



# The involvement of real estate owners and the municipality in solving vacancy in inner-cities

Three case studies of medium-sized cities in Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands

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# Preface

In front of you is my master thesis “The involvement of real estate owners and the municipality in solving vacancy in inner-cities: three case studies of medium-sized cities in Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands.” This thesis was written to fulfil the graduation requirements of the master’s program Urban and Economic Geography at Utrecht University. I started writing my thesis in February with my research proposal. In March the thesis writing and researching started with my internship, which ended today on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2024.

The research was commissioned by Platform Binnenstadsmanagement. Platform Binnenstadsmanagement is an independent knowledge and network organisation, focusing on cooperation in inner-cities. Over 65 Dutch and Flemish inner-cities are members of the organisation (Platform Binnenstadsmanagement, 2024). I came across their research internship through the website of GeoBaan UU. I was immediately interested, especially the international context of the research appealed me. Once I was hired, I came to work as an research intern at both Platform Binnenstadsmanagement and BRO, an advisory consultancy in Boxtel. Besides writing my thesis, I carried out some tasks for BRO, in their team Functions & Policy. Through these two organisations, I gained more insight into my future field of work. For example through, the weekly planning meetings at BRO or at the day of the inner-city organised by Platform Binnenstadsmanagement.

The master thesis in front of you is relevant for people who are interested in the inner-city. For example, if you are a stakeholder in the inner-city, but also as a researcher. Or if you have a lot of contact with people in the inner-city through your organisation. The thesis offers recommendations for improving cooperation between stakeholders in the inner-city, which contribute to reducing vacancy rates in the inner-city. These recommendations are especially interesting for municipalities.

I would like to thank a number of persons, to start with my thesis supervisor, Bas Spierings. Thank you for the guidance during the process. I have benefited a lot from your always well-constructed feedback. I would also like to thank Ad Dekkers of Platform Binnenstadsmanagement and Frank Simons of BRO. The monthly check-in moments were very valuable and I could always come to you both for questions and feedback. I would also like to thank the other colleagues at BRO, I could always come to you for questions. Then I would like to thank the contact persons in the different cities, who provided me with the contacts of respondents. Next to them, I would also like to thank Kees Verhagen, Marinus Verhagen and Joost Pennings for reading through my chapters during the process and providing me with feedback.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, boyfriend and friends for their unconditional support. In particular, I would like to thank the ‘Lekker bieben’ Whatsapp group for their support and valuable insights during our weekly library sessions.

I wish you much reading pleasure.

Lise Verhagen  
Utrecht, 28th of June 2024

## Abstract

Inner-cities are important as being vibrant meeting places, economic centres and offer a wide range of amenities, yet they also face significant challenges. One challenge is vacancy, which has a negative effect on the street and cityscape of the inner-city, while stakeholders want a fun, vital and accessible inner-city. Cooperation between stakeholders in the inner-city is seen as a solution of the current vacancy problem. Therefore, the question that is answered in this research is: “To what extent does cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality have an impact on solving the vacancy problem in the inner-cities of medium-sized cities?” In this study three medium-sized cities in Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands are compared to learn from practices in international context. Real estate owners, municipality employees and other relevant professionals in the inner-city are interviewed about the organisations, strategies, resources and dependencies in the inner-city. What became clear in this research is that working together in an organisation in the inner-city contributes to solving the vacancy problem in the inner-city. Those collaborations ensure sustained investment and strategic alignment which both are crucial for addressing vacancy. Resources do not specifically affect solving vacancy, but the dependency, mainly on the resources of the municipality, associated with it does. This gives the following answer to the main question: effective cooperation between real estate owners and municipalities, characterized by structured financial involvement, active stakeholder engagement and strategic planning plays a critical role in solving vacancy problems and revitalizing inner-cities of medium-sized cities. Suggestions for further research are to examine cities in which cooperation is not yet so obvious. Next to that it would also be interesting to zoom in on the role of the municipality, to find out if and how they feel dependent on real estate owners. Additionally, researching big real estate companies, that don't have a connection with the particular inner-city, would be interesting as well. Finally, this study gives two policy recommendations, namely that municipalities should encourage initiatives between real estate owners and the municipality and therefore appoint a manager. Next to that, it is advised to set up a strategy of the inner-city and make the processes of permits faster.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

Inner-cities are of enormous value, they are lively meeting places, economic centres and offer a wide range of amenities (Sentel, 2023). The inner-city provides identity and vitality to the broader urban area. It's a central place where people meet for various purposes, giving it a social, economic and cultural value (Sentel, 2023; Evers et al., 2020). It is a place that is constantly changing, shaped by economic processes and technological advancements. Developments such as working from home, online shopping, flash deliveries and transformations from shop to housing require a new perspective on the inner-city. Additionally, the inner-city faces challenges in areas such as security and combating crime, the dwindling availability of amenities and issues related to climate adoption, mobility and densification. These challenges are part of the transformation of the inner-city (Broekman et al., 2022).

## 1.1. Retail vacancy in the inner-city

Another large challenge in the inner-city, is retail vacancy. This is a social problem. Vacant properties give a rundown and impoverished street- and cityscape and can be a target of vandalism. This has a negative effect on the city's business and investment climate and a price-dampening effect on property values (RVO, 2017). In 2021 and 2022 there was a significant decline in vacancy rates in the inner-city. With a vacancy rate of 6%, vacancy was to back to levels seen at the beginning of 2011, the end of the credit crisis. However in the last quarter of 2023, vacancy began to rise till 6,4% (Slob, 2024). In the inner-city, the percentage is even higher, namely 8,3% (Slikker et al., 2024). It is mainly the inner-cities of medium-sized cities that are struggling. More than one in ten shops is vacant in those inner-cities. Reasons could be competition from the nearby more attractive big cities and the fact that some shops are already vacant for long periods of time (Slikker et al., 2024). Other reasons are high rents, increased labour costs, steep energy prices and shopping has become more expensive. And also shopping behaviour has changed permanently since consumers shop online. Chains, like Zara and H&M, close branches, because their costumers mainly buy clothes online. They only keep their flagship stores in the big cities (Slikker et al., 2024). Next to that, municipalities in medium-sized cities often lack both the financial resources and manpower required to invest in their inner-cities and even maintain communication with entrepreneurs and real estate owners (Evers & Heebels, 2021).

## 1.2. 100 million euros available

Despite the challenges in the inner-city, its core functions, such as shopping, working, living and cultural activities, have remained consistent over the years. The inner-city is and will remain the place for meeting and connecting with others (Sentel, 2023). To ensure it remains liveable and appealing for residents, visitors and businesses, it is essential for the built environment to adapt continuously. To help cities, the Dutch national government has made 100 million euros available. The money is for the restructuring of shopping areas of inner-cities and business parks to improve liveability, so that transformation can be initiated (Evers & Heebels, 2021). However the national government can't work alone on this transformation challenges, stakeholders in the inner-city must cooperate (Sentel, 2023).

## 1.3. Stakeholders and their resources in the inner-city

Cooperation is seen by many as an important key in the transformation process (Platform Binnenstadsmanagement, 2020; RVO, 2017). According to Suijkerbuijk (2020)



collaboration between the 'golden triangle' is crucial. Parties of the 'golden triangle' are the municipality, real estate owners and entrepreneurs (Lansen et al., 2018; Van Dijken & Dorenbos, 2021). These parties are often not aware of each other's interests, do not have a shared vision for the future of the inner-city and do not cooperate sufficiently (Suijkerbuijk, 2020). As challenges in the inner-city have grown and more people live and work there, the concept of the 'golden circle' has emerged. Consumers and residents also play a significant role in the development of inner-cities (Platform Binnenstadsmanagement, 2020). The parties from the 'golden circle' are the carriers of the approach and are all needed for a successful transformation of the inner-city (IJdens-Talens et al., 2020). However, this research is specifically focused on the vacancy challenge. Real estate owners and the municipality have a direct impact on vacancy, because of property management and policies. In addition, these two parties have the resources to tackle vacancy, for example they decide about rents, renovations, policies and regulations. The engagement of consumers, residents and entrepreneurs is seen as important, but its beyond the scope of this particular study.

In a study of Hakansson & Lagin (2014) the critical role of real estate owners in the development of town centres is highlighted. They concluded that real estate owners often overlook the necessity of actively engaging as stakeholders (Hakansson & Lagin, 2014). It is also difficult for the municipality to involve real estate owners in the inner-city (IJdens-Talens et al., 2020). The municipality needs their real estate expertise and their financial resources, while real estate owners also need instruments from the municipality, like subsidies or building permits (Verlaan, 2019; Boelens, 2009).

This availability of resources influences the actions of stakeholders and their cooperation with each other (Arik et al., 2016). Availability of resources affects decision-making, determines the feasibility of projects and shapes the dynamics of stakeholder interactions. Adequate resources facilitate cooperation, leading to sustainable development and effective management of urban environments. Understanding and leveraging resource dynamics can enhance stakeholder interactions and project outcomes (Pereda et al., 2017)

## 1.4. Three medium-sized cities in Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands

To understand cooperation with stakeholders, their resources and the associated dependence three medium-sized cities are researched in this study. A medium-sized city is defined as having a population ranging from 50,000 to 250,000 inhabitants (Eurotowns, 2024). Helsingborg in Sweden, Turnhout in Belgium and Spijkenisse in the Netherlands are studied. These cities have been setting up cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality in recent years. All three cities take a different approach. In Helsingborg, for example, a city company operates with a establishment manager. In Turnhout, the real estate owners work together with the municipality in a non-profit association. And Spijkenisse has a BIZ for entrepreneurs and real estate owners. Next to the BIZ, the real estate owners work together with the municipality in a three-party consultation. The cities will be explained further in the methods chapter.

## 1.5. Scientific and social relevance

This research is scientific relevant and there is knowledge gap to be filled. It is clear that real estate owners are indispensable as stakeholder in the inner-city (Hakansson & Lagin, 2014). There have been a number of studies on the role of real estate owners in urban environments (Sa & Haila, 2023; Ryan-Collins, 2021). What is missing in this studies is the specific focus on the inner-city. Next to that, these studies focus mostly on bigger cities, instead on medium-sized

cities (Talen & Park, 2021; Warnaby & Medway, 2022). There has been research done on resources of stakeholders in the inner-city, but most studies focus on one resource instead of different resources together (Sa & Haila, 2021; Ionascu & Anghel, 2020). The last reason why this research is scientific relevant, is because this study researches cities in an international context, the authors above focused on one city, while this research will compare three cities in three different countries.

This research is also socially relevant, because of the topic of vacancy. This research can help stakeholders to fix vacancy problems in the inner-city of medium-sized cities. At first, vacancy is only a problem for the real estate owners, who will miss out on income. Vacancy becomes a problem for the municipality if there are negative effects for third parties. Empty buildings can lead to an increase in crime, which can lead to a decrease of the quality of life in the area which creates a negative cycle (Bromley & Thomas, 1993). Empty buildings have negative effects on the environment and decrease visitor flows (Evers et al., 2015). Another reason why this study is socially relevant, is that all stakeholders in the inner-city want a fun, vital, accessible and liveable inner-city, from which they all profit (Marlet, 2009). To achieve this, it is important that all stakeholders in the inner-city are willing to work together. For that reason, it is important to research to what extent real estate owners and the municipality are dependent on organisations, visions, resources and other parties.

## 1.6. Research question and sub-questions

This brings the following research question:

*“To what extent does cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality have an impact on solving the vacancy problem in the inner-cities of medium-sized cities?”*

And the following sub-questions:

- What is the role of different organisations in the inner-city?
- What are the strategies real estate owners and the municipality use in the inner-city?
- What are indispensable resources for real estate owners and the municipality to operate in the inner-city?
- To what extent are real estate owners and the municipality dependent on each other in the inner-city?
- How do organisations, strategies, resources and dependency affect the vacancy problem in the inner-city?

## 1.7. Structure of thesis

The research continues with a literature review, which explains the concepts of the research question and sub-questions. It then discusses how the data analysis will take place. The results are then performed and the research concludes with a conclusion and discussion chapter, in which also policy recommendations are given.

## Chapter 2 Theoretical framework

This study seeks to answer the question whether cooperation between stakeholders, like real estate owners and the municipality, in the inner-city has impact on solving the vacancy problem. This chapter pays attention to the theoretical concepts that are needed to answer the research question. There is a focus on the role of stakeholders in the inner-city, the resource dependence theory, the different public-private partnerships and the vacancy problem. To understand the role of stakeholders in the inner-city, it is important to know the history of their engagement. This helps to understand how their roles are changed over time and helps to identify or forecast their current actions.

### 2.1. From government to governance

From World War II, the government was heavily involved in spatial planning, guided by the belief of a makeable society. This faith dominated policies in the 1950s and 1960s. The economic crisis of the 1970s brought down the belief in a makeable society (Bruinsma & Koomen, 2023). From the 1980s, municipalities increasingly opted for market-oriented approaches, because of low budgets. These low budgets were the consequence of diminished tax revenues and national policy deregulation what resulted in decreased fiscal support (Van Melik, 2008; Bressers, 2009 & Harvey, 1989). Private entities were increasingly exerting influence and control over urban policies, which is called governance (Van Melik, 2008). Governance is part of neoliberalism, in which governments stand up for market forces and support entrepreneurial interests such as property rights and international free trade (Harvey, 2005). Urban governance takes into account the complex interactions between different stakeholders, who are all involved in shaping the urban environment (Zakhour & Metzger, 2019; Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004). The inner-city is an important part of the urban environment these days (Evers et al., 2015). The inner-city usually ends at a canal or former city wall (Van der Cammen et al., 2012). The boundaries are more difficult to define in industrial and modern cities, but even this cities have a central core that can be defined to as an inner-city (Evers et al., 2015).

Because of the rise of urban governance, real estate owners were given the opportunity to participate in the inner-city and be co-responsible. Cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality is sometimes difficult, because of differences in culture and responsibilities. Values and interests are hard to be aligned and nowhere is the pressure of social and economic interests on an area as high as in the inner-city (Evers et al., 2015; Van der Boor, 1991). Nevertheless, it is certain that both parties need each other in urban development in the inner-city (Oude Veldhuis, 1993). Stakeholders in the inner-city all want a fun, vital, accessible and liveable inner-city (Marlet, 2009).

### 2.2. Stakeholders

As written in the introduction chapter, in this research there will be focused on real estate owners and the municipality as the most important stakeholders for solving vacancy. First, there is elaborated who the real estate owners are and their role. Then the focus is on the role of the municipality.

#### 2.2.1. Real estate owners

A real estate owner owns property in order to acquire as much capital as possible (Guy, 1994). Three types of real estate owners are often referred to, namely owner-user (uses the property itself), the owner-developer (sells the property after development) and the owner-investor (leases the property). Next, to these three sorts, there are also the institutional and

private investors. Institutional investors are often large parties that obtain their financial resources from pension funds or insurance policies (Van de Wiel, 1998). They operate regionally, nationally or even internationally and therefore have little involvement in local issues (Segeren, 1998). Private investors are mainly interested in retail properties, largely located in secondary streets (Vastgoedrapportage, 2010). The business interests of the investors exist of achieving as much return as possible with the lowest possible risk (Stolwijk, 2012). In the study of Hakansson & Lagin (2014), to which was referred before, it also became clear that real estate owners do not perceive the need to integrate resources to the same extent as stakeholders deem necessary. This is also how they are seen by others, as being reactive in their approach, only taking action once competition enters the market (Hakansson & Lagin, 2014). Although real estate owners acknowledge the importance of cooperation, they fail to understand the significance of actively participating as stakeholders according to Hakansson & Lagin (2014) and Todeva & Knoke (2005).

### 2.2.2. Municipality

A municipality performs tasks of direct relevance to its residents and its businesses. Structural visions and zoning plans have to be made for the layout of the municipality. In a zoning plan, the municipality lays down exactly what an area should look like. Next to the real estate owners, also the municipality can play an important role in a strategic alliance. Next to that they also rely to varying extents on investments and decisions made by private entities to stimulate growth (Offe & Kean, 1984; Lindblom, 1977). According to Offe & Kean (1984) & Lindblom (1997), this dependence is often structural, as real estate developers possess real estate expertise and financial resources that local governments lack. Additionally, the market contributes to local employment opportunities and tax revenues (Verlaan, 2019).

The resource dependence theory (RDT) is an appropriate theory to understand the relationships between different stakeholders in the inner-city. This theory provides a framework to understand the complex interdependencies, power dynamics, strategic adjustments and external influences that characterize the relationships between different stakeholders in the inner-city (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005; Hillman et al., 2009). The following paragraph will explain this theory and outline the various resources, stakeholders need to operate in the inner-city.

## 2.3. Resource Dependence Theory (RDT)

The resource dependence theory (RDT) is a very influential theory in organisational theory and strategic management (Hillman et al., 2009). RDT stems from the question of accessing external resources while mitigating the risk of overreliance on partner organisations. This question has captivated researchers since the late 1950s (Biermann & Koops, 2016). The work of Thompson (1967) represents one of the earliest attempts to explore how external resources enter organisations and the consequences of the uncertainty associated with this process on the actions and behaviours at the organisational level (Johnson, 1995). According to Thompson (1967) no organisation operates in isolation, every organisation must engage in exchange relationships with various actors, entities and organisations in their environments. The uneven distribution of valuable resources inevitably gives rise to asymmetric exchange and power dynamics among organisations (Johnson, 1995).

RDT gained public awareness when the book “The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective” was published by Pfeffer & Salancik (1978). RDT sees the corporation as an open system, which is dependent on conditions in the external environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). RDT views the environment as uncertain, but the interests of the environment lie in the fact that it has scarce resources that are valuable to the organisation.

Therefore the organisation needs to accept the environment to obtain resources from its environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Next to the environment, power is also an important concept. (Ulrich & Barney, 1984). Power is the opposite from dependence. Emerson (1962) suggested by using the concept of social exchange, the degree of dependence of one social actor 'A', on another actor 'B', is determined by how much control 'B' has over a resource or action that 'A' values. And by the lack of alternative for 'A' to acquire this resource or action from other individuals. This imbalance in dependence creates an uneven power relationship between individuals, as outlined by Emerson (1962) and Johnson (1995).

In summary, the most important assumptions of RDT are the organisation's environment, the necessity for scarce and valuable resources and the uncertainties surrounding their accessibility (Arik et al., 2016). Ulrich & Barney (1984) also mentioned this assumptions of RDT. They add the believe that organisations pursue two interconnected goals within their environment. Namely, obtaining authority over resources to diminish their reliance on other organisations and securing control over resources to heighten the dependence of other organisations on them (Arik et al., 2016).

RDT can be linked to public-private partnerships. Those partnerships are predominantly viewed as a tool to mitigate power disparities and to navigate the mutual dependencies between focal organisations and external parties on whom the public and private parties rely for essential resources (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Ulrich & Barney, 1984). In this way, public-private partnerships can optimize their control over critical external factors (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005). After paragraph 2.3, these public-private partnerships are further discussed.

### 2.3.1. Resources in the inner-city

Thus, most organisations require fundamental resources. Resources required for area development are held by several parties (Zhang et al., 2021). Types of resources have been researched in several countries. For example, Jahed et al. (2020) conducted research on regulatory schemes, market-based/financial schemes and informative approaches in the UK and Turkey. Market-based/financial schemes are also called economic tools/instruments by Kern et al. (2017) and Liu et al. (2020). They did research to resources in respectively Finland and UK and in China. Tan et al. (2018) also wrote about these instruments and added knowledge as well in Hong Kong. Meijer et al. (2009) also speak about organisational instruments in Australia and Europe. Not all of these resources are relevant to this research about the inner-city. Therefore five categories were chosen, namely physical, financial, relational, technical and regulatory resources. These resources were chosen because they are essential for successfully working together in the inner-city. An explanation of the different resources used by both the real estate owners and the municipality in the inner-city is find below. This explanations show the extent to which these resources affect cooperation and vacancy in the inner-city.

First of all, physical resources are important. Local governments possess or oversee physical resources, which include land, buildings, infrastructure and vehicles. Effective management of these resources is important, because they form the foundation of any urban development and are therefore crucial for effective collaboration (Farvacque-Vitkovic & Kopanyi, 2014; Aghion et al., 2009). Examples of physical resources to tackle vacancy, are modernisation and transforming of properties, window dressing and pop-up stores (Boelens, 2009).

Secondly, financial resources play a role in the inner-city. Financial resources are necessary to fund urban projects. Without sufficient financial support, projects can fail to get off the ground. By working together, real estate owners and the municipality can plan joint investments, leading to more efficient use of financial resources and increasing the economic vitality of the inner-city and eventually solve vacancy (Quigley & Raphael, 2005). Examples of

financial resources are subsidies, loans, rent incentives, own capital and taxes (Bouwma et al., 2015; Boelens, 2009).

Thirdly, relational resources are of importance. Gulati (2007) researched how relational resources, also known as network resources, positively influence the formation of new alliances. Next to that, he investigated the role of relation resources in an entrepreneurial context, finding that they impact new companies' quest for resources (Gulati, 2007). According to Bouwma et al. (2015), relational resources often emerge from public-private partnerships. The agreements between the parties are formalized in a covenant or agreement. Relational resources are voluntary and actors utilize them because they depend on one another to achieve their goals, like solving vacancy. Meeting each other is also a relational resource. (Bouwma et al., 2015).

The fourth category of resources are technological or digital resources. Over the last decade, there was a rapidly growing role of ICT and digitalization in urban development, those created a new urban knowledge infrastructure (Benko et al., 2021). Digitalization has compelled governments and public institutions to rethink laws, regulations and policies related to urban development (Zysman & Kenney, 2018). Technical resources are crucial for implementing modern urban solutions and improving the overall quality of the inner-city (Bughin et al., 2016).

The fifth and last important category of resources are legal and regulatory resources. These resources encompass a wide range of laws and regulations. Their primary characteristic is that a public authority sets binding requirements, which, if not complied with, are followed by sanctions, for example a vacancy fee is given to a real estate owners who doesn't do anything with a vacant property. They apply equally to all targeted actors and protect them from arbitrary governmental decisions (Bouwma et al., 2015). Examples are zoning planes, preferential rights and buildings permits (Boelens, 2009).

Like as with every theory there are some shortcomings in RDT as well. RDT focuses heavily on power dynamics and dependency relationships between organisations, potentially overlooking other critical factors such as innovation and trust. Next to that, this theory focuses primarily on external factors and the relationships between organisations, often neglecting internal factors. Internal factors such as organisational culture and internal processes can also significantly influence organisational actions and outcomes (Biermann & Koops, 2016; Hillman et al., 2009). These shortcomings are tackled by also looking at the organisational structure of the organisation. In this way, not only the external factors will get clear, but also the internal factors. The next section therefore looks at the structure of different organisational forms between public and private parties.

## 2.4. Public-private partnerships (PPPs)

In the last decade, there has been a growing trend towards utilizing public-private partnerships to facilitate service delivery and execute substantial infrastructure projects (Ghobadian et al., 2004; Hodge et al., 2010). A public-private partnership (PPP) is a partnership in which resources will be shared between the public and private actors. Both have specific qualities, a combination of those qualities can lead to a greater result (Hodge & Greve, 2007). Van Ham & Koppenjan (2001) define a PPP as a collaborative arrangement between public and private entities aimed at jointly developing products and services, while also sharing associated risks, costs and resources (Ysa, 2007). This collaboration typically encompasses two key dimensions: financial involvement of public and private actors and how they organize themselves to achieve goals (Hodge & Greve, 2007). Below 3 different forms of PPPs are described. The choice to describe these three forms of PPPs lies in their ability to highlight different aspects of urban cooperation, like risks, benefits and resources (Kivleniece & Quelin, 2012; Warnaby et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2001). First, the joint venture is described.



### 2.4.1. Joint Venture (JV)

Joint ventures have become a prevalent business model in certain industries. Originating from the need to effectively execute organisational strategies, joint ventures aim to integrate economic resources, skills and knowledge (Guofeng et al., 2020). According to Raff et al. (2009) a joint venture (JV) can be described by the sharing rule governing the distribution of profits among partners cooperating on a project. It is a collaborative arrangement between businesses that maintain their independence. To facilitate collaboration, a legally independent entity is established (Reitsma, 2024). While joint ventures are an effective way to finance and implement large urban projects, there are other models of public-private partnerships that are more focused on the day-to-day management and improvements of inner-cities. One such model is town centre management.

### 2.4.2. Town Centre Management (TCM)

Town Centre Management (TCM) can be defined as a structural partnership of public and private parties in an inner-city with a joint deployment of resources, on the basis of equality. To strengthen the appeal and thus the economic functioning of the inner-city (BRO, 2010; Hogg et al., 2007). In the 1980s, TCM was non-committal in nature and took place on the basis of goodwill and trust (Wells, 1991). Over the years, cooperation between parties has become increasingly professional and non-committal has been replaced by a more business-like management of the inner-city (Platform Binnenstadsmanagement, 2020). Given the diverse values of stakeholders, achieving alignment in goals and direction may prove challenging (Riviezzo et al., 2009). Therefore, it is essential for all stakeholders to possess an understanding of the competitive pressures and available resources to enable a successful TCM alliance (Whyatt, 2004). TCM uses instruments to get entrepreneurs and real estate owners to cooperation. They are deployed as little as possible so that us-versus-them feelings stay away, all actors must share the belief that they will be harmed if they do not take collective action (Van Melik & Van Aalst, 2011). Examples of instruments are property tax (OZB), neighbourhood tax, precario tax and advertising tax (Menger, 2005). These taxes had little success in the Netherlands, that is why the BIZ was introduced in the Netherlands. A BIZ is according to Menger (2005) also a financing instrument of centre management, a centre manager can be hired by a BIZ (Menger, 2005).

### 2.4.3. Business Investment Zone (BIZ)

The Dutch BIZ concept is inspired by the business improvement district model (BID), which the US and Canada already use since the 1970s. Since 2000, the UK has also been using it (Lloyd & Peel, 2008). In the Netherlands, the BIZ started with an experiments act in 2009, in 2015 the experiment act was converted into a permanent law (VNG, 2019). A BIZ is a geographically defined area. Entrepreneurs and/or real estate owners in the BIZ agree together on investments to improve the quality of the area. They pay a compulsory tax every year, that goes through the municipality back to the BIZ, which can make investments with the money. The advantage is that problems about financial contributions and free riders, which cause so many initiatives to fail or to be implemented only marginally, are circumvented (Menger et al., 2005; Forsberg et al., 1999). Free riders are people who act independently and anonymously, apart from the group (Carpenter, 2004). Next to paying a tax, it is mandatory to draw up a BIZ plan for the period the BIZ is in operation. With a fixed period for planning and operation, the BIZ offers a more business-like perspective on area-based cooperation (Cotterill et al., 2019). A BIZ exists for five years and must be extended every five years (Risselade et al., 2019). There are three forms of BIZ in the Netherlands, namely user-only BIZ, BIZ of real estate owners only and joint BIZ for owners



and users (Risselade, 2020). The success of BIZ hinges on strong local engagement and a shared sense of urgency among business members, alongside tangible reciprocal investments in the business community (Boonstra, 2010). A BIZ can make a significant contribution to reducing vacancy in the inner-city by investing in infrastructure improvements, marketing, supporting local businesses, security and cleaning services and organising events. These joint efforts can increase the attractiveness and vitality of the inner-city, leading to higher occupancy rates of premises (Mitchell, 2001; Risselade et al., 2019; Raff et al., 2009; Hogg et al., 2007). Unfortunately, there is still vacancy in the researched inner-cities. The possible reasons and solutions are described below.

## 2.5. Vacancy problem

According to Locatus (2018), a retail property is registered as vacant if it is reasonably expected that an outlet in retail, hospitality or other type of consumer-oriented services will return in the vacant property. In addition, if located within a shopping area, the property must have been in use as a shop and is now actually vacant, or the property is indicated as being for sale/rent as an outlet. Finally, the vacancy duration is important in the definition: a maximum of one year for initial and friction vacancy, between one and three years for long-term vacancy and three or more consecutive years for structural vacancy (VNG, 2017; Van der Voordt et al., 2007). Structural vacancy can become a problem for society. When buildings are left empty, it can lead to an increase in crime. The broken window theory of Wilson & Kelling (1982) explains this, it states that visible signs of disorder, such as broken windows, send a signal to criminals that the area is not being watched, which can lead to more crime (Boggess & Maskaly, 2014). When crime increase, the quality of life in the area decreases, which has negative effects on the environment and decrease visitor flows (Evers et al., 2015; Vermeulen et al., 2016).

### 2.5.1. Reasons for vacancy

Talen & Park (2022) did research on urban retail vacancy. Explanations for retail vacancy in urban areas are structural transformation of the retail industry, demographic changes and the urban context. Structural changes in the retail industry, driven by e-commerce and the rise of chain stores, have transformed consumer behaviour (Williamson & Dunham-Jones, 2021). The shift towards online shopping has impacted traditional storefronts, while chain stores' pricing strategies and economies of scale challenge small entrepreneurs. Creative destruction, wherein large entrepreneurs outcompete smaller ones, exacerbates this trend (Jia, 2008; Florida, 2017; Sutton, 2010; Bromley & Thomas, 1993). Moreover, suburban development patterns have diverted consumer traffic from urban street retail to suburban shopping centres (Talen & Park, 2022). The second explanation, demographic change, involves shifts in population characteristics that affect retail demand and storefront viability. Changes in population density, income levels, and neighbourhood demographics impact consumer spending patterns and preferences, potentially leading to higher vacancy rates. Gentrification processes also alter retail offerings and pricing. (Talen & Park, 2022; Lokhorst et al., 2013).

Talen & Park (2022) also identify the urban context as explanation for retail vacancy. This encompasses factors such as the availability and distribution of retail space, zoning regulations, historical development, walkability, and community engagement within a neighbourhood. Population and income levels may not align with existing retail inventory, impacting vacancy rates (Talen & Park, 2022).

According to Talen & Park (2022) real estate owner behaviour also significantly influences retail vacancies. Decisions regarding leasing, pricing, and property management directly impact storefront occupancy. Some real estate owners exploit vacancy tax relief programs, disincentivizing active tenant-seeking (Talen & Park, 2022).

### 2.5.2. Solutions for vacancy

A solution for vacancy could be to transform or restructure empty properties to residential locations or other functions, like entertainment or catering (Harmsen, 2008). A temporary solution could be to open seasonal shops or pop-up concepts (Stolwijk, 2012). Or there could be window dressing, a way to disguise vacancy. The windows could be used for commercial purposes (Holmqvist & Lunardo, 2015). Real estate owners can address vacancy by promoting active leasing and responsible property management (Talen & Park, 2022). An example is to attract new tenants with rent incentives. This brings opportunities for start-up entrepreneurs to try out new shop concepts or products. A risk of this solution is that property can quickly become vacant again if the entrepreneur does not make it (Talen & Park, 2022).

### 2.6. Conceptual model

The conceptual model (figure 2.1.) below is formed on the basis of this theoretical framework. The model starts with the two stakeholders that are researched in this study, the municipality and real estate owners. They form public-private partnerships, for example joint venture, town centre management or business investment zone. Those partnerships are influenced by the way they are dependent on each other. On the other hand, those partnerships contribute to solving vacancy in the inner-city, which is the end goal. However the different resources available in the inner-city have an influence on the approach of vacancy in the inner-city.

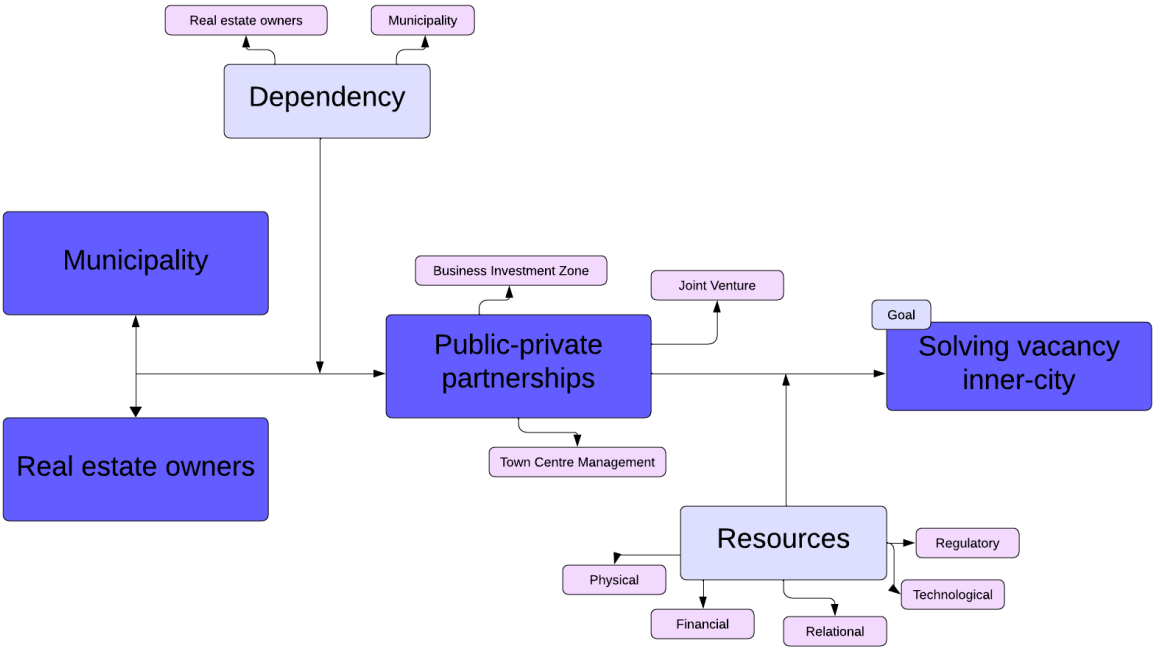


Figure 2.1. Conceptual model (Verhagen, 2024)

## Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter explains the qualitative methods that are used in this research. Next to that, the different data sources are explained, namely semi-structured interviews, policy documents and news articles, figures and reports. Then the ethical reflections are showed. After that, the cases and their respondents are further explained. Next, the topic list and the coding process are discussed. The chapter ends with an explanation of validity, reliability and suitability.

### 3.1. Qualitative methods

Reasoning from the research question, “To what extent does cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality have an impact on solving the vacancy problem in the inner-cities of medium-sized cities?”, a qualitative scientific research design was arrived at. Qualitative research aims to understand the richly textured experiences of human beings and their reflections on those experiences. The research question aligns well with the aim of qualitative research, because it seeks to explore and understand the complex and nuanced dynamics involved in addressing vacancy issues (Jackson et al., 2007). This question tries to understand the relationships between real estate owners and the municipality and how this affect the vacancy in the inner-city. This question also seeks to understand how the stakeholders experience their cooperation, those reflections are also a part of qualitative methods (Yin, 2009). Next to that, qualitative research is a great method to unpack the complexity of a research problem like this one, it explores the multifaced aspects of the problem (Charmaz, 2014). At last, qualitative research aims to generate insights that can provide recommendations, this research can give recommendations about cooperation in the inner-city to the municipality (Charmaz, 2014).

### 3.2. Case study research

This study is a case study research, which is a form of qualitative methods. It compares three cases, three medium-sized cities in Helsingborg, Turnhout and Spijkenisse. The objective of case study research is to examine and portray a particular context in order to enhance comprehension of it (Cousin, 2005). Typically, case studies utilize various data sources and are constrained by specific spatial and temporal parameters (Schoch, 2020). This is also the case for this study. The data sources that are used, are semi-structured interviews, policy documents and news articles, figures and reports. This forms of data sources will be explained in the next paragraphs. The cases are constrained by specific spatial parameters, namely the study is about the inner-cities of the researched medium-sized city. Next to specific spatial parameters, the cases are also constrained by temporal parameters. The cases are researched in a specific time frame, namely from March to June. This could have the effect of painting a picture of the situation in those months when the situation would be different earlier or later. Some consequences of working together, could also become visible only later. This can be accommodated by using a secondary data source, namely policy documents (Schoch, 2020). Specific spatial and temporal parameters give the advantage to bring focus in the research (Schoch, 2020). Another advantage of case study research is that it provides a detailed and comprehensive description of the topic, which helps in understanding its complexity (Houghton et al., 2014). Next to that, case studies often take a holistic approach, which mean they study the whole topic instead of only isolated parts (Njie & Asmiran, 2014).

Understanding the role of the researcher in relation to the subject of the research is crucial. There exists a spectrum of involvement, ranging from complete detachment, where the researcher is an ‘outsider’ to varying degrees of engagement. In this study, the researcher

assumes the role of a 'visitor', a common stance where they visit the research site and conduct interviews with respondents (Scapens, 2004). Unfortunately, due to the limited time of this study, it was only possible to visit one of the cities once. This study exemplifies a collective case study, where multiple instances within the same category are chosen to attain a form of representation. In principle, research always look for representative cases, but a rigid sampling process was not used in this study. This is because, the cases are selected based on their suitability for research access (Cousin, 2005).

### 3.3. Data sources

#### 3.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

As already stated above, this research makes use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for consistent exploration of key issues across multiple interviewees while retaining the flexibility to delve deeply into topics and pursue follow-up inquiries based on respondent's responses (Scapens, 2004). Advantages of semi-structured interviews are their adaptability and versatility. They can be employed in both individual and group settings, which was handy in this research, because some interviews were conducted with more than one person. A key strength lies in their ability to foster a dynamic interaction between interviewer and participant, allowing for spontaneous follow-up questions based on responses (Galletta, 2012; Hardon et al., 2004). The interviews are focused, with an front-designed topic list, while they still give the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This topic list can be found in the Appendix. There are also some disadvantages to semi-structured interviews, namely it is recourse-intensive method. They require a significant amount of time to conduct, transcribe and analyse (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This has been tried to accommodate by using Microsoft Team's transcription feature. This application makes a transcription of the interview while conducting. This transcription still contains occasional errors, but was helpful while writing the transcripts. Next to that, for analysing the interviews, the coding program NVivo was used. This program was helpful, because it was used to make an overview of different codes which was later used to make a code tree. Another disadvantage of semi-structured interviews that was experienced during the study is the variability in data quality (Harris & Brown, 2010). Not every respondent was equally talkative, which caused some respondents to answer a question very extensively, where others gave a very short answer. Because of this, there was a lot of difference in depth of the interviews. This has been resolved by reading policy documents as well. These clearly describe what cooperation looks like in the inner-city and what resources are used. The interviews often provided additional information on this, therefore it was not a big problem if a complete answer to the question was not given (Zhang & Cresswell, 2013).

#### 3.3.2. Policy documents

A part of this study is to understand the different strategies that are implied in the inner-city. Having a clear vision about the inner-city has a profound impact on stakeholder cooperation. It provides a common direction, increases engagement, improves communication and facilitates coordinated decision-making (Zhang & Cresswell, 2013). There were different kind of policy documents seen and read in the cities. Those are shortly described below:

##### Helsingborg

- An establishment strategy which creates consensus between different real estate owners regarding the needs and supplies that are in demand in the inner-city of Helsingborg. The strategy is also intended as a tool that the establishment manager can use in dialogue with potential tenants and real estate owners (HBG City, 2023).

- Three different strategies for some areas in the inner-city in which are the following things are described: feelings about the space, preferred target group, why the place is unique, the style of the place, experiences, perceptions and the environment (HBG City, 2024).
- A map on which the seven different named areas of the inner-city of Helsingborg are seen (HBG City, 2024).

#### Turnhout

- A brochure about the core strengthening policy in the inner-city. In the brochure there is written about the demarcation of the inner-city, the image quality plan of the city, the benefits entrepreneurs and real estate owners receive from the municipality and instruments to solve vacancy (Stad Turnhout, 2024).
- A map of the current demarcation of the inner-city, with the core shopping area, the transition zones and approach streets (Stad Turnhout, 2024).
- An internet page about the fee system in the city. On which also the image quality plan is explained (Stad Turnhout, 2024).
- A report about retail in Turnhout. In this report the most recent figures about vacancy in retail in the core shopping area could be find (Provincie Antwerpen et al., 2024).

#### Spijkenisse

- A course document and implementation program for transition from ‘shopping area’ to ‘city hall room’. In which the course of the inner-city is described, the implementation agenda and some underlying analyses (ArnoRuigrok-PPP & De Zwarte Hond, 2021).
- A map of the inner-city which shows how many square metres of shops were transformed to other functions (Gemeente Nissewaard, 2024).

One of the advantages of reading policy documents is already stated above. Another advantage is that it they also work to other way around, instead of using the policy documents as an extra source, they are also used to control the data that was given by the respondents (Harris & Brown, 2010). Next to that, the policy documents were read before conducting the interviews, in that way the historical context was already a bit clear so that the questions could be adapted to that (Zhang & Cresswell, 2013). The data obtained from reading the policy documents can be read in the results chapter or is used to describe the cities in the introduction or methods chapter.

### 3.3.3. News articles, figures and reports

Next to semi-structured interviews and policy documents, this research made also use of newspaper articles, figures from Locatus (2024) and reports. Newspaper articles about vacancy problems in the different cities are used. Newspaper articles and figures from Locatus (2024) could contribute to the research by giving the most current information about the status of vacancy in the specific inner-city. Next to that, also some reports were read and used to outline the problem of vacancy in inner-cities. A disadvantage about news articles is that they may be subject to bias or inaccuracies, especially if they are written quickly to respond to breaking news. Journalist may make mistakes or misinterpret information (Maier, 2005). This was captured by looking at several news articles and comparing them with the read reports.

### 3.4. Ethical reflections

The information gathered during the interviews needed to be anonymized to ensure that no participants can be identified from the research data. This process involved removing any identifiers from the interview transcripts that might revealed the identity of participants (Hutter et al., 2010). This was sometimes hard, because some respondents hold unique positions within the inner-city, which makes it easy to identify them. To prevent this situation, respondent' opinions were often grouped together, so that it is not clear who exactly said what. At first, it was the idea to group the real estate owners in categories according to how many properties they had. This was alter modified to ensure the anonymity of real estate owners. Indeed, in some cities, there were only a few major owners, so it would be immediately clear who had said something.

Another important issue to reflect on, is the use of online interviews. Traditionally, qualitative interviews have been conducted in person (Novick, 2008). However, in this study, challenges such as time and place have limited the physical mobility of the researcher. In the short period this research had to be conducted, it was not possible to visit the cities in three different countries. Conducting the interviews online was a solution (Cater, 2011). What does matter when conducting online interviews is that the researcher and respondent are both experienced and confident with video communication technologies (Farooq & De Villiers, 2017). Next to that, a disadvantage of conducting online interviews is the risk of technical problems, ranging from poor internet connections, software failures or problems with audio and video (Upadhyay & Lipkovich, 2020). To minimise the risk of technical problems, respondents were informed in advance that the interview was being conducted via Microsoft Teams so that they could test the software beforehand. In addition, the researcher made sure she was always in a quiet place at the time of the interview (Upadhyay & Lipkovich, 2020).

A last ethical reflection is about the fact that some of the interviews were conducted in a second language. In qualitative research interviews, it is common for researchers and participants to speak different first languages. This is also the case in this study, in the case of Helsingborg. Talking in a second language, in this case English, can impact the quality of the interview data. Participants often require more time to conduct interviews in their second language, which can affect the depth and clarity of their responses (Cortazzi et al., 2011). To avoid this as much as possible, the topic list was sent to the respondents prior to the interview. In this way, they could prepare themselves for the questions that would be asked. This could help them answer more fully and accurately (Cortazzi et al., 2011). In addition, a translation app was used, both by the researcher and the respondents, during the interviews to quickly look for terms.

### 3.5. Sampling method

As said before, a rigid sampling process was not used in this study. At first a survey was made by Platform Binnenstadsmanagement. Dutch and Flemish respondents could fill these in, if they wanted to be part of the research. Based on these answers, a Dutch city was chosen. Unfortunately, the city couldn't participate any longer, because the real estate owners didn't had time. In the meantime, it was decided to research a medium-sized city. In Sweden, there was first contact with someone in Gothenburg who gave a contact from someone in Helsingborg. Helsingborg was directly enthusiastic to take part in the research. In the inner-city they were working hard to strengthen the cooperation between the municipality and the real estate owners. At first it was hard to find some city in Flanders. There was a city found, but this one was not already invested in cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality. That is why, there was chosen to look out for another city. Turnhout was found by looking for medium-sized cities on the internet. Turnhout stood out because they are engaged by a core strengthening policy in the inner-city. Turnhout also wanted to participate in the research. At



last, Spijkenisse was found at the day of the inner-city, which is organised by Platform Binnenstadsmanagement. Spijkenisse gave a presentation about their work in the inner-city, in cooperation with the municipality and the real estate owners. They were also willing to participate. That is how the three cases were selected, not by a rigid sampling process but on the fact that all the three cities were already engaged in cooperation between the municipality and real estate owners. By focusing on cities already involved in collaborative projects, the results can be directly relevant to the purpose of the study. This increases the practical applicability of the findings. These best practices could be useful for other cities by providing valuable insights (Fröding et al., 2013).

### 3.6. The three chosen cases

Above there is showed how the cases were chosen. What the cases have in common is that they all are engaged in the cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality. Next to that, they are all medium-sized cities. Helsingborg has 151,306 inhabitants, Spijkenisse has 72,830 inhabitants and Turnhout has 46,923 inhabitants (City Population, 2023; CBS, 2024; Turnhout, 2024). A medium-sized city has between 50,000 and 250,000 inhabitants according to Eurotowns (2024). Next to the agreements, there are also some differences between the three cases. First of all, the distance to a neighbouring, often bigger city. For example, Helsingborg is a 65km drive from Malmö, in contrast Spijkenisse is just a 25km drive from Rotterdam. Turnhout is just in between, with a 45km drive from Antwerp. Next to that, Turnhout and Helsingborg both are close to a country border, respectively the Netherlands and Denmark in contrast with Spijkenisse. The average income in the cities is different. In Helsingborg, the average income is 58.000 euro per year. In Spijkenisse, it is 28,250 euro per year. And in Turhout, it is 31,669 euro per year (CBS, 2024; SKR, 2023). Also, in Belgium the municipality has more resources to use in the inner-city than in the other two cities (Stad Turnhout, 2024). At last, they all use different forms of cooperation between the municipality and the real estate owners in the inner-city. The three cases can show the effects of different forms of cooperation on vacancy in the inner-city. This helps identify which forms of collaboration work better in reducing vacancy rates. This leads to more comprehensive and robust conclusions that are applicable in different contexts (Fröding et al., 2013).

### 3.7. Respondents

In every city, seven respondents were interviewed. Five real estate owners and one employee of the municipality. The seventh person was different in every city. In Helsingborg, this was someone from the city company. This is a company who is responsible for the inner-city, a nationwide concept in Sweden (HBG City, 2024). In Turnhout, this was an catering entrepreneur who was also part of the inner-city association and in Spijkenisse this was a centrum manager who worked on behalf of the BIZ. The interviews were conducted from April to June via Microsoft Teams, however the first interview was conducted on location in the city hall of Turnhout. This was done, because the municipality of Turnhout could not sent the contact details of real estate owners due to privacy constrictions. There was chosen to conduct 21 interviews, to reach theoretical saturation. It was thought that by the amount of 21, there would not emerge any new codes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This turned out to be the case.



### 3.8. Operationalisation

The schema below shows the topics that were used in the interviews, those are based on the concepts of the theoretical framework. Next to the topics, some dimensions are showed and the reasoning, why this topics are used.

Table 3.1. Operationalisation (Verhagen, 2024)

Theme	Dimensions	Reasoning
<b>Stakeholders</b>	<i>Real estate owners</i>	Is the respondent aware of the other parties in the inner-city? If so, the respondent is good at naming the extent to which he depends on others.
	<i>Entrepreneurs</i>	
	<i>Municipality</i>	
	<i>Costumers</i>	
	<i>Residents</i>	
<b>Organisations</b>	<i>Active</i>	Is the respondent part of an organisation? And how does this organisation operate? In what way is the respondent dependent on this organisation?
	<i>Profit</i>	
	<i>Role of real estate owners</i>	
	<i>Role of municipality</i>	
	<i>Origin and purpose</i>	
	<i>Vision</i>	
	<i>Financial costs</i>	
<i>Meetings</i>		
<b>Resources</b>	<i>Physical resources: transformation, window-dressing</i>	Can the respondent name different resources on which he is dependent while operating in the inner-city?
	<i>Financial resources: subsidies, charges</i>	
	<i>Relational resources: other organisations</i>	
	<i>Technological resources: online platform, data analysis, automated management</i>	
	<i>Legal and regulatory resources: transformation, flexible leases</i>	
<b>Dependence</b>	<i>Role municipality</i>	Can the respondent name in what way he is dependent on the other party in the inner-city?
	<i>Role real estate owners</i>	
<b>Vacancy</b>	<i>Owned properties</i>	What does the vacancy problem look like according to the respondent? What is the role of themselves in solving the vacancy problem? What is the role of the other party in solving the vacancy problem?

### 3.9. Coding

Before the coding could start, the interviews were all transcribed with help of Microsoft Teams. The coding started with inductive coding for the first seven interviews that were conducted in Helsingborg. The interviews were read and every interesting topic or sentence got a

code by using the program NVivo. There were six main codes, namely, dependence, future, organisations, real estate owners, resources and vacancy. Those main codes were divided into several sub-codes and extra sub-codes. After the process of inductive coding, the process of deductive coding started for all the three cities. Inductive coding was only done in the case of Helsingborg, after analysing this city, there was chosen to go directly to deductive coding for the other cities, to save time. This could be a drawback, because there is a greater risk of bias and misinterpretation (Armat et al., 2018). This was tried to avoid as much as possible by going through all the interviews of Helsingborg very carefully and clearly writing down all codes. On the basis of the codes from inductive coding, a new list was made for the deductive coding. The risk of deductive coding is that there is only focus on what the answer is on the research question. That is why it is the best to combine both methods, there is a focus but also space for other codes (Armat et al., 2018). The codes that are used for deductive coding can be seen in the code scheme, that can be found in the Appendix. Some codes are especially used for one city. In the code scheme, they are seen in different colours. Quotes were also coded, the codes that are used in the results chapter from respondents in Turnhout and Spijkensisse were translated to English.

### 3.10. Validity, reliability, intersubjectivity and suitability

Below some important concepts which are (not) guaranteed in this study are explained.

Internal validity, also known as credibility is ensured in this study. This is ensured, because the interviews are recorded and transcripts of the interviews were made. Next to that, there is a code scheme available of the codes that were used in the analysis of the interviews. If the research would be conducted again, the chance that the answers would be the same is plausible (Scapens, 2004).

External validity, also known as transferability in qualitative research, is not ensured in this study. The results are not applicable to any other context. The results say something about working together in the inner-city. The results are not transferable to inner-cities where there is no cooperation (Scapens, 2004). A recommendation for follow-up research is therefore to also examine cities where there is currently no form of cooperation. These recommendations can be found in the conclusion & discussion chapter.

This study is reliable, because the sample is representative. It is a target sample, which means that specifically individuals were selected who have particular characteristics. In every city there are five real estate owners, one person from the municipality and one person from an inner-city organisation interviewed. The fact that the same types of people were interviewed in each city makes the sample representative (Scapens, 2004).

Next to that, in qualitative research, there is as much as possible strived for intersubjectivity. In qualitative research it is hard to remain objective, but it is important that the research results are not coloured by the opinion of the researcher. A way this was eliminated as much as possible in this research, was the involvement of internship supervisors. They read along with the research and were able to provide feedback without being in that research bubble. In this way, space was made for other perspectives (Scapens, 2004).

A last reason to name, why the study is reliable and suitable, is the critical attitude of the researcher during the study. The interviews were listened back during data collection. In this way it could be noted in what ways further questions needed to be asked and what information was still missing after conducting some interviews (Scapens, 2004).

## Chapter 4 Results

In this chapter the results of the interviews are analysed. Next to that, the policy documents that have been viewed are discussed. Since this is case study research, each topic is broken down into the three different cities, namely Helsingborg, Turnhout and Spijkenisse, in this order. At the end of every section a table is showed to see the differences and agreements between the cities.

### 4.1. Different organisations in the inner-city

In this part, the organisations that are operating in inner-city of the different cities are discussed. This is important, because the way the stakeholders are organised says something about how they work together in the inner-city.

#### 4.1.1. Helsingborg

In Helsingborg, there is a city company active that is responsible for the inner-city. The municipality is responsible for the rest of the city. This is a nationwide concept in Sweden and a way for the municipality to ensure that the inner-city is being proactively worked on and that it becomes a very attractive part of the city. Because of this city company, the role of the municipality is not big in the inner-city, even though they pay a big part of the company, visit meetings and stay in contact with the real estate owners. The most important role is reserved for the establishment manager of the city company, he also makes the situation in Helsingborg unique. He is working under the board and his role is to keep the bridge between the real estate owners and the municipality. He was hired in 2022, because major chains such as H&M, Stadium and Åhléns announced that they would be leaving the inner-city.

He helps the real estate owners to find companies and potential tenants. In bigger cities, the real estate owners have an establishment manager in their own company already. According to the establishment manager, this is one of the reasons why his role works in Helsingborg, because of the size of the city. Another reason why the collaboration with the real estate owners is successful, is that the establishment manager in the beginning only focused on gaining trust, he said:

*“The more open you can be with me and let me in on your ongoing discussions, the easier it’s going to be for me to find the right tenants.”*

The city company is owned by the municipality, but also by the real estate owners and the tenants. The tenants exist of the entrepreneurs, restaurant and café owners. This means that every party pays for a part of the company, where the municipality pays the biggest amount of money. The tenants pay the lowest amount of money. At the moment 25 real estate companies are part of the organisation, varying from small privately owned real estate companies to the larger ones. The city company has a board with nine members, every party sends three members to the board and someone from the city company leads the meetings. This person is therefore independent of the three parties. Four or five times a year there is a meeting with all the members, around 100 people come this meetings. Next to that the members also meet in apart focus groups to discuss certain topics in specific areas of Helsingborg. The purpose of this city company is to enable the parties to work together to strengthen the attractiveness of the inner-city.

A real estate owner sees the value of meeting and working together, and said the following about:

*“And that’s a great place to know, mingle and meet potential new tenants or meet politicians or meet people from the city. But also getting a grasp of what’s going on, what’s new and what’s happening. It’s really good.”*

Next to the meetings with the board, the real estate owners also meet separately. One thing that the real estate owners like about working together is that they have more resources. They acknowledge they have a bigger impact because they’re with many. They can learn from each other, solve issues on a daily basis and organise great events. The municipality of Helsingborg also like the fact that the real estate owners are working together and said:

*“We tend to see that they stay there for a very long time, they don’t just buy it, take the equity and leave. They actually in for the long run so that is nice to see.”*

Not all real estate owners are involved, the establishment manager mentioned that it is hard to reach housing cooperatives, which often have shops under their apartments. It is important to reach them, because they sometimes get tenants in their shops which shouldn’t be there, because they don’t connect with the rest of the stores in the area. Next to them, it is hard to reach private real estate owners who don’t live in the city. According to the municipality this is not like a big problem, because there are just a few and they don’t impact the day-to-day work.

The real estate owners that are involved have come so far in their thinking that they understand how much money they put in the inner-city, if they can’t work together with their neighbours or the municipality, it will be like throwing all the money into a black hole. They really see the importance of working together on a long term.

#### 4.1.2. Turnhout

In Turnhout, there is an association active in which the real estate owners, catering entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs, are active. The association is non-profit and is also called a covenant, this means that there is an agreement wherein the association is expected to do some tasks in the inner-city. The members of the association, sometimes pay for activities that are organised, because the municipality has not enough budget. The meetings of the association are joined by three members of every party and an alderman from the municipality. He is responsible for centre management in the inner-city, meaning that his task is to deal with vacancy. About the division of tasks, between the municipality and the association, he said:

*“Hardware is with us, software is with them.”*

By this he meant, that the municipality is responsible for the physical infrastructure and facilities in the city. The association focuses on the intangible aspects of urban management and development. This includes marketing, event planning, city image and other initiatives. This year features a first for the real estate owners, they are going to co-finance a project in the main shopping street of Turnhout. This street will be made bus-free and renovated. They are going to co-finance, because they want to show the municipality that they are committed. The real estate owners, the catering entrepreneur and the municipality like to work together, it takes some time to invest but on the long term they will get it back.

A real estate owner said the following about working together:

*“What I find important is actually to notice that there are a number of actors who really have an interest in the city thriving and flourishing that they are willing to put their shoulders to the wheel to see what the solutions could be. I think that is an important signal among themselves and also to the outside world.”*

Not all the real estate owners are affiliated with the organisation either. Real estate owners that are not involved can be divided in two groups. The first group are real estate owners who are not involved in working together. They don't look ahead and are just focused on their own goals and money. They don't look at the interests of society, the involved real estate owners don't like that, one real estate owner, said the following about it:

*“It is a free society, but sometimes it is sad, when people choose to build the wrong buildings in the wrong place.”*

The other group are real estate owners who are active in the inner-city, but are not a part of the association. Only the three biggest real estate owners of Turnhout are member of the association. The two other real estate owners that were interviewed indicated that they know a lot about the city. However, they didn't know about strategies of the city. They said that every real estate owner does their own thing in the inner-city, but they would like to be more involved to learn from the others and to be part of organised events.

There is even a third group of real estate owners that are not involved in the association at the moment, this are the real estate owners that are not part of the inner-city (anymore). Because of the strict demarcation of the inner-city, some who used to be in the wider area feel unheard according to the alderman. The municipality knows that they should continue to pay attention to them to not lose their interest.

Next to this association of real estate owners, catering entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs, there is also an association for only catering entrepreneurs. This is founded because in the hospitality there are some specific needs, like terrace layout or what the canopies should look like.

### 4.1.3. Spijkenisse

In Spijkenisse there are two organisations active in the inner-city. The first one is a BIZ for entrepreneurs and real estate owners in the inner-city. Their purpose is to work together on an attractive liveable inner-city that can survive on the long term. The municipality is participant in the BIZ as well as stakeholder. They are participant, because they also have real estate in the inner-city. They are stakeholder, because they set framework conditions, provide information and collect the funds. An account manager of the municipality is active in the BIZ. One of the first things he did when he started to work on the inner-city, was making a map of the inner-city with all the real estate owners and visited them. One of the real estate owners said about him:

*“He is a very positive official because he is very active. It always depends on the puppet, on the people shall we say.”*

Every participant has to pay a certain amount of money, based on the WOZ value of their property(s). In this way free rides are excluded, because everyone has to pay. There is a centre manager who works on behalf of the BIZ, he is busy with all facts of what goes on in the inner-city, marketing and promotion, event organisation and inner-city layout. Next to that he is also acquiring for owners who can't get their premises filled. He sees the inner-city as a big shopping

mall. The inner-city doesn't consist of individual shops but is a big shopping construction where you can get different things. The BIZ was founded in 2016 and extended in 2021, members of the BIZ have to vote every five years for granting. One real estate owner don't understand why this is necessary, after all:

*“You can't unscramble scrambled eggs.”*

Not everyone is interested in the activities of the BIZ, however they have to be part of it. The account manager and centre manager don't have the illusion that all the owners are equally enthusiastic and see good reasons for that fact that not everybody is interested. It could be that their pensions depends on their real estate or that their shareholders say, you have to focus on making money.

The board of the BIZ exists of nine members, one independent chairman, four entrepreneurs and four real estate owners. During their meetings, it was discovered that entrepreneurs and real estate owners are concerned with the inner-city on a different level. Entrepreneurs are mainly concerned with the short term, where real estate owners are concerned with the long term. Therefore, the three-party consultation was established for the six biggest real estate owners. This is the second organisation active in the inner-city of Spijkenisse. Next to the real estate owners, also the BIZ and the municipality are part of it. The parties together drew up a course document in which they outlined what needs to happen in the inner-city, to make it future proof and save the vibrancy of the inner-city. The collaboration started right before Covid-19 and the added value was immediately clear. They met almost every week to quickly anticipate on changes.

In the table 4.1. the agreements and differences between organisations in the three cities are showed.

*Table 4.1. Overview of the different organisations in the inner-city (Verhagen, 2024)*

	Helsingborg	Turnhout	Spijkenisse
Organisation	City company	Association	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BIZ</li> <li>2. Three party consultation</li> </ol>
Members of organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Municipality</li> <li>• Real estate owners</li> <li>• Tenants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real estate owners</li> <li>• Entrepreneurs</li> <li>• Catering entrepreneurs</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Entrepreneurs &amp; real estate owners</li> <li>2. Real estate owners, BIZ &amp; municipality</li> </ol>
Purpose organisation	Enable the parties to work together to strengthen the attractiveness of the inner-city	Focus on the intangible aspects of urban management and development. This includes marketing, event planning, city image and economic initiatives.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work together on an attractive liveable inner-city that can survive on the long term.</li> <li>2. Make inner-city future proof and save vibrancy</li> </ol>
Role organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active establishment manager who connects municipality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connects three parties in the city</li> <li>• Organising events and activities</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevention of free riders, centre manager who acts like a broker,</li> <li>2. Talking about the inner-city on the long</li> </ol>

	and real estate owners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps real estate owners to find new tenants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> </ul>	term, instead of short term
Problems organisation	Hard to reach housing cooperatives and private real estate owners who don't live in the city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not every real estate owner is involved, however they like to be involved.</li> <li>Real estate owners who are outside of the core shopping area feel unheard</li> </ul>	1. Not everyone is interested
Role municipality	Pays the biggest part of the company, but doesn't have a big role in the inner-city	An alderman of the municipality joins the meetings, he is a centre manager and is responsible for fixing vacancy	Municipality is participant in the BIZ and stakeholder Account manager is active in BIZ and three party consultation
Role real estate owners	Very active, lot of meetings, like to work together	Very active, like to work together, only 3 big real estate owners involved	Very active, like to work together
Financial contribution	Every party pays a part of the city company	The municipality has a budget, but not enough, real estate owners co-fund projects	Compulsory contribution in the BIZ
Strategy/vision	For four different areas in the city	Core strengthening policy, visual quality plan	Course document

## 4.2. Strategies of the inner-city

In this part, the strategies that the different cities have, are discussed. It shows the analysis of the reading of the policy documents. This is important, because having a vision says something about how the parties are working together in the inner-city. Next to that it says something about the available resources in the inner-city.

### 4.2.1 Helsingborg

The establishment manager has set up an establishment strategy to create a consensus between different real estate owners regarding the needs and supplies required in the inner-city of Helsingborg (HBG City, 2023). The strategy is also intended as a tool that the establishment



manager can use in dialogue with potential tenants and real estate owners. The strategy can be used by real estate owners, housing associations, private real estate owners, developers working at the municipality and other real estate stakeholders, such as estate agents and consultants. In the strategy the background of the organisation is explained. Next to that the role and responsibilities of the establishment manager are discussed. The establishment manager serves as a primary contact for potential tenants seeking connections with various real estate owners, he actively develops and promotes innovative concepts to attract central establishments in the inner-city, he acts as a coach and advisor for both real estate owners and potential tenants and he engages with real estate owners to identify the types of activities needed in the inner-city. The document also indicates that real estate owners are responsible for handling space allocation and rent negotiations, supply up-to-date details on premises, prepare comprehensive information on each space, involve the establishment manager in discussion about future vacancies and contract terms, maintain an open dialogue about potential tenants and redirect stakeholders whose space requirements cannot be met by the real estate owner.

Next to the tasks of the stakeholders, there are also some goals named in the document. The goals are to enhance the appeal of the inner-city through strategic ground-floor utilization and cooperation, fostering a vibrant environment that attracts more visitors. The aim is to make the inner-city's offerings compelling enough to compete with e-commerce and external retail, focusing on convincing existing customers and businesses of Helsingborg's value. Continuous reassessment and improvement of business models and concepts are essential. There is a strive to building long-term partnerships with serious players to improve both the quality and financial stability of offerings. Activities will be strategically relocated and new ones established according to the route strategy. By highlighting select locations, current concepts will be showcased. Finally, minimizing establishment costs for real estate owners is crucial to ensure investments remain worthwhile. In the strategy there are set some targets for 2024. The goal is to get five new members of real estate owners groups, 15 new establishments and a vacancy rate of 5%.

The establishment strategy refers to some neighbourhood strategies, which have been set up in collaboration with the three parties (HBG City, 2024). The strategies are helpful for example when a real estate owner has an empty premise. They just have to look at the strategy of the specific neighbourhood and they know what kind of shop or restaurant is needed in that area.

On the map below, there are seven different areas seen, all with a specific purpose, varying from the harbour to art and culture, shopping, the old town, innovation district, experience and do and creative multiculturalism and student life (HBG City, 2024). This image indicates a multi-faceted city that caters to a wide range of interests and needs, promoting a rich and varied urban experience.



Figure 4.1. Map of purposes areas inner-city (HBG City, 2024)

Three different street strategies were viewed. The strategies exits out of the following topics, feelings about the street or square, the designated target group, the experience, the characteristics of the neighbourhood. And are filled with images of supply, experiences and the environment as inspiration for the specific area.



Figure 4.2. Image from one of the street strategies (HBG City, 2024)

The establishment strategy and street strategies of Helsingborg demonstrate a comprehensive approach to urban development that prioritizes collaboration, strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and the creation of vibrant appealing urban spaces. These efforts are designed to foster economic growth, enhance community well-being and position the city competitively in the regional and global context.

#### 4.2.2. Turnhout

In Turnhout, the municipality has set up a core strengthening policy. This policy exist of two parts, namely new impulses for the inner-city of Turnhout and new demarcation of the inner-city. The first part is about the fact that the municipality will take target action in the period 2020-2025 (Stad Turnhout, 2024). They want to strengthen the image quality and appearance, to improve commercial property infrastructure and to strengthen affordable and quality housing in the inner-city. To improve the image quality, the municipality developed an image quality plan. The image quality plan outlines a framework for construction projects and redevelopment of public spaces. There is a directive in force that puts a brake on the increase of specific commercial establishments, namely kebab shops, mini-supermarkets, day shops, pizzerias, betting shops, newspaper shops, mobile phone repair services and barber shops. The strong growth of these shops had a negative impact on the desired image of the inner-city. In certain streets, they also lead to impoverishment of the supply.

In the vision there is also something written about the financial situation in the inner-city. In the period 2020-2025 the municipality gave an annual grant of 100.000 euros to the inner-city association for organising shopping and hospitality experiences. Next to that, the municipality gives premiums for those who invest in the quality and appearance of the available commercial premises, by doing this, new commercial activity will be attracted. Investing can be done by



merging existing smaller premises, façade renovation and providing opportunities for working and living above shops. In the transition zones and approach streets, support will also be granted to vacant commercial premises that are transformed to residential units.

Next to grants, the municipality also has an annual levy of at least 2500 euros that will be given to a real estate owners of an vacant property. Before giving this levy, the municipality tries to contact the owners to ask them for a solution. This can be done, for example, by reoccupying the property or by renting, renovating or selling it. If there is no solution, the owner is charged with the levy.

The second part of the core strengthening policy is about the new demarcation of the inner-city. Turnhout has a defined core shopping area and retail growth area since 2000. These are evaluated at the start of each new legislature and adjusted if necessary. See the map below for the demarcation. The red area is the core shopping area, the yellow area is the transition zone and the green area are the streets leading up (Stad Turnhout, 2024).

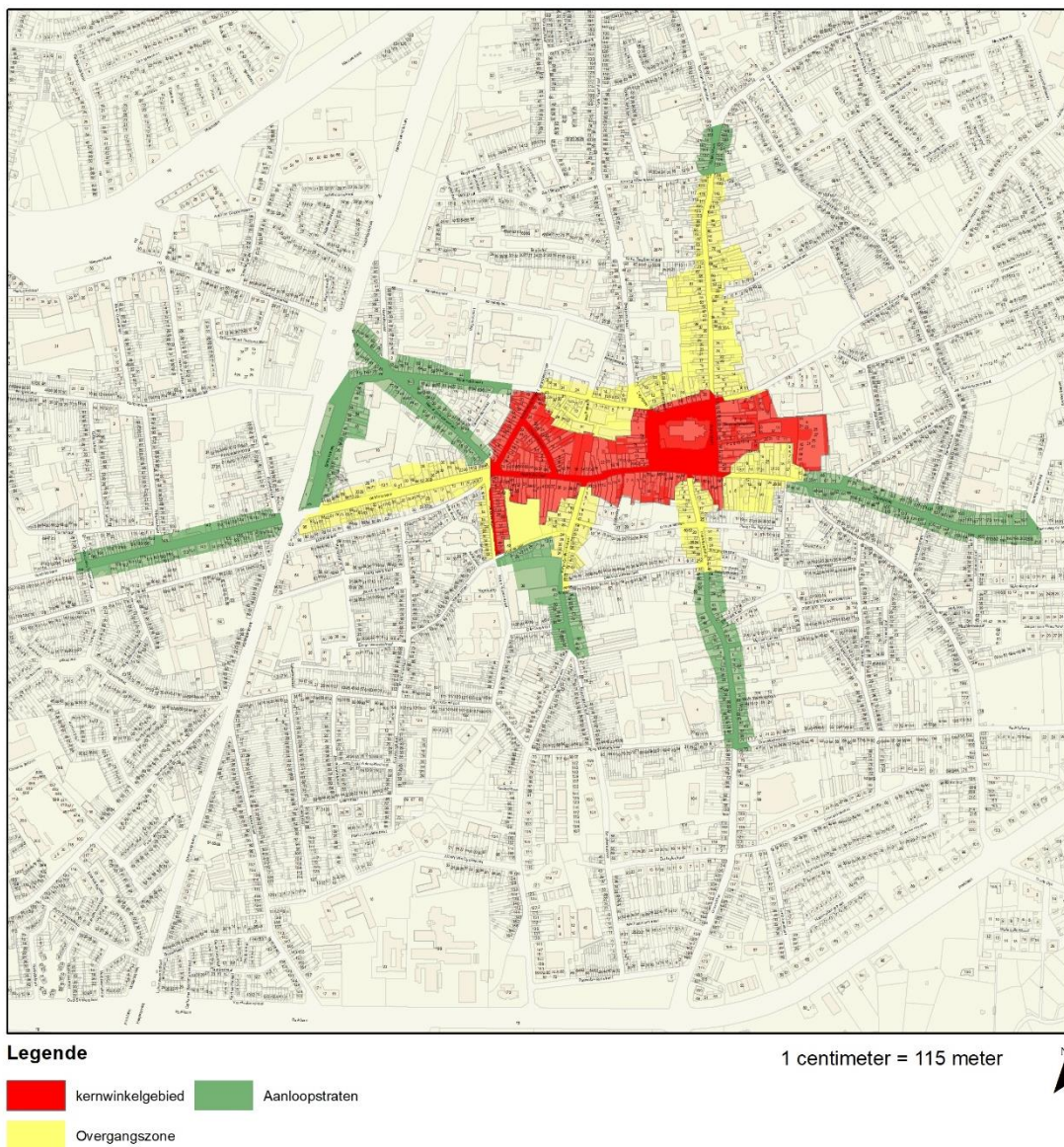


Figure 4.3. Map of the inner-city of Turnhout (Stad Turnhout, 2024).

What becomes clear on the basis of above information is that Turnhout uses a multifaceted and strategic approach in which they combine regulatory measures, financial incentives, and targeted urban planning. This can effectively enhance the quality and

functionality of an inner-city area. This can lead to a more vibrant, attractive and economically sustainable area.

### 4.2.3. Spijkenisse

The parties in the three-party consultation wrote together the course document and implementation programme for transition from 'shopping area' to city hall room' (ArnoRuigrok-PPP & De Zwarte Hond, 2021). The document exists of three parts, namely the heading in which the functional and spatial direction for the inner-city's approach is discussed and the organisational approach to the transition. The second part is the implementation programme, in which the implementation agenda, the main tasks and project and the area profiles that are leading in steering the development in parts of the inner-city are discussed. The last part exist out of four appendices which address underlying analyses or provide further depth. The purpose of the document is to more sharply outline the functional future of the inner-city and the appropriate spatial structure and layout. In order to make the inner-city more viable, attractive and sustainable, a complete range of facilities, a recognisable structure, an attractive accommodation by filling the buildings and designing the space and a compact centre by properly managing shrinkage is needed.

The document also write something about the cooperation between stakeholders: municipality, real estate owners and entrepreneurs. In that cooperation, parties have to fulfil their own roles but they must also position each other in such a way that everyone can play their part. Cooperation is necessary to achieve improvement of the inner-city. It is a long-term process that requires monitoring and adjustment along the way. In this process, all stakeholders have a role to play. Roles are related to specific tasks and responsibilities of the parties, with the nature and extern of their interests and with the resources at their disposal. That is not only money, but also the deployment of other resources and instruments available to those parties. In the three party consultation, the interests come together. This consultation is therefore important for implementation of the joint programme. Here, parties discuss how they can make optimal use of each other's efforts and to achieve maximum results together. Next to that, projects which are of importance for the transition of the inner-city are also described in the document.

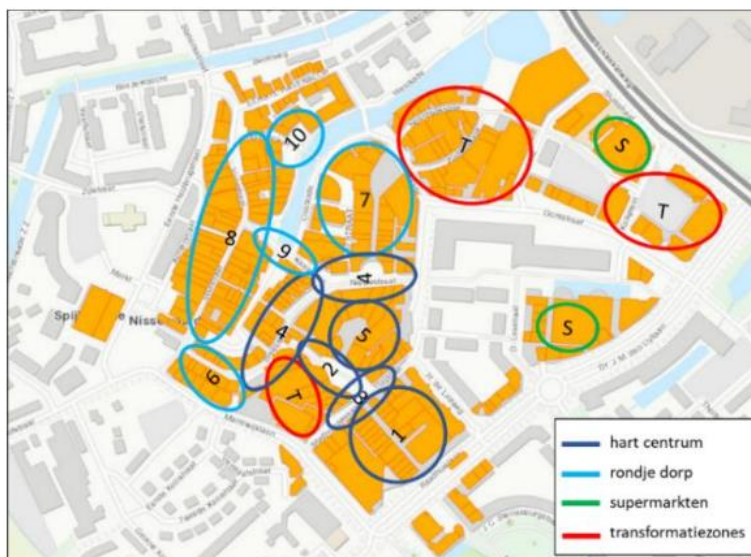


Figure 4.4. Map of the inner-city of Spijkenisse, on which four different zones are highlighted. In dark blue, the heart of the inner-city, in light blue, around the village, in green, the supermarkets and in red, the transformation zones (ArnoRuigrok-PPP & De Zwarte Hond, 2021).

The map, figure 4.4., above is divided in four groups. The dark blue circles mean ‘the heart of the inner-city’. This is where the core branching is located. The light blue circles mean ‘around the village’, these are zones where the complementary branching is located. These are shops that to some extent are purposefully visited. This is also where the focus of evening catering and services is. Then there is the green group, where the ‘supermarkets’ are located. The last group, are the red circles, ‘transformation locations’. A number of sites will lose their retail function completely. Conversion to another function is the issue here. This can consist of transformation to a substantially other form of use, mainly residential.

The course document and implementation program for the inner-city transition of Spijkenisse demonstrate a strategic, collaborative, and adaptive approach to revitalizing urban areas. By defining clear directions, fostering stakeholder cooperation, and categorizing development sites, Spijkenisse aims to create a vibrant, sustainable, and attractive urban environment for residents, visitors and businesses alike.

*Table 4.2. Overview of different topics of the strategies in the inner-city (Verhagen, 2024)*

	Helsingborg	Turnhout	Spijkenisse
Discussed topics			
Role stakeholders	X	Mainly about the municipality	X
Prioritize collaboration	X		X
Strategic planning	X	X	X
Goals inner-city	X	X	X
Financial contribution		X	X

What is striking when comparing table 4.1. and table 4.2. is that in Turnhout the municipality want to work on collaboration with the real estate owners, but about this is not much said in the vision about the inner-city. Next to that, in the strategies of Helsingborg nothing is said about how the financial contribution of the city company works.

### 4.3. Resources and dependency on real estate owners and the municipality

In this part, the resources of the stakeholders in the different cities are discussed. The resources are divided into five categories, as explained in the theoretical framework. Next to that, the resources are divided into the resources of the real estate owners and the municipality. Also, the dependency on the different stakeholders are discussed.

#### 4.3.1. Helsingborg

In Helsingborg not much resources were mentioned by the real estate owners. An internet platform on which they can put there empty spaces was mentioned. Next to that, they sometimes do window dressing. The fact that few resources were mentioned may be linked to the fact that real estate owners in Helsingborg feel very dependent on the municipality. The real estate owners complained that the municipality of Helsingborg is too slow at the building



permits processes. Because of the long waiting time, real estate owners can't do their projects because it takes too long to get a building permit and by waiting they lose income. When the real estate owners want to change something or build new things, they feel very much dependent on the municipality. One real estate owner said the following about it, to indicate that real estate owners can't operate without the municipality:

*“Sometimes it feels like we can make our own choices, but we are very in their hands, so to say.”*

According to the real estate owners it should be different, the municipality should be more open for discussion and they need to have a bigger understanding of what the real estate owners need to build a good project. According to the establishment manager of the city company it has to do with the people who are working at the municipality. According to him it is a very big problem, because if it doesn't get better, the real estate owners will no longer invest in the city, because they can't do anything with the buildings they bought. One real estate owner says about it:

*“Yeah so it's very strict, it's sometimes really ridiculous, rules are frustrating, or the person who is taking care of the question.”*

The municipality, not the department of building permits, said that they are very aware of this challenge and they set up meetings between the real estate owners and the department of building permits and they act like a neutral partner. However, the municipality acknowledge that the building permits department has to be strict: *“the city is built for hundreds of hundreds of years, we can't just do whatever is requested right now.”*

The municipality has a lot of more resources than the real estate owners in Helsingborg, which is not surprising given the high dependency on the municipality experienced by the real estate owners. The municipality has financial resources, for example out of taxes. They own public space, there is detail planning about which they decide, there are policies and rules about architecture. Next to that, because the municipality pay the biggest amount of money to the city company, it is them who decide if the city company keeps existing. If they are not interested anymore, the city company has no chance of existing anymore.

Even though the municipality has far more resources than the real estate owners, they still feel dependent on the real estate owners. This is because the municipality needs them to be interested in continuing investing in Helsingborg. They need to know what their strategic plans look like, need to have day-to-day conversations with them, need to share plans of the municipality, need to create a common vision, like where to develop in the city. Next to this, they wish for the fact that every real estate owner company has an employee that works proactively to fill the vacancies: *“it would be great if there would be more people within the organisation that work proactively to actually fill their offices and houses and promoting the region and the city, that is something that we want to step up together with them.”*

In Helsingborg, both the real estate owners and the municipality are dependent on the city company, because they are the party which is looking for a golden path between the three different interests.

### 4.3.2. Turnhout

The real estate owners in Turnhout have a lot more resources than the real estate owners in Helsingborg. For example when there are vacant buildings, they can make use of transformation from shops to residential units, they can refurbish the buildings, they can sell the building to a colleague real estate owner, they can make use of flexible leases, also called

pop-up contracts in Belgium. Normally a lease is nine years and can be ended every three years. With a pop-up contract, a building can be leased for only half a year. If all of these resources don't work, the real estate owners use window dressing. For example they fill a vacant shop with little concepts like crafts, a temporary coffeeshop or ice cream shop. Or they have a collaboration with a school who make clothes and they hang those in the shop window or someone fills the shop window with their collection of antique bicycles.

In Turnhout the real estate owners have financial resources they put in projects in the inner-city, for example for an event in the inner-city. Or this year, the main shopping area will be made bus free and they are going to co-fund the project to show the municipality that they care about the inner-city. Next to that, there is an app in which all the entrepreneurs of Turnhout are highlighted. The idea is that it will also include an agenda showing what's on in Turnhout.

In line with the amount of resources the owners have, they do not feel heavily dependent on the municipality. In general they are quite satisfied with the municipality. They understand that there are legislation and rules. According to them, they are not dependent as individual real estate owners, but as the association. One real estate owner thinks the municipality can think along more, and said:

*"I do it for the city, but it is my income."*

About the association, the financial resources the municipality has now are limited, primarily covering administrative costs and basic expenses. However, there is a push to increase these resources to enable more substantial investments in local entrepreneurship and city marketing. This would allow the association to develop and implement more ideas and concepts. Increased funding could also lead to greater tax revenue for the city, making it a beneficial investment. The financial system has already developed over time, because there has been another financial system in place before, which did not work great in Turnhout. At the time of the previous financial system, everything was organised per street and there was a tax regulated by the municipality. The tax was collected in a specific area and the objective was to actually use those funds to finance every street. The funds were collected centrally but were redistributed by street and if in one street the funds were not fully used, another street could apply for that money from the municipality. Everyone paid but in the end, one or two streets got the money and this led to inconsistencies and competition for resources. According to the alderman of the municipality:

*"and then you get contradictions, but I'm paying for something and I'm chasing them with my contribution more and more to yonder."*

The municipality immediately stopped the system at the start of a new administrative period and set up an alternative system. Now there is a general tax system, where different types of taxes come together and a general allowance is paid to the association. The clear delineation of the area ensures transparency and effectiveness. The municipality also indicated that much would depend on the new elections, which at the time of the interview, had not yet taken place. A new budget for the association could be set after the election. One of the real estate owners mentioned the continuity of the real estate owners as an important resource, because the politics are replaced every six years. Everything has to be decided again, while the real estate owners just can continue their work.

Next to their contribution to the association, the municipality helps the real estate owners also in another way. They offer subsidies for façade renovations and quality improvements to retail spaces. These subsidies aim to enhance the overall aesthetic and functionality of the inner-city. Additionally, there are incentives for converting upper floors of retail spaces into residential units, contributing to a more vibrant inner-city.



The real estate owners underscore the interest of working together, and being dependent on each other:

*"I think it's very important for any city in the whole world or any municipality in the whole world that investments can happen to attract residents, to get rid of vacancies, to renovate old buildings or give them a second life, I think that can't be separated. That's just government and economics I will say."*

However, overall, the real estate owners say that being independent is maybe a bit too much to say:

*"The word dependent is quite strong. I am convinced of the value of working together, the fact that we see each other regularly, very much so, but being dependent I am or we certainly are not and neither are they from me."*

The real estate owners don't say there a dependent on the municipality, but they do say to be dependent on chains or other real estate owners. Some keep asking very high rents, while many premises are vacant, they proactively do nothing to get those filled.

Not only the real estate owners have a lot more resources, also the municipality has a lot more resources than in Helsingborg. In Belgium, the municipality has the resource vacancy fee, this means that the municipality can impose a levy on a real estate owner if a property is vacant for too long. The real estate owners in Turnhout understand why this fee exist and think that in general it is good motivation for a real estate owner to do something with the property. Next to that, the municipality can transform shops into housing. When properties are difficult to repurpose, the municipality can purchase and revitalize them, however this is seen as a last option. What is special in Turnhout is the rule that some types of shops are no longer welcome in the inner-city. In paragraph 4.2. there is written about this policy. It is thought that this violates the European Services Directive (2024), but this does not appear to be the case. One of the derogations to the rule is being used. What is important is that it can only be a temporary rule. With this rule, Turnhout has control over which shops are settling in the inner-city. The real estate owners understand this, one said:

*"It is just common sense. There's nothing wrong with a hairdresser, but of course if it's a fake hairdresser where other things happen in the back of the room, I think that's what they mean, I think that's perfect."*

At the moment they are thinking about solutions when this rule will be over, for example issuing conditional authorisations in which you need substantive assistance, you get training and guidance. So that the municipality can monitor what is earned and how. Another resource that challenges the real estate owners is additional costs that are incurred when shop owners are for example open during a Saturday or Sunday. Also in Turnhout it is sometimes hard to get building permits. One real estate owner, who is not in the association, said:

*"In some areas they are just completely missing the ball, that I don't think they know it is so alive."*

### 4.3.3. Spijkenisse

Collecting money for a specific area, also happens in Spijkenisse, namely in the BIZ, as described in paragraph 4.1. Because of the BIZ, the real estate owners have financial resources to invest in the inner-city.

The municipality feels dependent on the real estate owners, because of this financial resources:

*“Real estate owners bring financial resources to the table and will start investing only if something favourable comes out of it for them in the end.”*

In Spijkenisse, the real estate owners don't really make use of window dressing, because vacant shops are not in a walking route and would unnecessarily draw visitors away from other places. Sometimes, they use stickers on their shop windows to attract attention of visitors. Apart from that, real estate owners use temporary contracts so temporary tenants can make use of the buildings. At last they use internet platforms of brokers with vacant stores.

Another important resource that the real estate owners have is the fact that they can keep a property empty. It is sometimes better to do that, because the bank looks at the value of their property every year. Suppose you are going to put a tenant in at much lower rental terms, then your WOZ value goes down, the bank then says at some point, this happens to so many properties of yours, so actually you are under water, you are worth less than as stated in the book, so then an owner sometimes really has to write off millions at the bank. So then sometimes it's more convenient to leave a property empty. The municipality feels dependent on this actions, because a vacant shop does not contribute to the streetscape, which is important for the municipality.

However, the municipality has much more resources in the inner-city than the real estate owners. First of all, the municipality has subsidies. They do a lot of research to subsidies they can apply for. In total almost two million in subsidies got granted. Some examples are, the relocation subsidy, the impulse subsidy which just takes the edge of investments and the façade fund. One of the real estate owners said about those subsidies:

*“Just looking back, now there are 44 houses under construction, but they could not have been realised without subsidies. So yes in that sense dependent on the municipality yes.”*

The municipality also has some resources which make the real estate owners dependent on the municipality in a more negative way than the subsidies. For example the preferential right, this means that the real estate owner can only sell their property to the municipality. The municipality uses this to monitor the quality and infill of certain properties in the inner-city. Other resources that the municipality has are policies, procedures, public space, lawyers, a council and aldermen, licences, paid parking and zoning plans. With these zoning plans, the municipality can change the planning purpose of a property. This is a resource that will be used if nothing else works for transformation of properties. If they are planning to do so, they have let the owner know in advance, other way planning damage is created. Changing the planning purpose of a property can limit the options for the owner and it does something to the value of his property. The owner has a year to change his property.

The above resources make the real estate owners very dependent on the municipality. One real estate owner said that in the following way:

*“For us the city hall, to put it generically, is necessary.”*

However, the real estate owners and municipality are dependent on each other as well, when it comes to investing for example. They both need each other to continue investing in the inner-city. In recent years It has become clear that the parties need each other in the inner-city. According to one real estate owner:

*“A municipality can't do this alone, an owner not alone, an entrepreneur not alone. That collaboration is necessary.”*

Table 4.3. Overview of different resources and dependencies in the inner-city (Verhagen, 2024)

	Helsingborg	Turnhout	Spijkenisse
<b>Resources real estate owners</b>			
<b>Physical resources</b>			
Window dressing	X	X	X
Transformation buildings		X	
Refurbishment buildings		X	
Keeping a property empty			X
<b>Financial resources</b>			
Financial contribution to inner-city	X	X	X
<b>Relational resources</b>			
Contact with other real estate owners	X	X	X
Continuity		X	
<b>Technological resources</b>			
App about the inner-city		X	
Internet platform	X		X
<b>Regulatory resources</b>			
Flexible leases		X	X
<b>Resources municipality</b>			
<b>Physical resources</b>			
Paid parking			X
Public space	X	X	X
Transformation buildings		X	X
<b>Financial resources</b>			
Taxes	X	X	
Subsidies		X	X
Financial contribution to organisation	X	X, but limited	
<b>Regulatory resources</b>			
Building permits/licences	X	X	X
Detail/zoning planning	X		X
Rules about architecture	X		
Vacancy fee		X	
Preferential right		X	X
Banning certain types of shops		X	
Rules about closing times shops		X	
<b>Are real estate owners dependent on other parties?</b>			
	Yes, on the municipality	Yes, on the municipality Yes, on chains or other real estate owners	Yes, on the municipality
<b>Is the municipality dependent on other parties?</b>			
	Yes, on the real estate owners	Yes, on the real estate owners	Yes, on the real estate owners

Table 4.3 shows the differences in the availability in resources the three cities have. Next to that it also shows the differences in resources between the municipality and the real estate owners.

## 4.4. Vacancy in the inner-city

This paragraph compares the different vacancy situations in the three cities. Next to that the different reasons and solutions are discussed. This paragraph is a stepping stone to the final section in which paragraphs 4.1. up to 4.4. are compared with each other.

### 4.4.1 Helsingborg

In Helsingborg, there is at the moment 6% vacancy. Last year it was 5%, it went 1% up, but this is no problem according to the establishment manager. The stores are already rented out but they haven't started to build the stores yet. Next January, the vacancy rate will be probably 3-4% according to him. The worst year in Helsingborg was during the pandemic in 2020-2021. Some entrepreneurs had a lot of troubles and had to put down their businesses.

Vacancy in the inner-city of Helsingborg is driven by multiple reasons. One significant issue are changing consumption patterns, particularly the rise of online shopping. This poses a major challenge for smaller shops. Additionally, inconsistent opening hours among shops in the inner-city create an uneven shopping experience, especially when compared to the shopping hours of the shopping centre outside of the city. This shopping centre draws customers away from local shops. Economic factors such as downturns, high interest rates and inflations are also reasons that were named for vacancy. However, some real estate owners believe this is a temporary issue that will solve itself. Moreover, some real estate owners, the ones that are not concerned with the inner-city, choose to keep spaces empty until they find the right tenant, rather than filling them with less desirable tenants.

To address the vacancy challenge in Helsingborg, several solutions have been proposed. According to the real estate owners, the establishment manager and the municipality working together is crucial. Developing and adhering to a shared strategy, where specific street are designated for particular types of retail, ensures coherence and maximize the appeal of different areas. The municipality can play a significant role by creating job opportunities and attracting large companies to the city, which stimulates economic activity and reduce vacancies. Improving the relationship between the municipality and real estate owners also contributes to reducing vacancy rates. Real estate owners need to be proactive and creative in attracting tenants, for example by reducing the rents. Lowering rents even if it means a decrease in property value can be more beneficial than having empty spaces that generate no income. According to the respondents, Helsingborg can in this way effectively address inner-city vacancies.

### 4.4.2. Turnhout

There is still a vacancy problem in Turnhout, even though Turnhout scores among the better ones compared to neighbouring municipalities according to the alderman. The real estate owners said that it sometimes would be nice if the buildings are faster filled, but that is not a very big problem.

Vacancy in the inner-city of Turnhout is driven by a range of economic, social and structural factors. High rents, personnel costs and additional pay for weekend work make it expensive to operate stores. Strong labour unions limit opening hours and restrict Sunday and evening shopping. Next to that, the rise of online shopping puts pressure on shopping at physical stores in the inner-city. The difficulty to access the inner-city reduces customer flows, while

Turnhout relies on shoppers from surrounding areas. Another mobility issue is that in the main shopping street a bus is driving multiple times per hour. The socio-economic landscape of Turnhout also contributes to vacancies. Many residents have lower-than-average income, partly due to a significant migrant population. Additionally, the proliferation of retail spaces has led to oversupply. This overexpansion results in vacancy and decay, attracting lower-quality businesses and potentially criminal activities, disrupting the social balance.

Also in Turnhout, addressing vacancy requires collaboration between stakeholders. Next to that, vacant retail spaces should be transformed in residential properties. The municipality plays a crucial role in revitalizing the inner-city. They should concentrate retail in one or two main streets and organize well-managed hospitality areas that can draw more shoppers. This combination will make main streets more vibrant and attractive. Reducing bus traffic and adding green spaces in the main shopping street can improve the shopping environment. What real estate owners could do, is selling converted properties to end-users to bring more long-term investment and care than renting. By working together and implementing above strategies, Turnhout can address inner-city vacancies and create a vibrant shopping and living environment.

#### 4.4.3. Spijkenisse

The vacancy in Spijkenisse was around 18% and some parts were even 35%, but now the vacancy rate is around 10%. And if all the projects in Spijkenisse will be completed, the vacancy would be around 4-5%. Some shops are still empty, but it is nothing comparable how it used to be.

Poor decisions in the distribution of retail spaces and a lack of cohesive planning have resulted in an overbuilt environment from 2000 to 2007. Next to that, the Dutch retail sector suffers from a shortage of new tenants, leaving a gap when businesses go bankrupt. Due to bankruptcy large properties are left vacant. Other reasons for left vacancies are relocation policies and health reasons of entrepreneurs. Also in Spijkenisse, the rise of online shopping had impacted physical stores, compounded by competition from other places, like Hoogvliet and Hellevoetsluis, who both offer free parking. In contrast to Spijkenisse, where visitors have to pay for parking. The city's proximity to Rotterdam, with a metro connection that brings people to the city in 20 minutes, adds another layer of competition.

Addressing vacancies in Spijkenisse requires a multifaceted approach, in which strong collaboration between stakeholders is again an important factor. Cooperation among real estate owners and the municipality has proven beneficial. Regular discussions about property use and shared goals for the inner-city help to align efforts. This collaborative approach has led to a clear understanding of the types of businesses desired in the inner-city. One strategy is to reduce the total retail space to create a more compact and vibrant core shopping area. Real estate owners should convert properties into residential units when suitable. Active engagement with the centre manager, account manager and brokers, as well as organizing events to attract tenants is crucial. Next to that, providing incentives and offering flexible rental contracts can help as well. The municipality can play a pivotal role by strategically purchasing, transforming and reselling properties. According to the respondents, by implementing these solutions, Spijkenisse can effectively address inner-city vacancies and create a more dynamic and appealing inner-city.

Table 4.4. Overview of the vacancy problem in the inner-city (Verhagen, 2024)

	Helsingborg	Turnhout	Spijkenisse
Current vacancy rate (measured on the basis of shop floor area)			
	6% <sup>1</sup>	14,7% <sup>2</sup>	10% <sup>3</sup>
Reasons for vacancy			
Online shopping	X	X	X
Inconsistent/strict opening hours	X	X	
Shopping centre	X		
Economically bad times, lower spending pattern	X	X	
High interest rates	X		
Real estate owners that keep building empty	X		
High rents		X	
Personnel costs		X	
Costs for weekend work		X	
Difficulties around mobility		X	
Overexpansion of retail spaces		X	X
Lack of cohesive planning			X
Shortage new entrepreneurs			X
Relocation policies			X
Bankruptcy entrepreneurs			X
Competition other places			X
Paid parking			X
Solutions for vacancy			
Work together	X	X	X
Strategy	X	X	X
Attract large companies	X		
Proactive real estate owners	X	X	X
Reduce rents	X		
Transformation		X	X
Contain inner-city, reduce retail space		X	X
Organizing events			X

<sup>1</sup> HBG City (2024)

<sup>2</sup> Provincie Antwerpen et al. (2024)

<sup>3</sup> Gemeente Nissewaard (2024)



Make the inner-city more attractive		X	
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Table 4.4. shows that there are a lot different reasons of vacancy in the three cities. And that there are three solutions that are named in all the three cities, namely work together, a strategy and proactive real estate owners.

## 4.5. The role of policy on vacancy in the inner-city

In the last paragraph of the results chapter, the paraps above are all brought together to show the role of policy on vacancy in the inner-city.

### 4.5.1. Helsingborg

Helsingborg is well on its way with a 6% vacancy rate. The city company has played a big role in this, including appointing the current establishment manager. Because he has been active in linking real estate owners with properties and entrepreneurs, the vacancy has decreased in the inner-city over the past years. Besides this manager, strategies also contributed to this. This has made it quickly clear to real estate owners what type of retail should be in their empty premises. As a result, vacant properties are also not vacant for an extremely long time. What can help reduce vacancy rates even further is for building permits to be issued faster by the municipality. And it will also make real estate owners feel less dependent on the municipality, which will enhance cooperation between the two parties.

### 4.5.2. Turnhout

At the moment, there is a vacancy rate of 14,7% in Turnhout. The vacancy rate in the inner-city has not changed much over the past years (Provincie Antwerpen et al., 2024). On that basis, there could be said that setting up an association has not made much sense. Yet this is not true, in fact, setting up the association has led to a better relationship between real estate owners and the municipality. And also to better relationships between the real estate owners mutually. In Turnhout, the municipality's resources, particularly regulatory resources, play a major role in the inner-city. For example, imposing a vacancy fee and banning specific shops from the inner-city. This is expected to help reduce vacancy rates. On the contrary, other resources the municipality has, do not reduce vacancy rates and may even contribute to increasing vacancy rates. Those are rules about opening times of shops and Saturday and Sunday fees. Because of these instruments, the real estate owners are dependent on the municipality.

### 4.5.3. Spijkenisse

In Spijkenisse the vacancy rate is 10% at the moment. This is a lot less than the vacancy rate in the past, when it was 18% and even 35% in some parts of the inner-city. This reduction was initially due to the appointment of an account manager from the municipality. He together, with the BIZ, and its centre manager ensured that a structured cooperation between them and the real estate owners was set up. One of the outcomes of these consultations was a covenant with about 11 projects in the inner-city, one is to make the inner-city more compact. Among other things, this measure has reduced vacancy rates. In Spijkenisse there are not so much

resources available in the inner-city. Still the parties feel dependent on each other, this is caused by the fact that people need each other to invest in the inner-city.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion & discussion

This chapter gives an answer to the research question. First sub conclusions are given and after that the research question is answered. After the conclusion, the discussion starts. In the discussion, the results are linked to the theory. Next to that, the limitations and the implications of the research are discussed. Suggestions for follow-up research are given at the end. After the discussion, some policy recommendations are given.

### 5.1. Conclusion

This research was conducted to give an answer to the research question: *“To what extent does cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality have an impact on solving the vacancy problem in the inner-cities of medium-sized cities?”*

#### 5.1.1 Organisation of stakeholders

The first sub conclusion is about how the stakeholders in the three cities are organised. This says something about how they work together in the inner-city. The three cities all have a different kind of organisation in the inner-city. What is similar is that all three organisations include at least real estate owners and entrepreneurs. What is striking is that in Turnhout, the municipality is not part of the organisation. They do contribute through money and an alderman takes part in meetings as a centre manager but the municipality is not an equal partner like in Helsingborg and Spijkenisse. In Turnhout, the discussion partners are the real estate owners, entrepreneurs and catering entrepreneurs. In Helsingborg, the municipality also doesn't play a very big role, instead there is an establishment manager who takes the role over from the municipality in the inner-city. The municipality pays money to keep the organisation alive. In Spijkenisse the municipality is participant in the BIZ and their account manager is active in the three party consultation. These two organisations in the inner-city of Spijkenisse have different purposes. Where the BIZ is more focused on the short-term and financial aspect, namely preventing free riders. The three-party consultation is concerned with the long-term and making the inner-city future-proof. The financial situation is also not the same in the different cities. In Helsingborg and Spijkenisse (BIZ) all the parties pay money, based on to which party they belong or their WOZ-value. In contrast, in Turnhout only the municipality pays the organisation. However, this year the real estate owners are going to co-fund a project for the first time.

#### 5.1.2 Strategies of the inner-city

The second sub conclusion is about the strategies the three cities use in the inner-city. The strategies are very different from each other shape wise, but the content is quite similar. The different forms of strategies will be discussed in the discussion chapter, this sub conclusion will focus on the content of the strategies. All the strategies discuss the role of stakeholders in the inner-city, although in Turnhout the focus is mainly on the role of the municipality. This is not surprising as the document was written by the municipality. Next to that, in all strategies the strategic planning and goals in the inner-city are discussed. What is striking about the strategies in Helsingborg is that nothing is said about the financial situation in the inner-city. In contrast, in the strategies of Turnhout and Spijkenisse this is mentioned.

### 5.1.3. Resources of stakeholders

The third sub conclusion is about the available resources the real estate owners and the municipality have in the inner-city. Real estate owners in all the three cities can make use of window dressing, have financial resources to contribute to the inner-city and they have contact with other real estate owners. What strikes is that real estate owners in Turnhout have more resources than the real estate owners in Helsingborg and Spijkenisse. Real estate owners in Turnhout especially named more physical resources, like transformation and refurbishment of buildings. Next to that, it strikes that in Helsingborg the real estate owners have the fewest resources. The availability of resources of real estate owners are confirmed by the resources the municipality has in the inner-city. Namely, in Helsingborg both the real estate owners and the municipality have the fewest resources. In contrast, in Turnhout both the real estate owners and the municipality have the most resources. This is especially striking in the regulatory resources, in which the municipality of Turnhout has three instruments that are not used in the other cities.

### 5.1.4. Dependency in the inner-city

The fourth sub conclusion is about the dependency on other parties in the inner-city. It got clear from the results that in all the three cities the real estate owners are dependent on the municipality. What is striking is that only in Turnhout the real estate owners said that they are dependent on chains or other real estate owners. In addition, the municipality also said in all three cities that they are dependent on the real estate owner in the inner-city.

### 5.1.5. Policy on vacancy

The first and last sub conclusion is about the role of policy on vacancy in the inner-city. To give a sub conclusion about this topic, first there needs to be looked at the vacancy situations in the three cities. The vacancy rate is the smallest in Helsingborg with a rate of 6%. Accordingly, in this city, the least different reasons were cited for vacancy. What is further striking is that as many as 17 different reasons for vacancy were mentioned in the three different cities, while only a maximum of eight reasons were mentioned in each city. Corresponding (partly) reasons were online shopping, inconsistent and strict opening hours, economically bad times, and overexpansion of retail spaces. On vacancy solutions, respondents were more in agreement across the three cities. The three solutions that are named by all three cities are working together, a strategy and proactive real estate owners.

### 5.1.6 Answer to the research question

Now that all the sub conclusions are written down, the research question can be answered. Therefore, once again the research question: *“To what extent does cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality have an impact on solving the vacancy problem in the inner-cities of medium-sized cities?”*

The relevance of this study is that it can help the municipality, real estate owners and other stakeholders to fix vacancy problems in the inner-city of medium-sized cities. Next to that a fun, vital, accessible and liveable inner-city is wanted by stakeholders in the inner-city, working together can contribute to this goal. Therefore it is important to know to what extent real estate owners and the municipality are dependent on organisations, strategies, resources and other stakeholders. What became clear in this research is that working together in an organisation in the inner-city contributes to solving the vacancy problem in the inner-city. Those collaborations ensure sustained investment and strategic alignment, which are both crucial for addressing vacancy. Resources do not specifically affect solving vacancy, but the dependency associated

with it does. Especially that fact that the municipality has certain resources to tackle vacancy in the inner-city. Real estate owners depend on this, for example on building permits. They have to wait long on this regulatory resources of the municipality. Balancing resource dependency and power dynamics between stakeholders further enhance the effectiveness of these cooperative models in fostering vibrant inner-cities. In essence, effective cooperation between real estate owners and municipalities, characterized by structured financial involvement, active stakeholder engagement and strategic planning plays a critical role in solving vacancy problems and revitalizing inner-cities of medium-sized cities.

## 5.2. Discussion

### 5.2.1. Interpretation results

This section compares the results with the theory from the theoretical framework. It shows the agreements and disagreements with the theory. First of all, according to Hakansson & Lagin (2014) real estate owners themselves do not recognize their significance within strategic alliances or among other stakeholders. This does not match with the results, they show that real estate owners in the researched cities do recognise the importance of working together. Hakansson & Lagin (2014) acknowledged that real estate owners only come in action when the economic interest is involved, this turns out to be partly true. Real estate owners in the researched cities were interested in the economic part, but on the other hand they also recognise that if they do not invest in the inner-city, the value of their properties will not increase either.

The theory further shows that the municipality depends on real estate owners to invest in the inner-city (Offe & Kean, 1984; Lindblom, 1997; Verlaan, 2019). However, the results show that it is often the other way around. For example, in Helsingborg, the city company depends largely on money from the municipality for its existence. In Turnhout, they also need money from the municipality to organise activities, although they often get too little. That is why in Turnhout, they will soon co-fund a project in the inner-city for the first time. In this way they want to show the municipality that they want to invest, but need more money. In Spijkenisse, the organisation is the least dependent on municipality's money. In Spijkenisse, entrepreneurs and real estate owners contribute to the inner-city through the BIZ. However, real estate owners do depend on municipal subsidies for transforming properties, for example.

In the theoretical framework three different forms of public-private partnerships are described. The BIZ was used in one of the cities, namely Spijkenisse. An advantage named in the theoretical framework is that problems about financial contributions and free riders are circumvented (Menger et al., 2005; Forsberg et al., 1999). This is also the case in Spijkenisse and is often named by the stakeholders in this city. Next to that, according to the theory, a BIZ can make a significant contribution to reducing vacancy in the inner-city. This is partly true, given the results. Indeed, this shows that the participants in the BIZ are not always on the same page in terms of vision. This is because, the entrepreneurs are mainly concerned with the short-term, while the real estate owners are mainly concerned with the long term. Based on this, another organisation was set up alongside the BIZ, namely the three-party consultation. The real estate owners indicated that this consultation contributes to reducing vacancy, through the projects that have emerged from this consultation. It is therefore only partly true that a BIZ ensures a reduction in vacancy rates in the inner-city. The cooperation forms that exist in Helsingborg and Turnhout are not named in the theoretical framework.

In the theoretical framework is written that there are also some shortcomings of RDT, those would be addressed by also dealing with the internal factors, such as organisational structure and it therefore became clear that this is an aspect missing in RDT and should be added to paint a more complete picture of an organisation.

In the last part of the theoretical framework, some reasons for vacancy are named by Talen & Park (2022), which correspond with the results. However the demographic change is not named by any of the respondents in the researched cities. The solutions of Talen & Park (2022) are all named by the respondents.

To conclude, the biggest difference between the theory and results lies in the fact that real estate owners are more involved and interested in the inner-city than is assumed in the theory. Adding to this, the municipality and real estate owners are more interdependent on each other than the theory describes.

### 5.2.2. Limitations

What can be a limitation in this study is that the respondents were chosen by one contact person in each city. It is not clear on what basis these contacts chose these individuals. It is unclear whether, for example, personal preference played a part in this selection. Subjectivity is hard to solve, an idea could be to ask every respondent for different respondents.

Next to that, in this research, cities are researched that are already investing in cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality in inner-cities. This ensures that it cannot be assumed that these cities are representative of the average medium-sized city in Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands. In paragraph 5.2.4. this will be more outlined as a suggestion for further research.

Another thing that has to be named is that the policy documents that were analysed are all different in form. A reason for this could be that policy documents are not the same in the three countries. Another reason could be that are is not clearly asked for one form of policy document by the contact person. As a result, only the most important documents seen by them were sent. This could be solved, ask for specific documents next time.

A last limitations could be the fact that the available resources are named by the parties itself. As a result, parties might mention only the resources they consider important, which could create a distorted picture of resources. A solution to this would be to speak to more respondents to see if the answers match.

### 5.2.3. Implications

The results shows that the real estate owners and the municipality are dependent on each other, if nothing will be changed about this, things will continue this way and developments could eventually come to stand still. This would be a great pity, considering how much has already been invested in the inner-cities of the researched cities. Adjustments in the availability of resources are needed to continue with these developments.

The knowledge gap that needed to be filled, was if the way of organisation, vision, resources and dependency are of influence on the policy of vacancy. As was stated in the conclusion, this knowledge gap got filled.

### 5.2.4. Suggestions further research

As already described above, for follow-up research it would be interesting to examine cities where cooperation is not yet so obvious. The results of this follow-up research could confirm the answer to the research question.

What may also be of value for follow-up research is to focus more on the role of the municipality and to speak more to respondents of the municipality as well. Now it is very clear that real estate owners depend on the resources of the municipality. If more people from the municipality are heard, it could be studied if it is also the other way around for example.



According to the introduction, parties from the 'golden circle' are the most important in the inner-city, however there was chosen to look only at the role of the real estate owners and the municipality. For further research, it would also be interesting to know what the role of the other parties is in cooperation in the inner-city.

One last thing, the real estate owners that were now researched were all already involved in the inner-city. It would also been interesting to research real estate owners who are not yet involved to find out the reasons for not investing in the inner-city.

### 5.3. Policy recommendations

Based on this research, two policy recommendations can be given. First, municipalities can encourage initiatives that promote structured cooperation between real estate owners and the municipality. This includes establishing platforms or organisations in which they meet regularly to discuss and achieve common goals, good communication is essential. Appointing a manager can help. A manager can be the key between real estate owners and the municipality. In this regard, it is important that is an external manager, which only has the functioning of the inner-city as its interest. In Helsingborg, this is already case. A manager like there could also be helpful in Turnhout and Spijkenisse. This manager can connect the interests of the different parties in the inner-city.

Secondly, a common vision or strategy helps to have a clear understanding of what the common goals in the inner-city are. Creating a long-term vision is especially important, as real estate owners invest for the long term. The municipality has to ensure that building permits applications are faster. That way real estate owners will stay more involved, it reduces uncertainty and may cause them to develop more confidence towards the municipality. A vision like the one in Spijkenisse is a good example of long term strategy, with concrete tasks for the inner-city.

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# Appendix

## Topic list (Verhagen, 2024)

Practical info	Name: Function: How long active: Place property: Objective:	Date: Time:
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I am Lise, urban geography student at UU.</li> <li>- Research for Platform Binnenstadsmanagement.</li> <li>- Research on cooperation with real estate owners and municipalities in inner cities on the topic of vacancy.</li> <li>- The interview is confidential and will be anonymised.</li> <li>- May the interview be recorded? The recording will only be used to accurately process the information. The recording can be stopped at any time.</li> <li>- Does the respondent herself have any questions about the survey or the topic prior to the survey?</li> </ul>	
Theme: stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parties active in the inner-city</li> </ul>	
Theme: are made Organisations up of internal and external coalitions. Coalitions arise from social exchanges formed to influence and control behaviour.	<p>Organisations active in the inner city:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Active</li> <li>- Profit</li> <li>- Role of municipality/real estate</li> <li>- Origin and purpose</li> <li>- Vision</li> <li>- Financial costs</li> <li>- Pros and cons</li> <li>- Meetings</li> </ul>	
Theme: The environment contains scarce and valued resources essential for organisational survival.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Physical resources</li> <li>- Financial resources</li> <li>- Relational resources</li> <li>- Technological resources</li> <li>- Legal and regulatory resources</li> </ul>	
Theme: Organisations acquire control of resources that minimise/maximise their dependence on other organisations	<p>Dependence on other parties:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In control?</li> <li>- Role municipality</li> <li>- Role real estate</li> <li>- Role inner-city organisation</li> </ul>	
Theme: Vacancy	<p>Downtown vacancy problem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Owned properties</li> <li>- Causes</li> <li>- Solutions</li> <li>- Own role</li> <li>- Relationship municipality</li> <li>- Interests</li> </ul>	

	- Future
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thanking respondent.</li> <li>- Offer final product for inspection.</li> <li>- Indicate that respondent can decide at any time to have their contribution to the study removed by contacting us.</li> </ul>

Code scheme (Verhagen, 2024)

