

From Practice to Policy: Temporary Uses for a Long Term City Re-make

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Keywords: Informal practices, urban policies, temporary uses, urban regeneration, vacant city.

Abstract: Contemporary urbanism and city planning are suffering from a kind of rigidity, progressively grown with their institutionalization, that could not let them take innovative contributions from the informal side. The blossom of different latitudes of spontaneous actions aimed at urban requalification poses the chance to critically question their significances and innovation values today.

These practices are showing their ability to understand the wide vacant dimension of our fragmented society and are becoming the messenger of new needs, aspirations and solutions, but they are also asking to let them act through policies able to experiment out of the narrow prescriptions of city regulations.

Facing the unprecedented demand of a perimeter of action by informal initiatives, what urban planning should do today is to provide the city with the legal conditions and cultural and economic resources not to be braked but, if anything, always to be ready and reactive on the trajectory of complexity and processuality.

The paper critically examines how spontaneous initiatives, with their temporal and spatial fluctuations, can produce multivalent outcomes and approaches able to display their effectiveness in the long-term re-make of the city, making a compelling argument for city planning to incorporate them as part of the urban development process.

1. Introduction

The explosive interaction between the crisis of the metropolitan footprint and the financial protocols of development requires to review urban planning paradigms no longer in terms of growth, accumulation of consumption, but by designing and regulating contraction, adaptation and quality. In the re-assembling city – the “shrinking city” (Oswalt, 2005) – the solutions demand a creative effort of resources and integration of actions, producing resilient, adaptive and fluid settlement systems.

The current practice of urban redevelopment, in the phase preceding the economic-financial recession that hit the real estate market since 2007, especially in European countries, has manifested itself preferentially according to a dual method: assimilation or isolation (Marzot, Righetti, 2013). The first, whose origins date back to the early manifestations of redistribution in the territory of

productive activities, started from the second half of the 1970s, recognizes in the abandoned areas the opportunity to operate in continuity with the existing city and the related practices of use. It is the model systematically experienced in the Barcelona Olympic, in the post-unitary reconstruction program of Berlin and in the metropolitan consolidation of Paris. The second one, deriving from the extension of the markets, whose effects are visible from the first half of the 1990s, makes a precise selection of the existing opportunities, privileging those contexts which, due to a wide transformability and intermodal accessibility, lend themselves better to insert the host cities within international urban networks of variable configuration. Emblematic in this research direction are the experiences gained in Lille, Rotterdam and London.

Both the circumstances, and the relative modalities, have been characterized by conditions of economic growth, ease of access to credit, prospect of stability of the financial markets and, above all, high mobility of goods, resources, services and people in the territory in an open logic of cross-borders and urban fractures. It is precisely these assumptions that have failed in the last ten years, when most projects were put on hold, planning goals had to be drastically reduced and vacancy rates of the existing fabric rose considerably.

The changed context requires a general updating of the intervention policies on the city and entails a progressive and general rethinking of the methods and times of urban transformation compared to the models consolidated during the previous decades. In particular, the phenomenon involves an in-depth reflection on the actuality of the redevelopment strategies, at the various intervention scales, and on the definition of the corresponding implementation methods, in order to adapt them to the problems posed by the current situation.

The landscapes and spaces of the shrinking cities, having lost the original functional vocation and the corresponding urban role, legitimized by the plan before and then de-legitimized by the crisis, could, then, be lent to a complete experimentation, both in forms and in behaviors.

The theme of temporary uses is fully part of this perspective, with the aim of contributing to the reactivation of the existing unused heritage, of large dimensions and of small dimensions, as a triggering factor for the enhancement process of the areas to be redeveloped, where the meaning of "value" is fully inherent to the different aspects of civil cohabitation and not limited to the economic component alone.

By analyzing the case study of the NDSM-werf of Amsterdam, in which city planning have succeeded in incorporating temporary uses as part of the urban development process, the paper critically examines how spontaneous initiatives, aimed at reactivating abandoned areas and buildings, can produce multivalent outcomes and approaches able to display their effectiveness in the long-term city re-make.

The paper is born with the intent of revising and systematizing the information acquired on the issue of temporary uses during the first part of the PhD project. For this reason it is intended "incomplete" in terms of methodology and results because considered as a small part of a wider research, still open to new external contributions and further speculation.

2. Vacancy as a resource

Economic crises, financial market instability, de-industrialization, political changes have lead to the collapse of the former intended use of buildings and urban areas and even when there are not new programs and reuse projects, then there is a "time gap". It is in this "time in between" of old and new use, that it is possible to experience projects and activities that can offer new scenarios for urban regeneration (Inti, Cantaluppi, Persichino, 2014).

A careful and closer look to many vacant lots, that have not yet a definitive new use, shows us how, in the absence of real estate development, many areas have become a testing ground for different populations, new forms of art, as well as the place to start-up for associations related to social projects such as spaces for events, or entertaining, gardening, informal markets, temporary housing and more. The uncertainty and openness of these places has catalyzed new forms of cities, inspired temporary activities and projects, and has allowed the initiation of self-organized informal economies and new services to local contexts.

The blossom of these different latitudes of spontaneous actions aimed at urban requalification, as well as the “old” demand of counter-culture and activism, which has traditionally played an important role in the urban voids’ reactivation process, pose the chance to critically question their significances and innovation values today. These practices, in fact, showing their ability to understand the wide vacant dimension of our cities, are becoming the messenger of new needs, aspirations and solutions. So, while strategic planning finds itself engaged in an endless attempt to bring order into the chaos of the city (which however is constantly changing), informality becomes a heuristic zone able to understand emergent practices, narratives and other forms of understanding and social formats in the making (Oswalt, 2005), whose scope of action is often marked by a stream of small scale reactive maneuvers (Nemeth, 2013).

As Arieff argues, in our increasingly complex urban world “no single master plan can anticipate the evolving and varied needs of an increasingly diverse population or achieve the resiliency, responsiveness and flexibility that shorter-term, experimental endeavors can” (Arieff, 2011). Indeed, the predominating capitalist development models will always be characterized by boom/bust, decline/growth cycles. What Harvey calls the “spatial fix,” or the fixing of capital to a particular place, is never absolute or permanent (Harvey, 1996).

Temporary use has come a long way from informal activities, advocating not only for alternative settings of politics and social life but aiming to pinpoint the lack of sensitivity of top-down planning practice towards ordinary and everyday life. Referring to temporary activation of vacant or underused land or buildings with no immediate development demand, they take from the informal side not only the spaces in which they are located, but, above all, the forms and operating methods in which they are declined.

Born in the pause between the state of current abandonment and the expectation of conversion projects, temporary uses offer the opportunity for experimentation, potentially providing an understanding of local ideas and revealing the possibilities for the area in which they are established. Empty spaces thus become real laboratories to observe the tactics of self-organization and urban reserves to test the collective dreams of the post-capitalist city, thanks to their nature of resistance to economic pressures and speculations (Inti, Cantaluppi, Persichino, 2012).

The phenomenon of “new” groups appropriating buildings and urban spaces has been largely addressed by the cultural and semiotic dimension which finds its main literature in Raban’s *Soft City* (1974), Zukin’s *Loft Living* (1982) and Gottdiener’s *Theming of America* (1997). In parallel, the main investigation of informal urban development takes up the traditional method of works published in the 1960s and 1970s and where the means of an analysis and conceptualization of the real-life city served as a valuable impulse for a renewal of the urban planning debate. “The dead and life of great American cities” by Jane Jacobs (1961), “Learning from Las Vegas” by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Izenour (1972), “Collage City” by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter (1978), or, published that same year, “Delirious New York” by Rem Koolhaas, all of these very different studies are based on the examination of unplanned and unconscious processes, of aspects of urban development that went unnoticed, or marginalized and whose potential for future planning practices has opened up.

In Berlin, Philipp Misselwitz, Philipp Oswalt and Klaus Overmeyer, the initiators of the Urban Catalyst research and development project, have deeply explored the potential of temporary uses in various collaborations. They argue that while the combined effect of de-industrialisation, flexible production, “just-in-time” logistics which require less storage areas, demographic change and shrinkage of public institutions, such as school, army and hospitals, leaves increasingly large areas of inner city land vacant, at the same time there is a great demand for affordable space for cultural initiatives and start-ups, opening a large-scale structural opportunity for creative temporary uses (Misselwitz, Oswalt Overmeyer, 2013).

Nonetheless, the common interest of real-estate owners and users, or “urban pioneers” exploring the new potential of spaces, is not always easy to find. The process requires mediators and a clear supportive role of the public authorities. In a lack of direct investment resources, public authorities can “initiate and mediate processes” by, for example, assisting in locating sites, relaxing licensing procedures, relinquishing a site on favourable terms, or giving financial advice (Overmeyer, 2007).

In Vienna, Haydn and Temel emphasize the critical character of temporary uses, linked to activism and do-it-yourself-mentality of city residents. In a clear distinction to the pragmatic and economic North American approach, the European “temporary use” should be seen as a tool to ensure diversity and alternative space provision.

In Helsinki, Lehtovuori and Ruoppila argued that vacant spaces available for various temporary uses are a condition for cultural renewal in cities. In Helsinki’s early 2000s context of relatively regulated urban development process combined with continued high demand in space, the slow planning process seemed to not open opportunities for temporary uses (Lehtovuori and Ruoppila, 2017). During the last decade, however, public authorities’ attitudes towards temporary uses have changed markedly. Temporary uses and art programmes have become an integral part of several large city-led development projects, and a recognised resource for Helsinki economic development policy towards more diverse creative and service-based economy.

There are several good reasons why the interest towards temporary uses has intensified recently, as reported by Bishop and Williams in their description of “temporary urbanism” (Bishop and Williams, 2012). The current economic development produces vacancies and creates demand for alternative, adaptive strategies that temporary uses can provide. The financial crisis has undermined faith in perpetual growth, which has decelerated private investment, but has had an effect also on public spending, consequently cutting investments in urban development. Hence, the supply is great for temporary users who tend to select those sites that are of little interest to property investors at a given time.

“Urban planners need to recognize that this enthusiasm is not incidental but represents an appreciation of experimentation and a willingness to ‘see what happens’ that is perhaps the spirit of our time. When planners and policy makers start to experiment as well, this could represent a powerful mechanism to retune our cities for whatever lies ahead” (Bishop and Williams, 2012).

3. Governing the unplanned

Cities are in a state of flux, caused, by such forces as globalisation, population growth, increasing multiculturalism and advancing technology (Bauman, 2012). Within this context, activities are changing faster than the physical environment, reducing the power of typical urban design

instruments and providing (physical, social, economical and political) gaps for temporary uses to flourish.

As Bauman asserts, “policies change before draft strategies become adopted documents, chief executives hop onto the next job, or economic conditions alter almost before the ink on the masterplan is dry” (Bauman, 2012).

With informal processes for the most part prevailing over formal ones, what looks at first like a crisis of planning turns out to be a process in which planning becomes more complex.

Facing the unprecedented demand of a perimeter of action by informal and spontaneous initiatives, what urban planning should do today is to provide the city with the legal conditions and cultural and economic resources not to brake them but, if anything, always to let them be ready and reactive on the trajectory of complexity and processuality. The “escape from the law” of parts of the city represents the attempt to innovatively give a new legal context of reference to urban practices and policies that in the more traditional experimentation do not find those suitable regulatory elements. In this perspective, therefore, not only the city can be regenerated, but also the right that it deals with.

Whether they can provide impetus to new developments and influence the urban quality in the stagnating economy experienced by many Western cities, temporary uses are still ignored in most official policymaking and city planning circles. So how can they be incorporated into planning and urban development? How can planning open itself up to the unplanned? And finally, can the unplanned be planned, the informal formalized?

While there are certain activities that lend themselves more to informalization than others, it is not the intrinsic characteristics of those activities, but rather the boundaries of state regulation that determine their informalization (Sassen, 2013). To “formalize” informal practices and to integrate them into established structures means that we have to think not in terms of de-regulating but in terms of adapting rules, which can empower processes of self-organization.

One of the factors that hinders the construction and implementation of regenerative pathways is, in fact, undoubtedly constituted by the rigidity of the regulatory fabric of reference, contributing to slowing down the propulsive drive, especially in those hypotheses which, due to the experimental nature of the proposal, are not suitable for an immediate re-traceability within the existing regulatory grids, proving to be justifiable only on the basis of weak legitimizing titles.

This strong contrast between the temporality of the use one wants to make of a place and the stability of a right or an authorizing title does not allow legal provisions to create the conditions for legitimacy, certainty and transparency over the long term. The presupposition of an advancement in design culture should be based, in fact, on the intent of reducing the constraints and obstacles of a regulatory nature that currently prevent the actions aimed at favoring the use of architectural and urban assets. In this way temporary uses could become an integral part of a processual approach enabling city planning to avoid preconceived spatial models and functional assignments and helping it instead to determine projects experimentally (Oswalt, 2005).

What the paper wants to suggest is encouraging a more systematic inclusion of temporary uses into existing planning and design instruments in order to realize the best potentials of vacant urban lands as an important resource.

In this direction Oswalt (2005) proposes what he defines the “open source urbanism”, a form of planning that gives users “the opportunity to become serious partners and catalysts of a use and process-oriented form of urban development” in which the goal is “to synchronise the stages of formal planning (competition, outline plan, development plan) with the phases of infor-

mal activation (establishment and cultivation of temporary uses)". He describes this fusion as being paradoxical in nature: "one is based on small, short-term steps without a long-term goal, the other on a grand final vision. One of them essentially operates from the bottom up, the other from the top down. One of them attempts to enable development without capital, while the purpose of the other is in most cases capital growth" (Misselwitz, Oswalt Overmeyer, 2013). This highlights the stark differences between informal uses and classical planning. Oswalt explains that this fusion, result in a "new hybrid of open source urbanism", is unable to "preserve the authentic anarchistic character" of temporary uses, or "achieve the security, stability and singleness of purpose" of traditional planning. However, "they all incorporate spaces, actors, and developments into the process that classical city planning has long since ceased to reach" (Misselwitz, Oswalt Overmeyer, 2013). This synchronisation of formal and informal processes has implications for urban design because it involves the collaboration of a wider range of actors rather than just the usual power elites involved in urban development.

Another important factor to consider for a more systematic inclusion of temporary uses into existing city, is to recognize the need of different stages in the development, where temporary uses, in transition to become permanent, turn into a real tool for the potential establishment of a future urban, economic, cultural and social project. Through temporary use, in fact, urban (re)development can gradually evolve from experiment to implementation and from temporary to durable development. In this way decisions can be better justified and planners and designers gain more confidence in their confrontation with the current unpredictable and uncertain context. The experimentation and reversibility that temporary uses afford enable, in fact, a much more incremental and flexible approach to city planning.

4. The NDSM-werf of Amsterdam

Case studies, public policies and pilot projects carried out by a network of researchers, architects, administrations and activists constitute today a social capital in continuous movement, which has supported and designed an evolutionary geography of the temporary reuse of abandoned spaces. The here-reported case study, by incorporating temporary actions within the existing urban framework, seem to be the presupposition of an advancement in design culture, based more on relationships and intersections of actors than on hyper-figurative forms characterizing the ending glimpse of the last century.

Following the transfer of activities and transportation companies to the North-West part of the city, better connected with the river network and the sea, the Northern area of the port of Amsterdam underwent a process of gradual decline so that during the 1990s became the subject of many urban plans aimed at reconversion or demolition for new housing development. The interventions initiated a process of gentrification of craft and artistic activities in favor of a new middle class of inhabitants. Most of the area, like old warehouses, docks, hangars and open spaces, is still in disposal today. One of these is the NDSM (Noord Dock Shipyard), with 56000 square meters of open spaces and 20000 square meters of warehouses.

In the end of the 90s a group of artists, squatters and activists, who were claiming new spaces for their activities, defined, with the help of students and inhabitants, a mapping of the empty spaces of the city and a press campaign that forced the administration to a design comparison. From this experience the public administration opened the Bureau Broedplaatsen, an office, working as an incubator of creativity, which defined contracts on social loan and provided financial support to projects of temporary use. In 1997 the municipality announced a public com-

petition of ideas to grant temporary use in the area of the NDSM with the goal of establishing a settlement core that can pave the way for a new type of development.

The group led by Eva De Klerk won the ban, contracting the management of the main building and related open areas for a duration of 5 years, renewable for further 5 years. From 2000 to 2003 public investments started to finance the basic infrastructure and the renovation of some of the hangar.

In those years, NDSM was the place to start and experiment the “Die stad als casco” (translatable as “City as frameworks”), an alternative theory of urban and responsible planning with the aim of creating affordable working spaces and trigger fresh social dynamism: the existing buildings provided the skeleton where the users, helping actively and not as passive consumers, decided which elements to build and install for their personal needs, becoming responsible also financially.

Calling itself “Kinetisch Noord”, the group drew up a ten-years operating plan with three modules (development, budgeting and arts programme) and turned the former shipyard into a site for experimental art, culture and enterprise.

The main design focused on the large shipbuilding hall, into which a metal frame with concrete floors was inserted. The users installed their own work-places in the structure, forming a small town with studios and workshops on one or two storeys, linked with indoor streets and squares. Over the years also other buildings and open spaces have been converted: today, in warehouses, shipyards and open spaces of the dock, there are about 200 companies that self-manage their own space, coordinated by the association that collects the shares of the expenses and acts as an intermediary with the municipality of Amsterdam.

A colourful mixture of studios and workshops, leisure facilities and restaurants, boat-hotels plus concerts, flea markets and events, is now attracting interest from big financially powers that want to benefit from the creative atmosphere.

The role of three actors has been decisive in the realization of the project: the municipality of Amsterdam, the association of artists, architects, urban planners who undertook the process of temporary reuse of abandoned spaces and the civil society, which supported the path of claiming space, participating still today, in the socio-cultural activities offered (Inti, Cantaluppi, Persichino, 2014).

The project shows how spontaneous and bottom-up initiative has succeeded in making a valuable contribution to the quality of life of the area and the effect that new forms of financial support can have (Christaanse, Baum, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The temporary use model has the capacity to expose the ongoing conflicts and contestations between competing value systems, interests, agendas and stakeholders, be they economic, social, ecological or cultural. Rendering visible the hidden mechanisms in the production of urban space, it can be instrumental in managing competing agendas and interests in a more just and equitable manner, addressing conditions of future development. The process of implementing this model both always requires and facilitates the inclusion of diverse voices: aside from the opportunity to involve thus far marginalized communities and interests, it also helps to overcome the sectoralized approaches and conceptions of urban vacant land that often inform the organization of broader governance and decision making systems.

Answering not only as a remedy for the disarmament of architecture in our urban landscape, temporary uses, by building an agenda of policies and actions through which to imagine direct

processes and reinvent new life cycles, become a possible global tool aimed at giving multiple answers to the crisis of the large systems or, better, to the idea of progress itself (Ciorra, 2013).

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