



Rethinking urban transformation: Temporary uses for vacant land



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ABSTRACT

As some cities grapple with economic decline and depopulating neighborhoods, a number of academics and professionals have focused their attention on the causes, conditions and patterns of the resultant vacant land, whereas others lay out broad programmatic, institutional, fiscal and design responses to address vacancy on site or citywide scales. We find that, regardless of condition and context, most responses advocate complex, officially sanctioned, formal programs and policies that call for or depend on implementation over several multi-year phases. While laudable in scope, we question whether “permanent” solutions are appropriate given the widely varying causes, durations, contexts and patterns of vacancy and the inability of similarly scoped government-led programs to thus far achieve intended goals or improve local quality of life. We present examples that make the case for temporary, incremental, flexible and experimental responses to urban vacant land, then conclude by outlining the potential benefits and drawbacks of this temporary use model.

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Introduction

On a spring weekend in Berlin, the decommissioned and abandoned Tempelhof airport bustles with energy: thousands of people find their place in the vast area – picnicking, Frisbee throwing, spontaneous soccer matches, musicians practicing their craft, families barbecuing, students reading books, people tending to small vegetable and flower beds children flying kites. None of this was planned or programmed in the traditional sense; instead, these spontaneous activities rose up in the absence of planning, since the City has been unable to redevelop the site as planned due to budget constraints and onerous upfront construction costs.

In St. Louis's urban core, one can see a dense successional forest emerging. On aerial photographs, it distinctly resembles Central Park in New York City, only with more trees. Walking by the chain link fences that separate it from the street, the birdsong makes one forget one is still in a city. This forest has emerged on abandoned sites including the former Pruitt-Igoe housing project. These parcels now host new ecologies that create visual intrigue, provide opportunities to interact with forms of urban nature, and serve a number of infrastructural benefits, from stormwater infiltration to new habitat establishment to urban heat island mitigation.¹

All of these benefits were unplanned and required no new investment from the City.

These are not isolated cases. In Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago, many vacant lots now contain plots of sunflowers, root vegetables and rows of corn flourishing in temporary community gardens filled with neighbors watering, weeding, or just chatting about the day's business. In Sebastopol, CA a parking lot transforms twice weekly into a vibrant market for all kinds of organic food and produce – complete with a colorful and mostly suburban crowd milling around – surrounded by abandoned warehouses that simultaneously emit a feeling of being on the “wrong side of the tracks.” And on Cleveland's Lorain Avenue thoroughfare – a street with lined by chain businesses and parking lots – a sliver of the rural appears in the raised beds and chickens wandering around backyard coops.^{2,3}

Any landscape architect or designer of public space would be proud of such diverse uses.⁴ What these examples have in common is that all take place on formerly vacant land, and all can be considered temporary uses. But what does it mean for a use to be temporary, especially since all uses can be considered temporary, with some just lasting longer than others (i.e., a 99-year leasehold is still “temporary” in the long run)? We adopt a definition derived from

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¹ “Pruitt Igoe Now: The Unmentioned Modern Landscape” design competition, www.pruittigoenow.org, accessed 03/13/2012.

² Gather 'round Farm, Cleveland, OH. <http://gatherroundfarm.webs.com/>, accessed 03/13/2012.

³ For more examples of temporary uses, see Schwarz (2010).

⁴ For photographs and other documentation of the spontaneous uses at Berlin Tempelhof Airport, see the blog New Urban Domain <http://www.newpublicdomain.com/2011/06/berlin-tempelhof-former-airport-becomes.html>, accessed January 28, 2012.

Bishop and Williams (2012) that argues that temporary use cannot be “based on the nature of the use, or whether rent is paid, or whether a use is formal or informal, or even on the scale, longevity or endurance of a temporary use, but rather the *intention* of the user, developer or planners that the use should be temporary” (p. 5). Indeed, they continue, the temporary phase can be short or long, accidental or planned, legal or illegal, but what distinguishes it from a “permanent” use on one hand and a stop-gap or interim use on the other, is that these distinctions assume that temporary use is secondary or provisional, a stand-in or substitute for the preferred permanent option.⁵ So here we define temporary use as that which is *explicitly and intentionally* time-limited in nature.

In this paper, we explore the potential for this temporary use model and conclude with some thoughts on the benefits, drawbacks and conditions in which this model might gain a foothold in the context of vacant land. This article is not a “how to” guide for professionals seeking solutions to vacant land, rather it is an exploration of the possibilities for the temporary use and occupation in cities. Now we must define what we mean by vacant land.

Defining vacant land

We use a broad definition of vacant land to include all land that is unused or abandoned for the longer term, including raw dirt, spontaneous vegetation and emergent ecologies, land with recently razed buildings, perimeter agricultural land fallen out of cultivation, brownfields and other contaminated sites, or land that supports long-term, abandoned derelict structures. When no structure exists, one can consider land vacant if the property is not currently used by humans. When a structure sits on the property, some contend that a structure is abandoned, and its lot considered vacant, when it has been unoccupied for 60 days; others use 120 days or longer (Pagano & Bowman, 2000). Vacant land can be zoned residential, commercial, industrial or some combination thereof. In this definition, *underutilized* parcels, or lots that function below their functional or capital-producing capacity relative to adjacent land uses are not considered vacant land.

At the beginning of the last decade, the typical large city in the US had upwards of 15% of land lying vacant or abandoned (Pagano & Bowman, 2000). This number has held relatively steady although the recent foreclosure crisis likely increased this percentage (Mallach, 2010). And the foreclosure crisis in the US has not helped: a recent estimate put vacant land increases at 60+ acres per zip code in 10 cities with the largest decline in population from 2006 to 2009 (Németh & Hollander, 2012). But vacant land is not confined to the biggest or slowest growing cities: even Denver, a fast growing Sunbelt city, contained 935 vacant lots in the central city in 2010 (Schroepfel, 2010).

Vacant land develops for a whole host of reasons, many of which are political and economic in nature. Historical redlining by insurance and banking sectors encouraged development in certain areas over others, and many federal policies (including Community Development Block Grants) focus on new infrastructure and new development versus rehabilitation or infill redevelopment (Jackson, 1987). Much of the increase in vacant land in recent decades occurred due to shifts from an industrial to service economy (and the expensive cleanup and negative image of environmentally degraded land), suburban migration, the shift to a more mobile workplace, weak economic cycles and disinvestment in infill property. In addition, some tax policies encourage speculation and property holding by investors and developers and others encourage abandonment as an alternative to underperformance,

especially as this abandonment keeps land cheap for eventual assembly. Following Schumpeter (1994 [1942]), Harvey (1985) describes these processes of “creative destruction” as a necessary byproduct of capitalism.

The emergence of urban vacant lands can be tied to a host of shifts in urban conditions that often involve historic and current patterns of uneven development and investment. Most notable are redlining practices and the resulting disrepair of public parks and other infrastructure as well as housing and redevelopment policies and projects that resulted in the development of “ghettos” and “transitional zones”, often foregrounding race as a factor.⁶

Physical features and zoning codes also help turn land vacant. Morphological causes include steep topography, unsuitable soil and bedrock conditions, concern for natural features and hazards (e.g., view corridors or flood plains), or the imposition of a diagonal arterial or orthogonal grid on an organic street pattern. In addition, functional zoning separates uses and often leaves remnants of marginal space, required setbacks and buffers adjacent to heavy infrastructure like highways, arterials or boulevards (Garde, 1999; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996). The land subdivision system also requires specific size and dimension requirements that can create oddly shaped parcels less suited for traditional development. Because most zoning is based on allowable uses (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial), and property used for any purpose might at some point become vacant, land that does become vacant generally keeps its current zoning distinction: vacant residential land remains residentially zoned, vacant industrial land will stay zoned industrial, and so on. In rare cases, however, land can be zoned “vacant” as a sort of placeholder that allows a municipality to institute more specific zoning at a later date; in this way, the condition of vacancy – especially when experienced by several contiguous or nearby lots, is often the spark that ignites a local zoning code rewrite.

Vacant land can occur in any location but is most likely to occur along transportation corridors (transit or automobile oriented), in areas of transitioning use (e.g., former industrial or commercial), in transition zones between different morphological patterns, at the edges of cities and suburbs, or in sporadic, individual or contiguous lots in downtowns or neighborhoods.

We adapt a classification system from Northam (1971) to place vacant land into three categories. *Remnant parcels* are frequently small in size, irregular in shape, have steep slopes, flood hazards, protected view planes or other geophysical or regulatory limitations that impede development, and have thus never been developed. *Reserve parcels* are lots held by private owners for speculation or future expansion (e.g., land in gentrifying areas) or by public agencies for future sale or development (e.g., utility right of ways). *TOADS*, temporarily obsolete, abandoned or derelict sites cover a wide range of sizes and previous uses, but frequently are the sites of former industrial or commercial activities. An important distinction is the presence or absence of contamination (i.e., brownfields versus greyfields).

These classifications show that vacancy is mediated primarily by two factors: ownership and developability. Ownership can be public, private, business, corporate, or some combination thereof. Developability can be influenced by numerous urban conditions, be they physical, regulatory (including land use plans or zoning), or the real estate market (most common). But what is clear from the above is that development cycles depend on vacant land, as it is a necessary byproduct of urban development processes. Berger (2006) suggests that urban vacant land should be understood as “a natural component of every dynamically evolving city” and is in

⁵ Many see temporary use as a “meanwhile” use in conditions where commercial letting is not presently viable (Bishop & Williams, 2012, p. 5).

⁶ See the concept of “zones of transition” in the work of the Chicago School, in particular by Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess, developed in the 1920s. Vold, Bernard, and Snipes (1998) provide a critical account on this and other concepts.

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