

MEANWHILE SPACES

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Sarah Milliken is a research assistant in the School of Architecture, Design and Construction at the University of Greenwich. She originally trained as an archaeologist, and has taught at various universities in the UK, Ireland, and Italy. A keen interest in environmental issues and a desire to actively address them recently led her to undertake postgraduate qualifications in landscape architecture and urban sustainability. Her current research focuses on how the economic and non-monetary evaluation of ecosystem services can be integrated into the discourse and praxis of urban planning and design. Recent publications include "Southbank Gardens" (*Garden Design Journal*, issue 110, 2011) and "The Value of Green Infrastructure in Urban Design" (*Urban Design Journal*, issue 126, 2013).

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Vacant land is a natural phenomenon in cities characterized by a continuous cycle of development and redundancy, and there is a long tradition of temporary appropriations for legitimate community use. Historically these have tended to be bottom-up initiatives instigated by local activists, such as the William Curtis Ecological Park, which was created on the site of a decommissioned lorry park in 1977, and lasted for almost ten years until it was developed to make way for the headquarters of the Greater London Authority. Dating to the same era is Meanwhile Gardens, a community space created on canalside land in London being cleared for development. Despite the fact that permission was only granted for temporary use, the garden has been enjoyed by local residents for more than thirty years, and the site is unlikely ever to be developed. The recent economic downturn caused many construction projects to stall, resulting in large areas of land that had been cleared for development lying vacant. UK government policy designed to regenerate city centers introduced the concept of "meanwhile leases," originally intended to facilitate the short-term use of empty shops and other business premises, these have been subsequently extended to the temporary lease of land. This has sparked a paradigm shift

in the attitudes of owners, developers, and local authorities toward the temporary appropriation of land, with projects not only being facilitated but also initiated by them. The benefits for these bodies are clear: a reduced chance of unauthorized occupancy, the apparent fulfillment of corporate social responsibility expectations, and the possibility that the enhanced appearance of the landscape will generate a short-term source of revenue for the local economy and attract longer-term business investment.

As a result, the past five years has seen a florescence of meanwhile spaces in cities throughout the UK, particularly in London. Meanwhile spaces are explicitly and intentionally time-limited in nature. This would appear to conflict with the traditional focus of placemakers on long-term “permanent” strategies which is enshrined in the masterplanning process and which leads to a structured, prescriptive use of space. A selection of meanwhile space projects in London is used here to stimulate a brief discussion about the place of temporary urbanism in the theory and practice of contemporary landscape architecture.

100 UNION STREET

This vacant plot in Southwark has hosted three successive meanwhile spaces created as short-term installations curated by the London Festival of Architecture. Although the owner and developer has planning consent to build offices and flats, he sees intrinsic value in the temporary use of the site as a means of pioneering change in the wider neighborhood and generating urban renewal. Southwark Lido was created in 2008 by the architecture collective EXYZT. Consisting of a sun deck, paddling pool, sauna, beach huts, and bar, it hosted a variety of social activities over a five day period. Two years later the Union Street Urban Orchard was created using timber reclaimed from the Lido project. Designed by Wayward Plants, the orchard included fruit trees and other edible plants, a cinema screen, and a ping-pong table in a builder’s skip. Central to the design of the orchard was a plant exchange: local people contributed hundreds of plants from their homes to create an ever-evolving garden built by the community. The garden was used to host a series of community events, and was dismantled after three months. The third installation was the Urban Physic Garden designed by Wayward Plants in 2011 [FIGURE 11]. Arranged along the lines of a conventional hospital, medicinal

plants placed in “wards” for different medical disciplines were used to create an educational pop-up garden which hosted talks, workshops, film screenings, and other events. At the end of the summer the thousands of plants were distributed to community spaces in the local area.

THE PLANT ROOM

The architecture practice What if: projects has been mapping the vacant and neglected spaces that surround the housing estates of inner city London, and developing strategies to appropriate them in order to accommodate the needs of the local population. In 2008 they were commissioned by the Shoreditch Trust to create a temporary community space on a site located adjacent to a busy road which was overgrown with vegetation and attracted rubbish dumping and other anti-social behavior. The Plant Room was conceived as a room with walls created from vertically stacked plants, designed to protect the space from the noise and pollution of the traffic, and the pots were allocated to local residents for growing flowers and herbs. The garden was closed when the site was sold in 2009.

KING’S CROSS SKIP GARDENS

Skip gardens have appeared on various empty plots during the redevelopment of Kings Cross [FIGURE 2]. The temporary nature of the vacant plots encouraged the creation of growing spaces that are designed to be moved around the site as the development progresses. The garden was created in 2009 by volunteers from Global Generation, a local sustainable education charity, and Guardian News and Media, and has grown into a community project which provides opportunities for local residents and hosts school visits. The fruit and vegetables are used in “pop-up” cafés on site, as well as being sold to local cafés and restaurants.

DALSTON EASTERN CURVE GARDEN

The garden was created on the site of a disused railway line that had been derelict for over thirty years, and had become an unofficial landfill site. The potential of the site had initially aroused the Barbican Art Gallery who, in 2009, were seeking a temporary outdoor exhibition space. The success of this project, which saw 12,000 visitors during a three week period, led to a meanwhile arrangement by which the landowner



FIGURE 1 Vacant Lot (image: Sarah Milliken 2008)



FIGURE 2 The King's Cross Skip Garden (image: Sarah Milliken 2013)

allowed the space to be used by the local community until more long-term developments are finalized. The garden, which combines structure planting with areas for growing vegetables and herbs was created the following year by landscape architects J & L Gibbons in collaboration with muf architecture/art as part of the Making Space in Dalston Project funded by the London Development Agency. Most of the garden furniture was constructed from reclaimed wood and recycled pallets. The space is tended by volunteers, and the project has delivered tangible benefits to the local community, with the creation of a design and construction apprenticeship scheme and the promotion of learning and development skills in horticulture. Despite its popularity, developers are planning to transform this award-winning garden into a thoroughfare lined with restaurants and cafes as part of a scheme for a new shopping center.

VACANT LOT

Designed to address the basic needs of food production and social space, Vacant Lot is a mobile allotment created in 2007 on a housing estate in Hoxton by What if: projects using bulk bags filled with soil [FIGURE 1]. Despite being commissioned as a temporary intervention for the Shoreditch Festival, the allotment continues to be used by the local community, and the success of the project led to the award of funding to create twenty food growing spaces for local residents on inner city housing estates.

DISCUSSION

Meanwhile spaces are not just about one-off initiatives in times of economic downturn; they are about embedding important principles of temporary use into placemaking. Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams (2012) argue that temporary

planning should not be a different process from permanent planning, nor should it be the process before the real planning starts. Instead, it should be an integral part of an urban development, with both permanent and temporary planning merging into a new adaptive planning strategy. These case studies from London demonstrate that meanwhile spaces offer possibilities for “practices of innovation and playful intervention” (Groth and Corijn 2005, 4), and the potential for creating vibrant points of community and cultural engagement. By providing an opportunity to experiment and create immediate benefits that are at the same time contextual, responsive, flexible, and ephemeral, they present an alternative to more “permanent” public spaces which tend to be over-designed and formalized (Kamvasinou and Roberts 2013). But they can also be used to inform the design of such spaces. Matthew Carmona and Filipa Matos Wunderlich (2012) argue that public spaces that are the most adaptable and amenable to change will ultimately be the most successful. Creating adaptable spaces means avoiding filling them with fixed features that prevent them from being adapted for different functions, and avoiding over-specification in a manner that stifles adaptability. Meanwhile uses therefore provide an opportunity for testing the choreographic potential of planned permanent spaces in order to gauge how they will perform.

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