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## 'What's the Story Buddleia?' A public geography of dereliction in Dublin city

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**Abstract:** Since 2007, like many other places, Ireland has experienced a series of economic and social shocks. These were brought on by an over-reliance on property development and debt as a means of development. One of the ways in which these shocks were made evident was through the over-production of housing and other properties across the island. While there has been research conducted on this form of overproduction, there has been less on longer standing forms of dereliction and vacancy. Such derelict buildings and vacant sites are a prominent feature of Dublin city's landscape. They remain part of a city that has undergone significant transformation in the last two decades. In an effort to understand why they remain in place, we undertook a survey of this dereliction in 2013 and 2014. In the first part of the paper, we outline the origins and aims of our survey: to understand why dereliction persists particularly in one part of Dublin city. In the second part, we describe the methods we used to gather data on individual derelict sites and our attempts to engage a wider audience through an online collaborative process. Our research shows that the collection of data on derelict sites in Dublin is often made difficult by opaque planning practice. The paper concludes that the apparent disorder of the city seen in derelict properties can be recast if we more fully understand what the relationship between use, or usefulness, and that order might be. Possible uses for these sites are often elided in favour of the ordered practices of a network of actors. Re-thinking Dublin city after the crisis requires us to understand how public engagement for planning purposes can be improved.

**Keywords:** Dublin, dereliction, participative mapping, planning

### Introduction

*Buddleia davidii* is a woody, deciduous shrub that grows abundantly at brownfield sites and from the walls and rooftops of buildings around Dublin. It sprouts in woody arches from chimney tops and the walls of nineteenth century buildings. In the summer time, its flowers adorn these places with appealing blossoms of purple or blue. In its abundance in Irish cities, it marks the encroachment of green space where it is not meant to be. As a play on the common Dublin greeting of 'bud' (meaning familiar friend), we are trying to integrate the fabric of the city, as it is

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experienced by people in everyday contexts, with buddleia's ubiquity as a plant. In this context, we understand buddleia's growth as a weed or a plant that is out of place. Buddleia, and the sites on which it grows, echoes Mary Douglas's (1966: 36) two conditions for people and things being out of place: 'a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order'. Seen in an urban context, buddleia seems a contradictory and confusing presence. Its prettiness and fecundity belie the apparent decay of its environs, just as derelict spaces seem out of place in the orderly spaces of Dublin city. Buddleia has become ubiquitous among the derelict sites and vacant lots of the city and is a symbolic marker of the tensions between order and disorder in the urban landscape.

This paper is the first step in an attempt to rethink the role of planning in Dublin city following a prolonged economic crisis. It tries to make sense of the relationship between an order imagined by urban planners and the apparent disorder of dereliction and vacancy. It is a paper about how basic geographic research can help raise questions about the processes at work in the city that produce the persistence of derelict land and vacant buildings across economic cycles. We conducted our research in an area of Dublin's north inner city which has been at the centre of State led regeneration schemes for the last forty years and subject to private property capital flows for the past two decades. The area contains a built environment assembled from historic layers of struggles between labour and capital and an urban order produced from compulsory purchase orders, dangerous buildings and derelict sites legislation, city development plans, local area strategies and development plans (Moore-Cherry *et al.*, 2015). Our research emerged from our interest in the relationship between these processes and the apparent disorder of dereliction.

In seeking to rethink the relationship between the formal order of planning and the apparent disorder of dereliction, we avoid starting from a position of viewing dereliction as a problem. Instead, we proceed on the basis that urban space and the planning and property regimes which regulate it are interconnected and co-constitutive (Braverman *et al.*, 2014). As other papers in this issue have discussed, cities are never completed but in a state of becoming, unfolding across time (Till, 2015). Thus, the dereliction of the sites we investigated is produced out of interactions between the material surroundings, planners, architects and the users of the city (Lefebvre, 1974; Zukin, 1987). A key goal of this project was to draw attention to these often-hidden interactions, as constituent of the complex influences on the city and the politics of urban decision-making. This necessarily included an understanding of how data is derived by officials and by the public (through readily-available technologies) and made use of (Lauriault and Mooney, 2014). Although this is a challenge, we sought to open up a discussion about the planning of Dublin city and enable a more participative role for the city's residents in deciding the future of these derelict sites. Kitchin *et al.* (2013) have identified some compromises and issues associated with doing public geographies. Using our approach, we wished to use dereliction and vacancy as a way of doing such public geographies and clarifying the often opaque politics of the formal planning

process. Aside from being residents of the north inner city of Dublin, we wanted to understand the continued presence of dereliction, and the recurrent encroachment of a nature represented by buddleia, within an urban space governed by a planning system that strives for the orderly and efficient use of space. Conducting a public geographical project seemed like a useful exercise to help rethink Dublin city and interrogate what caused these sites to remain undeveloped in an environment of intense competition to develop urban brownfields during the Celtic tiger era (Kelly, 2009; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2015).

Our paper begins with a description of the project and our motivations for conducting it. It outlines the methods we used to survey, the ways in which we conducted our fieldwork and some of the challenges that emerged. At the centre of these challenges are a series of methodological questions around how public participation can best be facilitated to achieve the project goals.

### **The project and the methods used**

The north side of Dublin city, which contains a relatively high number of derelict sites and vacant buildings, is a vibrant residential and commercial area but it was also affected by Ireland's history of declining industry and colonial establishment in the 19th century. It is also home to some of Ireland's most economically and marginalised residents (Haase, 2009; Pratschke and Haase, 2014). The presence or absence of derelict sites is not the cause of this poverty but there has been an evident neglect of certain sites over a long period of time that may not have been as prolonged in more affluent areas. As residents of this part of the city, we wanted to understand why so many places on our regular walks and cycles into and around this area were left unoccupied at the beginning of the now apparent housing shortage. Our study area is bounded by the north bank of the river Liffey to the south and enclosed on the north by the North Circular Road. The river does not directly meet the ends of the North Circular Road but it forms a fairly discrete area of approximately 4 square kilometres, and contains about 42,500 residents (CSO, 2011). The map below indicates the study area within the broader Dublin region.

In late 2012 and early 2013, we began identifying individual locations within this boundary. This consisted of noting the location of boarded up buildings and empty sites during routine walks into the city centre and to and from our respective workplaces. At this stage we had no formal definition of dereliction or vacancy beyond a working definition of sites and buildings that appeared not to be in use. Their locations were geo-referenced by taking photographs using our mobile phones. Additional information about the sites and buildings was also noted at this time, including whether the site was boarded up or fenced and if it contained vegetation. Any recent activity on the site was also noted. By a combination of these photographs and their geo-referenced locations, we compiled a small database of sites and mapped these points to the Google Maps tool. This allowed us to coordinate the placing of points on the map as well as attaching our photos

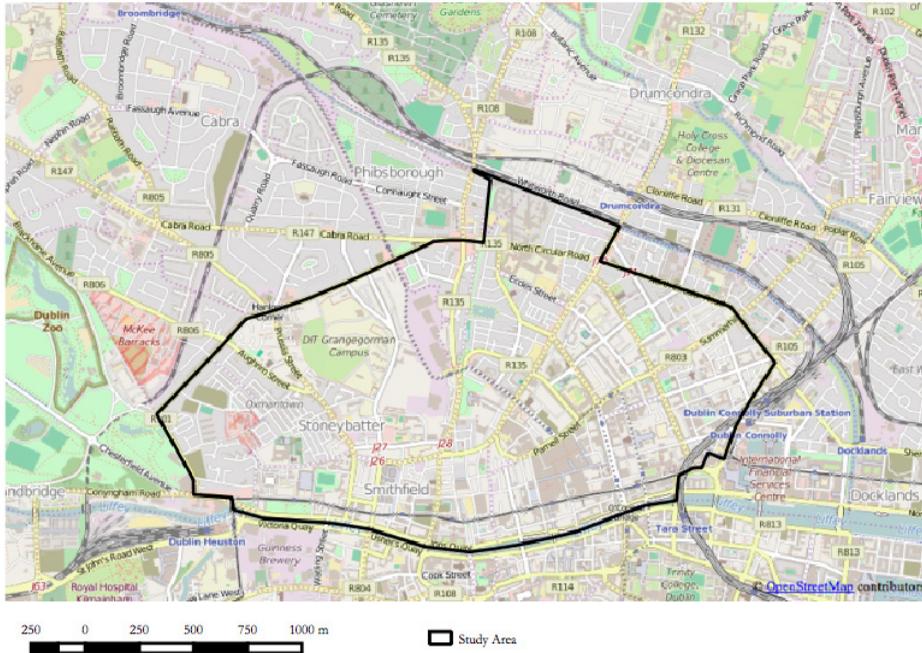


Figure 1: Study area. Scale: 1:30,000. (© OpenStreetMap contributors; the data is available under the Open Database Licence)

to those points. Google Maps allows for users to attach photos and text to a point on a user-derived map. Using Google Maps, we were also able to create polygons for some of the larger sites we noted and had photographed. Physical access to these sites, in order to measure area or examine them in more detail, is difficult but creating polygons allowed some sense of the scale of these sites to be assessed. Creating polygons and individual points also allowed us to export the data into other formats for analysis. However, while readily available applications like Google Maps are useful for sharing limited amounts of data, they can inhibit a more extensive analysis. In particular, Google Maps collects data in formats that are not easily-usable in other applications without greater knowledge of more advanced GIS and related applications.

By early January 2013, 22 locations within the study area had been catalogued comprising:

- derelict sites;
- vacant buildings occupying an entire site; and
- vacant buildings occupying part of a larger site.

Vacant buildings were identifiable through boarded up windows and doors as illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4. Among the sites initially identified were former manufacturing and warehousing buildings, but most were former residential buildings. Within the study area, and across the Dublin city area more generally, Georgian-style four-storey townhouses were left derelict or subdivided into



Figure 2: Derelict site at Mountjoy Street, Dublin 1 (Source: Eoin O'Mahony)



Figure 3: Vacant unit at Manor Street, Dublin 7 (Source: Eoin O'Mahony)



Figure 4: Vacant unit at Frederick Street North, Dublin 1 (Source: Eoin O'Mahony)

apartments throughout the twentieth-century. All of those we found in the initial survey were enclosed in some form: buildings had windows shuttered or boarded up and sites were surrounded by mostly intact fencing. Field notes were also taken on the surrounding environment. Initially, no typology of vacancy and dereliction was imposed, other than to note that most were former residential or commercial premises. An inductive or grounded approach was taken in that we wanted to let the data speak back to us to direct the next phase of research within the broad frame of understanding the geography of dereliction in post-crisis Dublin. We proposed to repeat the survey on an annual basis to track the trajectory of individual sites within the project area.

#### *Making data public – risks and responsibilities*

The 22 sites were plotted on Google Maps and in January 2013, the map was made publicly available to facilitate the participative co-creation of understanding about dereliction in Dublin city. The project was publicised through Twitter and Facebook and within a few hours, a number of people (albeit self-selecting) contributed data points they themselves had identified. By asking for contributions in this way, we were no longer able to impose a geographic limit to where people might identify derelict units, vacant sites or disused buildings. The use of Google Maps did not allow us to restrict the study area for those who publicly contributed; they were able to place their own points wherever they wished. It also meant that a small

project on dereliction in north inner city Dublin became a crowdsourced effort to map dereliction in Dublin more generally. In a short time, the new participants were looking for some definition of what constituted vacancy and dereliction. To meet this demand, we suggested that for a building to be included, it should contain:

- Boarded up windows, and/or
- A visibly collapsed roof.

We also asked people to take a picture of the sites, if possible, which could be added to the now-public Google map. This map was available online through a link that was posted on social media with all of the data hosted by Google. As sites were recorded on the map over time, it became clear that the initial criteria would be inadequate. Some contributors asked us if closed retail units should be included on the survey, or how sites with a disused retail unit on the ground floor but an active and clearly occupied second and subsequent floors might be classified. This illustrates the complexity of the task of investigating land use in the city and the difficulties in ordering something that is more than just two-dimensional (O'Donnell, 2012). By the end of January 2013, we agreed on a typology that relied on colour coding to denote classes of data on the map and the crowd-sourcing effort continued within that frame. The project's participants at this stage, while self-selecting, spoke from a specific position in their recognition of dereliction. Those that contributed were people, linked to the researchers via social media, with broadly similar political perspectives on the dereliction found at these sites that may have shaped their practice in seeing the city in a particular way. This raises issues around how certain forms of knowledge and their production circulates around online networks and questions about who, and whose interests, is served by the integration of social media and geographic practice (Kitchin *et al.*, 2013).

Deriving a classification for this crowdsourced data encouraged more public engagement using widely available technologies, i.e., Google Maps and phones with cameras equipped with GPS hardware and software. It meant that a part of the landscape of Dublin city could be mapped relatively easily using commonly-available tools. However, the evolution of the project into a form of participatory GIS, obscured the initial aims of the project as we refocused efforts on deriving a data classification for the new participants. We entered into a dialogue with a specific public and in doing so, spanned a boundary between formal academic investigation and more direct political activity. The project could hardly be understood as participatory GIS but it did create a dialogue with a new public (Corbett and Keller, 2005); the co-creation of the dataset was very clearly a form of public geography but the time taken and energy expended on classifying the data might have been used more productively in data collection during the first stage of the project.

Table 1 illustrates the results of the crowd-sourced dataset, and the classification schema, and represents the total number of sites and building information

collected by early February 2013. Given the complexity of classifying land uses and activities noted above, there is little to suggest that the categories are discrete or exclusive but they do provide a picture of dereliction in the city.

<i>Class</i>	<i>Symbol used</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage of total</i>
Vacant sites	Blue flag	31	14.3
Boarded up houses	Green flag	22	10.1
Closed commercial	Red flag	55	25.3
Closed commercial (ground floor)	Yellow flag	15	6.9
Closed institutional or publicly owned	Purple flag	13	6.0
Unclassified	Blue pin	50	23.0
DCC derelict properties list	Red pin	31	14.3

Table 1: Vacant space classification following public engagement

Unclassified sites were the second largest class recorded and this arose from a lack of agreement on whether a site could be described by one of the existing classes. Information from the Dublin City Council Derelict Properties list was also included; it covers the entire administrative area of the city, not merely the study area and adopts a very specific definition of vacancy: vacant land ‘is zoned development land which has not been developed and does not have Rateable building/s on it’ (Dublin City Council, 2013). This understanding of vacant land and dereliction is based on land and buildings that are not producing a rateable value. If such sites are left vacant, the Council loses on potential rates income. We have included their data in the table because it serves to highlight the narrowness of what the City Council deemed at the time to be vacant land relative to how our public participants were experiencing and perceiving the city.

Following the public release of the Google map online, we had collected data on 217 individual sites and buildings as well as photos for the vast majority of them. We also identified, across 80 sites and buildings within our project area, 45 planning records held in Dublin City Council. The data was organised and plotted using QGIS. Each of the sites and buildings identified within the project area was revisited during summer 2014 to note any changes since early 2013 and to get some seasonal snapshots of the sites where vegetation would not have been present in mid-winter. Our initial marker was the presence of buddleia; our later fieldwork confirmed that it was not the only marker of derelict urban space; other markers include barricades, fly tipping and other vegetation. After initiating a dialogue with a specific public on this mapping project, we restricted the collection of the next set of data – planning records – to the original project area. The analysis of this

data is still ongoing but should generate particular insights into why certain sites within the city remain derelict even during a development boom.

## **Discussion**

A project that began as a scoping exercise of dereliction in the north inner city in early 2013 had become a much larger project by the middle of 2014. In the intervening 15 months, our participatory mapping efforts had appeared on a news website in Ireland (Barry, 2013) and the researchers regularly receive email messages asking for more information on the sites displayed on the public map. Many of these inquiries came from potential users of the spaces, such as artists, or property companies seeking information on ownership. While we lacked the resources to maintain this dialogue over a longer timeframe, it demonstrated the emergence of an awareness of the potential for these vacant buildings and derelict sites among a public that were, unfortunately, operating in a relative information vacuum. This highlights a major barrier in terms of how users of the city and those who are officially responsible for 'ordering' the city interact and may go some way towards explaining the persistence of dereliction.

Based on our analysis of the data and a limited number of site histories constructed from data held in the formal planning application system, an extended investigation will revolve around a small number of themes. The persistence of dereliction at many of these sites raises questions about the way in which individual sites are part of a larger network. Derelict sites might be understood as an outcome of interactions between a range of urban actors, both human and non-human (Latour, 2005). These actors include urban planners, developers, investors and local residents, as well as the sites themselves and the surrounding parts of the city. The brief histories of some of the sites suggest that they are not necessarily resistant to integration into a vision of the planned city. We would argue that the trajectories of these sites are not determined solely by market forces, or aesthetic concerns for a particular neighbourhood, but that formal planning may itself have played a role in producing and maintaining these vacant spaces.

When we speak about a set of ordered relations for the city, whose order are we talking about? Vacant buildings and derelict sites might be deemed useless space but this perception of 'uselessness' is subjective and may be produced more by the fencing of these sites than by their disuse. As Till (2015) has argued in this issue, the formal planning process with its insistence on permanency can often close off potential uses while Kearns (2015) has questioned the historical relationship between use and exchange values. We would extend these discussions into the formally political by asking who defines use in the city and with what implications? What is the role of an extended public in the creation and re-creation of their city? Our experience with the public mapping element of this project demonstrates a potential appetite among the citizenry in having these debates made more open and inclusive.

Beyond the political, this research also raised a number of methodological and

technical challenges. Once we opened up the map to the public, it became more difficult to organise and control the identification of sites. We were challenged to externalise our unspoken assumptions about dereliction and vacancy and to impose classifications quickly on material that was initially aiming to be much more exploratory in nature. It may have been preferable to hold back the map from public consumption until we could more purposefully contain the public contribution within very clearly defined limits, but this may have constrained engagement. As the project developed, the means of presentation of the data also took on a greater significance. Google Maps was a useful tool for initial participation with others but to answer the bigger research questions, a mapping technique that could be combined with other sources of data to record the heterogeneous narratives through which urban spaces are produced would be preferable. The ready availability of Google Maps fixed the grammar of the project at an early stage, disallowing more detailed analyses that might have been better facilitated through a simple spreadsheet of locations. However, whether that would have captured the public imagination to the same extent is open to question.

Using a mapping project to rethink Dublin post-crisis requires a public geography that is planned on a more structured basis. During the project, technical challenges emerged associated with the geo-tagging of photos by the public using mobile phones. By using the GPS of photographs, we recorded the location of the position of the photographer rather than the site prompting questions about the use of tagging in crowdsourced projects. If a site is tagged separately by different people at different times, several sets of XY coordinates will be gathered for the same location and any display on software systems will result in multiple entries without necessarily tagging the precise location of the site. For our purposes, the geo-coordinates were sufficiently accurate; a second phase of this project could involve linking the geotagged photograph to any relevant public record of the site, including open planning applications and prior refusals. In this way, focus would be moved away from the precise location of the site and shifted to tracking the history and fate of the sites over time. One of the major challenges is that planning permission records online are held in a format that does not allow ready access in this way, inhibiting our ability to track these sites over extended periods of time (Lauriault and Mooney, 2014). This is a major challenge in developing projects using crowd-sourced data to engage people in more substantive discussions on the planning of the city.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have described a project that sought to open up a public debate about Dublin city through a focus on urban dereliction. We devised a project that tried to understand the dynamics of dereliction in a changing city, particularly after the property crisis in 2007/08. Spatial data was collected that proved interesting to a wider public but also raised particular challenges for the researchers.

In particular, the definition of what constituted vacancy and dereliction in

Dublin became a significant problem for the progress of the project. What began as a process of routine data collection on an *ad hoc* basis became a larger project with epistemological and political concerns. In trying to make Dublin city's planning more legible and engaged, we were confronted by a series of data incompatibilities. For example, there are clear discrepancies between how the city authorities (via the Derelict Properties list) and the broader public view dereliction. This raises questions in terms of the potential for more effective public engagement with administrative planning systems.

Similarly, while simply identifying derelict sites is a difficult enough task, a bigger and more complex issue is how the data generated by the public can be integrated into the planning consultation system in a more participative way. The practices of the local authority are premised on seeking an order for the city, its neighbourhoods and streets. The persistence of vacancy and dereliction challenges the effectiveness of these practices, appearing to disrupt the order that planning attempts to put in place and thus, perhaps, explains why official planning discourse might choose to define these issues in a very narrow way. Finally, an initial analysis of the planning records obtained for many of our sites suggests that dereliction may well arise from the functioning of the planning system itself and this will provide the focus for further research.

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