Debating Temporary Uses for Vacant Urban Sites: Insights for practice from a stakeholder workshop

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Abstract
Temporary land uses have become the focus of much debate within academic and policy circles in recent years. Although the international literature contains numerous case studies of temporary interventions, little attention has been paid to the dynamics of the interactions among different stakeholders. This paper reports on a stakeholder workshop that used a participatory research approach to collectively define the issues facing those interested in the potential of vacant urban sites. The paper outlines the goals, design and evaluation of the workshop and concludes with a discussion of suggested lessons for practice that emerged from the workshop sessions.

INTRODUCTION

Temporary urban uses have become the focus of increased attention from policymakers, residents and other stakeholders across a range of contexts in recent years (Bishop and Williams, 2012; Colomb, 2012; HUD, 2014; Till, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of temporary uses; Haydn & Temel (2006, p. 17), for example, describe them as uses that are "planned from the outset to be impermanent" and "seek to derive unique qualities from the idea of temporality" while more recently Bishop and Williams (2012, p. 5) have defined them as an "intentional phase" within the development cycle. Temporary urban uses are diverse and include pop-up shops, restaurants, and temporary parks; creative activities such as art installations and studios, yarn bombing and seed bombing; and a broad range of other community engagement initiatives.

From an urban practice perspective, temporary use activity has been associated with spontaneous interventions made by artists and community activists on vacant sites or buildings in what might be described as a form of 'interstitial urbanism' (Tonkiss, 2013). While there has been a history of temporary use activity in many cities, such as Berlin, for many decades (Colomb, 2012; Till, 2011), since 2008 within the framework of austerity and weakened land and property markets in north America and Europe, discussions around temporary urban uses have gained significant momentum both within and across cities.

The literature provides numerous case studies of both formal and informal temporary uses on vacant urban sites and, in particular, critiques the role of temporary users in sustaining neoliberal urbanism (Rosol, 2012). However, although participatory research approaches are gaining impetus across the social sciences generally (Cresswell, 2003) there has been limited

attention by researchers to how city officials might engage more directly and pro-actively with those who have no "formal" voice in the planning and development process.

This paper reports on a stakeholder workshop held in Dublin (Ireland) to create a platform for communication and collaboration between different stakeholders interested in temporary urban interventions with a view to collectively defining the issues facing those interested in the potential of vacant urban sites, and thereby informing practice. We outline the goals of the event; the workshop design and evaluation; and the key findings. We conclude by highlighting the key lessons for practice that emerged from the workshop, that have the potential to positively enhance planning practice and research,.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

In most cases, temporary uses tend to be considered outside the normal building cycle (Colomb, 2012); they are seen as a short-term solution until more permanent redevelopment occurs (Tonkiss, 2013). Within the context of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012), temporary uses are attractive because they can perform many roles including maintaining public property at low cost; creating new open spaces within the city that contributes to urban vitality; contributing to economic development (HUD, 2014) and drawing positive attention to underused sites at limited cost to the taxpayer. Colomb (2012) has even suggested in the case of Berlin that temporary uses haves allowed particular sites to be redefined, representing a precondition for permanent redevelopment.

Understanding temporary urban uses as an economic development tool is at the heart of some of the more top-down interventions evident in the literature (Andres, 2013; Wilson et al., 2012) but this is problematical in our opinion because this ignores the wider potential of temporary interventions. Groth and Corijn (2005) in their discussions of the creative use of indeterminate spaces in Berlin, Helsinki and Brussels suggested that more "bottom-up" temporary interventions by informal actors (those with no formal role in the planning and development process) have the capacity to shift the debate about planning and urban politics in contemporary cities and challenge economic development as the over-arching priority. Temporary interventions – have the capacity to diversify urban land use and "shock" citizens out of a familiar urban environment and thus generate debate about the types of cities that they wish to inhabit (see Moore-Cherry, forthcoming). The capacity of these urban sites to contribute to broader understandings of urban sustainability has been acknowledged by Pagano (2013, p. 389) who argues that policymakers "would do better to tolerate a little disorder to make way for the experimentation on which healthy cities thrive". This experimentation may relate to the physical use of particular sites but could also relate to new ways to engage citizens, or particular communities, with their cities.

While the literature contains examples of a range of approaches both top-down and bottom-up (Andres, 2013; Colomb, 2012: Till, 2011), little attention has been paid to the potential of developing 'in-between' spaces where policymakers and grassroots organisations intersect and could

collaboratively develop temporary activities. Based on our review of the literature, it might be expected that engagement among different stakeholders could be limited by competing conceptualisations of the role of temporary uses. This paper discusses a stakeholder workshop held with a range of key stakeholders associated with temporary urban interventions in Dublin that was designed to investigate these issues.

THE TEMPORARY CITY WORKSHOP

Held in October 2014 at University College Dublin (Ireland), a key goal of our workshop was to forge communication among a variety of key stakeholders involved both formally and informally with temporary interventions in Dublin, many of whom had not previously met. The two main objectives of the workshop were to:
1. explore narratives, governance, and opportunities and challenges associated with temporary uses for urban land and buildings;
2. explore types of uses, impacts, and lessons associated with temporary uses for urban land and buildings

Design and implementation

The initial idea for the workshop was influenced by the communicative turn in planning, broadly defined as ""collective decision making with the participation of all those who will be affected by the decision or their representatives [and] decision making by arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality" (Elster, 1998, p. 8). Specifically, we aimed to create a space for participants to engage with each other and through a collaborative process explore the similarity/differences in meanings of temporary uses across the stakeholder groupings. Secondly we hoped to generate a debate and better understanding of the spatial politics at work in shaping the city.

Participants were chosen to represent a diversity of stakeholders actively engaged in temporary interventions in the city and included local authority planners, architects and other officials; business representative from the BID and the Chamber of Commerce; non-profit/grassroots activists who work on temporary interventions; private practitioners e.g. landscape architects; researchers and policy analysts. An initial cohort of participants was identified based on personal knowledge and a desk-based review of temporary activity involving vacant sites in Dublin. These were invited to the event and asked, in a snowballing method, to identify possible additional participants to be invited. From a target of 30 stakeholders that were contacted, 24 (80%) agreed and 22 participated on the day: 7 researchers/policy analysts; 4 local authority planners and officials; 6 non-profit/grassroots activists and 5 business representatives.

The high positive response to our invitation was expected given the purposive approach to selecting invitees; all had either previously publicly indicated interest in temporary interventions or were keen to network with other participants. In order to ensure added value for the participating stakeholders, we invited a high-profile keynote speaker Prof Peter Bishop, co-

author of *The Temporary City* (Routledge, 2012), to open the workshop with a
lecture and to participate in the workshop. The inclusion of a keynote lecture
by a renowned and well respected practitioner-academic turned out to be a
critical tool in incentivising attendance:

> '… a fantastic and thought provoking day yesterday in UCD. I thoroughly
> enjoyed Professor Peter Bishop's lecture and also found the workshop
> sessions very exciting'. (Local Authority official, feedback comment)

Our methodology was based on purposively gathering a particular set
of stakeholders together and discussing clearly-defined questions linked to
our two main objectives. However, the mechanics of the workshop sessions
were experimental in nature. One of the purposes of the workshop was to
generate discussion and debate across a broad range of interested parties
that rarely have a chance to interact outside of the often accepted and
unchallenged formal planning and power structures. To do this the format of
the workshop combined small-group and whole-group discussions focused on
key questions; a sub-set of guiding questions (See Appendix 1) were provided
for the discussion.

Session 1 (in the morning) aimed to explore narratives, governance,
and opportunities and challenges associated with temporary uses for urban
land and buildings. While broadly pitched, it aimed to generate discussion on
whether temporary interventions offer, and represent, something new in terms
of urban development or whether they are "stop-gap" measures being used to
sustain "business-as-usual" within the context of austerity urbanism. In
advance of the session, the large group was sub-divided into three discussion
groups deliberately comprising a mix of people including at least one
participant from each of the broad stakeholder groups: researchers/policy
analysts; public sector stakeholders; grassroots activists; business interests
and practitioners. The expectation was that any pre-conceived ideas and
assumptions around the discussion topic would be challenged within the
group discussions.

Session 2 (in the afternoon) focused on exploring types of uses,
impacts, and lessons associated with temporary uses for urban land and
buildings. Here we were attempting to uncover differences and similarities in
terms of the conceptualisation and understanding of temporary urban
interventions. In contrast to the morning session, stakeholders were
deliberately grouped by similarity of background. Our intention was to
generate representative viewpoints on the discussion questions based on the
different perspectives of each group to potentially provide a basis for
comparison and contrast, and identify possible tensions between those
producing space in different ways.

During the small-group sessions, a graduate student scribe engaged in
a participant observation technique known as "participant as observer"
(Kawulich, 2005). While the graduate students had a declared interest in the
topic under discussion and could involve themselves in the debate, their main
role was to observe the interactions and take detailed notes on the intra-group
discussions in order to document the dynamics (level of concensus/dispute) at
work within each group even to the extent of recording the body language of
different participants to give a sense of the power play at work. These

observations were particularly important during session 1 where the groupings were deliberately organized to generate debate. When the larger group was reconvened after the morning and afternoon small-group sessions, the discussions were recorded on a dictaphone and later transcribed for analysis.

Evaluating the workshop

As well as attempting to address our two main objectives, the workshop format proved exceptionally useful in bridging the research-practice divide and in challenging the traditional interactions that normally underpin the planning process and public engagement with planning. At the end of the workshop day and in the days following the event, we asked participants to send us their thoughts and reactions to the event. The concensus that emerged was that while we did not necessarily disrupt power relations in an overt way, the workshop helped to undermine the 'gatekeeping' that often takes place within the city by providing a constructive platform for direct and frank engagement between different stakeholders including urban activists on the one hand, and high-level local authority officers on the other.

As such, the workshop provided an interactive space within which a range of stakeholders participated as equals. By deliberately mixing the stakeholder groups in the morning session, participants had the opportunity to sit in a comfortable, non-confrontational environment exchanging opinions and ideas. While experimental in design, given that we did not know if this 'mixing' would produce effective and meaningful engagement or whether different stakeholders would simply talk past one another, this way of generating debate was, in fact, very useful for both the participants and the organisers. For the stakeholders, it provided a rare and valuable opportunity to engage with different people outside formal strictures as reflected in participant comments after the event:

> 'I really enjoyed the discussions, it was a very unusual 'vertical integration' of planners, designers, users and observers and…brought up points for (hopefully) further discussion'. (Urban activist A, feedback comment).

> 'Being at the workshop you held was enlightening in many ways. It was incredibly empowering to be able to speak with the many interesting people you had in attendance. I was also really delighted with the first group I was thrown in with as they all had very different views to me. It rattled me a bit and took me out of my comfort zone and was a definite inspiration'. (Urban activist B, feedback comment).

The success of the workshop was illustrated in the expectation from participants that a practical output would emerge, resulting in our agreement to produce an overview report with recommendations for practice.

Workshop findings

Participatory research is becoming increasingly important across the social sciences as a critical approach to studying the social world (Kitchin, 2001; Cresswell, 2003). At its core, participatory research approaches – such as our workshop – engage with the people most directly involved in a particular issue with the goal of harnessing critical reflection to promote positive change, and thus has particular resonance for planning practice and research.

Throughout our workshop discussions, it became increasingly clear that there is significant potential for both local authority officials and other interested stakeholders to engage more pro-actively and openly with one another around the issue of temporary urban uses in Dublin. However, for this to happen it requires some changes in terms of how planning is practiced and a better understanding of the micro-dynamics and micro-practices at work in the city (Healey, 2003). From our perspective, the results of the morning session forced us to reflect on our own assumptions about the perspectives of different stakeholders. Unexpectedly, based on the feedback to the larger group at the end of the small-group discussions and the results of the participant observation exercise, there was less conflict and disagreement during the small-group stakeholder discussions than we had initially expected. Some areas of mutual concern were identified and discussed in depth, in particular, the inflexibility of the planning system in relation to temporary uses. One planner stated:

> 'I think as a planner and I would say you probably mostly want to, of course mostly you want to encourage these things, tick all your objectives but really what you are doing is advising people ***how to stay out of the statutory planning system*** because it's not going to help you at all. And if you can call it an event, if you can call it a temporary event, even if it's a long term temporary call it temporary! A temporary event! … Because really once you start to engage in the planning system, in licensing with health and safety, with fire regs, you know, you are into a whole other ballgame. ***In many cases planners are trying to work with you in sort of this grey area***'. (Local authority planner, feedback to large group, emphasis added).

In the context of Bishop & Williams' (2012, p. 215) contention that the 'biggest barriers [to temporary use] sits with city government … whose historical role has been so strongly associated with the process of control', the local authority planner quote is insightful in illustrating the conflicts that temporary use activity generates for city officials themselves. For the stakeholders participating in our workshop, the articulation of this conflict opened an unanticipated line of discussion around how planners and activists could better work together to meet mutual objectives.

Although not one of our two main objectives, a clear outcome of the workshop was its importance for networking. Many of the participants were either not aware of others within the city with a similar interest in temporary uses or would never have normally had the opportunity to engage with them. At the end of the workshop, there were repeated requests for us to circulate the list of participants and contact details and a desire to continue the discussion in a variety of ways:

'It was a really good day's work … There were a few people there that I am going to follow up with'. (Academic researcher, feedback comment).

"As your workshop was the first one I attended within my Masters degree it set off a chain of events and gave me an idea of the who's who in Dublin …. it informed a lot of my start off research and I think my thesis is going to focus on the legacy of temporary events'. (Grassroots activist, feedback comment)

While not overtly designed as a participatory action research project, the outcome clearly fits with the philosophy of action-oriented participatory research where the researchers take on facilitative roles and the validity of the approach is based on 'the extent to which the process of research itself develops the skills, knowledge and capacities of participants to use the results themselves to tackle problems that they have identified' (Flowerdew and Martin, 2005, p. 147). Our afternoon workshop session that grouped stakeholders together by background, while perhaps not as enlightening for the participants, provided the research team with very clear perspectives on how temporary uses are understood and interpreted by different types of stakeholders.

LESSONS FOR PRACTICE

In response to the time invested by the participants and their active engagement during the workshop, we agreed to produce a briefing document after the workshop summarizing the key points of each session and an overall analysis of the discussion. This was framed around seven main lessons for practice:

1. Local authorities should consider appropriate points in the planning system at which temporary uses and interventions might be ***built into the development process***.
2. Local authorities should establish a database of successful temporary uses.
3. ***"Zones of tolerance"*** within the city should be considered where temporary uses could be facilitated with limited need for formal regulation.
4. If interested in harnessing the potential opportunities of temporary urban interventions, local authorities needs to ***make clear public statements of support of temporary uses*** and adopt the role of broker in both connecting and negotiating with different stakeholders to facilitate temporary interventions.
5. Local authorities need to establish a designated single contact point at its offices for anyone interested in becoming involved in a temporary intervention. These latter two points are consistent with findings elsewhere that more consistent, strategic approaches need to be taken by local authorities to support temporary use (Angus, 2015).
6. Temporary users should be more aware that projects are often brought to fruition through more informal arrangements. ***Asking for help from the local authority is critical***.

7. A simple guidance document for temporary users needs to be developed to share **the learning from previous temporary interventions**. This might be a very simple guidance document, outlining the general process and highlighting that each project may have different circumstances.

While at first glance these lessons seem to speak to the need for changes to formal institutionalised planning practice, there is clearly interconnecteness with and implications for other stakeholders that must be acknowledged. For example, if lesson 3 was to be acted upon, it could have significant consequences for landowners and businesses in particular districts. By delimiting certain spaces for the temporary, would limits be imposed on the types of use that would be permissible or could it preclude temporary usage in other areas? Similarly, lesson 7 requires that those at the grassroots level see the bigger context within which particular projects are brought to fruition and actively connect with other groups and agents to ensure that there is a learning legacy.

Narratives of temporary urban interventions

In the international literature, there is a clear concensus around the validity and potential of temporary urban uses. These can range from macro-advantages for the city as a whole, including enhacned understandings of creativity and the generation of new economic activity, albeit short-term perhaps, to more micro-advantages for local communities such as preventing occurrences of anti-social behaviour. Based on our workshop discussions, temporary urban interventions in Dublin were viewed positively in principle but a significant gap was evident between the theory of temporary uses as a "good thing" and the conditions in place to support their emergence. While the local authority participants were clearly supportive of the idea of temporary uses, the grassroots/activist participants displayed some surprise at this perspective and argued for a much clearer statement by the local authority to this effect (lesson 4).

While no participants directly addressed the question of whether temporary uses represent part of a new, more sustainable approach to urban growth and change, there was some debate around the definition of temporary. There was a clear distinction made between projects that are about short-term innovation and others that are more overtly "anti-establishment", which reflects how temporary urban uses are complex and varied. A very clear sense also emerged from the discussions that temporary urban uses should be understood as a part of the urban development cycle and process (lesson 1); while this might suggest that they should be strategically and formally incorporated in the planning system and process, this raises the concern, however, that they then become stifled by the very regulatory mechanisms that planners are helping other stakeholders to avoid.

There was also consensus among the participants that a very delicate balance needs to be struck between supporting temporary urban interventions and recognising the informality that often underpins their very success (lesson 6).

Impacts and lessons associated with temporary urban interventions

While the insights that emerged through this participatory engagement between a range of stakeholders, provides a potentially useful menu of actions for officials and those engaged in temporary urban interventions, many of the suggestions are not new. For example, Bishop and Williams (2012, p. 216) recognized the need for planning to be more flexible and suggested that the 'underlying condition that seems to be most conducive to temporary activity is freedom'. Andres (2013, p. 763) likewise suggested that weak planning – of which the creation of zones of tolerance (lesson 6) might be a part – 'can enable flexible, innovative and bottom-up approaches which are not exclusively related to monetary values'. A key lesson from our workshop is that temporary uses require responsive, flexible, open and holistic planning environments (lessons 2 and 5) but that the responsibility for achieving successful interventions lies with both officials and other stakeholders.

The concensus among grassroots activists/temporary space users during our workshop was that local authorities could be more pro-actively engaged with other stakeholders. While a high-ranking local official argued that for temporary interventions to be successfully initiated "part of the skill [is] knowing when to ask" for help, there are perceived barriers to doing this. The constraints of the current planning system appear to be a restriction on stakeholders. As became evident in our workshop discussions, planners working within the local authorities in Dublin are frustrated and trying to *work around* the planning system to facilitate diverse urban uses. This is in direct contrast to other contexts where planners have argued that facilitating meanwhile uses is outside their formal remit (Angus, 2015). Yet even in Dublin where there is a generally positive disposition to meanwhile or temporary uses, the local authority could more actively broker temporary use agreements, develop a database of successful temporary use activities, identify zones of tolerance, create advisory contact points for potential temporary users or collaboratively develop simple guidance material (lessons 2,3, 4 and 7).

Although the literature argues that city officials need to create the conditions that might support temporary urban use, our workshop uncovered a systemic reluctance by urban activists to engage with the city. One participant described their perception that:

> 'there is like an impregnable force between you and people that can actually help you through the kind of grey area that you are talking about'. (Urban activist A, group discussion).

However, the most senior local authority participant at the workshop argued that:

> 'there should be more of a demand from people to ask the local authority to help enable, you know, to create some kind of a platform to enable these initiatives but **we by and large don't get asked in a coordinated structured way** whereas if there was a movement to ask the local

authority to help facilitate well that will be good and it's a perfect time to ask that question because all local authorities are hearing at the moment is "Well let's cut that service" and "Let's cut that service" instead of people saying "Actually this is something that local authorities could do"'. (High-ranking local authority official, group discussion).

This gap in perception has not been identified and discussed to any great extent in the literature but it is a significant part of the dynamic shaping the debate in Dublin. The identification and discussion of these micro-dynamics by the stakeholders themselves was a crucial finding of the workshop and highlights an opportunity for developing enhanced and more productive interactions in the future.

CONCLUSION

Temporary uses for vacant urban sites have become a growing trend in cities across North America and Europe, and have attracted the attention of a variety of stakeholders in recent years. Simultaneously, they have been conceptualised as a 'stopgap' solution in a depressed property market with high vacancy rates, and, on the other hand, 'an early point on a pathway heading towards the widespread understanding and application of meanwhile use within planning and urban development practice and thought' (Angus, 2015, p. 283). While much of the literature and debate on temporary uses within cities positions the researcher as intermediary between planning officials/practitioners and grassroots activists, we wished to explore how a participatory research approach - involving "collaborative research activities" (Bergold and Thomas, 2012) framed through a stakeholder workshop - could position participants to collectively define the potential of temporary urban interventions and uncover the micro-politics at work in the city. At relatively low cost financially and in terms of the time invested, the workshop aimed to address a significant void in the literature in terms of bringing the voices of policy makers, practitioners, activists and researchers together to identify issues of potential concern with the overall goal of producing insights to enhance planning practice.

Through dialogue a diversity of narratives associated with temporary urbanism in Dublin were uncovered yet while multiple perspectives on temporary urban activity were evident, there was far less conflict between stakeholder perspectives than initially anticipated. A better understanding across the stakeholder groupings of mutual frustrations and potential challenges was generated in the workshop sessions that ultimately produced seven key lessons for practice. In the spirit of participatory research, if addressed these could form the basis for developing more positive and collaborative future working relationships. While focused on the specific context of Dublin, the lessons challenge more broadly our understanding of planning as system and practice and the power relationships that underpin social practices within the city. In order for planners to facilitate temporary uses, they are actively working with temporary users on the margins of regulations and outside the formal strictures of the planning system. Given the planning context in Dublin bears many similarities to that in the UK, it is likely

that these types of informalities and micro-practices are also at work in other contexts and deserve further exploration.

Unexpectedly, the workshop also facilitated the emergence of a network within the city, *Connect the Dots,* that aims 'to explore, pilot, and test a series of creative/experimental interventions to help those interested in activating vacant space to learn about each other and from each other – to connect, pool knowledge, share resources, and collaborate' [1]. Two of its three co-founders participated in the workshop and have taken up the challenge of building institutional memory around temporary interventions and recognizing the importance of network building. Based on their experiences during our workshop, they have replicated this format to generate debate and new ideas:

> 'It was a definite inspiration. I really wanted to recreate that in the first Connect the Dots [meeting], purposefully placing people together with very different perspectives and motivations'. (Grassroots activist, feedback comment).

The paper has highlighted the value of participatory research approaches – such as this workshop - for researchers in generating data, in this case on the conceptualisation of temporary urban interventions and their spatial politics, but has also illustrated the importance of this type of workshop for building capacity, competency and generating important lessons for practice.

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APPENDIX 1 – WORKSHOP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Session 1: Exploring narratives, governance, and opportunities and challenges associated with temporary uses for urban land and buildings

Guiding questions:
1. What is the nature of temporary when it comes to vacant or underutilized land and buildings, in cities generally and in Dublin specifically, and does temporary use represent a 'stop-gap' reaction to broader forces affecting cities or is it a new development paradigm?
2. How do temporary interventions challenge traditional 'planning' approaches / paradigms and planners?
3. How can planners use the idea of the 'temporary' to fulfill their objectives?
4. How does a focus on the temporary or temporary interventions open up new spaces of participation / 'bottom-up' engagement?

Session 2: Exploring types of uses, impacts, and lessons associated with temporary uses for urban land and buildings

Guiding questions:
1. What are the main kinds of temporary uses?
2. How can we conceptualise their difference (productive/consumption; for-profit/not-for-profit; economic/cultural; bottom-up/top-down)?
3. What sorts of impacts – both positive and negative - do these have, directly and/or indirectly?
4. Are there lessons to be learnt about more sustainably developing vacant urban sites through a focus on temporary interventions?