SHORT TERM PROJECTS, LONG TERM AMBITIONS: FACETS OF TRANSIENCE IN A LONDON DEVELOPMENT SITE

Krystallia Kamvasinou, Leverhulme Research Fellow, Department of Planning and Transport, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, University of Westminster, London

Email: kamvask@westminster.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper forms part of a research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust focusing on ‘Interim spaces and creative use’ (Oct 2012-Mar 2015). The research proposal stemmed from an ongoing interest in alternative uses and readings of vacant land (see Kamvasinou 2006 and 2011). It was however driven forward by (and particularly well-timed with) London’s temporary land use initiatives in the recession period 2008-2012 (some of which were on development sites and paradoxically developer-led). Examples of such initiatives include the Site Life Campaign by Property Week (the professional magazine for the property sector); the Capital Growth initiative by the Mayor of London; the Forgotten Spaces competition run by the RIBA; and the Leadenhall competition by developer and landowner British Land (see Kamvasinou 2014).

The initial hypothesis was that ‘Vacant land can be beneficial for local communities and urban resilience if officially brought into temporary uses – in particular at times of recession and stalled developments’. The purpose of this particular paper is to investigate this hypothesis using evidence from a case study in London.

Definitions

Depending on the stage of development it relates to, vacant land can be classified under three main categories: land unfit for development (eg. railway embankments), land pending development (eg. stalled sites), and previously developed, derelict, decommissioned land (eg. post-industrial) (Kamvasinou 2011, NLUD 2003). Vacancy appears to be a contested idea. Often it is associated with economic failure, lack of productivity, urban blight and ‘wastelands’. It has also, however, attracted attention as the place of freedom and possibility, offering opportunities for informal appropriation by people and nature, urban agriculture and ‘loose’ and temporary activities not easily permitted

The life-cycle of vacant land seems to follow a cyclical itinerary, re-emerging at times of recession. When associated to extended periods of economic inactivity it contributes to the phenomenon of ‘shrinking cities’ (significant in the US and Eastern Europe) or to abandoned developments such as those experienced in recently crisis-ridden countries such as Greece and Ireland.

Short term projects on vacant land in the UK often come under the terms ‘interim’, ‘interwhile’ (Reynolds 2011), or ‘meanwhile’ and these terms invariably refer to vacant urban lands used temporarily for purposes other than their long-term designation. Hence they are not just temporary but an in-between stage of development (assuming development or some more permanent state before and after). Whilst ‘interim’ uses have often existed in the past in an unofficial and informal manner (with examples ranging from children using vacant land as adventure playground, to people squatting on derelict land and buildings) the term has however taken on a new definition in recent years with interim uses often becoming official and licensed.

**Historical framework**

Short-term projects on vacant land are not new. From the appropriation of wastelands to ‘graffiti art’ and ‘guerrilla gardening’, there has been a historical evolution internationally with key milestones that show significant parallels in the UK with Europe and the US. Such milestones included the late 19th century philanthropic projects aiming at social reform in, for example, Detroit, Philadelphia and New York, which encouraged cultivation of vacant land to support food growing for the urban poor (Lawson 2005); the ‘Dig for Victory’ gardens during the two World Wars, with even London’s Kensington Gardens being dug for food supply. The 70s gave prominence to activist projects and the emergence of Guerilla Gardening as resistance to urban abandonment, in parallel to a growing and increasingly vocal squatting movement (Lawson 2005, Awan et al 2011). The 1980s recession and collapse of real estate market in the US led to the proliferation of garage sales and street vending (Crawford 2008, p.29), while art projects on vacant development sites such as Agnes Denes’ New York “Wheatfield – A confrontation” (1982) paved the way for an increased environmental awareness. In the 1990s community ‘gardening’ became community ‘greening’, with environmental concerns, entrepreneurial and training programs dominating the temporary agenda (Lawson 2005). The fail of speculative development plans that followed the 1989 fall of Berlin Wall, led to the rise of informal and insurgent planning, ‘civil society-based, smaller “developers” […] and urban creative industries’, through temporary use of ‘idle land and buildings’ (LaFond 2010, p.62).
The 2000s temporary use projects were characterized by recreation, community food security and food growing, job training and education (Lawson 2005). Food growing projects seem to have a positive effect on community conflict resolution and many non-profit food organisations were operating from vacant lots (see for example the 2003 Garden Resource Program Collaborative, Detroit); a move that gradually became formalized, for example with the 2008 ‘Garden for Growth Program’ in the US (state-run, leases vacant plots for growing) or the ‘Capital Growth’ program in London (2010, funded by the Mayor of London).

London has had a unique position in this evolution, not only internationally but also in the UK. Most post-war reconstruction in the UK was led by local authorities and the LCC (London County Council, 1889 to 1965) and GLC (Greater London Council, 1965-1986) in London. The progressive policies of the early LCC were influenced by ideas stemming from the working class ‘radicals’ that advocated a move beyond philanthropy to public ownership, public investment and control of land, housing and planning. This was done using legislation and the power of the state, with land moving to public ownership through compulsory purchase, and housing development projects receiving state funding. However the property boom that started with the relaxation of planning controls in the mid 1950s brought the rise of property developers and an almost overnight rise in land values, leading to London’ status as a World City suitable for ‘prestige’ company headquarters (Marriott 1989, p.5) and in recent years an investment heaven for foreign investors. With high land values, and with London’s status as a major Global City, vacant land for temporary uses has become exceptionally scarce.

Despite this trajectory, there are examples from London in the 80s when reclamation and occupation of vacant land by community activists or community organisations led from temporary projects to permanent ones (see, for example, Camley Street Nature Park at Kings Cross; and the Coin Street redevelopment in the South Bank). These form useful precedents for charting the emergence of short-term projects with long-term ambitions in recent days.

**A complex systems/resilience framing**

A complex systems framing is also useful for understanding how small scale interventions influence city-scale transformations. Urban systems are ‘the result of emergent processes [...] myriad interactions between elements, including people, business, institutions, culture and physical conditions’ (Radywyl and Biggs 2013, 160). Thus ‘transformative social innovations’, such as temporary land uses, must be able to be replicable in space (horizontal scaling) and to interact with systems at larger scales (vertical scaling) in order to affect broader systems change (Westley et al 2011, quoted in Radywyl and Biggs 2013,160).
Németh and Langhorst (2014, 149) propose vacant land as a system that ‘facilitates, provides or accommodates critical infrastructural services that are comparatively expensive to produce artificially’ – similar to the concept of green infrastructure as advocated in recent UK policy documents (such as the National Planning Policy Framework 2012 and the Localism Act 2011). As part of both social and ecological systems hence, temporary land uses on vacant land can be framed as a ‘critical instrument of social and environmental justice’ (Németh and Langhorst 2014, 149). They can thus potentially contribute to urban resilience at times of economic and environmental crisis in ways that will be further explored through the case studies.

**Collaborative planning theory**

Framing the temporary necessarily sits in close relationship to collaborative planning theory and the need to recognise ‘local knowledge’ (Healey 1997, 38, 195) by “widening stakeholder involvement beyond traditional power elites” (Healey 1998, 1531). Temporary intervention depends on the formation of a ‘community of practice’ or ‘custodial practices’: where community membership is consolidated through shared participation in meaningful activities that connect their lives and communities (Radywyl and Biggs 2013,164).

The process is eloquently described by Németh and Langhorst (2014, 149) as “continuous editing of urban transformation” asserting a role in spatial planning and design for communities as “co-author of the space and places they inhabit and as empowered participants in urban development processes”.

This short-term project is located in the Borough of Newham. It was a winning entry in the ‘Meanwhile London: Opportunity Docks’ competition that was launched in late 2010 by Property Week together with the now defunct London Development Agency (LDA), the Mayor of London and the Mayor of Newham. The competition aimed to promote three strategic redevelopment sites in the Royal Docks, East London, by finding temporary uses as part of the 2012 Olympics regeneration legacy. Ideas tested on these sites could be transferred to other sites in the locality, and could help promote the future regeneration of the wider area (Mallett 2010).

The project uses a vacant site owned by the London Borough of Newham opposite Canning Town tube station. The area is one of the most ethnically diverse but also most deprived in London. However big regeneration projects have been encroaching in the nearby Royal Docks. These include the ExCeL London Exhibition and Convention Centre; the Crystal building (a sustainability exhibition and education centre sponsored by Siemens); the Millennium Village; and the Emirates Air Line (a cable car connection over the river Thames between Royal Victoria Dock and Greenwich Peninsula).
The proposal aimed to turn the large stalled site into a temporary micro-scale urban ‘oasis’. The winning team included ten different members; however most of them dropped out of the implementation stage and the project was eventually single-handedly led by Ash Sakula Architects. The project started its life envisioning a wide range of ‘trading, making, cooking and eating’ activities that would engage both locals and visitors during the summer of the Olympics (2012) (Ash 2012, 27). The vision for the project included local skills’ development through the provision of training workshops, fostering community through food growing spaces, and even ticketed events. However the experience of very low winter temperatures in its first year of life pointed to the need for a more sheltered and enclosed structure for activities. This was constructed as a result of ‘Flitched: the upcycler’s design competition’ which was launched in November 2012 and encouraged multidisciplinary teams to reconsider construction waste and the recycling of materials.

The project was to have a temporary lease for five years before handing over to Canning Town’s new Town Centre by developer Bouygues. It started with a two-year lease, followed by another two-year one. It is uncertain if the full length of time will be granted by Newham Council. Whilst featuring a number of actors in its inception (two mayors; a major trade journal; London’s Development Agency; and teams of architects/makers) the project’s day-to-day life is critically dependent on a very
different set of practices, namely the active involvement of community members and volunteers and support in-kind, through the donation of materials and the voluntary offer of services rather than monetary exchange.

The uncertainty of the process of implementation can have a direct effect on the evolution of a temporary project. In Caravanserai, the site conditions changed between competition and implementation. The site initially had a block of 14 flats on it which however were demolished before the beginning of the project, hence hindering a number of decisions that had been dependent on this existing building, including a pop-up Hotel to generate precious start-up income during the Olympics (Ash 2013). According to the competition’s ‘small print’ all risks laid with the competitors for delivering an idea; however, the council reserved the right to claw back any profit that might be made by the project. This contradiction is indicative of the difficulties in fully thinking out temporary projects, even when those are the result of top-down initiation.

The next biggest drawback was the decision by the local authority and Transport for London not to allow passengers off at Canning Town tube station during the Olympic Games. This was one of the factors that led to the failure of most other ‘Meanwhile London: Opportunity Docks’ projects which had been counting on the increased footfall through Silvertown Way (the main avenue in the area) during the Games.

As the project nears the end of its temporary life, its managers, Ash Sakula Architects feel they are probably ready to move on, perhaps to new sites. The project’s experimental ethos might make it interesting for local authorities who are willing to accept ‘their liability’ and ‘comfortable with the idea that some creative energy could be injected into a piece of land that otherwise is just hoarded’ (Ash 2013). As Ash puts it, ‘repair, up-cycling and also creating new pieces with some ingenuity and sharing some skills is very much becoming the thing for a lot of young people because there’s only so much shopping you can do if you haven’t got much money anyway’ (2013). Such spaces are needed as an alternative to public spaces offered in new developments, which are too focused on consumption, but also to parks, which are less attractive for those who don’t have dogs or children (Ash 2013). They are also important in terms of a ‘methodology’ for future projects to ‘prove an impact’ and test whether there is a particular need (Ash 2013).
One of the issues with the timescale of this and similar projects is that they are often perceived as completed projects, while actually they are work in progress, an aspect that is almost impossible to capture.

From the beginning, there were issues with funding, as the local authority supplied the site free of charge, but did not financially support the project, nor was there funding coming from the prospective developers (Ash 2013). After unsuccessfully attempting to self-fund through applying for ‘Create London’ money in 2011 (£40,000), the winning team, which included practices experienced in running and delivering art and community projects (such as EXYST, Space Makers and Bonny One) quickly disintegrated, and Ash Sakula found themselves having to run the project. They also had to support the project financially, including paying for planning permission, an expense which could clearly have been waived by the local authority.

One of the key issues with managing the project was how to get the wider community of interest involved. The idea was that if different groups of people were interested, then there would be this ‘resilient network of weak links that would create enough of a trampoline in the project to keep it going’ (Ash 2013). According to Ash (2013) these groups could include, for example:

- architecture students who need to learn some building skills;
- people who want to learn about collaborated design and collaborative consumption and service design;
• people who exhibit at ExCel who might want to have a site where they can demonstrate some of their building materials;
• The developers Prospect GB who are involved in large scale development in the area for whom a local site might be a good opportunity for their CSR (corporate social responsibility) program;
• the local school, with Jamie Oliver championing funding one of its posts; etc

Such involvement would require a designated department, not usually available to short-term projects, to make use of all this potential interest in a way that translates into financial or in-kind support or labour. On the contrary, the lack of continuity of income has meant that each year priorities had to be set that excluded other potential uses. For example, in 2013 not enough went into the events side and building up the regular local sessions because the priority was to build a toilet without which ‘it wasn’t too useful to invite loads of kids or older people to the site’ (Ash 2013), to build a shelter (the Flitched building), cooking facilities and ‘enough trees and raised allotment beds and cupboard space’ that would then enable ‘corporate dinners and supper clubs cross-funding local events’ in the year 2014 (Ash 2013). This was achieved through the award of £10,000 from the Comic Relief fund – the competition for which was fierce with only 6% of entries awarded.

As Ash contends (2013) it was always difficult in the competition to imagine the project was going to be commercially self-funded completely because of its location, which is not on a major pedestrian route or a shopping street, on the contrary people have to cross a major road from the train station. A lot of the funding and management of the site has to do with ‘resilience training and learning how to scavenge and talk your way into borrowing things’ (Ash 2013) including recycling material from the Olympic sites and donations from construction companies. Some contributions have come from corporations such as the Bank of America, Deutsche Bank and Jones Lang LaSalle who have used the site for their away days – but these days also require a lot of input from the hosts.

The current management scheme is that of a company limited by a guarantee with a board of six directors who oversee the fundraising and also do bits of the work. The limited company status means that the project is separate from the Ash Sakula business, and Ash Sakula cannot make a profit from this, despite being a major funder for the project.
As Ash puts it, ‘it was always in the DNA of the project to be a collaborative design and build project’. The Caravanserai was going to be built through using skilled labour very sparingly and by training up lots of people. This would be achieved through a panelized system of construction based on a template, so that people could get involved in building, even if they just had a few days to spare, because everything was marked out (Ash 2013). This experience would be important for a community very much in need of training skills.

The impact on people is debatable. As Ash (2013) contends, ‘it’s really a mood dependent project, so depending on what the weather is like, the site looks either beautiful or dreary. Depending on the energy in the team, the whole opportunity seems either catalytic and exciting or “this is just a kind of last ditch place for people who can’t get a job”’.

Caravanserai is not exactly a community facility, an open public space, because it does require to be locked up at night, it is behind hoardings, and it does need active hosting, and intelligent programming. Aside from architecture students and those looking for hands on experience in construction, the support of the neighbourhood varies, from those who bought their flat and were really disappointed that the site across the road was not ‘nice and clean’; to others who have been very supportive and provided water and electricity in the early days of the project (Ash 2013) but did not use the site despite having children who could do with an outdoors space for play. Both reactions may, however, be because in 2013 Caravanserai looked like a building site, due to the construction of Flitched. Nevertheless, there was involvement by the local primary school as well as
hosting events such as ‘Light night’ run by various artists and involving light installation, music and performance that can give the site a special identity and atmosphere – similar to Cody Dock. There is also hosting of different activities but not continuously, eg. a twice weekly pan drumming workshop happening, a theatre company and various growers and supper clubs (Ash 2013).

![Image](image-url)

**Fig. 6** ‘These baulks once sat under the cranes which built the velodrome. Takes 8 to lift 1.’

**Analytical Framework: key themes**

The initial hypothesis was that ‘Vacant land can be beneficial for local communities and urban resilience if officially brought into temporary uses – in particular in times of recession and stalled developments’. The intention of the Case Study approach was to identify key themes that could be generalised. In particular, the following emerged:

- Environmental and social contribution of vacant land in relation to urban systems, sustainability and resilience
- Urban development as an incremental, collaborative process, and emerging patterns of collaboration and synergies between involved actors, within the context of recession
- Planning policy implications

**Environmental and social contribution in relation to urban systems, sustainability and resilience**

Short-term projects on vacant land have historically been linked to cycles of resilience to crisis in socio-ecological terms. They reconnect people and nature, have been used to provide education,
skills, and civic-mindedness, and create democratic, participatory spaces where diverse groups can come together in mutual self-interest.

True to this history, the case study presents various facets of sustainability, economic, environmental and sociocultural. Caravanserai has introduced gardening sessions and small allotments in raised beds, while it promotes the upcycling of construction waste. Overall it reactivates dormant vacant open space. Finally, socio-culturally it attempts to engage local communities, but also communities of interest: those wanting to learn more about food growing, upcycling and self-build.

**Urban development as an incremental, collaborative process, and emerging patterns of collaboration and synergies between involved actors**

Short term projects’ influence on long term development can be threefold. First, they open up vacant, previously inaccessible land and put it back on the map, making it known. Second, they integrate small scale community action and landowners’ or developers’ sustainability and corporate social responsibility programmes, preparing the ground for mixed communities. Third, they are live experiments with land uses and activities that, if successful, might be incorporated into permanent development.

To create and maintain the conditions of collaboration, appropriate management is necessary. Contrary to popular belief, short-term projects don’t happen spontaneously. As Ash (2013) confirms, local authorities could help by subsidising a post to deal with project administration and day-to-day project needs.

In collaborative development, community participation is paramount but very difficult to achieve. Community engagement requires investment in time, but short term projects often do not have the luxury of time to make an impact on communities. As Ash (2013) puts it:

> ‘you want to work with the grain of these things, and other people will come on board afterwards. Because some people are not initiators, some people are um…kind of joiners, so, you don’t want to wait for everybody…’

The trend towards the installation of short-term projects on vacant land through collaboration with developers and landowners in the recent recession has led to a significant debate on the extent to which these projects can be seen as ‘creative conversations’ or as part of co-option. However the near abandonment of the Caravanserai by both local authority and developer suggest that top-down
initiatives are perhaps more of a ‘tick-box’ exercise than truly initiating change and supporting community.

Planning policy implications in the UK context

A major challenge for short term projects is the slowness of current planning policy and procedures for setting them up. If short term projects were to become part of policy, the gain for planning would be that, new thinking might emerge in relation to valuing land, wasted resources and processes of placemaking. A “light touch” framework for the inclusion of short-term projects in planning would need to allow for flexibility (in time, space and regulations); enable innovation and experimentation (aided by their short-term character); and mediate for genuine collaboration between different actors. Policy makers could help by not only ‘licensing’ short-term projects in a non-restrictive way, but also by relaxing the planning permission processes, and by financially supporting some basic costs of their management.

Conclusions and further research

The paper explored the issue of short term projects on vacant land through empirical research in London in the latest downturn. Such projects seem to be moving into the mainstream while top-down initiation or involvement has become increasingly common in the latest recession. This is in contrast to traditional perceptions of vacant land as marginal and its usual appropriation and reclamation through activist, bottom-up action; however it is consistent with less known historical cycles of resilience to crisis, for example philanthropic projects on vacant land since the late 19th century. Crucially, a far more interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach to urban development seems to emerge, with implications for planning policy and practice.

This paper has touched upon the special nature of London today, dominated by the property market, which renders it unique in relation to other places in the UK. This condition presents perhaps a problem as to what extent the conclusions of this study can be generalised, or are indeed unique to London alone. More research is needed to clarify this.

It is possible that short term projects are the result of the charismatic individuals driving them, the so-called ‘champions’. In that sense they could never be regulated in the planning system. Still, the conditions could be put in place to allow more of them to happen.

Finally, the paper has also hinted at a criticism of top-down initiatives that appear to only be promoting short term uses of vacant land without in essence enabling those – financially or otherwise. There is a real need for urban spaces beyond high value development and spaces of
consumption; spaces with more participation and hands-on action, by a wider range of social groups. Although short-term projects do not offer solutions to all these issues, they do test ideas that can be refined and integrated into more permanent developments. Hence the gains - social cohesion, environmental sustainability, open space provision – do not have to be only temporary.

References

Ash, CANY (2012), A tool towards adaptable neighbourhoods, Urban Design 122: 27–28


Awan, Nishat, Schneider, Tatjana and Till, Jeremy (2011), Spatial Agency: Other ways of doing architecture, Abingdon: Routledge


URL: [http://www.propertyweek.com/comment/analysis/opportunity-docks/5008941.article](http://www.propertyweek.com/comment/analysis/opportunity-docks/5008941.article) (accessed 2/1/15)


Radywyl, Natalia, Biggs, Che (2013) Reclaiming the commons for urban transformation, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 50, 159-170
