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After Temporary

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Entanglements of Temporary Urbanism:

for a critical, longitudinal approach

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Since the mid-2000s, practices as diverse as guerrilla gardening, pop-up shops, political occupations and artistic performances have been brought together and celebrated as ways of collectively appropriating and transforming vacant spaces in cities. Particularly after the 2008 global financial crisis, which affected urban development in many European cities, temporary uses have proliferated, becoming established as a seductive, and increasingly mainstream, mode of urban practice (Ferreri, 2015). This emergence is steeped in long-standing temporary experimentations in art, architecture and activism, which materialised in practices of reclaiming vacant buildings and land, often in areas of politicised and contentious developments. Vacant spaces are social and cultural constructions. Wastelands and empty properties have been aptly described as ‘the morning after of our romance of the new’ (Stam and Shohat, 2002: 41): it is in the space of ambivalence and slight discomfort that vacancy is inextricably linked to a culture of incessant urban creative destruction and projection toward a newer, better, future. In the United Kingdom, this reflection became increasingly clear in the first wave of nation-wide institutional support for projects of temporary use during the brief recession that followed the global credit crisis of 2008. At a moment of crisis for a traditional consumption-led urban model, the re-appropriation of vacant spaces, albeit on a temporary basis, was explicitly about superposing positive images of occupation and vibrancy over negative imaginaries of abandonment, vacancy and decay.

The central assumption shared by proponents of temporary urbanism is that it is better to use vacant spaces, even if temporarily, than to let them lay empty. This seductive proposition is only apparently straightforward: to the immersed observer, the discourse of temporary urbanism had emerged through time- and space-specific translations of multiple, and at times contradictory and contested, rationales and value judgements. Approaching the discourse of temporary urbanism requires understanding how assumptions and arguments are mobilised through competing position-takings and cross-pollination across a range of urban practices, from architecture to visual and performative art, to marketing and urban design. It is important to note, following Bourdieu, that the ‘field of position-takings’ of temporary urbanism does not arise from an overarching coherence in the position of participants or from an underlying consensus: the field is itself ‘the product and prize of a permanent conflict’ over the production of meanings, and participation in this struggle becomes the main criterion for belonging to it (Bourdieu, 1993). The discourse of temporary urbanism can be seen as relationally constituted through processes of establishing semi-stable meanings and narratives, which are contingent and produced through time and space-specific power relations, both in the creation of discursive formations and in the struggle between them (Colomb, 2012). It is in this sense that the cross-disciplinary field of temporary urbanism should be understood as *entangled*: in

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terms of distinctive disciplines and urban and cultural practices, in terms of the actors that willingly or unwillingly became entangled in its emergence, in terms of the spaces and institutions it reached, permeated and transformed, and in its relation to broader imaginaries and the settling of new forms of understanding and making sense of cities.

In post-recession London, architects took a place of prominence in the development and mainstreaming of the discourse of temporary urban reuse. An example of this was the public talk organised at the main venue of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) on 28 June 2011 and titled 'A Flourish of Meanwhiles'.

Such a story shows the prefigurative potential of reclaimed vacant spaces as the exercise of direct use and the power to affect change in the city, in contrast to commodification and neoliberal dynamics of temporal and spatial enclosure.

The introductory remarks described London as a city in flux and urged urban practitioners to embrace change, and to integrate the proliferation of terms such as pop-up, interim, temporary and meanwhile into

architectural practice and planning policy. Most presentations appeared to be addressed at local government's planning officers, developers and investors, mentioning figures such as the '43 million lost revenue for dilapidated and underused spaces in Central London' and explaining how temporary uses could mitigate the risks of rejection of planning applications by developers to test out aspects of their place-making strategies. In fact, it was just as much about translating the official narrative into a script for urban professionals. This was consistent with RIBA's previous role in promoting temporary uses through a design competition titled *Forgotten Spaces* (2010 and 2011), run in collaboration with Design for London and aimed at architects and social entrepreneurs asked 'to nominate a forgotten space in Greater London and conceive an imaginative and inspiring proposal for its regeneration'¹. In this context, the event could be seen as playing an important role in setting a script and a set of tasks for young urban entrepreneurs, who were to map 'forgotten spaces', use their skills to extract existing knowledges about places and draw on their social and professional networks to create short-term spatial interventions. It is worth mentioning, too, that in the years immediately after the 2008 crash, many architects found themselves looking for work as large scale development stalled and large studios and firms were downsizing.

Entrepreneurship as a way of rethinking the urban economy based on voluntary civic society organising was the framing for this script. The event explicitly celebrated the ability of 'civic entrepreneurs' to draw on existing local resources, both in the form of participants and volunteers and in the form of monetary and in-kind support, for running short-term spaces (NESTA and CABE, 2011). In this respect, the event was important politically to re-position discourses of temporary uses in light of urban and social policies promoted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrats Coalition Government (2010–2015), which involved a combination of drastic reduction of government spending and a promotion of voluntarism and civic enterprise under the slogan 'Big Society, Small Government'. The ambiguity of this combination has been defined by critical geographer David Featherstone et al. as a form of 'austerity localism' (Featherstone et al, 2012). In this context, the definition of civic economy centred on the idea of 'unlocking dormant assets' through 'collaboratively "mapping" the assets of places (both physical spaces and hidden talents and learning dreams)' (NESTA and CABE, 2011). The idea of dormant social and physical assets needing to be unlocked or activated by urban professionals was also central to the presentation by architect Klaus Overmeyer, one of the editors of the seminal temporary use book *Urban Pioneers* (2007) and the person commonly referred to by many London architects and planners as 'the pop-up guru'. Similarly, architect Tobias Govert from the

¹ *Forgotten Spaces London 2011*, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/competitions/-forgotten-spaces-london-2011/8610891.article>

public agency Design for London argued that the 'activation of community spaces' through temporary projects were the true incarnation of the 'Big Society'. As 'best practice' example, he mentioned the Dalston Curve, a pop-up garden in a former car park and dumping ground in the North London Borough of Hackney².

The origin of the Dalston Garden is more interesting and complex than this representation would let on. The presentation conveniently glossed over the fact that the initial proposal for reusing the site had originated in the voluntary work of local community group Open Dalston, in collaboration with architects muf and J & L Gibbons. After months of organising, the proposal by the community group finally came to life when the architectural platform EXYZT used the site for an installation as part of the Barbican's *Radical Nature* exhibition (Jun-Oct 2009). Rejecting the idea that the installation would be dismantled at the end of the summer, Open Dalston obtained a 2-year small grant that enabled them to remain on site and established a social enterprise for gardening and education, the Dalston Eastern Curve Garden. The reclaimed garden started functioning as volunteer-run community garden, a cafe, children playing area and a workshop space. The site, partly owned by the local municipal government and partly by the owners of a nearby shopping mall, has been continuously under threat of demolition to make space for a paved alley to connect the road with a new planned residential redevelopment. Through campaigns and everyday practices, the organisers reclaimed their presence, and rephrased the terms of its representation. In an interview in 2015, coordinators Marie Murray and Brian Cumming adamantly refused the label of temporary space and described feeling a 'pop up disquiet' whenever they observed how society's taste for exciting pop-up events erases the value and possibility for developing ordinary, everyday relationships and a growing community of learning and caring (Ferreri, 2014).

Such a story shows the prefigurative potential of reclaimed vacant spaces as the exercise of direct use and the power to affect change in the city, in contrast to commodification and neoliberal dynamics of temporal and spatial enclosure. But the precarious framing of such occupation compels a problematization of the idea that direct use is intrinsically emancipatory and alternative to existing social, economic and power relations. Even in the case of critical and declaredly political projects of reuse, there remains a need to address their legacy, material and immaterial, beyond the short-termness to which they are relegated, and the ways in which collective use is negotiated, organised and sustained over time, as well as the 'tensions they establish with their contexts and the forces which attempt to direct them' (Barry-Slater and Iles, 2009: 23). As recently written by planning scholar Ali Madanipour in the introduction to *Cities in Time. Temporary Urbanism and the Future of the City*, the key question to ask is 'whether [temporary urbanism] is an interim fashion aimed at filling short-term economic gaps or a reflection of structural change and an instrument of transformation with long-term impact' (2017: 1). Posing this question is fundamental given that temporariness in city making – or rather, a specific construct of temporariness – is here to stay, both as a practice and as an object of knowledge and research (Ferreri, 2019). The issue is how to disentangle convenient dominant narratives and practices from genuine counter-narratives and projects. At a time when imaginaries and values of temporary urbanism have become naturalised in the language of urban policy makers and planners, an effort needs to be made to maintain a critical understanding of temporary urbanism as a contested field; I would argue that such a project requires a situated, in-depth and longitudinal approach. Ten years after the beginning of austerity, the 'temporary' Dalston Eastern Curve Garden continues to exist. Still run by volunteers, it is an open green space where everyone is welcome, but that no-one, under no circumstance, can enclose for a private event, even if temporarily. In the densely built and rapidly gentrifying Dalston, I would venture to call this an example of a counter-temporary opening.

² Goeverst was referencing an article on the Dalston Curve garden which had appeared the *London Evening Standard* article 'The big society begins in Dalston' (30th June 2010).

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