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## Guest Editorial

### Re-thinking the post-crash city: vacant space, temporary use and new urban imaginaries?

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## **Rethinking the post-crash city: vacant space, temporary use and new urban imaginaries?**

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### **Introduction**

Cities are at the forefront of some of the most profound social and environmental changes taking place globally. As centres of technological and economic development, hubs for international migrants and refugees, key focal points in geopolitical disputes and the home of growing proportions of the world's population, cities are increasingly spaces where the stabilities and instabilities of the contemporary world are at their most intense. Yet, cities are also important actors, sustaining the mobility of people and ideas, and enabling inhabitants to make sense of, respond to, and imagine change within particular institutional and ideological frameworks. Imaginaries of the city, defined by the interactions between different social groups and sets of laws, values, institutions and symbols (Sartre, 1940) abound and this special issue tracks how these are evolving in the context of Dublin, Ireland in the period since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

A watershed year for the global economic system, the year 2008, also marked the demise of what had been broadly heralded as the 'Celtic Tiger' economic miracle, as a triple crisis (financial, fiscal and banking) took hold in Ireland. There has been much debate about the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, the economic and fiscal crisis, the role of various individuals and institutions in that demise, and the social and economic consequences of the property collapse and subsequent 'austerity politics'. Much of the debate has focused on a critique of the neo-liberalist ideology framing the Irish boom, the planning and development processes, and in particular the excessive de-regulation, market liberalisation and privatisation agendas that permeated the planning of the city (MacLaran and Kelly, 2014). However, less has been written on the current city and the choices that it faces, as it emerges from this systemic shock. This special issue focuses on alternative perspectives that draw from, but extend, currently existing discourses about the crisis and its consequences. *Re-thinking the post-crash city* primarily focuses on the city of Dublin but some of the major themes have clear resonance with the wider urban environment in Ireland and beyond. Collectively, the papers highlight the need for, and provide examples of, new urban imaginaries, and consider the key issues for planners and other actors as they re-configure themselves in a new urban context.

This special issue has its genesis in a series of short presentations made to a research symposium in NUI Maynooth (3 October 2013) on '*Meanwhile Spaces*

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and *Pop Up Parks: Dublin's Granby Park as Urban Experiment*'. Some of the authors in this volume were invited to speak at the symposium alongside some of the artists who had been involved in the Granby Park project, an urban pop-up park opened for one month in summer 2013. The park project received much media attention as the site had previously been the proposed location for a major social housing regeneration project during the economic boom. Based on a public-private partnership (PPP) funding model, the project was stopped in 2007 when the developer went bankrupt and the site lay derelict for six years. The opening of a temporary park on this site in summer 2013 was welcomed by many but critiqued by some who argued that it did nothing to address the real problems generated by a dominant speculative urban development model, of which this failed PPP project was just one example. What the project successfully brought to the fore, however, was the challenge of dealing with vacancy in the city and the tensions between private capital and social gain inherent in a capitalist urban economy. Albeit in a very narrowly defined way, the park project highlighted the potential of civil society and groups other than property developers and the local authority to reshape the city and generated debate about the types of city that we want to produce and inhabit. This debate continues in the pages of this special issue.

While some of the papers reference the Granby park project, the focus of this volume is much broader as it attempts to identify some of the legacies of the boom and its prelude, examine contemporary urbanism in post-crash Ireland and highlight the complexity of planning challenges as the city moves into a recovery phase. While the economic/fiscal/banking crisis has unquestionably had devastating consequences for many communities and places, it has also facilitated a moment of stillness, to reflect on and re-think how we should be planning our cities, and opened up a space for more critical urban studies.

### **Understanding vacancy in Dublin**

Each of the four papers in this volume adopt different methodological, conceptual, ideological and temporal approaches to understanding three key issues: vacancy, dereliction and urban temporary use. Yet, there are also many synergies across the papers, including a questioning of the nature of the city, how it is discursively constructed and what needs to be done to enhance urban liveability for its citizens. In the last eight years, the issue of vacancy in Dublin has become a major policy issue at the local level, but the way in which it has been positioned is far more complex than media and policy discourses would suggest.

Post-2008, the visual and physical impact of 'ghost estates' across the country (O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2014) and high-profile stalled urban developments in key locations resulted in significant public, media and policy attention being brought to the issue of vacant sites and land. Publicly, the discourse centred on vacancy as a product of the crash summarised eloquently here by a senior Dublin City Council official in an interview with *The Irish Times*: '*The tide went out and we were left with vacant lands*' (Kelly, 2013). Even in the national press, a keyword search of

‘vacant AND Dublin’ from the year 2000-2008 only reveals four small articles. This myopic and simplistic understanding of the processes through which vacancy has been produced in Dublin underpins the lack of interest in understanding the broader systemic issues underlying urban vacancy and dereliction and steers the debate in a particular direction that is contrary to any evidence-base.

For example, O’Donnell (2012) has argued that vacancy in Dublin was not simply a product of the crash and has in fact been relatively persistent over time – even during the boom – albeit with some variation in the spatial distribution. Her research suggests that, from the early 1990s up until the property crash, vacancy rates in Dublin ranged from 13.36% (1993) to 10.42% (2000) to 13.9% (2008/09) of all land parcels within the inner city. Vacancy is a permanent feature of capitalist cities, and a requisite part of an urban structure that relies on unevenness to create the conditions for development. Yet, despite this general understanding, and the requirements of the National Spatial Strategy (2002) that local authorities undertake and maintain an audit of derelict land within their jurisdictions, in Dublin there was no focus on this key issue during the boom years, feeding the argument that land capacity within the city was low and justifying sprawl on the edge. There is some evidence that during the boom there was some geographical switching of vacancy within the city of Dublin (O’Donnell, 2012), but the papers by Kearns (2015) and O’Mahony and Rigney (2015) in this issue highlight that many of the places that were vacant and ‘problematic’ even as far back as the 19th century, along the river, north inner city and docklands, are precisely the same areas that remain so today. In their paper, O’Callaghan and Lawton (2015) note that in the mid-1980s derelict sites accounted for about 65ha of land within Dublin City; this was one of the main drivers behind the most significant urban policy ever introduced by the state, the Urban Renewal Act (1986). Today, Dublin City Council estimates that there are 63ha of vacant land in Dublin yet, as many of the papers in this issue suggest, the response has been much more fragmented and piecemeal. Why the response in 21st century Dublin is relatively muted compared with the situation in the mid-1980s and why there is such a persistency of derelict land and vacant buildings within particular parts of the city drives some of the work described by O’Mahony and Rigney (2015) in their contribution.

### **Vacancy, temporary use and the ‘developed’ city**

Each of the four papers in this volume focusses on a core set of themes, but they also use these issues to raise fundamental questions about our approaches to urban development and, to the city more generally, through time. Marcuse (2015) has recently argued that how we describe urban processes has real impacts on policy and decision-making and this theme is picked up in a number of the papers. How we think about utility and usefulness within the city shapes how we define what is vacant or derelict. In their paper, O’Mahony and Rigney (2015) argue that ‘uselessness is subjective’ and they question who defines ‘appropriate use’ within the city and with what implications? They highlight the significant gap between official data on the number of vacant/derelict sites within the city and

their data crowd-sourced from those who experience the city (and thus vacancy/dereliction) on a daily basis. Why this is the case is unclear but they suggest that perhaps it may be to do with the fact that the very presence of these ‘unused’ sites challenges the orderliness we associate with a city that is subject to development plans, regulation and planning control.

Kearns (2015) suggests in his contribution that strong relationships exist between vacancy and alternative visions of urban futures – not necessarily those held by people who have formal power – and these can contribute to the enhanced liveability of the city in ways that may not be visible, permanent or generate worth, according to monetary exchange. While perhaps aesthetically displeasing, vacant or derelict sites can often have hidden uses, such as providing important ecosystem services (Burkholder, 2012). This directly contradicts traditional representations of derelict sites as problematic, useless or waste and opens up an important debate about how exchange value is prioritised over use value within the city and what that means for the types of urban imaginaries that can emerge.

These themes are considered in all of the papers within this special issue, and particular attention is drawn to the question of temporary ‘use’ of vacant sites, a growing phenomenon, in Dublin in recent years. Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) have suggested that temporary activities allow people to express dissatisfaction with the present state of the city while Burke and Shear (2014) argue that temporary use activities can be effective in permitting different groups to turn their discontent into something productive that can demonstrate alternate sets of values. Much of the literature on temporary use activities (Colomb, 2012; Till, 2011), such as the Granby Park or Dublin Biennial projects discussed in this volume, suggests that these can play an important role in changing perceptions of urban space and create the conditions for new urban imaginaries to emerge. Yet many of the critics of this approach claim that temporary uses are little more than a new tool in an entrepreneurial/neoliberal vision of the city (Rosol, 2012). O’Callaghan and Lawton (2015) in their paper argue that the growth in temporary use activity in Dublin is simply a stop-gap, sustaining a boosterist agenda that does not fundamentally challenge dominant city visions. However, Till and McArdle (2015) argue that simply critiquing temporary interventions because they may sustain ‘business-as-usual’ approaches to urban development and fail to challenge broader hegemonies of neoliberalism, runs the risk of missing the more intangible effects that temporary projects can often have. They call for a more nuanced understanding of urban development, that does not pit temporary versus permanent uses but rather creates space for an in-between, what they term the ‘improvisational city’. The intangible value in doing so is exemplified in the discussion on Granby Park (Till and McArdle, 2015) where they quote architect Sean Harrington, as remarking on how the park became the second most visited tourist attraction in Ireland in the time it was open because of its ‘unfinished’ nature.

What all of our papers highlight is the complexity and politically-infused nature of the debate around vacancy and temporary use. In their discussion, O’Mahony

and Rigney (2015) highlight the appetite among particular publics to have a voice in this debate and engage with their city in a way that current institutional structures and contexts make difficult. However, this raises significant challenges for planning and the planning system as currently configured. For example, if the ‘improvisational city’ was to be allowed to emerge, the temporally confined way in which we think about planning the city would need to change. In Dublin, for example, city planners are required to produce new development plans every six years, with a two-year pre-publication review. Arguably this cyclical race against time in locking a development plan down creates a focus on fixity and discourages any long term visionary thinking that might consider alternative approaches to urban ‘development’. Till and McArdle (2015) raise this issue by questioning institutional fixations with urban ‘development’ as solely about bricks and mortar. They argue that if a new imaginary for how we plan the city is to emerge then the structures and context must be created to allow different groups to experiment in urban space. This is a core theme of other work in this area that has identified a major problem with the regulations and formal strictures of the planning system that even planners are actively trying to work around in order to facilitate alternative uses of urban space (Moore-Cherry and McCarthy, 2016; Moore-Cherry, in press).

So, how might the formal planning system respond? Informed by a better understanding of not just where vacancy occurs but the dynamics that underpin it, we could begin to de-homogenise both our understandings of vacancy and our potential responses. O’Mahony and Rigney (2015) have argued, in the context of Dublin, that vacancy or dereliction is the product of the various interactions between space, property regimes, and users of the city. Taking that starting point, we might think about two different types of vacancy to which we would consider differing responses.

The first type is what could be termed ‘*responsive vacancy*’, that which is produced by a specific event or set of events such as the property collapse and which we traditionally think about as problematic. These are most likely sites where redevelopment remains the overall goal and there may be different paths to achieving this outcome. These sites are in what Andres (2013) terms a ‘watching stage’, just waiting on property market uplift. Depending on the willingness of landowners, interim/temporary uses could be permitted on these sites until a recovery occurs. Landowners should be compelled through fiscal/policy responses, such as a strongly implemented vacant land levy, to redevelop their sites quickly once market conditions improve.

The second part of the typology responds to the observation of a number of the authors herein, that vacancy can be relatively long-term. This ‘*persistent vacancy*’ is more tenacious and may be indicative of a failure in the interactions between space, property regimes, and users of the city. It is in these sites that the best opportunities for alternative imaginaries of the city can emerge as their very persistence requires us to think differently about their use and re-use.

In Dublin City, a basic site audit has now been completed by the local authority



and we know that there are currently officially about 320 vacant spaces in the inner city. An assessment is now required to ascertain which sites through some fiscal or policy response can be brought back into the 'bricks and mortar' development cycle. However, not all sites may be suitable for a variety of reasons. This should not be construed as a problem but a potential resource to do a different kind of urban development. By de-constructing our understanding of vacancy, we can begin to see possibilities for how alternative development paths and imaginaries of the city might be facilitated to emerge.

## Conclusion

In bringing historical and contemporary perspectives of vacancy in Dublin together in this special issue, it is clear that the solutions we think of as innovative today, are very often rooted in the past. Kearns (2015), in his discussion of 19<sup>th</sup> century Dublin, notes the debate at that time about taxing vacancy (a vacant land levy) and the barriers to effectively doing this caused by jurisdictional fragmentation in Dublin. While some early suburbs such as Rathmines moved to tax vacant lands, others such as Kingstown took a more laissez-faire approach, preventing the emergence of a coherent approach to planning the city as a whole. This continued lack of co-ordinated, strategic planning is partly the reason why large tracts of land remained undeveloped in Dublin City during the recent boom years, while greenfield sites were being swallowed up by suburban sprawl on the urban fringe. If we were to really re-think the city in a post-crash context, high on the agenda would be a meaningful restructuring of governance within the broader city region. It would also be worth considering the way in which vacancy was discussed in earlier centuries when the conclusion was reached that 'the private waste of socially useful assets was not an unlimited right of property' (Kearns, 2015, p.30). Cities should not be seen solely as spaces of potential profit, where the exchange value of sites is prioritised and justifies land hoarding and speculation. An alternative urban imaginary where use value is also privileged would allow us to think anew about the city, vacancy, temporary uses, improvisationality and active citizen engagement. Our call is for discussion about a city of alternatives and our contributors begin this debate in the papers that follow.

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