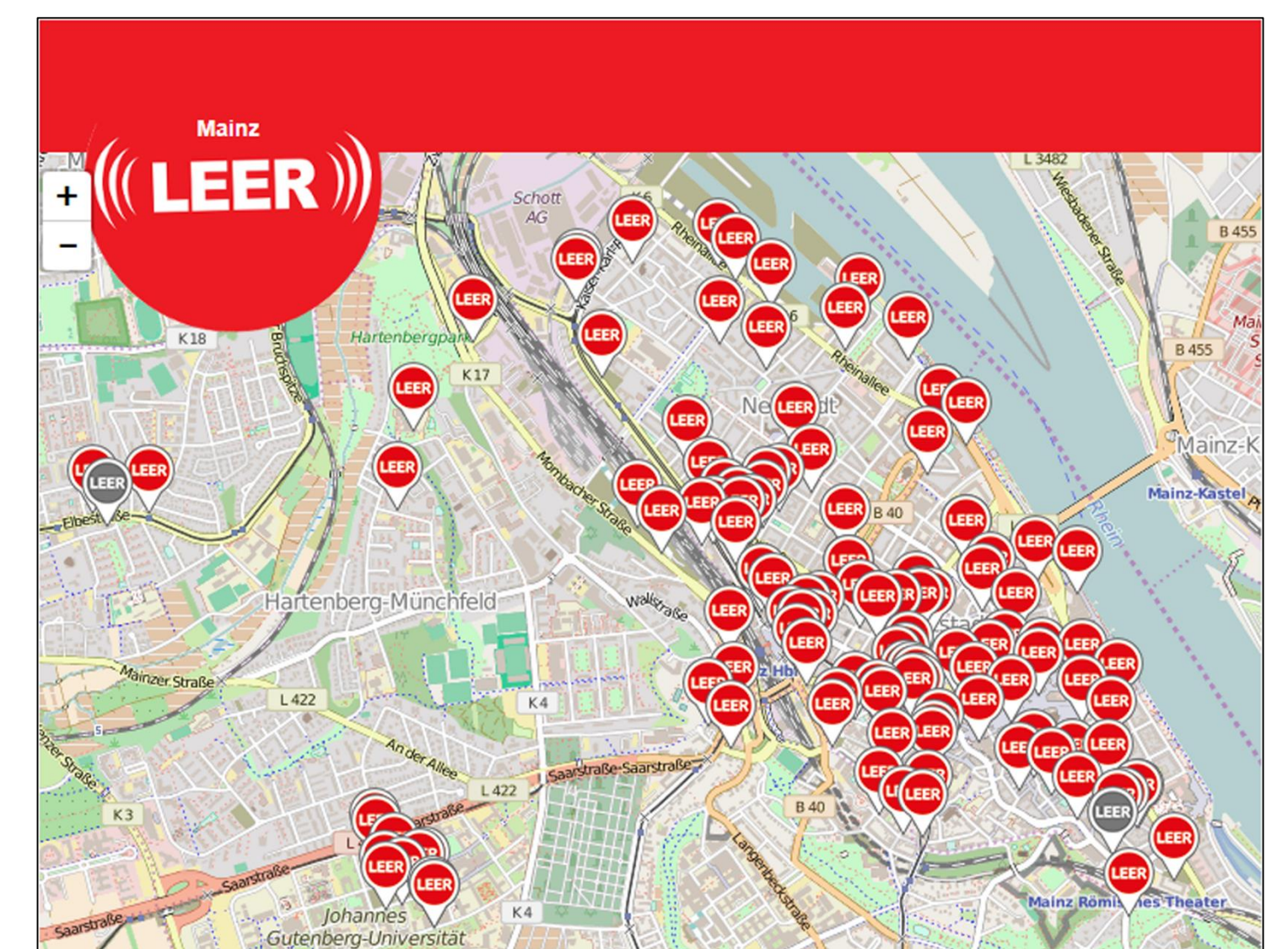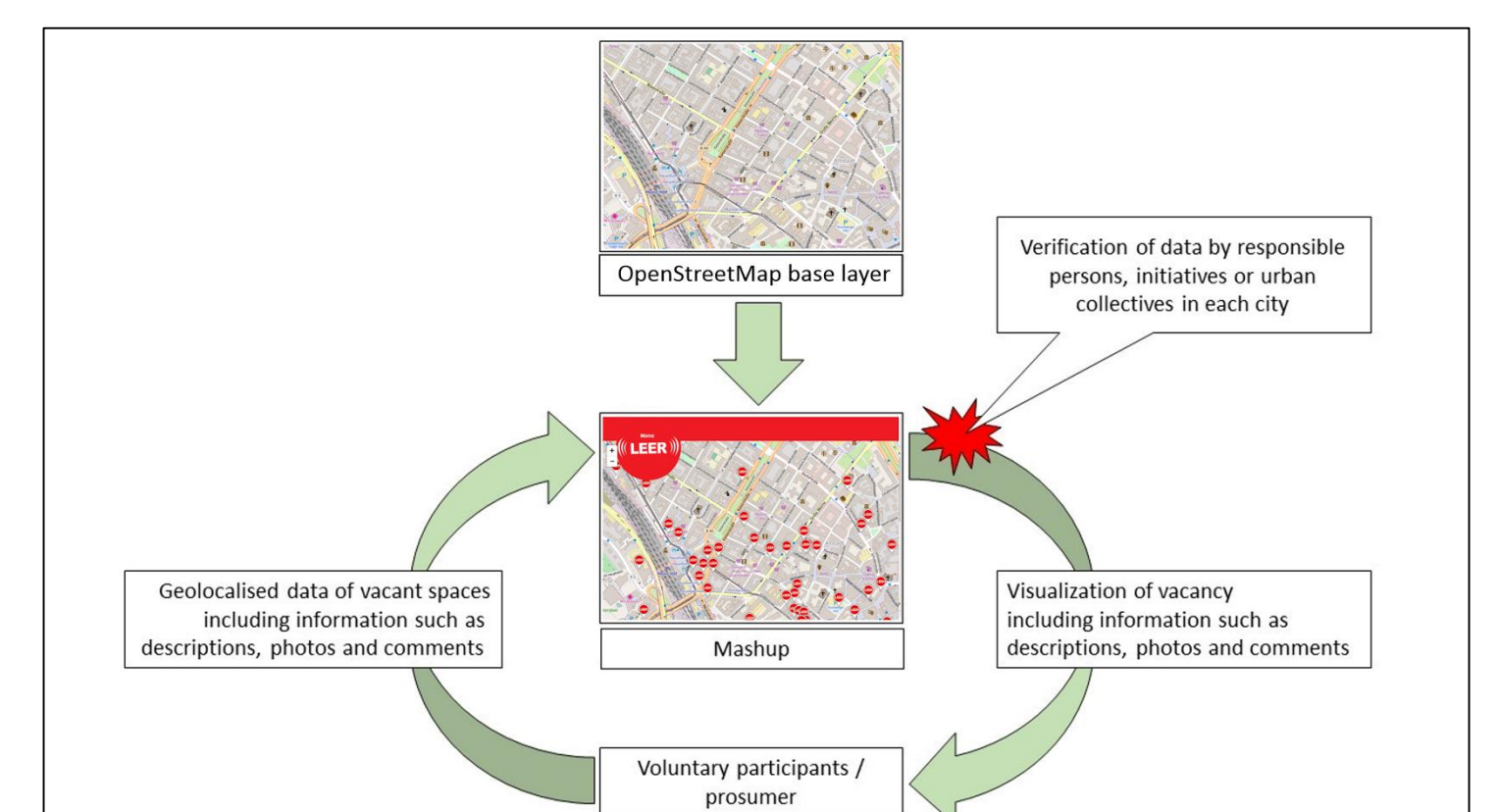

Fig. 2: Technical Realization and scales of vacancy in Mainz

Fig. 3: Vacancy and urban movements' protest in Mainz

4 Conclusions

In a first step, the crowd of the platform reveals vacancies in the inner-city areas. Hereby, *Leerstandsmelder.de* serves as a component of classical mapping, public relations and information efforts, it simply provides facts and figures of unused spaces. In a second step, this knowledge can be used to create pressure on urban policies and administrations to introduce measures to open vacancies and to make unused spaces available for an affordable, socially sustainable and cultural use. Then, *Leerstandsmelder.de* serves as a tool to encourage an urban policy discourse about inner-city resources and open spaces. Thus, urban movements are sustained through Internet communities, too, by carrying their content-related issues into the digital networked space. They have adopted the subject of vacancies online using the new possibilities created by web 2.0 cartography and respectively they carry the voluntary collective web mappings of vacancies into the urban policy discourse, or as OY (2002, 72) puts it: "In the process of the implementation of new technologies, they are actors and beneficiaries of this implementation at the same time". *Leerstandsmelder.de* therefore not only depicts the subject of vacant urban real estates, it is furthermore a critical tool serving as an instrument for movements to strategically make their issues and demands a subject of discussion. Thereby they regain influence on urban development.

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