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Temporary solutions? Vacant space policy and strategies for re-use in Dublin

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Abstract: In the context of the ongoing economic crisis and the associated slow-down in the commercial property sector, urban policies that seek to encourage 'temporary uses' have grown in popularity internationally. Such strategies have been streamlined with pre-existing 'creative city' agendas. The post-crisis scenario in Dublin has seen an increased engagement at the official level with these strategies, which have also been positively represented within media discourses. Vacancy, in this framework, is transformed from a form of 'blight' to an 'opportunity' for 'innovative' and 'creative' re-use of urban space. Thus various 'temporary uses' of vacant spaces in Dublin have also been mobilised in attempts to brand and market the city. In this paper, we offer a critical examination of Dublin's emerging approach to vacancy and reuse. We focus our analysis on the wider policy discourses that temporary uses are being constructed within, and the set of assumptions about how temporary uses can contribute to broader urban development strategies. Our core argument is that the potential impacts of these strategies need to be more critically considered within the context of the city's wider political economy, particularly in the context of the transformation of post-crisis cities.

Keywords: vacant space, temporary use, gentrification, Dublin, Ireland

Introduction

'Temporary uses might be part of a solution to the challenges that are facing cities as they struggle to adapt to the conditions of the twenty-first century' (Bishop and Williams, 2012, 4).

On 13 February 2014, Dublin City Council (DCC) hosted an event at their Wood Quay offices entitled "City Limits – Inventive Uses for Urban Spaces", which focussed on vacant or "underutilised" space within the city and 'creative' ways to reuse it. Included were short presentations on temporary use initiatives such as Granby Park (a month-long temporary park and arts initiative), Allotment Homes (a proposal to use shipping containers to provide temporary housing), the Ballymun Rediscovery Centre (a social enterprise dealing with recycled materials) and Makers, Brothers and Others (a craft retail operation who launched a pop-up

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shop). The event drew an impressive crowd, which the organisers, Dublin City Architects, took as a welcome sign of growing public engagement with urban issues and a recognition that 'we', in the words of one of the speakers, must be 'far more creative' in improving our city in times of limited resources. Recently, in Dublin, there has been an intensification of official engagements with temporary uses as part of a suite of responses targeting vacancy and dereliction. In particular, the City Limits event linked experiments in temporary uses to efforts to lobby central government to introduce a new 'vacant land levy' in the city, designed to penalise 'land hoarding' and encourage redevelopment. In this schema, temporary uses were to be viewed as a tool to both open up space for alternative uses and to kick-start the property market to encourage more 'viable' long-term uses. The overarching perspective was that through collaboration and consensus, temporary use could be mobilised as a way to simultaneously combat vacancy, encourage redevelopment, and allow for 'alternative' uses.

The City Limits event captures a contemporary zeitgeist regarding vacant space in important ways. While temporary uses have a long history in certain cities – for example, Berlin and, for different reasons, Detroit – their deployment as an explicit urban policy mechanism has become more formalised and widespread in recent years. This can be seen partly as an evolution of 'creative city' agendas and partly as an immediate response to increasing, or at least more visible, levels of vacancy in cities following the global financial crisis (GFC) (Bishop and Williams, 2012). Although the initiatives outlined in the City Limits presentations, in different ways and to varying extents, have a positive impact on the city by opening up spaces for experimentation that might ordinarily be left idle, temporary use is far from the panacea it is sometimes claimed to be.

In a key text on the subject, Oswalt *et al.* (2013, 7) note a contradiction between increased numbers of undelivered plans and vacant spaces serving new temporary uses. However, this simple equation actually obfuscates a range of important processes relating to the complex role that vacancy plays in the capitalist city. As the fickle movements of people, policy, and especially capital express themselves in the built environment, different parts of cities are created, destroyed, and recreated as areas of investment potential and use (Ley, 2003; Smith, 2002). In that vacancy can either represent a form of urban blight or an opportunity for redevelopment, policy pronouncements about perceived urban decline or the need for regeneration are always influenced by some vision, real or projected, about future potential.

During the aforementioned City Limits event, audience questions pointed towards the limitations of temporary uses in the face of the wider forces of capitalist urban development. In recent years, Dublin has not only seen an explosion of temporary uses, but also often their subsequent closure due to increased rents, contestations over types of use, or the desire on the part of the landowner to redevelop the space (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015). A key debate concerns the extent to which 'temporariness' is seen in a positive light and the assumptions about the forms of growth that are implied both in discussions around

vacancy and activation of urban space. Many speakers at the City Limits event emphasised how temporary solutions could offer more flexible and fluid engagements with the city. Some even challenged the very notion that ‘permanence’ was to be desired or pursued by planners, architects and others. However, for the chief artist behind the Smithfield Art Tunnel (Figure 1) – a combined outdoor art gallery and community project, which having run for two years was facing imminent closure – the feeling was quite different. ‘Obviously, we don’t want to give it up,’ she said, but ‘...no landlord would let their land for such uses without knowing they would get it back.’



Figure 1: Former site of Smithfield Art Tunnel, vacant in March 2015. (Photo by Cian O’Callaghan)

In this paper, we offer a critical examination of Dublin’s emerging approach to vacancy and reuse. We focus our analysis on the wider policy discourses that temporary uses are being constructed within, and the set of assumptions about how temporary uses can contribute to broader urban development strategies. Our core argument is that the potential impacts of these strategies need to be more critically considered within the context of the city’s wider political economy, particularly in the context of the transformation of post-crisis cities.

Vacancy and the capitalist city

There is no internationally accepted definition of what constitutes ‘vacant’ land (Pearsall *et al.*, 2014). Rather, in attempting to determine vacancy rates, public

bodies and commercial agencies use different classifications. Ireland's Central Statistics Office (CSO), for example, deems a property to be vacant if the enumerator has visited the property a number of times and has no contact with the occupier, while estate agents, Savills, only count vacant properties currently on the market in their estimates. What is captured by official vacancy rates will only be part of the map of vacant space in any city. This is partly due to the impossibility of fully accounting for the shifting mosaic of land use. But it is also because determining what space is 'in use' involves value judgements about what constitutes 'appropriate' use. The term 'underutilised land', which is used by many local authorities (Turas, 2014), reinforces this view. Therefore, attempts by cities to determine levels of vacancy, and to address the 'problem' this poses, are always context-specific in that they intervene in localised property markets and seek to respond to particular development challenges.

Indeed, the capitalist city needs a certain level of vacant space for its very reproduction. Literature within debates about gentrification has been at pains to point to this dynamic, particularly that which draws upon a 'production-oriented' explanation. As is summarised by Smith (1982, 151)

'The logic behind uneven development is that the development of one area creates barriers to further development, thus leading to underdevelopment, and that the underdevelopment of that area creates opportunities for a new phase of development. Geographically, this leads to the possibility of what we might call a "locational seesaw": the successive development, underdevelopment, and redevelopment of given areas as capital jumps from one place to another, then back again, both creating and destroying its own opportunities for development.'

The 'devalorization' of the centres of US cities through mid-twentieth century suburbanisation, for example, led to future opportunities for transformation through the subsequent gentrification of these same city centre spaces (Smith, 1982). There is often a tendency within policy circles to perceive the 'revalorization' of space, usually for more 'productive' or 'higher-end' uses as a positive response to vacancy. This, however, as has been dealt with by Marcuse (1985), embodies considerable contradictions as it exacerbates rather than solves the more challenging impacts of rounds of investment or disinvestment: 'A vicious circle is created in which the poor are continuously under pressure of displacement and the wealthy continuously seek to wall themselves within gentrified neighborhoods. Far from a cure for abandonment, gentrification worsens the process' (Marcuse, 1985, 196). From the 1970s onwards, with the transition to the post-industrial city and the congruent entrepreneurial city model, Smith (2002) argues that gentrification has transitioned to a global urban strategy. Thus, the creative destruction of urban space has at once become more rapid, generalised, and central to the global capitalist system (Brenner, 2014).

The trenchant impacts of capitalist urbanisation have been significantly exacerbated under the conditions of financialisation that reached maturity in the context of the GFC. The financialisation of the Eurozone economies, which funnelled increasing amounts of credit into speculative investments in the built environment, has been identified as one of the primary causes of the crisis (Aalbers, 2008; Christophers, 2015). With this, the underlying assumptions of entrepreneurial urbanism – that, in a relative sense, inter-urban competition will allow all cities to grow economically – have been significantly challenged (Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014). Urban policy has tended to focus on leveraging investment as a vehicle for urban regeneration so as to attract new economic and cultural uses and users. Under financialised models, the exchange value of property is further privileged over its use value.

Vacancy, the crisis, and temporary use

In recent years, a range of factors have led to the emergence of vacancy as a key concern for urban policymakers. The effects of the GFC in terms of stalled, unfinished and vacant developments, stagnant property markets, and iconic ‘new ruins’ (see O’Callaghan *et al.*, 2014) have made vacancy a more visible and politicised feature of many cities. *Architect* magazine observed that ‘today’s stalled developments are unlike those seen in previous slumps in both scale and prevalence’ (cited in Bishop and Williams, 2012, 44). While the conditions associated with the GFC are important, however, contemporary concerns about vacancy can also be contextualised within the wider set of discourses about ‘shrinking cities’. Rustbelt cities in the US like Detroit have become the subject of intense scrutiny, with high levels of vacancy, spectacular ‘ruins’, and a spiralling economy being read by various commentators as indicative of the city’s terminal decline (Millington, 2013).

Within the context of the perceived threat of dereliction posed by both short-term economic crises and long-term urban decline, various groups have begun to employ temporary use as a response to vacancy. These interventions vary considerably. Temporary uses have a widely differing set of institutional structures and actors involved in their implementation, different interpretations of ‘temporary’ and different political motivations. Some forms of temporary use, like Berlin’s ‘beach bars’, are viewed as a stopgap between more viable long-term uses. ‘Pop-up’ shops, restaurants, or art spaces, similarly, aim to utilise vacant properties for a defined period of time. In a scheme launched by Camden Town Limited in London, for example, pop-up shops are expected to function as incubator space for new businesses that will enable them to transition into more ‘permanent’ premises (Bishop and Williams, 2012, 80). At the other end of the spectrum, temporary uses have emerged as a long-term response to chronic levels of vacancy and economic decline. Detroit, for example, has seen significant reclamation of vacant land by marginalised communities for the purpose of urban agriculture, and to address issues of poverty and social fragmentation (Draus *et al.*, 2014).

A central claim of the literature promoting temporary use is that these practices can transform perceptions of urban space and therefore ‘could represent a powerful mechanism to retune our cities for what lies ahead’ (Bishop and Williams, 2012, 35). For example, cultural initiatives that use non-traditional spaces as temporary performance or exhibition spaces often aim to transform perceptions of individual sites or areas of cities. The projects of Assemble, an architecture and design studio who recently won the Turner Prize for their work on innovatively refurbishing social housing in Toxteth Liverpool, offer a good example. Their project ‘The Cineroleum’ transformed a petrol station in London into a temporary cinema, while the ‘Folly for a Flyover’ transformed ‘a disused motorway undercroft in Hackney Wick into an arts venue and new public space’¹. Underpinning their projects is a collaborative approach that seeks to engage the public in transforming underutilised spaces to experience them in new ways. Other temporary uses more explicitly challenge dominant development agendas. In the case of Park Fiction in Hamburg, temporary uses including outdoor film screenings were used as part of an activist strategy to garner public support and participation in the production of an alternative development plan for a site that had been slated for redevelopment as a shopping centre (Oswalt *et al.*, 2013). Projects like London’s Obliette Arthouse (Bishop and Williams, 2012, 134) or similar initiatives in Dutch cities such as Maastricht, meanwhile, have their roots in squatting movements, and utilise strategies that involve different levels of formalised relationships with landowners where squatting is tolerated on a short-term basis.

The growing body of literature documenting temporary use practices has also stimulated a burgeoning policy interest. However, a distinction needs to be made between the diverse set of practices that are often grouped under the banner ‘temporary use’, and the emergent policy discourse, which tends to focus on a narrower sub-set of these practices and employs a selective narrative about their objectives. This model emerged largely out of a series of experiments in Berlin during the 1990s and 2000s. Following the reunification of the city, the anticipated levels of redevelopment failed to materialise, leaving a large amount of vacant space that was employed for ‘temporary’ or ‘interim’ uses (Colomb, 2012; Till, 2011). These initiatives took a range of forms. For example, various groups took on semi-derelict buildings or sites and repurposed, rather than redeveloped, them for alternative uses – including using vacant riverside locations to construct urban ‘beach bars’ and the use of former industrial spaces as nightclubs housing the city’s techno scene. Artists used specific vacant sites to produce events that often reflected on the city’s troubled history (Till, 2011), while more overtly politicised uses such as the Schwarzer Kanal Queer living space (Colomb, 2012) also grew out of Berlin’s tradition of radical social movements. Over time, larger temporary use interventions served as a stimulus to challenge commercial and institutional hurdles and realign planning regulations (Oswalt *et al.*, 2013). Thus, temporary

¹ <http://assemblestudio.co.uk/> [Last accessed 20 September 2015]

uses were ‘gradually harnessed into urban development policies and city marketing campaigns’ (Colomb, 2012, 132) and Berlin was popularised as a model.

This policy discourse builds on creative city agendas that, following Florida’s (2002) framework, have attempted to attract the ‘creative class’ by promoting ‘liveability’ through urban design and events (Lawton *et al.*, 2014). Such policy frameworks have, in recent years, been increasingly intertwined with what has been called ‘tactical urbanism’ (Mould, 2014). Tactical urbanism incorporates a variety of forms of temporary use, along with ‘guerrilla gardening’, ‘yarn bombing’, and the ‘hijacking’ of space for alternative uses. Underpinning this approach is the assumption that urban planning mechanisms are cumbersome, exclusionary, and fail to allow immediate and improvised responses to problems. Conversely, through the principle of ‘urban acupuncture’, small scale interventions in the city can change the larger urban context. These interventions, however, also synchronise with the creative city agenda in that they provide fodder for urban branding campaigns, which increasingly promote a succession of small-scale events and interventions that present the idea of a vibrant urban life.

Critics have argued that the incorporation of temporary uses into urban policy has co-opted them into the normal apparatus of the neoliberal ‘creative city’ (Bradley, 2012; Colomb, 2012; Mould, 2014). As Colomb (2012) outlines, the incorporation of temporary use strategies in Berlin for official urban regeneration purposes has precipitated negative impacts for artists and others engaged in urban experiments. Land speculation has become more common while the forms of temporary use that are both viable and sanctioned have been reduced. Others have emphasised that the current appeal of this brand of DIY urbanism is a response to the post-recessionary condition of ‘austerity urbanism’ with its need for low-cost ‘solutions’ to urban rejuvenation (Peck, 2012; Pratt and Hutton, 2013). Thus, temporary use allows for the local State to foster the transformation of the city in a manner that, while on the one hand seems ‘edgy’ and ‘alternative’, assists in a process of capitalist accumulation and ‘business as usual’ urban development.

This is particularly pertinent in the context of post-crisis cities. The policy responses to the crisis in the form of bank bailouts, the establishment of asset management companies to deal with the loans associated with unfinished developments (Byrne, 2015), and the concurrent shift to ‘austerity urbanism’ (Peck, 2012), has served to further entrench financialisation. These conditions give rise to increased levels of vacancy while at the same time making access to urban space increasingly prohibitive (Fields and Uffer, 2014; Simone, 2014). We can see evidence of this in, for example, the wave of foreclosures across Spanish cities, the crisis of homelessness in Dublin, the erosion of rental protections in Berlin, and the crisis of affordability in London (Colau and Alameny, 2014; Dorling, 2014; Fields and Uffer, 2014, Homeless Dublin, 2015). As such, policies promoting the temporary *use* of space do nothing to wrestle control away from financialised market mechanisms that privilege its *exchange* value.

In sum, while the current trend for the reuse of vacant space promotes temporary uses as a form of saviour, it very often ignores the wider dynamics that have served

to produce vacancy in the first place. Furthermore, the policy model mobilises a selective reading of the multitude of temporary uses – focussing primarily on cultural projects and shying away both from more radical forms of intervention, and mundane or everyday uses – and co-opts their diverse aims into the service of an entrepreneurial or neoliberal vision of the city.

Vacancy and Temporary Use in Dublin

Vacancy has been a persistent long-term feature of Dublin's urban landscape throughout periods of growth and recession (see Kearns, this volume; MacLaran, 2014). Indeed, Dublin's political economic history has been marked by periods of severe urban economic decline and social deprivation in the 19th and 20th century and its related urban physical decay. By the 1980s, the challenge of urban decline in Dublin was firmly embedded within urban political discourse (McDonald, 1985). MacLaran (1993, p.121) points out that by 1986 there were 600 sites and derelict buildings, which together comprised 65 hectares in Dublin. Much of this vacancy could be directly linked to site assembly, whereby speculators amassed sites with a view to future development or selling on to other developers (*Ibid*). Such tendencies are in keeping with those observed in North American contexts at the time (Smith, 1982; Smith and Williams, 1986). A predominant image of the mid- to late-20th century Dublin was that of the 'temporary' surface carpark dotted intermittently amidst the city centre.

In the context of this decaying city image, one of the most well-known examples of the connection between vacancy, alternative uses and subsequent planning measures emerged: the renewal of Temple Bar from the early 1990s onwards. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the transport agency CIE had planned to build a large central bus terminus flanking both sides of the river Liffey in the area now known as Temple Bar. While plans for the redevelopment were in progress, the combination of cheap rents and available premises attracted numerous smaller scale enterprises and cultural venues into the area. Thus, in a relatively short period of time, the area began to develop a form of 'bohemian' atmosphere. By the late 1980s, in combination with the emergence of 'cultural planning' and an increased desire to promote the city centre as a living entity, the ideal of what the area could or should be shifted. In the early 1990s, through government backing and support, the area was designated as a 'cultural quarter', drawing its reference points from European influences in terms of urban design and mix of residential, cultural venues, restaurants and bars (Lawton and Punch, 2014). As such, in the example of Temple Bar, formerly temporary uses became ensconced within a more long-term strategy of urban renewal.

The redevelopment of Temple Bar also marked the beginning of a gradually evolving entrepreneurial approach to urban transformation in Dublin. This, as has been documented by Lawton and Punch (2014), has entailed a significant focus upon city image making, including architecture, urban design and a highly visualised approach to urban planning. In drawing direct reference from well-

known ‘archetypes’, such as Barcelona, since the early 1990s, this shift has entailed the transformation of the public realm, and the development of high-profile landmark buildings and bridges by well-known architects such as Santiago Calatrava and Daniel Libeskind (*Ibid*). From the middle of the last decade onwards, this approach was furthered through the incorporation of Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’ hypotheses into Dublin’s urban policy formation. Increasingly, this approach became explicitly focused upon the promotion of the city for the middle and upper-classes (Lawton *et al.*, 2013). Such ideals formed a significant element of policy and strategy during the years of the Celtic Tiger, and a continuing legacy into its aftermath.

The collapse of Ireland’s property bubble in 2008 resulted in a dramatic drop in property prices and a landscape of unfinished and vacant developments (Kitchin *et al.*, 2014). In the period 2004-2008, 108,700 housing units were completed in the Greater Dublin Area (Dublin Regional Authority, 2010). This building boom was paralleled in the office sector with 1.97 million square metres of office space built between 1995 and c.2008 (MacLaran, 2014). While Dublin occupies a relatively privileged position vis-a-vis the rest of the country, in that employment has largely kept pace with new development, the city has not escaped the problems of vacancy. In line with national trends, many of those developments in Dublin that were still under construction at the time of the crash were left vacant or unfinished (Figure 2). Similarly, escalating land prices during the boom (which nationally had risen



Figure 2: Examples of vacancy in Dublin. Clockwise from top left: Unfinished new headquarters of Anglo Irish Bank, North Wall Quay; Hammond Lane; Vacant office space in Smithfield; Grand Canal Dock)

from €10,000 per hectare in 1998 to €58,400 per hectare in 2006) (Savills HOK, 2007), encouraged the speculation and hoarding of land. As such, while many parts of the city were undergoing significant redevelopment, Dublin retained large pockets of vacant land.

Following the crash, DCC renewed their focus on the urban core². Drawing on a policy discourse that emphasised the importance of strong urban centres to national economic development and of attracting the ‘creative class’ through quality of life, DCC advocated reallocating scarce resources to the city centre. Their argument was an entrepreneurial one: Dublin, as the only city in Ireland that could realistically compete for global investment, was the economic driver of the country and, thus, in order for any other area to achieve growth, there was a need to ‘get urbanism right’ in Dublin city centre. Much of this can be read as a reaction to the impacts of speculative land investment.

Associated with the wider desire to promote the urban core, since 2008, there has been an intensification of the perceived role of ‘design’ and ‘design-thinking’ as one of Dublin’s unique selling points within the global hierarchy of cities. This is particularly emphasised through the example of Pivot Dublin – the bid to be Design Capital in 2014, which was subsequently won by Capetown. Here, design is perceived as a central driver of the promotion of urban quality of life. This ideal is succinctly summarised on the Pivot Dublin website as follows:

‘Cities that use design as a tool to think, to act, and to react become better cities. PIVOT Dublin is an initiative driven by the need for better design: for design that matters and enriches our social, economic and cultural lives. PIVOT Dublin communicates, champions and celebrates the positive impact design can have on our lives and on the world around us.’

This is concluded with the catch-phrase: ‘Design Matters.’³ There is thus a firm belief that design can be used as a means of enriching the social, cultural and economic life of the city (see Lawton *et al.*, 2014).

In the absence of new development, part of the emphasis on improving Dublin’s quality of life was refocused on a dual strategy of dealing with the problem of vacant space and investing in acupuncture measures to revitalise the street life through design-led interventions. Notwithstanding the challenges of vacancy within suburban municipalities, much of the approach to vacancy in Dublin has been led by DCC. It is here that the challenges of vacancy have perhaps been most acutely felt. As of April, 2015, DCC estimated a total of 61 hectares of vacant or

² County Dublin is presided over by four local authorities (Dublin City Council, South Dublin County Council, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and Fingal County Council), while the Greater Dublin area also takes in Kildare, Meath, and Wicklow. While these local authorities ostensibly work together under the auspices of the Regional Development Plan, in reality they are in competition for development and investment.

³ <http://www.pivotdublin.com/> [Last Accessed on 24th April, 2015]

derelict land within its boundaries.⁴ In this regard, in recent years ‘temporary uses’ have become an element of policy-making. For example, the Dublin City Council Development Plan 2011-2017 makes provision in three clauses for temporary uses (Policy RE8; RE11; and RE29), which outline how temporary uses can help to improve the public realm and the street level activity of areas. The earliest example of this was the Pretty Vacant scheme, which DCC launched in mid 2010. Essentially a variation on ‘meanwhile use’ (see Bradley, 2012), the scheme sought to make vacant properties in private ownership open to alternative uses from the arts and cultural sector. DCC acted as a liaison between owners of property and the cultural sector (who were required to put together a proposal about their plans for the space) while also taking on the insurance liability. This later transitioned into the Vacant Space Scheme, a more long-term strategy that is run out of the DCC’s Arts Office. In this scheme, tenants are expected to ensure that premises are occupied and open ‘during core business hours’ and that the use is ‘not in conflict with surrounding businesses’ (Brownfield Initiative Steering Group, 2013). This is promoted as a ‘win-win’ scenario. The benefits for landowners include the upkeep of the premises and security – which is seen to protect against ‘illegal use’ such as squatting – while also potentially drawing new users into the area, which could help stimulate regeneration. For the users of the space, the benefits are access to land/properties for free or reduced rents.

Outside the more institutionally run initiatives there has been a wide array of temporary or long-term uses of vacant urban space promoted by different groups (see Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Turas, 2014). These include large-scale initiatives, for instance, a proposal to convert the half-built Anglo Irish Bank headquarters into a public park, along with small-scale projects like Designing Dublin, which sought on-street interventions such as seating areas in place of car spaces. Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) document the emergence of ‘independent spaces’ in the city since the early 2000s. Operating at the fringes of, though still within, the private rental sector, they offer an example of temporary use in a quite loose sense, whereby groups aim to make use of run down, often former industrial, buildings.

‘Most of the spaces make possible events and activities which could not otherwise take place, including gigs, exhibitions, workspaces, bicycle workshops, cafes and restaurants, gardens, crèches, film screenings, studio space, political meetings and discussions... [and] emerge in response to a particular dissatisfaction with the city and the limits placed on different aspects of social, cultural and working life’ (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015, 40).

To offer a cross-section of examples: Seomra Spraioi, organised on anarchist

⁴ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/dublin-city-audit-finds-282-vacant-sites-ahead-of-land-hoarding-levy-1.2123606> [Last accessed 11th September, 2015]

principles, provided space for gigs, cultural events, and political meetings while also holding a regular bicycle workshop and cafe; The Exchange was a volunteer run not-for-profit alcohol free social space in Temple Bar that primarily catered to young people; Mabos in Grand Canal Dock grew out of a skateboarding festival to create a space that incorporated office, workshop and exhibition space; Block T in Smithfield is a 6,553 square meter building that combines studio/hot seat office space with event space along with screen printing, photo development and a cafe



Figure 3: Granby Park, a temporary pop-up park in Dominick Street which ran from August – September 2013. (Photo by Cian O’Callaghan)

(see Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015, 41). These spaces were enabled by groups finding ways of collectively paying rent, through donations, fundraisers, membership, providing food, or renting out studio space. In some cases independent spaces were also in receipt of some level of public funding – both the Exchange and Mabos were partly funded by DCC, for example, while Block T had been in receipt of Arts Council funding, although in each case the funding was subsequently cut. Initiatives like the Smithfield Art Tunnel and The Complex Theatre, which both utilised the availability of vacant spaces to create projects that combined community development with art, also emerged over this period. Additionally, the post-crisis era has seen a significant growth in vacant spaces in Dublin being used for urban agriculture (Kettle, 2014). The geography of temporary use initiatives has primarily been limited to the city centre. As noted above, Dublin retained significant pockets of vacancy throughout the city centre during the boom. Thus, outside of the core shopping streets, there was ample available spaces. The city centre focus, however, also suggests particular characteristics.

Both sanctioned and unsanctioned temporary uses tend to be located in areas where footfall is guaranteed or at least accessible. Conversely, the wider set of problems at the city regional level, including vacancy in suburban spaces and the myriad of ‘ghost estates’ dotted around the Irish landscape (Kitchin *et al.*, 2014), have largely been ignored in debates on temporary use. Thus, rather than temporary use being a response to problems of vacancy in the city as a whole, it targets particular types of vacancy in specific geographic areas.

As the crisis wore on, temporary use began to be incorporated more centrally into DCC’s development agenda. The aforementioned Vacant Spaces Scheme, for instance, continued to grow in popularity, while DCC also became invested in using temporary uses as part of their design-led approach to urban branding.

One of the most successful examples, both in terms of the project itself and in terms of its promotional cache for DCC, was Granby Park (Figure 3), an urban ‘pop-up park’ produced by Upstart, a non-profit voluntary arts collective (see McArdle and Till, 2015). Granby Park has subsequently been incorporated into DCC’s promotional strategy as an example of the city’s ‘design-led’ approach to urban development. This can be seen reflected in a number of recent interventions also. ‘Connect the Dots’, for example, is aimed at bringing together different individuals and groups interested in vacancy in Dublin; Reusing Dublin is a web-portal which allows users to geotag and add information about vacant sites; and Whatif? Dublin used temporary installations in space to articulate the potential of transforming perspectives about the city (Figure 4).



Figure 4: What if? Dublin installation near the wholesale fruit market on Mary Street. In line with DCC’s plans for the site, the installation superimposes a scene of a busy retail market on top of the streetscape. (Photo by Philip Lawton)

The policy approach promoting temporary use has more recently transitioned into a wider strategy to tackle vacancy over the long-term. In Ireland, at present, landowners are not taxed on vacant land or property. In response to this, and to the wider challenges of vacancy, DCC has led an effort to introduce a vacant land levy. Initially intended to be limited to Dublin city centre, ultimately a version of the levy has been extended nationally. In law, 'vacant' property is distinguished from properties that are empty but could potentially be put to use, the latter which are subject to a tax. There are three categories of vacant land: i) vacant land with no evidence of permanent use; ii) vacant land and buildings which are in a state of dilapidation; iii) vacant buildings in such a state of disrepair that their future use is unlikely (Brownfield Initiative Steering Group, 2014). A proposed levy of 3% was intended to increase the amount of vacant land/property that is liable for local taxation (Dublin City Council, 2013). Overall, while the proposal was designed as a means of discouraging land hoarding and speculation, it is couched within an entrepreneurial framework: 'The proposed levy is intended to be pro-development, pro-investment, pro-business, pro-ratepayer, pro-employment, pro-resident, and pro-community' (Dublin City Council, 2013). Pointedly, the proposal also explicitly allowed for the provision of temporary uses as a mechanism by which landowners can be exempt from payment. DCC, in their memorandum to the Department of Finance, suggested that the 'legislation could provide a reduced/zero levy where the site has a compliant interim use such as a temporary park or playground' (Dublin City Council, 2013). However, in its final form, the vacant site levy – as introduced through the *Urban Regeneration and Housing Bill 2015* – does not legislate for any forms of temporary use. The primary focus of the Bill as finalised is instead explicitly placed on wider pressing needs such as the provision of housing and long-term urban regeneration. In its evolution, the introduction of the vacant site levy perhaps demonstrates the relative weakness of local government in introducing legislation that directly impacts upon its respective area. It is also, however, indicative of how the changing conditions of the property market – in this case the resurgence of Dublin's commercial property market and a growing homelessness crisis – can very quickly and dramatically shift the focus of urban policy. While it is perhaps too early to predict, it currently appears that temporary use may have once again receded from the urban policy spotlight in Dublin.

The Limits of Temporary Use

Without wishing to oversimplify, we can identify three characteristics of 'sanctioned' temporary uses in Dublin. Firstly, they are primarily, though by no means exclusively, cultural in nature. The proclivity for cultural temporary uses fits with DCC's 'creative' - or 'design' -led approach to urban development. Secondly, they tend to be located in the city centre area. The focus on the urban core reflects various policies rolled out by DCC to encourage city-centre living. Thirdly, they tend not to have an explicit political agenda and are not in tension with DCC's entrepreneurial pro-development agenda. Embedded within the promotion of

‘temporary use’ in Dublin at present is a notion that an ‘alternative’ urban reality is possible. However, as temporary uses are increasingly co-opted into the service of a broader entrepreneurial agenda, the capacity for these interventions to propose real alternatives is significantly diminished. Within the set of policy narratives about vacancy and re-use, we can therefore identify a number of challenges, limitations and contradictions.

On a fundamental level, the policy model does not address the problems posed by gentrification or, increasingly, financialisation in the city. The sidelining of initiatives that have an overtly political agenda – for instance, those that seek to challenge private property rights – has allowed policy-makers to construct a narrative that sees temporary use as compatible with a ‘progressive’ entrepreneurial agenda. Here, temporary uses are refashioned as part of a set of ‘creative’ engagements intended to innovatively transform the city. However, the continued dominance of the property market – which creates the need for alternatives to begin with (see MacLaran and Kelly, 2014) – renders many options for change impossible. Temporary uses have failed to usher in such alternatives, and moreover, remain highly vulnerable to the ravages of the neoliberal city. Out of the seven case studies used by Bresnihan and Byrne (2015), for example, only Block T remains open. Their research suggests that spaces close for two principle reasons. Firstly, they close due to an inability on the part of those involved to pay the rent – or, more accurately, that participants feel that the efforts needed to both sustain this revenue (e.g. fundraising) and the buildings themselves (maintenance) absorbs too much time. Secondly, spaces are shut down or people are evicted by the Gardaí (police force), local authority, or fire officials. Seomra Spraoi, for example, was shut down following a Garda raid and subsequent inspection by the fire service. The Exchange was closed by DCC (who were also the landlord) following local businesses lodging a complaint regarding alleged anti-social behaviour in the vicinity (Provisional University, 2014).

There is a danger that culturally-oriented temporary uses, by accident or by design, are utilised as a means of paving the way for future more financialised approaches to urban transformation, via ‘culture-led’ urban revitalisation projects. The Smithfield Art Tunnel, for example, was evicted because the landlord wanted to redevelop the site, while Mabos was evicted when NAMA (their landlord) sought to redevelop the site. The overwhelming evidence is that when landowners see an opportunity for profitable redevelopment, temporary uses are easily ended. At another extreme, the dominance of exchange values in urban space may have little to no capacity to support the continuation of the types of cultural uses envisioned by DCC. There is little evidence of future planned cultural uses within many of the more high-profile temporary use locations of recent years, including the Smithfield Art Tunnel, The Exchange, and Granby Park. Indeed, the increasing financialisation and globalisation of Dublin’s real estate market in the period since the crash suggest that these problems are becoming more trenchant (Byrne, 2015; O’Callaghan *et al.*, 2015). As Dublin’s property market becomes abstracted from the local context, the danger is that any uses that do not accrue financial value will

be increasingly prohibitive, despite whatever cultural, social, or economic benefit they might bring to the city.

This also poses significant challenges for DCC's 'creative city' agenda. While there is a tendency to glorify 'creative' uses of urban space as engaged and 'playful' notions of city living, the reality for many cultural actors is one of 'getting by' upon existing scarce resources, including the availability of space (Markusen, 2006; Rose, 1984). Temporary uses entail a significant amount of labour time in terms of the physical and social transformation of a space. Notwithstanding the less tangible benefits of temporary projects for those involved (see McArdle and Till, this volume), the viability of democratically inclusive projects within urban space is reliant upon real and discernible outcomes that are visible for prolonged periods of time. There is a real risk that those involved in temporary solutions will become fatigued if their efforts to transform the city are consistently erased by wider market forces. Moreover, the importance of the spaces themselves to the production of these initiatives is often underestimated and it is assumed that they can be reassembled IKEA-style in another location without the loss of anything essential. This poses a significant challenge to the future of the 'creative city' as a policy ideal. An overly prescriptive approach to temporary use may serve to close off both space and social capacity for experimentation by corralling temporary initiatives into a rigid model and institutionalising the idea that the *only* solutions that are possible are *temporary*. As such, there is a risk that the policy model will fail to reproduce the types of activities that it seeks to promote in the first place.

The uncritical promotion of such strategies as a progressive approach to urban transformation may wield an outcome of what Slater (2014) refers to as 'false-choice urbanism', whereby temporary uses, as part of a wider market-led approach, are seen as the most favoured means of achieving a better urban future amid a high-density gentrified urban core. In order for temporary uses to really propose the possibility of alternative cities, there is an urgent need for policy-makers to engage in a much more critical conversation about their limits under the current model. Only by having a frank and open discussion, one that foregoes boosterist agendas in favour of sober reflection, can the temporary city begin to address the challenges facing contemporary urbanism.

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