

# Entering *voids*



Investigation  
*voids* in the  
and their  
and impli-  
nes of re-  
ute to the  
n *voids* as  
self-sufficient, transformative  
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everyday environment can af-  
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## Entering *voids*

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This thesis is an investigation on the notion of *voids* in the urban environment and their social perceptions and implications. These two lines of research firstly contribute to the literature strand on *voids* as self-sufficient, transformative and eventful spaces and secondly to sociological research on the impact of urban decay on citizens.

It is found that the accumulation of *voids* in their everyday environment can affect people's perceptions of their built and human surroundings significantly and culminate in their changed social interactions, daily routes and routines. Ultimately, it is argued that in areas with social tensions urban *voids* can take the role of projection surfaces and contribute to the self-perpetuation of social tensions and resentments between different groups of people.

The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city,  
written, erased, rewritten.

Teju Cole, Open City

I would like to express my appreciation for those  
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Thank you

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## 1. Introduction

Designers and architects can represent agents of change, be it by planning and executing practical solutions or by contributing to the analysis of social, political and technological phenomena that, from a theoretical point of view, affect the quality of our lives (Antonelli 2011). Whether concerned with larger or smaller scaled projects, they seek to define problems and to create solutions, highlighting over and over again the overall generative, naturalist nature of their professions (Cairns and Jacobs, 2017). However, creative practices have been devoting significantly less attention to the processes setting in after their endeavors come into being. “Invested as it is in creating ‘life’” to recall Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs’ meditation on the aging and decay of all things material, what is the relationship of design and architecture “to the processes of wasting, deterioration, destruction and ‘death’,” (2017, 1) to which it is inevitably subject? Projected into the urban sphere, how do these disintegrating structures, devoid of their initially assigned functions and audiences, integrate into their complex urban surroundings?

It seems that in our growth-driven society *voids* can disrupt the sound fabric of our cities, especially if they remain in their state of indeterminacy over a lengthy period of time. Whether *voids* reside in built or in undeveloped structures and whether they manifest through the absence of an initial function or a specific audience, more often than not they are perceived as discomforting or uncanny blind spots in the urban environment.

This study seeks to approximate the notion of *voids* in the urban environment. In the first part of my research, I will introduce relevant literature on *voids* and subsequently explore which types of *voids* can be identified in the urban context. I will conclude the first part of my research by providing three case studies and elaborating on the reasons behind this selection. In the second part, I will examine in which ways the accumulation of abandoned urban structures can correlate with changes in the behaviors and interactions of people and their built surroundings.

Intrigued by the elusive nature of this notion, I will be referring to *voids* as highly subjective indicators of specific absences in otherwise dense networks of living and inanimate actors. Thus, I will withhold from investigating this notion from an ontological perspective, rather hoping to familiarize with the different ways in which it is perceived and coped with by its many beholders!

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<sup>1</sup> Due to this skeptic position towards the absolute undertone of the term *void*, I will be using it in italic form throughout this study.

## 2. On the troublesome nature of voids

“Architecture,” as Jacques Derrida states, inherently “carries within itself the traces of its future destruction, the already past future, future perfect” (1990, 2). While the mortality of buildings, tunnels and streets may be certain, preceding processes of ageing and disintegration oftentimes remain uncurated by their planners. As Anique Hommels argues in *Unbuilding Cities*, neglected urban structures are regularly out of time and yet very much in place, as they linger in our fields of view, while undergoing slow and uncontrolled processes of degradation (2008).

However, negation and decay do not necessarily signify an irrevocable loss of value. On the contrary – dilapidated architecture, as Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs (2017) argue, can be suspended in its unvalued state over long periods of time before its negated structures are rediscovered and infused with new cultural meaning. The built environment can thus go through continuous economic cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment and is closely linked to processes of cultural, economic and social valuation, which help distinguish between their matter and their mattering (Cairns and Jacobs 2017). In this context, Christine Dissmann offers an interesting perspective on the ambiguous perception of urban *voids* in dependence on their momentary value. In her dissertation *Die Gestaltung der Leere* (Designing voids) she shows that the connotation of urban *voids* can oscillate between opposing extremes, being associated with wasteland at one moment and as elitist, lofty spaces, such as museums, galleries and green spaces at the next (2011).

Introducing another genre of visual culture, which values exactly the ruinous and uncanny appeal of urban *voids* and relics, JoAnn Greco (2012) analyzes the concept of ruin porn as the wistful appeal of empty, decaying spaces in her eponymous article for the CityLab: “It’s about time, nature, mortality, disinvestment. [...] Numerous blogs and online galleries share strategies for entry and showcase their collections of moss-covered factory floors and lathe-exposed school

buildings.” Rather than being fueled by an endeavor to reinterpret decaying structures culturally or to improve a neighborhood, according to Greco’s article, ruin tourism is driven solely by the explorers’ thirst for adventures and curiosity for the untapped obsolete (2012).

Arguing from a more general perspective, Rem Koolhaas (1985) addresses the value of dilapidating structures and *voids* for their larger urban contexts. In his article for the journal *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*, Koolhaas states that only through the evolutionary processes of erasure and the generation of conceptual nevoids does it become possible to cure cities from some of the agonies they are susceptible to (1985, cited in Dissmann 2011, 31). Seen through this lens, decay, destruction and the uncertainty of unplanned, *void* spaces are important catalysts for creative and regenerative urban processes. Similarly, in their book *Stadtlichtungen* (Urban Clearings), Undine Giseke and Erika Spiegel (2007) argue that the spotty perforation of densely planned urban environments can open new pathways through the city and reconnect formerly separated areas. This way, as they proceed, formerly tight-knit neighborhoods become accessible to new audiences which can in turn encourage new behaviors, patterns and rules, as the two authors proceed.

Another strand of literature emphasizes the role of non-human actors, who can reappropriate urban clearings as well: while one might erroneously equate *our* absence with an absence of life, as Gilles Deleuze writes in his meditation on radical temporality and extensiveness (2003), spaces deserted by people can be saturated with a far more ubiquitous, less human-centered eventfulness – being inhabited by diverse species and inanimate elements which elude our acknowledgement. Thus, rather than constituting an ultimate, morbid condition, *voids* can undergo continuous transformative processes, evolving over time (Finoki 2009) while offering a fertile ground for different forms of usage and life. According to David Gissen (2009), non-human occupants such as insects, birds, straying animals and untamed vegetation can shape micro natures around human

non-interference. In his book *Subnature*, Gissen further argues that such biospheres represent forces against established social orders: “The wild debris of nature, weeds take over the non-places of the city. They thrive in the smallest spaces, they grow in cracks, behind fences, in dark and inaccessible spaces and colonize voids anywhere and in any city” (cited in Jonas and Rahmann 2014, 99).

Despite their potential to regain cultural value, form habitats and open up new pathways through dense cities, processes of material decay and urban *voids* are oftentimes associated with failure and stagnation. In her book *Subtraction*, Keller Easterling (2014) argues that destructive processes are perceived as something negative, unknowable and to be avoided: “Even when subtraction is planned, it is often treated as the disposal of an accidental or unintended consequence - a failure of planning’s already fragile utopias” (2014, 2). As she postulates, dilapidation and decay generally signal loss, while accumulation signals growth: “When building is the only proper, sanctioned event, there is no platform in place for constructively handling the deletions that reasonably or unreasonably accompany buildings” (2014, 2).

While Keller Easterling meditates on the processual nature of subtraction and decay, Christine Dissmann (2011) examines the notion of *voids* as the ultimate condition resulting from these destructive processes. In this framework, Dissmann outlines a taxonomy of *voids*, in which she distinguishes between their material and immaterial manifestations: her definition of material *voids* includes, inter alia, an absence of human audiences and assigned functions; or minimalistic spaces and interiors. Further, Dissmann considers the lack of events; transformative processes; as well as cultural interpretations (i.e. the loss of an initial meaning after the reinterpretation of a building) to be symptomatic of immaterial *voids* (2011). Attributing material and immaterial *voids* to absence and loss, Dissmann argues that both can have a troubling effect on their human observers. Especially in cities with larger accumulations of vacant or undeveloped areas, *voids* are

oftentimes not associated with public spaces, in which to meet and interact with strangers, but rather with the unpleasant feeling otherwise experienced in empty subway stations, lonely streets and underpasses (2011, 101).

Vacant and neglected land, as criminologist George Kelling and sociologist James Wilson further lay out in their Broken Windows Theory (1982), can evoke wide ranges of negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety and depression. Correlating psychosomatic suffering with urban dilapidation and decay, they use broken windows as a metaphor for the disturbance in the integrity of a neighborhood. According to Kelling and Wilson “window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers, whereas others are populated by window-lovers” (1982). Rather, if no one bothers to fix a broken window, people assume that it is tolerated to break them and so, in order not to lose even more control over the condition of their neighborhood, more windows, and eventually doors or walls are damaged.

Beyond the impact, dilapidated and abandoned structures can have on the human perceptions of and behaviors towards their built environment, they can also affect the relationships and interactions amongst the residents themselves: as Christine Dissmann (2011) elaborates, with the outflow of young, educated and well-situated people from a neighborhood, only those disadvantaged and discriminated actors are concentrated in the decaying problem areas, who do not get a choice over their places of residence. Similar to Kelling and Wilson, she elaborates how the uncontrolled decay and *voiding*, as well as the unflattering connotation of certain neighborhoods as problem areas can be perceived as a downward spiral by and act as a self-fulfilling prophecy<sup>2</sup> for their residents, who internalize the marginalization and stigmatization of their living spaces and neighbors and withdraw from their built and human environments eventually.

The presented literature illustrates different ways, in which fallows, ruins and *voids* are embedded in the urban context, enlivened by unforeseen new functions and audiences and perceived by their human observers. Inherent in built structures or undeveloped surfaces of land; connoted with crises and stagnation or with luxury and new beginnings; causing anxiety or stimulating the thirst for adventures; appearing as wasteland or as a fertile ground – many existing approaches predominantly advocate for one particular way, in which to interpret the function and perception of *void* spaces. It seems that less attention has been paid to the immediate juxtaposition of these contrasting interpretations. Thus, it remains of interest, which social dynamics evolve at the intersection of eschewed and enlivened, feared and explored *voids* – in areas in which one (wo)man's *void* may be another (wo)man's habitat.

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<sup>2</sup> Coined by Robert Merton in 1948, the theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy entails “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (Merton [1948] 1968, 477).

### 3. Case selection

*Voids* are not any less of a challenge in the context of rural regions, than they are in the urban environment. On the contrary, while cities may be subject to declining industries, vacant commercial and residential structures and a decreasing population, the vision of urban life remains a highly desirable one, attracting waves of emigration from suburban and rural areas. In this sense, the closing of agricultural businesses and family-run farms, as well as the declining usage of rural infrastructures may be ever more omnipresent and noticeable in closely woven rural communities. Still I have chosen to investigate *voids* in the urban context, where they are not embedded in vast, sparsely populated rural landscapes, but in densely built and enlivened contexts, where I believe them to weave into more complex environments.

Distinguishing between sporadic clearings in overall lively, growing cities, higher vacancy levels in shrinking and ghost cities, and stagnated urban megaprojects, I have selected cities with demographic shrinkage as a framing context for my research for the following reasons: the accumulation and juxtaposition of neglected and abandoned structures, embedded in enlivened neighborhoods, as well as the likelihood of these *void* spaces to be abandoned to their fates and enabled to undergo uncurated destructive processes, rather than being redeveloped.

Further, I have chosen Germany and Ukraine as two countries having witnessed drastic demographic shrinkage since the 1990's and reacting to these processes very differently: while mostly associated with the Eastern regions of Germany, urban shrinkage has been spreading evenly throughout the West as well, especially affecting its industrial heartland in the Ruhr Valley. Having seen a national population growth of about four percent between its reunification and 2016, mainly small German cities, villages and towns, amounting to 365.000 inhabitants at most, have been subject to this negative trend.

In contrast to the deindustrializing example of Germany, the national population of post-socialist Ukraine has diminished by eighteen percent by 2016, with both smaller towns and megacities being affected by demographic shrinkage.

Lastly, I selected a handful of cities with total populations between 30.000 and 1.000.000 (based on population censuses until 2016) and shrinkage of 4% or more between 1990 and 2016, ultimately choosing the German cities of Cuxhaven, Neumünster and Itzehoe, as well as the Ukrainian cities Odessa and Nikolaev.

## Towards a catalogue of urban voids:

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### 4.1 Methodology

### 4.2 Catalogue of voids

### 4.3 Zoom in: Open doors and barricades

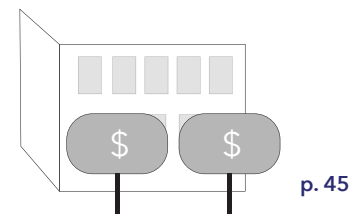
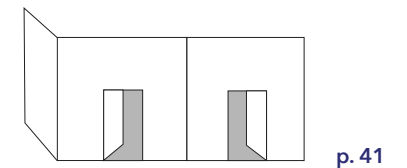
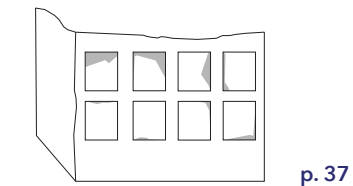
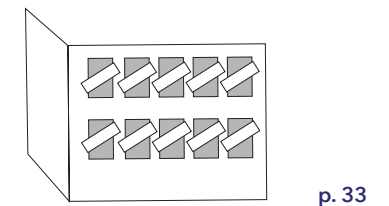
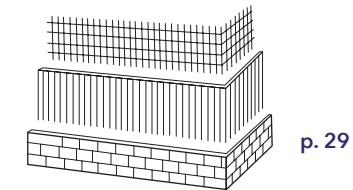
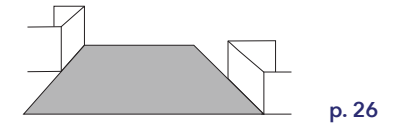
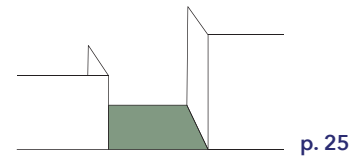
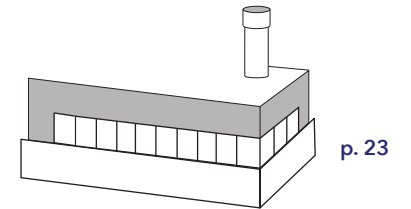
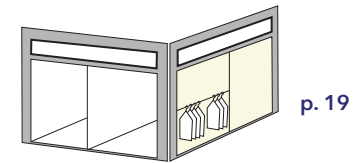
## 4.1 Methodology

Given the vagueness of the notion of *voids*, it appeared conducive to my research to refine my own understanding of this term and its different manifestations in the urban context, prior to familiarizing with the complex social dynamics evolving around and within *voids* in the urban context (chp. 5).

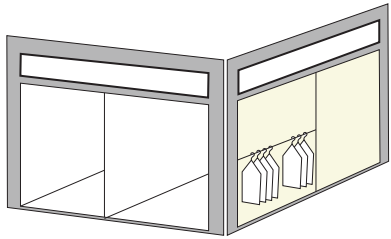
Seeking to refine my understanding of different conditions, materialities, and absences hinting at *voids*, I chose observational walking as a qualitative research method. This approach allowed me to develop a local literacy and an embodied understanding of the scales and rhythms (Pierce and Lawhon 2015) in the urban contexts of Neumünster, Cuxhaven, Itzehoe, Odessa and Nikolaev. I further selected photography as an investigative tool to document differently scaled elements and contexts, hinting at *voids*: by photographing phenomena, indicating decay and abandonment, I sought to visualize, by which means I identify *voids*. Additionally, by capturing lively and *void* spaces in juxtaposition, I tried to understand in what relation I determined them. Moreover, through the videographic format I sought to record more elusive phenomena such as sounds, movements and paces throughout my observational walks. I complemented these visual recordings with written and spoken field notes.

In order to consolidate my photographs, video stills and notes in the framework of a catalogue of *voids*, I selected the cluster analysis as a methodology allowing me to define thematic groups by mapping the similarities or dissimilarities of my mixed materials on multiple dimensions (Henry, Tolan and Gorman-Smith 2005). Aiming for a “classification of similar objects into groups, where the number of groups, as well as their forms are unknown” (Aldenderfer & Blashfield 1984), I thus used the cluster analysis to determine and categorize different *indicators* hinting at *void* urban structures. Lastly, rather than assigning titles, I produced graphic symbols for these categories, highlighting each one of their specificities.

## 4.2 Catalogue of urban voids







### unfilled retail spaces

- locked doors
- switched off lights
- drawn curtains
- lowered shutters
- "final sale" signs
- deserted interiors
- weathered shop signs
- improvised sight protection



Neumünster



Neumünster

## Explicit indicators

Two greater categories became apparent within my catalogue of urban *voids*: Firstly, having encountered several instances of extensive negligence and deterioration, I recognized that certain structures hinted at their abandoning much more explicitly than others. Amongst these more explicit, immediate manifestations of voids were the ruinous remains of residential houses, restaurants, or factory sites which had apparently been abandoned to their fates and disintegrated over long periods of time. Other structures, such as barricaded buildings or unfilled retail spaces behind locked doors, deserted at broad daylight, also seemed to point at urban structures having lost their purposes. Lastly, vast overgrown fallows and concreted areas with no further references to their assigned functions evoked an immediate association with undeveloped urban *voids*.



Itzehoe



Neumünster

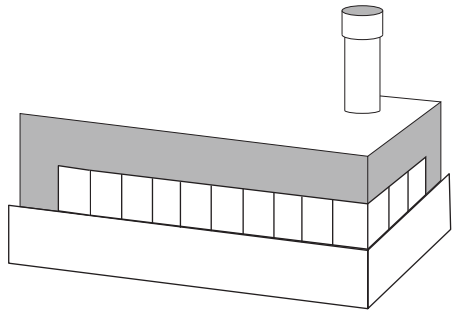


Itzehoe



Neumünster





**abandoned factories**

- empty parking lots
- broken windows
- weathered building materials
- locked/barricaded entrances
- overgrown courts
- "moved/closed" signs
- deserted interiors



Cuxhaven



Neumünster



19  
Odessa



Nikolaev

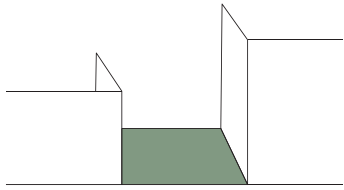


Nikolaev



Odessa





**green fallows**

no identifiable function  
 untamed/irregular vegetation  
 earthy/grassy grounds  
 scattered garbage



Neumünster



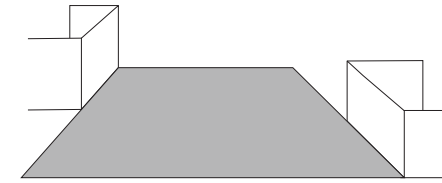
Itzehoe



Cuxhaven



Itzehoe



**concreted grounds**

no identifiable function  
 overgrown with vegetation  
 concreted/gravelled grounds  
 scattered garbage



Nikolaev

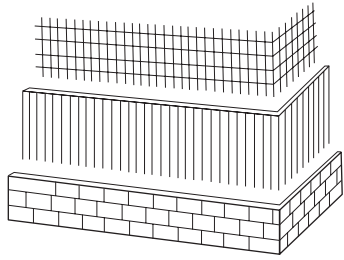


Neumünster









### construction fences/walls

covered internal areas  
 inaccessible houses/spaces  
 code/door locks  
 uncertain function (construction works/protection of those on the inside or those on the outside?)



Nikolaev



Odessa



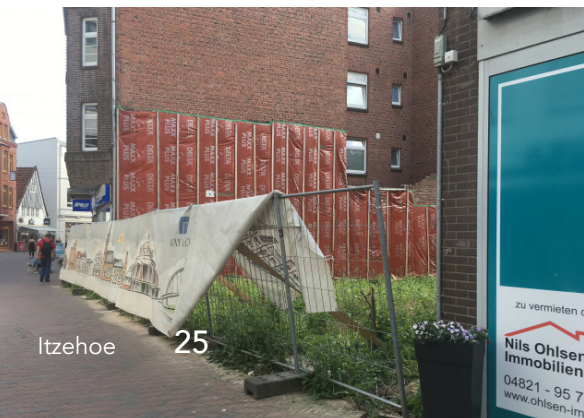
Odessa

## Implicit indicators

In addition to the abovementioned, immediate indicators of *voids* I detected a variety of more implicit phenomena within my clustered materials. Also speaking of destruction, decay and neglect, they hinted at absences of certain actors, maintenance measures, elements and sounds in a far more elusive way. For instance, the all-encompassing silence prevailing in many of my areas of research evoked the impression of walking through a deserted area. At other times, only in contrast to lively, well-maintained buildings, dilapidated structures would appear as abandoned and empty. Further, dusty “for sale” banners seemed to bare witness to a waning demand for apartments and office spaces. Broken windows, cracked wooden doors, unlocked house entrances, burnt roofs, peeling wall paint and unlabelled doorbell signs hinted at severe weathering, destruction and neglect. Tall construction fences and walls, enveloping half-built or heavily dilapidated structures and green fallows seemed to indicate stagnated and forgotten building projects.



Odessa



Itzehoe





Neumünster



Neumünster



Itzehoe

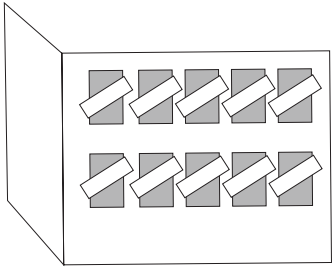


Odessa



Itzehoe





**barricades**

- inaccessible houses/spaces
- wooden panels
- iron shutters
- walled-up building apertures
- uncertain function
- deserted immediate surroundings



Odessa



Odessa



Neumünster



Neumünster



Neumünster



Neumünster



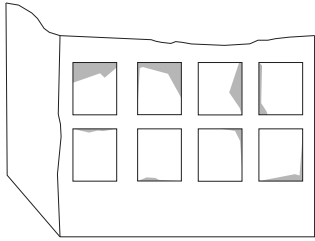


Nikolaev



Odessa





### severely weathered buildings

- broken windows
- cracked doors
- makeshift covers
- peeling wall paint
- dilapidated construction materials
- unlabeled doorbell signs
- left-open entrances
- scattered garbage



Nikolaev



Odessa



Neumünster



Neumünster



Odessa



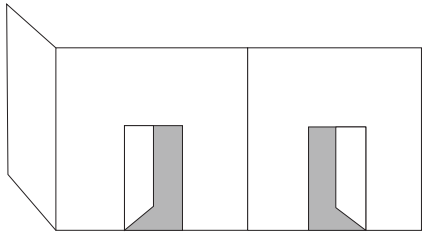


Neumünster



Neumünster





**severely weathered buildings**

- broken windows
- cracked doors
- makeshift covers
- dilapidated construction materials
- unlabeled doorbell signs
- open doors
- scattered garbage
- "please close door" signs



Nikolaev



Neumünster



Odessa



Neumünster



Neumünster



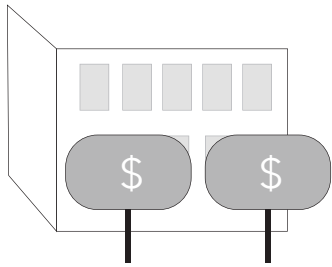


Neumünster



Neumünster





**"for sale" signs**

several adjacent buildings/spaces for sale  
 uncertain function (still occupied?)  
 deserted interiors



Itzehoe



Neumünster



Neumünster



Odessa



Neumünster



Nikolaev





Curiously, I perceived especially those structures which implicitly hinted at their abandonment and emptiness, to convey an uncanny sense of uncertainty. Projecting my anxieties over their uncertain functions and inhabitants onto assumed *void* spaces, my feeling of discomfort persisted even in those cases, in which blurry movements or sudden fragments of speech, leaking from the worn-out or ruinous structures, could have refuted my assumptions. Amongst those uncanny, implicit indicators for *voids* was a puzzling common motif prevailing in some of my areas of research - the juxtaposition of widely opened and thoroughly closed or even barricaded entrances to several urban structures: unfilled retail spaces, disintegrating ruins, dilapidated residential buildings, backyards and basements were publicly accessible, while grassy meadows and undeveloped sandy grounds, as well as seemingly uninhabited, windowless houses were barricaded behind tall fences and walls. In other words: many structures I would have assumed to be privately owned, inhabited and secured were publicly accessible, while inoperable, abandoned and overgrown spaces were closed off arduously.

Did the seemingly careless opening and meticulous closure of these structures simply hint at their vacancy, or were they representative of other, more complex social and spatial dynamics in areas facing large numbers of *void* spaces? Intrigued by this question, in the next chapter I will give a more precise account of three areas in which I encountered these paradoxical phenomena in immediate juxtaposition – the streets Kieler Straße in Neumünster and Devolanivs'kyi Descent in Odessa, as well as the shopping mall Holstein Center in Itzehoe.

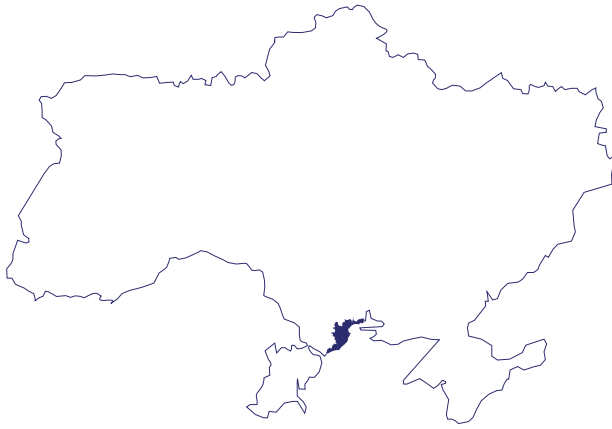
### 4.3 Zoom in:

#### Open doors and barricades

Connecting the port of Odessa with its historic center, the street **Devolanivs'kyi Descent** is mostly characterized by dilapidated structures and disintegrating ruins, immersing the street into a ghostly silence, especially in contrast with its bustling urban surroundings. Many house entrances facing this street are secured by combination locks, chains and iron fences or, like the entrance of the recently renovated boarding school Dom Sabrina or the individual parking spaces, stretching along the upper parts of Devolanivs'kyi Descent, surveilled by guards. Further, the back doors and ventilation systems of several newly constructed hotels and office buildings face the street, as these structures also remain inaccessible from this side.

The conditions of the buildings, sidewalks and cobbled or asphalted pavements on Devolanivs'kyi Descent differ extremely: with its densely inhabited apartment buildings and guarded parking spaces further towards Odessa's historic





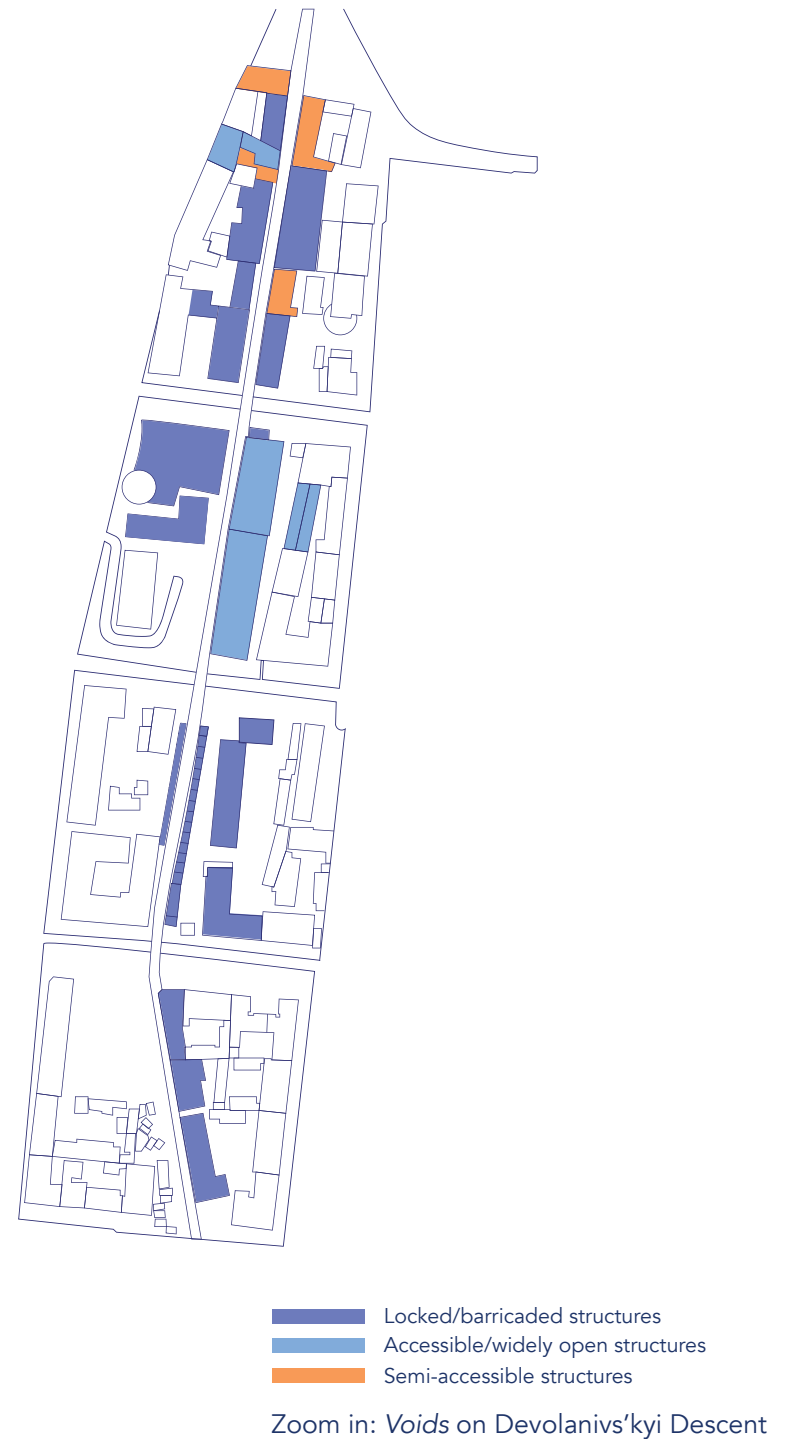
## Devolanivs'kyi Descent, Odessa, Ukraine

Odessa is the third largest city in Ukraine, a country having seen a national population decline of about 17% between 1990 and 2016. In those years, Odessa's urban population diminished from 1,092,000 to 1,009,000 inhabitants, amounting to a demographic shrinkage of 8%. Like its capital, the state of Odessa (Oblast Odessa) has witnessed a population shrinkage from 2,638,200 to 2,390,000 during these decades.



center, this street resembles any other vivid, slightly run-down residential area in the city. A newly renovated bridge shields this part of the street from the multistoried ruins of the former casino Chrystal Palace and a few immensely dilapidated buildings behind high piles of debris and garbage. A few meters further north, towards the next bridge and the port of Odessa, the street turns back into a residential area: behind the damaged windows and locked doors of these heavily dilapidated rows of houses are curtains and human voices, while in front of them are parked cars.

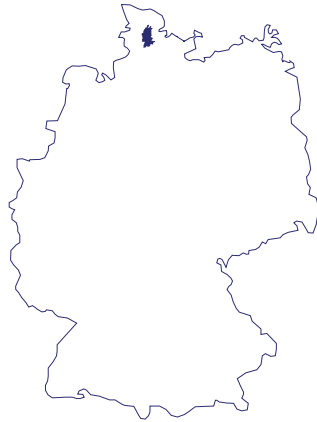
Unlike the closed off, clearly inhabited residential houses, the ruins of the casino Chrystal Palace are openly accessible from the street and occasionally climbed by teenagers posing for a photo, or accessed by the members of a cleaning crew, who sweep the street as I walk along Devolanivs'kyi Descent. Every once in a while, rattling cars drive over the irregular pavement, and elderly passersby carefully place one foot in front of the other, as they try not to trip over a loose cobblestone.





Three hundred meters from the main central station, **Kieler Straße** is a six-kilometers long street cutting vertically through Neumünster, a city of about 78.000 inhabitants. Starting in the southern center, this street extends to the northernmost and well-situated neighborhood of Einfeld. In its southern areas, Kieler Straße is sprinkled with a few predominantly empty boutiques and grocery stores, as well as numerous abandoned, two or three-storied apartment buildings. With their cracked window glasses, broken doors and peeling walls, many of the houses on Kieler Straße carry traces of weathering and dilapidation.

Regardless of its central location, I encounter only a handful of people and cars, disturbing the otherwise all-encompassing silence on Kieler Straße. As I repeatedly pass by doors slightly ajar or widely opened, I cannot help but wonder whether anybody still lives in these dilapidated houses at all. Occasionally I observe people as they enter the worn-out buildings by pushing their doors open, rather than getting out keys or ringing a doorbell.



## Kieler Straße, Neumünster, Germany

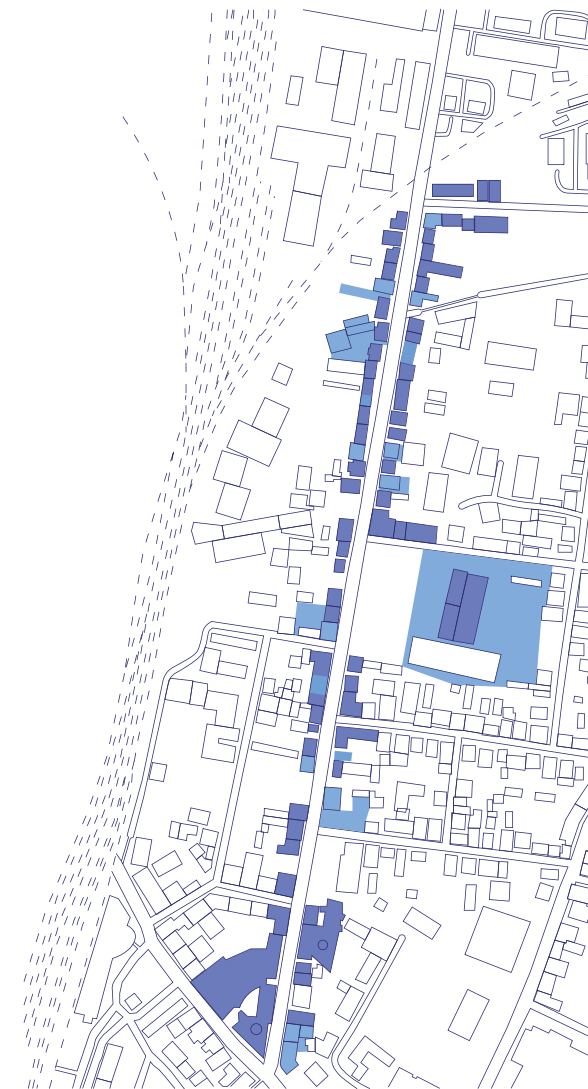
is, regardless of its diminishing urban population (83.000 to a predicted 71.605) inhabitants by 2025<sup>3</sup>), the fourth largest city in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. Over the course of the last 25 years, the city has witnessed a demographic shrinkage of about 7% and the highest vacancy rate in its state (5,3%), while as a country, Germany has seen a national population growth of approximately 4%.



<sup>3</sup>General information, statistics, demographic trends and forecasts regarding the state of Schleswig-Holstein were extracted from the 2008 regional demographic report of *Projekte und Studien für Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* in July 2018.



Entering several of the open buildings myself, I encounter numerous handwritten notes asking the residents to close the doors due to the many recent burglaries. While some of the houses look as run-down and abandoned from the inside, as they did from outside, in others, as I remain motionless in their entrance halls and corridors, I can hear the unexpected sounds of their inhabitants speaking, arguing, or listening to their radios and TVs.

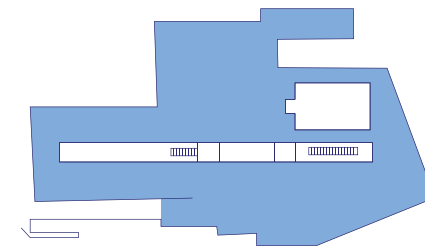


- Locked/barricaded structures
- Accessible/widely open structures
- Semi-accessible structures

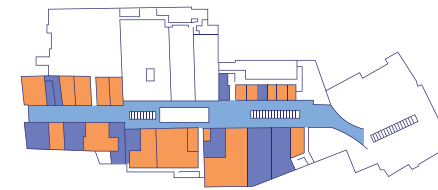
Zoom in: Voids on Kieler Straße

The third scenario in which the opening and closure of built structures manifested in a highly contrasting way, presented itself in the 33.000-strong city of Itzehoe. Located within a few minutes walking distance from the main railway station, **Holstein Center** is a four-storey shopping mall with only eighteen of the nearly fifty retail spaces still in use. While some of its empty stores are locked behind glass fronts or wooden boards, others are left open, as if still inviting visitors into the gaping emptiness framed by raw walls and electrical lines.

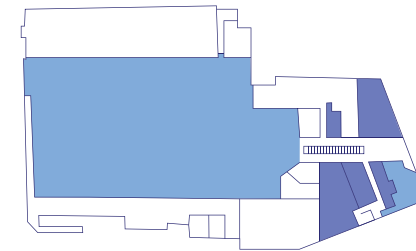
Holstein Center has two public entrances, one of them located on the ground-floor and facing the shopping street *Feldschmiedekamp*, while the other one is on the third floor, leading to the multi-lane car road *Brunnenstraße*. As I enter the mall from *Feldschmiedekamp*, I am welcomed by two large empty retail spaces on both sides of the entrance, out of which one is locked behind glass fronts, while the other one is openly accessible. Some of the people who enter the mall with me pass through this empty, open retail space to our left, which, as I later learn, leads to an elevator



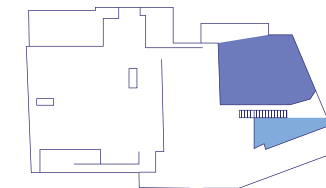
Parking Deck



Third floor



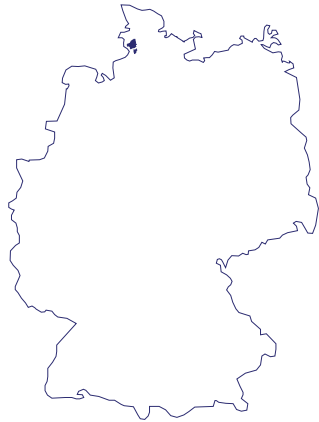
Second floor



Ground floor

- Locked/barricaded structures
- Accessible/widely open structures
- Semi-accessible structures

Zoom in: Voids at Holstein Center



## Holstein Center, Itzehoe, Germany

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as the tenth largest city in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, Itzehoe has witnessed a steady demographic shrinkage of 4% between the 1990s and 2016, when it counted approximately 32.000 residents. Similar to the city, the state of Schleswig-Holstein was predicted to undergo a shrinkage of 2,5% between 2011 and 2025.





in its rear end. Others, like myself, head straight for the escalators in front of us, transit the first and second floor, pass by the glass fronts of numerous empty boutiques and arrive on the slightly more lively third floor. Here we are surrounded by a handful of other people who stroll slowly through the arcade, or sit down on one of the benches. Not the sounds of music, door alarms, coffee machines and conversations dominate the soundscape at Holstein Center, but rather the fragments of muted conversations and squeaky shoes, wrapping the shopping centre in a sleepy atmosphere.

In the initial phase of my study I perceive both, widely open and barricaded entrances to hint at negligence and abandonment. Contrary to my assumptions, while some of these structures turn out to be *void* indeed, others are enlivened and used, judging by the muted radio voices sounding from the backyards of publicly accessible residential buildings, young families lingering in the seating areas of a half-empty shopping mall or teenagers climbing piles of debris in front of resolving ruins.

Intrigued by the question, why some apparently *void* urban structures are barricaded, while others are widely opened, as well as *why* and by *whom* the open structures are accessed, I wondered, whether these phenomena could hint at changing social behaviors and habits in areas with accumulated *voids*: Did the open house entrances in Neumünster indicate that people are more familiar with each other? Why do the residents of Devolaniv's'kyi Descent in Odessa do the opposite by installing code-locks and security guards on their half-deserted street? Similarly, why did people still visit the half-empty shopping mall in Neumünster, walking through its empty stores and arcades, rather than stepping into the *functional* boutiques?

Seeking to investigate these contradictory phenomena as potential manifestations of the impact of accumulated *voids* on their human and built environments, I decided to narrow down the framework of my research to the two streets and the shopping mall in Odessa, Neumünster and Itzehoe.

## 5. Which **impact** do urban *voids* have on their **human and inanimate** surroundings?

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### 5.1 Methodology

### 5.2 General observations

### 5.3 Analysis of socio-spatial references

#### 5.3.1 Devolanivs'kyi Descent, Odessa

#### 5.3.2 Kieler Straße, Neumünster

#### 5.3.3 Holstein Center, Itzehoe

### 5.4 Discussion

#### 5.4.1 Socio-spatial fragmentation

#### 5.4.2 A tradition of resentment

#### 5.4.3 Reinterpreting the *voids*

## 5.1 Methodology

I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with the residents, employees and visitors of Kieler Straße, Devolanivs'kyi Descent and Holstein Center. My questions involved their perception of social and material changes within the three areas of research; their familiarity and modes of interacting with their neighbors or customers; their feeling of safety and patterns of navigating through their everyday environments at different times of the day; and not least their opinions on the widely opened or thoroughly barricaded structures surrounding them.

I selected my interviewees by means of snowball sampling, a method often deployed in the framework of qualitative research in order to find research subjects and generate contexts and encounters through initial contacts (Atkinson and Flint 2001). In other words, I chose this method in order to be referred from one interview partner to the next, determining bonds or links between my first conversation partners and their referrals and circles of acquaintances (Berg, 1988). With an average age of 43,7 years, my interview partners ranged in age from 17 to 75. In total, 54,3% of my interviewees were female and 45,7% male.

In order to analyze the transcribed contents of my interviews<sup>4</sup> inductively, I chose Grounded Theory as a qualitative research method, which allows working out hypotheses and concepts systematically and in relation to the data collected during the course of the research (Glaser and Strauss 1967), rather than verifying preexisting theories potentially projectable to the research question. With the help of this research method I deducted thematic codes and overarching categories and extracted in-vivo codes – specific expressions used and references made by my interview partners – from my textual documents, in order to get a better understanding of the words, jargons and

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<sup>4</sup> Having originally conducted interviews in Russian, German and English, I have translated them into English myself.

specialized vernacular underlying in their answers (Manning 2014). Moreover, this method enabled me to recognize more overarching commonalities and contradictions in the narratives of my interviewees.

In order to illustrate the numerous human and spatial references articulated by my interviewees throughout our conversations, I produced maps and cartographic visualizations: firstly, having learned about several people I was not able to encounter during my research, I distinguished between the actors I had met, spoken to, or observed, and those, who were referred to but remained invisible until the end within these visual formats. In the framework of a second set of maps I further visualized areas described to me as particularly safe or dangerous, prestigious or troublesome during the interviews. Lastly, I depicted the modes in which my interview partners reportedly adapted their movement and navigation within their everyday areas.

## 5.2 General Observations

Before offering in-depth accounts of the social and spatial implications of *voids* based on the three case studies, this section provides a brief illustration of some common themes and general observations on the basis of my interviews in Neumünster, Odessa and Itzehoe.

The vast majority of my conversation partners described Kieler Straße and Devolanivs'kyi Descent, as well as the shopping mall Holstein Center as disastrous environments, repeatedly using words such as catastrophe, apocalypse, enclave and state of emergency. In the smaller cities of Neumünster and Itzehoe, many described their feeling of being forgotten, left behind and substituted by their adjacent, larger neighbors Flensburg, Hamburg or Kiel. Especially in comparison to these cities, many of my interviewees mourned not only over the negative developments in their material surroundings, but also over the increasing numbers of unpunished burglaries and the diminishing numbers of visitors and cultural offerings in their everyday environments.

On Devolanivs'kyi Descent my interviewees complained about the devastating condition of their street as well. However, rather than explaining these processes through the comparison with other cities, they considered the decline of their street an isolated phenomenon, feeling like a blind spot in the fabric of the otherwise well-maintained historic district of the city. Further, unlike my German conversation partners who spoke in a rather disdainful manner about their cities, Odessians seemed much more emotionally attached to their place of residence. During our short encounters, the stories of their street were laid out before me, involving every displaced cobblestone; every function, assigned to a house during the last century and every city planner, involved in the construction of Devolanivs'kyi Descent.

Regardless of how my interviewees felt about the current state of their cities, many of my conversations were permeated by nostalgia



for the past and the impatient anticipation of a better future: “Every stone was laid out neatly, trees were growing everywhere and a real waterfall was running in the park around the corner. [...] They keep promising us to take care of our street and build a bridge behind our house,” Nina, who was raised in house Nr. 1 on Devolanivs’kyi Descent herself, before raising her children and grandchildren here, told me. “They have just rebuilt one of the historic bridges,” as I further learned from one the guards watching the private parking lots in the neater end of this street, “and promised to renovate the pavement next.”

Similarly, at Holstein Center in Itzehoe, many of my interviews dwelled in their memories of the past and a hopeful vision of the future: having eagerly visited the shopping mall when it was still bustling with life, today Heidrun mainly comes here to park her car. “At the time of its inauguration, fountains, water playgrounds and restaurants were a reality at Holstein Center,” the elderly lady told me. Pharmacist Sylvia and cleaner Simone, both employees of the shopping center, spoke optimistically about the new investor, who is about to start renovating the building, rent out its empty retail spaces and advertise the commercial opportunities in Itzehoe, so that it can return to its former glory.

However, my interviewees’ dissatisfaction with the processes in their everyday environments seemed hardly reducible to the uncontrolled dilapidation of their built environments: conversations about both, the negatively perceived status quo and the vision of a desirable future were irrevocably linked to the idea of the *other*. Whether *investors* or *city officials*, *immigrants*, *revolting teenagers*, *social welfare recipients*, *drug addicts*, *alcoholics* or the *homeless* – in the next chapter I will show that an overwhelming majority of my interviewees closely related all negatively perceived material, spatial and social transformations of their surroundings with very particular actors and groups and described their growing resentment towards these scapegoated people emphatically.

## 5.3 Analysis of socio-spatial<sup>5</sup> references

### 5.3.1 Devolanivs’kyi Descent, Odessa

Amongst the most salient and omnipresent actors in the narratives of my interviewees on Devolanivs’kyi Descent were investors, who were assumed to buy up empty, historical buildings protected from redevelopment and demolition on this street. According to my conversation partners, these investors let monumental buildings run down until they lose their preservation orders, eventually replacing them with more lucrative high-rises. In the meantime, the empty and unmaintained properties taint the appearance of Devolanivs’kyi Descent over lengthy periods of time. Unlike the investors, whose presence was embodied only by their dilapidating buildings, other unbeloved actors, such as *city officials*, *gypsies*, *alcoholics*, *drug addicts* and *homeless people* were believed to loiter or house in the most ruinous, openly accessible structures on the street. “This street is empty. Only a couple of gypsies who live in the buildings further down the road

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<sup>5</sup> The term socio-spatial is used as an agent to highlight the interdependence and interactive connection between the two dimensions in the urban sphere – between inhabitants and their social and ecological environment (Spatschek and Wolf-Ostermann 2009).



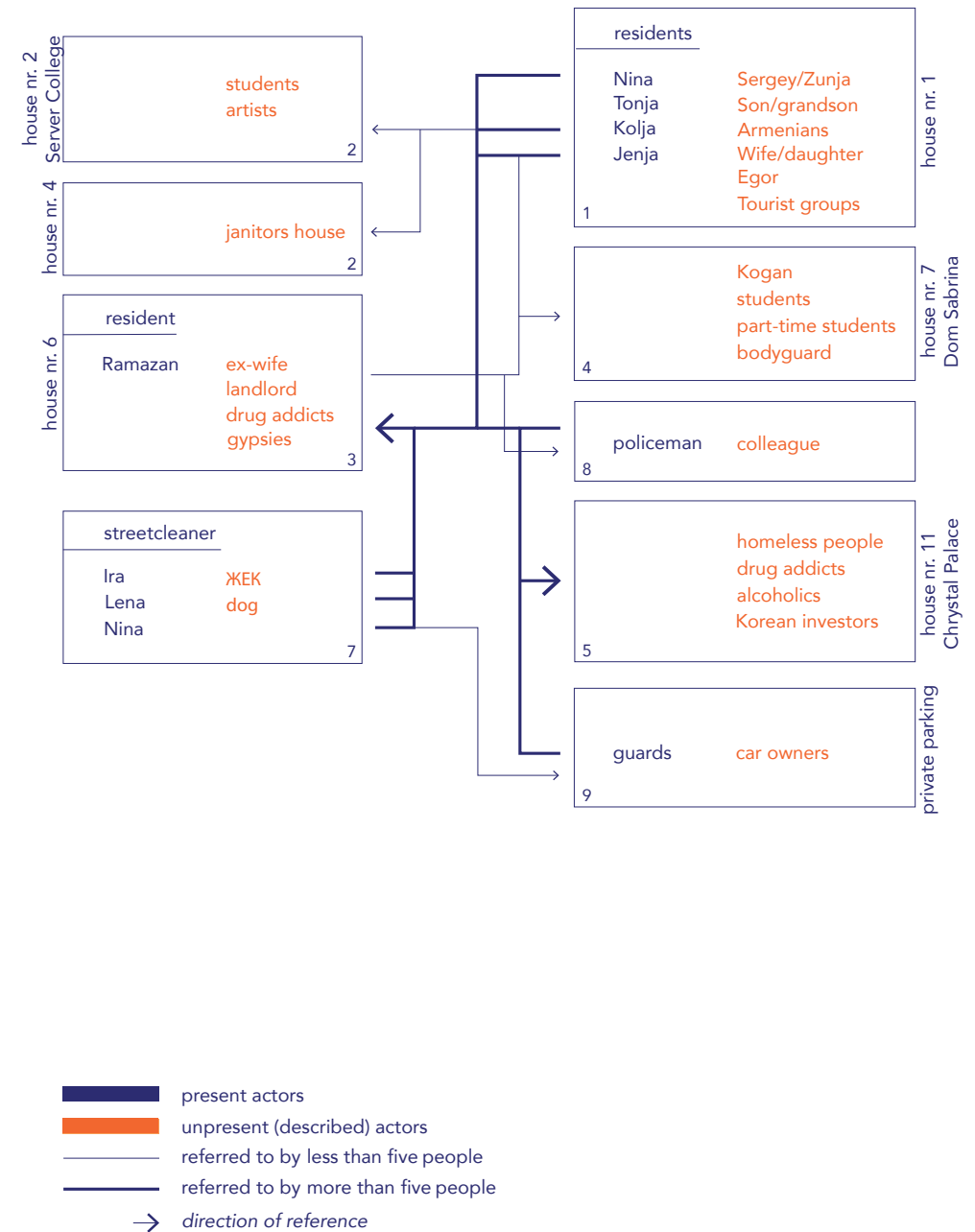
and a few bums who occupy the ruins over there.” said Lena (7), the member of a street cleaning initiative, pointing at the former casino Chrystal Palace (5) and adding “I sometimes run into really shady people when I walk my dog on this street.” Kolja, the beforementioned resident of house Nr. 1 (1), a worn-out building with a colorfully painted entrance behind a tall metal fence, further told me: “For the last twenty years people have lived under these conditions and nothing has been done about it. Why don’t they renovate our street?” Joining our conversation, Kolja’s neighbor Nina pointed at the house on the opposite side of the road explaining that it is rented out to gypsies (3), who, as she added reproachfully, leave their trash in the

middle of the street and cause constant unrest in the neighborhood: “Just the other day, the police was here because one of them killed his wife.” As Ramazan, a young man standing in front of the half-ruined building Nina was referring to, later told me “there are seven or eight people living in the two rooms that didn’t fall apart yet. I have been here only for a few days and we already had the police over. You cannot trust people like these. Even the young boys take drugs and drink.” From the two security guards who were watching the private parking places further southwards, I learned that the garages belong to people, who chose not to live on this street themselves. “Devolanivs’kyi Descent always used to be a street of bandits and it still is. There are drug addicts living in the former casino over there. The building was bought up by Korean investors recently, but they haven’t done anything in order to clean up the mess.”

Regardless of the overwhelmingly negative social references expressed by my interviewees, some of them proved to be deeply embedded into small communities of people: for instance, Nina and Kolja, inhabitants of house Nr. 1, asked each other friendly and intimate questions during our conversation, emphasizing that they have known each other closely over the course of many years. However, as becomes visible in map 01, outside of such tightly woven in-house communities and smaller groups of affiliates, such as the two garage guards or the members of the street cleaning initiative, none of my interviewees referred to any other residents or visitors of Devolanivs’kyi Descent positively. Rather, it seemed that within their street scapegoated neighbors were their only thematic point of intersection. Interestingly, while my interview partners continuously referred to an *empty* street *full* of *investors, gypsies, alcoholics* and *drug addicts*, the majority of these disregarded people remained invisible throughout my visits of Devolanivs’kyi Descent. Yet, the thought of their presence appeared to fill the uncertain insides of the dilapidated structures on this street.



Further, the described social insecurities and aversions seem to fuel my interviewees' perception of danger and safety on Devolanivs'kyi Descent. As a result, they named areas, which they preferred over others or considered particularly dangerous at certain times of the day. Moreover, they repeatedly pointed out ways in which they have adapted their everyday behaviors on the street in order to protect themselves and their houses from unpleasant encounters and burglaries: for instance, Nina and Kolja, residents of house Nr.1, explained that the processes of securing inhabited houses on their street began in the 1990's, when the number of break-ins started to increase and even parts of Devolanivs'kyi Descent's cobbled pavement would disappear over night. Since that time, like many on this street their house and backyard were locked behind an iron fence. Joining our conversation, their neighbor Jenja added that just like at Dom Sabrina (4), the boarding school, which was protected by a guard parking in front of the newly renovated building, they tried not to let strangers into their house anymore. "I never see people walking on this street," as Ramazan further told me, "and I do not see a reason to leave the house myself. There are only homeless people in the ruins over there [pointing at the former casino] anyway."













### 5.3.2 Kieler Straße

As they described their frustration over the material and human changes within the street, the residents and visitors of Kieler Straße in Neumünster also eagerly referred to *them* – the *foreigners*, *Bulgarians*, *Romanians* and *alcoholics*, who continuously appeared before the inner eyes of my interviewees. Germans or immigrants, residents or visitors – during my conversations it seemed as if nobody wanted to live *with them* and *like them*, seeking to stay at a distance from their notorious and accused neighbors.

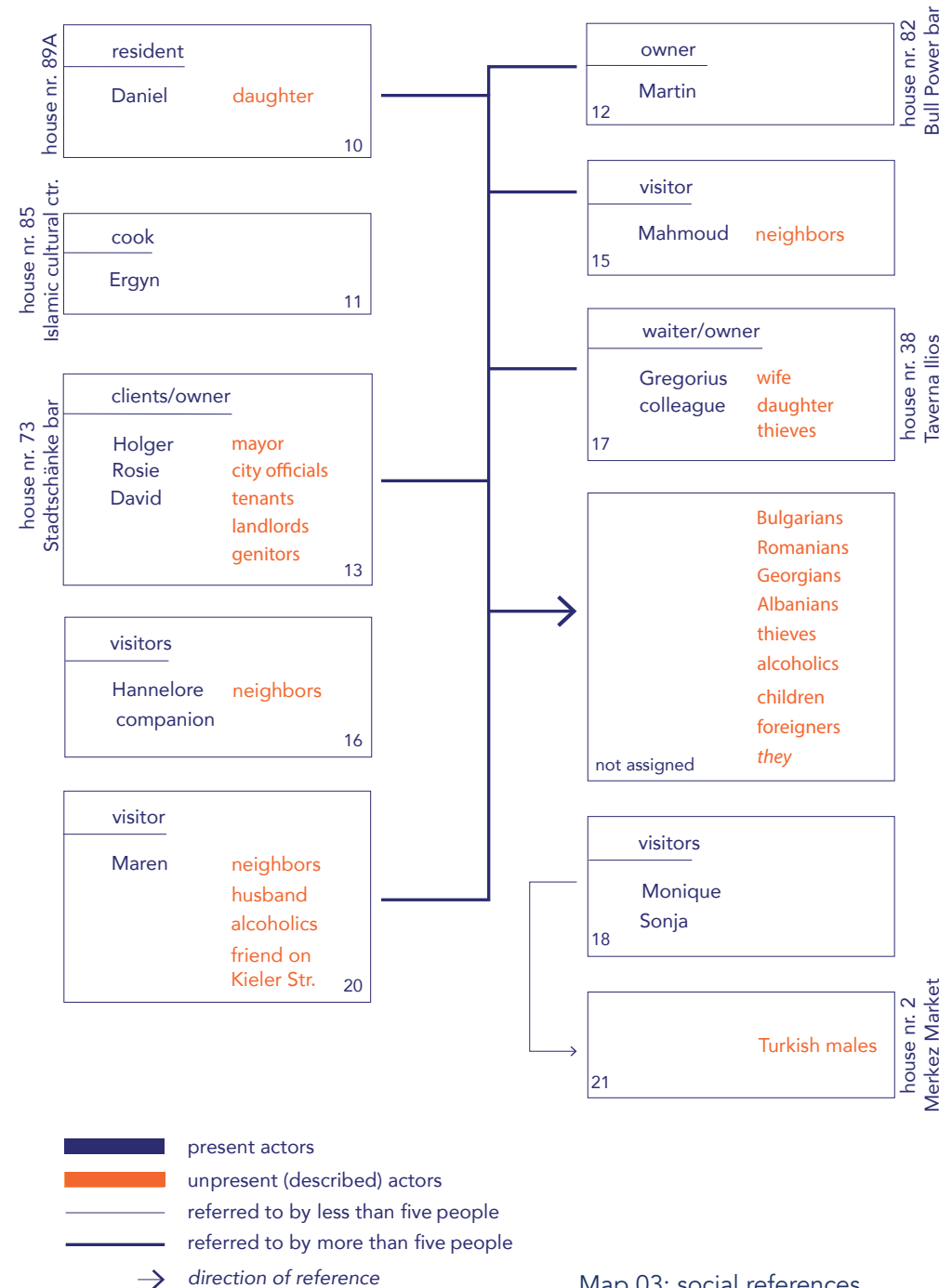
When asked about the people residing on or visiting Kieler Straße, Daniel (10), whom I encountered in the backyard of an open house, told me: “I do know the people in our house, but there are many Bulgarians, who get drunk and fight in the street,” indicating that he knows only people who are *not Bulgarian*. Rosie, the owner of the pub *Stadtschänke* (13), further explained that she has witnessed this street’s decline over the last decades and knows all those people *involuntarily*. Gregorius, the owner of Tavern Ilios (17) on Kieler Straße, also complained about the *Romanians*, *Bulgarians*, *Georgians* and *Albanians*, who linger in the streets all day, deal with drugs, break into basements, fill the streets with old furniture and let their children play on the car road carelessly. The restaurant owner further told me that while he might be one of the 30.000 immigrants living in Neumünster, “those foreigners are no good. I shoo them away as soon as they come near my restaurant.”

Most of my interviewees used questions about the many openly accessible buildings on their street as a further occasion to point fingers: “The doors”, as Rosie assumed, “are left open in order to air the many moldy apartments in this area. Nobody takes care of this stinking, dirty street - neither the city officials, nor the landlords.” Headed to a friend’s place in the neighborhood, Maren (20) explained that foreigners and alcoholics lose the keys to their apartments when they are drunk and break the door locks in order to get back home.

On his way to the Mosque, Mahmoud (15) also told me that it is typical of the *Bulgarian* and *Romanian* residents in this *bad neighborhood* to leave doors open and pile up old furniture on the street, stating that where he lives, the street is taken better care of and doors are always closed. Mahmoud was one of several interviewees, using the context of the open doors on Kieler Straße to point out that things are better where they live: “The area in which I live isn’t pretty, but I cannot complain. The houses are in better condition and it is not as loud as here. Everything is safe and closed,” David (13), one of Rosie’s clients at Stadtschänke added, pointing towards Wichernstraße in the direction of Einsfeld. “They behave in the same way they did back in their home countries,” Martin further told me, as he closed down his bar “Bull Power,” adding that further up on Kieler Straße 545, where he lives, everything is calm and in order.

Map 03 shows the social and human references made by my interviewees in Neumünster. During our conversations, many described their narrow familiar circles, such as their children and spouses, before proceeding to scapegoat the *loutish*, *unkempt* and *criminal* rest of the neighborhood. Similar to Odessa, while positive neighborly relations and affiliations amongst the residents and visitors of Kieler Straße were barely referred to, the vast majority of my interviewees had found a common denominator in their unbeloved neighbors. As becomes further visible in map 03, while the accused are omnipresent in the narratives of my interviewees, they remained invisible for me throughout my visits of Kieler Straße.

As illustrated in map 04, my interviewees repeatedly distinguished between two highly contrasting areas within Kieler Straße. The northern, less densely populated areas above Bismarckstraße, including the neighborhood of Einsfeld, were considered to be *safer* and more livable, while the areas in its south and towards the railway station [where I conducted the interviews] were perceived as *dodgy* or *dangerous* by many.



Mainly as a reaction to the described insecurities towards their neighbors in the southern parts of the street, many of my interview partners had reportedly changed their modes of moving through these areas over time. In this context, those who lived and worked on Kieler Straße described to me their attempt to withdraw into the premises of their apartments and businesses, while those who only passed through the area tried to circumvent certain areas perceived as particularly unsafe between *Anscharstraße* and *Bismarckstraße*: “It depends on where exactly you are,” I learned from Monique and Sonja (18), two teenage girls strolling on Kieler Straße. “For instance, nothing troubling ever happens in the area around the kindergarten (19). We do, however, avoid the area around the Turkish men’s café (21). Especially in the evening we try not to walk there,” the girls further told me. Living in the northern parts of Kieler Straße, Hannelore (16) stated that she picks out alternative streets parallel to Kieler Straße whenever she needs to get to the center of Neumünster. “I don’t like Kieler Straße at all,” agreed Maren, adding that this street is *acceptable* up to *Anscharstraße* and that she makes a turn to take a detour after she reaches the intersection of the two streets. Unlike Hannelore and Maren, Daniel spends most of his time in this neighborhood. However, “because of the regular fights in front of our house,” as he stated, “I try to go to specific, calmer places. For instance, I take my daughter to the playground (14) next door where they rarely go.”

As becomes visible in map 04, similarly to Odessa, the perception of insecurity related to certain groups occupying seemingly *void* spaces appears to have impacted the moving patterns of my interviewees in Neumünster, causing them to take detours around certain parts of Kieler Straße or avoid the street altogether.







### 5.3.3 Holstein Center

To a certain extent the antipathy of my interviewees towards their scapegoated neighbors in Odessa and Neumünster was mirrored in the attitude of the employees towards the visitors of Holstein Center. From the shop sellers and owners, a pharmacist, a cleaning lady and a security guard I learned that its main clientele, the *wealthier middleclass*, had long withdrawn from the shopping mall. These days, according to the interviewed employees, visitors mainly consisted of *social welfare recipients* with substantially less money at their disposal; *rioting teenagers*, who dispose of their empty beer bottles and cigarette butts on the parking deck and turn off escalators; *alcoholics*, who linger by the two entrances of Holstein Center all day long; and *immigrants*, who live in the nearby high-rises and come downstairs to occupy the benches in the arcade with their children daily. “Some of our new fellow citizens,” as Christine (27), the owner of a tobacco store on the third floor told me, “get drunk, team up and start fights at the mall.” Others “sit on the benches all day long. Our security staff struggles to restrict this. Its incredible how often we have to call the police on them.” Security guard Karsten (28) further noted that its visitors had earned Holstein Center the nickname *Asibunker* (antisocial bunker), telling me that the mall predominantly attracts *industrious drinkers* and *people with an immigration background*, who only come here to sit and kill time, like “the ladies (26) over there. This is just a break hall for them and so they come here to babble. And if you enter the mall from Brunnenstraße you walk over a pile of *drunkards*. You will probably do this once and then never come back.” As cleaner Simone (29) further stated, “this place has been turned into a youth center. There is no purchase power in this city and nobody comes to shop at the mall,” adding that her only job is to clean after *rioting teenagers* (22), who throw empty beer bottles and cigarette butts onto the floors, turn on smoke detectors, spray the walls and insult her verbally.”

Unlike in the two streets in Odessa and Neumünster, at Holstein Center I encountered not only those, who blamed others for the

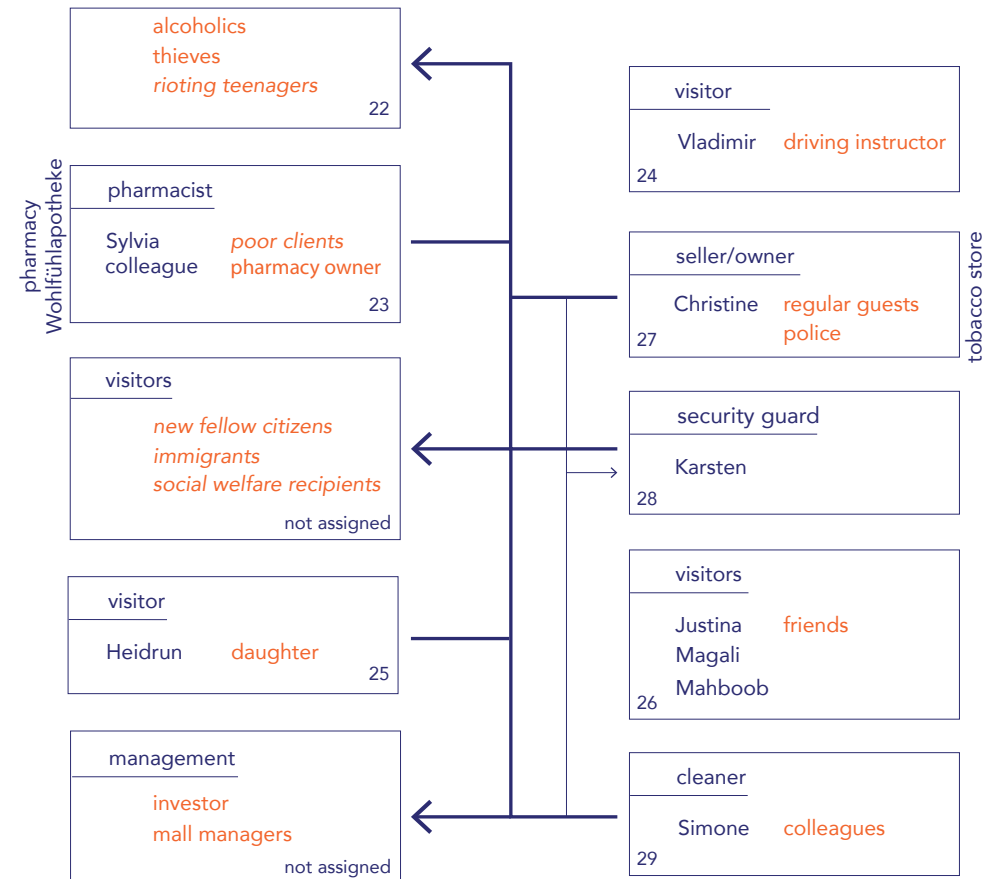
negatively perceived transformations of their everyday environments, but also some of the accused. In contrast to the employees, who spoke disdainfully of the mall’s new functions as a *break hall*, *youth center*, *promenade* or *pedestrian passage*, the visitors pragmatically dubbed it a *shortcut*, *meeting point*, *parking possibility*, or a *place to catch ones breath* during our conversations.



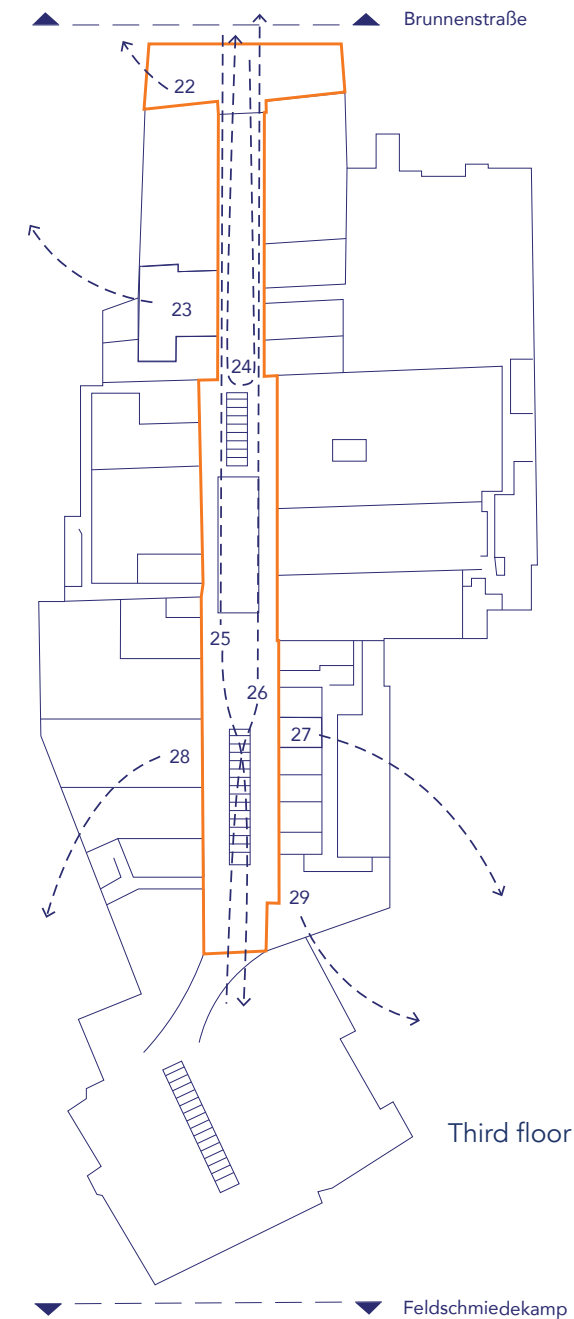
Map 05 depicts the social references made by my interviewees. As visualized, the accusing interviewees barely made any friendly or solidary references to fellow employees, friends or acquaintances. Similarly to Odessa and Neumünster, they rather concentrated on their anxieties and aversions towards those who they called *new fellow citizens*, *social welfare recipients*, *rioting teenagers* and *alcoholics* during our interviews, repeatedly emphasizing their reluctance to interact with, clean after or rebuke the abovementioned actors. In contrast, the scapegoated visitors of the mall seemed oblivious to their negative connotation amongst the employees throughout our conversations. Moreover, while they seemed to consider the material changes at Holstein Center as equally unfortunate, they refrained from pointing fingers and seeking out the guilty, rather concentrating on their new modes of using the half-empty shopping center.



Either way, most of the visitors I talked to and observed at Holstein Center did not seem to have come here to shop indeed: a few Afghani (26) women, surrounded by trolleys, bags and drinking bottles cheerfully chatted with each other, while their children ran through the arcade. My attempt to interview them remained unsuccessful, as we did not find a common language. However, other visitors such as Vladimir (24), a teenage boy awaiting his driving instructor, told me: “I guess that people use the mall as a shortcut between two streets. There’s a bus station on this side [pointing to Brunnenstraße] and different shops, cafes and the railway station on the other one.” Noting that she used to buy everything at Holstein Center, when the mall was still filled with life, Heidrun (25) added that she only comes here to park her car or to use the mall as a safer walkway through the city. Security guard Karsten further spoke of the socially unprivileged families, who live in the circumjacent high-rises and “pass through this building only to shop at Netto [a discount food retailer on Brunnenstraße]. This building is rather a promenade, than a shopping mall.” In face of the increased amounts of burglaries at Holstein Center, pharmacist Sylvia (23) mentioned that she rarely walks through the mall itself, rather using the rear door of the pharmacy on her way out of the building.



- present actors
- unpresent (described) actors
- referred to by less than five people
- referred to by more than five people
- direction of reference



- described as unpleasant zones
- - - - - described as preferred routes
- described as likely direction of movement

Map 06: spatial references

As illustrated in map 06, most of the employees at Holstein Center were inside of their working spaces and, as some of them stated, tried to walk as little as possible through the arcades of Holstein Center, in which most of its visitors sat, chatted or strolled. In face of the many empty stores, the visitors come to use the mall for other purposes than shopping, thus barely entering even the functional ones or interacting with the employees. Only the empty, accessible retail spaces were sometimes used as a shortcut to the elevators to get from the first to the third floor. As a result, juxtaposed in the confined spaces of the enlivened third floor of Holstein Center, the two groups seemed to experience the mall in two parallel realities, which did not appear to intersect.







## 5.4 Discussion

### 5.4.1 Socio-spatial fragmentation

Along with growing vacancy rates and processes of uncontrolled decay, many of my conversation partners have witnessed changes in the material and social qualities of their living or working environments. Furthermore, the presence, customs and behaviors of new actors, occupying and reinterpreting adjacent *voids* were perceived with unease by several of my interviewees: observing these slow material and social transformations over longer periods of time, my interview partners expressed a feeling of powerlessness and of being at the mercy of these new groups and individuals, believed to be catalysts for the decline of their urban surroundings: in fact, almost every person I spoke to had someone to blame for the negatively perceived changes. Lingering in the supposedly empty areas of the streets instead of traversing them hastily or remaining in the seating area of the shopping arcade instead of strolling through boutiques, the disregarded groups and individuals appeared to have established their own routines and habits

within the assumed *void* areas; routes and habits which were described as aimless, suspicious or uncanny during many of my interviews in Odessa, Neumünster and Itzehoe. In this context, all people, who were believed to linger in the two streets and the shopping mall with no apparent purpose, were considered to be up to no good – poor, unemployed and with a tendency to engage in criminal activities. Despite my efforts to familiarize with the perspectives of the accusers *and* the accused, seeking out the latter proved to be difficult in all three cities. Only in Itzehoe was I able to observe and talk to some of the actors, reportedly misusing and tainting the appearance of the shopping mall. Unsurprisingly, their perspectives significantly deviated from the aforementioned unflattering characterizations imposed on them and while they engaged in other activities at Holstein Center than shopping indeed, they did not make the impression of being too poor or too drunken to do so. Rather, they expressed their mixed feelings about the shopping mall as well, trying to grasp its new qualities as a public space to meet, rest, or use as a shortcut.

Contrary to my initial assumption, the widely opened structures in Neumünster did not represent increased neighborly familiarity and interaction. Instead, especially on Kieler Straße, the many opened structures were perceived as a security hazard and blamed on the foreign, loitering and drunken neighbors. Those, who lived in houses with constantly reopened doors complained about increased numbers of burglaries and about irresponsible neighbors, while those who lived elsewhere, described their unwillingness to pass by the open houses with the sketchy inhabitants. In contrast, on Devolnivs'kyi Descent most inhabited houses were locked meticulously, while newly built structures turned their backs on the street. Not the extreme opening, but closure and inaccessibility dominated the appearance of this half-deserted street. Yet, given Odessa's reputation as a city with open and inviting backyards and the ease, with which people used to meet and connect with strangers in these hidden passages throughout the city, it was precisely the closure that my interviewees

described as a phenomenon unfamiliar to their neighborhood. While it seemed that my conversation partners had more control over the (in)accessibilities of their buildings in Odessa than in Neumünster, the widely opened and locked entrances indeed appeared to be symptomatic of the changing social interactions and behaviors in their two neighborhoods.

In light of the above, *void* structures appear to have a significant impact on my interviewees' social perceptions: firstly, *voids* appear to be associated with insecurity and danger, allegedly emanating from negatively connoted new groups of people. The references to a vast variety of these actors – in combination with a substantial recourse to xenophobic stereotypes – indicate that the negative perception of *voids* has an important social dimension: in a way, citizens appear to fill the *voids* with their discomfort and stereotypes towards, as well as their desire to disentangle their identity and daily life from the *other*. Moreover, *void* structures and their depicted social implications appear to entail changes in the usage of urban space and associated patterns of movement. In fact, both the accusers – who aim to avoid the perceived zones of discomfort/insecurity – and the accused – who have established new forms and purposes of usage within and around the *voids* – seem to have changed the dynamics and routines of movement in the two streets and the shopping mall in Odessa, Neumünster and Itzehoe. Taken together, I will subsume these processes under the term *socio-spatial fragmentation*, referring to the evident fragmentation of urban space around the studied *voids*, resulting from the citizens' altering social perceptions, daily routes and routines.



## 5.4.2 A tradition of resentment

Remarkably, the widespread unacceptance of certain actors and groups as neighbors and their reputation as catalysts for the decay and *voiding* of Kieler Straße and Devolanivs'kyi Descent appear to be well-established phenomena following a long tradition of social devaluation and xenophobia in the two streets. In this context, my interviewees' alternate equation of *voids* and their (occasional) occupants through statements like "this street is empty. Only a couple of gypsies who live in the buildings further down the road [...]" could imply that they have denied certain actors and groups the acknowledgement as residents, neighbors and even as *bodies*, capable of filling the *voids*, over many years or even decades: for instance, according to a study conducted by the University of Kiel, the residents of Kieler Straße have had a tendency to blame city officials and landlords for not renovating dilapidated houses and accusing foreigners and social welfare recipients of exacerbating the critical situation by overcrowding their apartments, drinking, fighting, making noise and defacing the appearance of the neighborhood already back in 1992. As the study concluded, under the guise of bemoaned disorder and noise more profound biases and anxieties manifested themselves throughout the interviewees' narratives - such as the fear of losing their jobs and apartments to their foreign neighbors. Besides the fact that Turkish citizens have been substituted by *Bulgarians* and *Romanians* by the time of my visits to Kieler Straße, nothing seems to have changed about the fact that people were refusing to acknowledge certain groups as their neighbors over the course of many decades and still refuse to do so.

Similarly, Devolanivs'kyi Descent has never enjoyed the reputation of a pleasant neighborhood. Rather, during the last century, the street was notoriously known (and depicted in many movies) as the home of adventurous seamen and shady dealings. As Wladimir Chaplin, the director of Odessa's Museum of Jewish History told me, this street was always notoriously known for being a fertile ground for subver-

sive and criminal activities, "a rotting wound on the body of Odessa." While it seems to have lost its adventurous aftertaste over the last decades, the sense of danger has lingered especially in the narratives of its residents and visitors, who have never ceased to consider the unkempt and sketchy creatures in their street an exception rather than a rule.

In contrast to Neumünster and Odessa, it is not its past extending into the present of Holstein Center unnoticedly, but rather the future scenarios, promised by its managers and anticipated by its employees, which are already manifesting within the mall: In an article published in April 2018, the three owners of Holstein Center announced their plans to renovate and turn the shopping mall into the living room of Itzehoe by late 2019, offering citizens and visitors a cultural center with several gastronomic offerings and meeting points with a quality of stay. Ironically, many of the current activities at Holstein Center, referred to pejoratively during my interviews, are not as deviant from these future goals. Using it as a place to meet, eat a bite or rest, the arcades on the third floor have already gained the character of a living room, albeit only for those groups of people who are not accepted as the new and anticipated users by many of my interviewees.

## 5.4.3 Reinterpreting the voids

As has become evident in the preceding chapters, the residents, employees and visitors of Devolanivs'kyi Descent, Kieler Straße and Holstein Center have all adapted their modes of moving through their decaying and *voiding* surroundings. Most of the people I interviewed demonstrated a tendency to withdraw from and limit their exposure to their changing environments as much as possible. It was mostly in the narratives of these interviewees that I also learned about the groups and actors, who reportedly did the opposite by filling the *voiding* surroundings with their presence and everyday activities. Becoming apparent even in the pejorative descriptions and references

of most of my interviewees was that these actors had found new ways in which to reinterpret and enliven the *voids* in the three areas: people referred to as gypsies, alcoholics, drug addicts and the homeless were believed to use the ruins on Devolanivs'kyi Descent as a habitat and shelter. Others, described as Bulgarians, Romanians or foreigners were assumed to reappropriate Kieler Straße by spending more time outside of their houses and assembling in groups to sit, eat, chat, or dispose of old furniture. Lastly, the so-called welfare recipients, foreigners and alcoholics at Holstein Center apparently used the half-deserted shopping mall as a roofed space in which to meet friends and rest in the seating areas, or through which to pass, in order to avoid walking through the unmonitored and uncanny parallel streets.

Without a doubt, the ways in which most of the abovementioned people use and navigate through the *voiding* areas deviate from the initially assigned functions and established customs in the two streets and at the shopping mall. More than that, by ignoring the commercial function of Holstein Center, by residing in structures that seemed uninhabitable on Devolanivs'kyi Descent and by using the sidewalk and car road on Kieler Straße as an extension of their apartments, the actors and groups make undeniably clear that several buildings in these areas have lost their former functions and are being reinterpreted in formerly unknown ways by formerly unknown people. In other words, by filling these spaces with obviously new functions they inherently signalize a loss of the old ones.

## 6. Conclusion

## 7. References

Aiming to look beyond the surface of *void* structures in the urban context, this study offers several insights into the notion and the social implications of urban *voids*. In the first part, I have presented a catalogue of different indicators of *voids* and their characteristics based on subjectively set up categories. Within this catalogue I have labeled explicit indicators, such as the ruinous remains of residential houses or unfilled retail spaces that made unambiguously clear that the space was abandoned. In addition, I identified other, more implicit indicators, such as broken windows and other severe signs of weathering, hinting at *voids* more indirectly. I perceived especially those implicit structures to convey an uncanny sense of uncertainty. Remarkably, in light of the uncertainty over the functions and occupants of *these* alleged *voids*, my feeling of discomfort persisted even in those cases, in which blurry movements or sudden fragments of speech proved that the structures were inhabited.

One particularly salient implicit indicator, a reoccurring theme within and around *voids*, was the juxtaposition of open and closed structures. Against this backdrop, for the second part of this study, I have chosen the widely opened and barricaded urban structures in juxtaposition as lenses for the investigation of the socio-spatial implications of *voids* in the three case studies in Neumünster, Odessa and Itzehoe. Here I conducted interviews in order to learn how people perceive the accumulated *voids* in their surroundings and whether the extremely open or closed structures might be symptomatic for changes in their relations and interactions with their human and built environments.

In my three case studies, *void* spaces seemed to have become projection surfaces for anxieties, prejudices and resentments, frequently motivated by xenophobia or the degradation of certain social groups. Due to the sense of insecurity and danger associated with *voids*, as well as the depicted social resentments, some of my interviewees aimed to avoid perceived zones of discomfort and withdraw into safer spaces.

Others, however, established new forms and purposes of usage within the *void* structures, turning them into their homes or places of abode. Intentionally or not, through the withdrawal of some people and the extension of others, these two groups seemed to live (and move) in immediate juxtaposition and yet in clear distinction from each other. In light of the above, this study highlights a socio-spatial fragmentation resulting from the changed human interactions, routes and routines of my interviewees in and around Neumünster, Odessa and Itzehoe.

The approach taken in this study is to be broadly located within the strand of literature that approaches the notion of urban *voids* from a non-generative perspective – as self-sufficient, eventful and transformative spaces. In accordance with the work of Keller Easterling, Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs, I aimed to investigate the already complex dynamics within and around assumed *voids*, rather than suggesting ways in which to fill them. The presented findings further add to the work of George Kelling, James Wilson and Christine Dissmann, who investigate the impact of decaying and *voiding* environments on human audiences from a sociological perspective. However, extending beyond the grounds covered by existing literature, I offer an in-depth, critical account of the social and spatial dynamics and elucidate behavioral adaptations and patterns within and around *void* structures.

Given the increasing numbers of cities facing deindustrialization and economic stagnation, large accumulations of decaying and *voiding* built structures, fallows and ruins will remain a relevant challenge for policy makers, academics, as well as creative and urban practitioners alike. The findings of this study suggest that *voids* may not be at the root of persisting social tensions in crisis-torn areas and that it might be necessary to address the perception of urban *voids* not merely through their removal and refilling. Rather, given that certain groups were already reappropriating and reshaping their dilapidated surroundings in Odessa, Neumünster and Itzehoe, a fruitful approach might be to foster dialogue and exchange between them.



While this study did not aim at shaping policy solutions, the renovation or destruction of certain structures, but also smaller adaptations and modes of reinterpreting dilapidated spaces functionally could be turned into a communal matter between different residents and stakeholders. In this context, the facilitation of social meeting points, discussion rounds, workshops and initiatives for the residents of areas torn by crises and social tensions could allow them to determine the faith of their built surroundings collectively and regain a right to say over their immediate environments. In a nutshell, urban *voids* could take up the role of spaces of encounter and interaction, rather than that of alienation and fragmentation.

Beyond such practical approaches towards reconnecting different social groups, future research could investigate whether the tendency of certain actors to *expand into* and occupy assumed *voids* (and of others to withdraw from them) could be rooted in their diverse cultural backgrounds and different modes of using public space. Further, it could be of interest to investigate the perspectives of those actors and groups much more thoroughly, who were so difficult to locate during my research. Exploring their viewpoints could be conductive in order to learn not only about the precariousness, but much rather about the potential of *voids* to allow for new audiences, reinterpreted functions and modes of usage.

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