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## 7. Surveying the creative use of vacant space in London, c.1945–95\*

*Krystallia Kamvasinou and Sarah Ann Milne*

Some of the best things happen in the unplanned spaces. There is a tribe in Africa, that when they build their houses they always build one room that they have not planned for – and that is where something creative happens. And in a similar way when we made our skip garden, where we've now got our kitchen and our café, we didn't know what was going to be there in that space, it was empty space. So I'm quite interested in that whole designing in empty space, and then in the same way, you could say, actually enabling ourselves to find that empty space within ourselves ... we can come back to zero, creating the conditions for creativity. (Jane Riddiford, Global Generation CEO, 2013)

### *Introduction*

Emptiness does not sit easily within conventional histories of the city. The fields of architecture and urban planning are by definition preoccupied with filling in empty space, transforming the unoccupied into the inhabited, the unproductive into the functional, the empty into the built.<sup>1</sup> Challenging these dominant narratives, this chapter looks at the 'unofficial' history

\* This chapter forms part of a research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust focusing on 'Interim spaces and creative use' (Oct. 2012–March 2015). The research proposal stemmed from an ongoing interest in alternative uses and readings of vacant land (see K. Kamvasinou, 'Vague parks: the politics of late twentieth-century urban landscapes', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, x (2006), 255–62; and K. Kamvasinou, 'The public value of vacant urban land', *Municipal Engineer*, clxiv (2011), 157–66). It was, however, propelled forward by (and particularly well-timed with) London's temporary land-use initiatives in the recession period 2008–12 (some of which were on development sites and paradoxically developer-led). The project investigated a number of present-day initiatives sited on vacant land in London. Conscious of the long history but ephemeral nature and hence scarce documentation of past temporary occupations, the project strategically documented the temporary initiatives through interviews, film, site surveys and photographs.

<sup>1</sup> I. de Solà-Morales Rubio, 'Terrain vague', in *Anyplace*, ed. C. C. Davidson (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 118–23.

K. Kamvasinou and S. A. Milne. 'Surveying the creative use of vacant space in London, c.1945–95', in *Empty Spaces: perspectives on emptiness in modern history*, ed. C. J. Campbell, A. Giovine and J. Keating (London, 2019), pp. 151–77. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0.

of empty space in cities. It particularly addresses what, in urban design terms, is called 'vacant land', namely unbuilt-on, leftover or derelict land. In contrast to the perception of 'vacancy' as 'emptiness' to be filled, we take it that, historically, the 'empty space' of vacant land has actually often been full of life, activity and/or busy with natural processes and hence a *landscape of potential*.<sup>2</sup> This potential describes the freedom availed by, and the ability of, vacant land to accommodate informal activities, from walking the dog to creative play, and to offer opportunities for open and social space in densely built urban environments. This potential, however, remains invisible to those who perceive vacant land purely as an economic asset and therefore valuable only insofar as it can be explored to create measurable profit, through built development, rather than for its contribution to green open space or community participation. Vacancy can thus evoke the fear of failure, lack of productivity and waste if one focuses solely on economic value. The chapter contends that it is only when the relative 'emptiness' of these spaces is recognized by a range of citizens and organizations that valuable local transformations will occur. It points to the possibility of shaping the city not only through top-down planning and design action but also through its citizens' smaller acts of change in their local empty spaces.

Current debates in the fields of urban planning and architecture highlight the value of temporary uses of vacant urban land; such uses were promoted during the recent recession in London (c.2008) in order to bring back life to stalled vacant sites. While the recession on one hand acted as a catalyst for releasing private land on temporary leases to community organizations, on the other hand these temporary initiatives were taking place in an environment where collective knowledge of the importance of sustainability and environmental awareness was mainstream. The specific purpose of this chapter is hence to contextualize these contemporary trends against the wider historical background of the temporary uses of vacant urban space and their legacies. The chapter investigates the historical precedents of such initiatives and traces an evolution in perceptions of vacant land, looking at examples from post-war London. We propose a reconsideration of the local value of vacant urban plots, showing how a positive view attuned to the subtleties of such spaces has frequently been placed in opposition to those held by institutions (for example, by local authorities) and by house builders, developers or adjacent landlords in pursuit of profit. Our

<sup>2</sup> K. Kamvasinou, 'Reimagining interim landscapes', in *Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation*, ed. D. Deriu, K. Kamvasinou and E. Shinkle (Farnham, 2014), pp. 147–59, at p. 147.

examples, and the developing trajectories of temporary land use in London, demonstrate a progressive intermingling of these supposed conflicts. In this way the research observes patterns of appropriating empty space through uses which go beyond 'original' meanings or intended uses for vacant sites and identifies temporariness as a characteristic of emptiness in the longer-term urban development cycle.

More specifically, through examples of creative use of vacant urban space that range from artistic workshops to community gardening, the chapter will chart the post-war history of 'emptiness' in London, including the post-war reconstruction years; the 1960s' countercultural projects; the 1970s' post-countercultural community garden movement and the urban ecology turn; and the 1980s' global environmental awareness in the lead up to the 1990s' regeneration boom. Within this historical context we shall analyse five historical precedents from London – some of them truly temporary and others that have managed to endure – as indicative of how 'emptiness' can be a highly negotiable term and deployed for different purposes. Bringing these diverse initiatives together allows an exploration of how the concept of emptiness has increasingly become a point of connection between different local groups, as demonstrated through a growing appreciation of vacant sites as landscapes of potential.

This historical review also connects to wider movements worldwide, particularly those in the United States and Europe, where a direct influence on the London projects can be established. Key emerging themes that provide insights into practices and ideologies relating to 'emptiness' will be discussed and their legacies for contemporary urban projects identified. Taken together, we propose that there has been a historical evolution in how 'empty space' has been discovered, made visible and reimagined in twentieth-century London and highlight its relevance for today's vacant urban spaces.

### ***Conceptualizing empty space in the city***

Positive connotations of empty space have not always been so forthcoming in urban studies as they appear to be at the present time. Terms such as 'urban voids' and 'cracks in the city',<sup>3</sup> utilized in architecture and urban-design literature during the 1980s to 1990s, clearly associated vacant land with the failures of modernism as a movement in city design. Out of this movement sprang a rhetoric which emphasized the rigid separation of land uses and an

<sup>3</sup> A. Loukaitou-Sideris, 'Cracks in the city: addressing the constraints and potentials of urban design', *Jour. Urban Design*, i (1996), 91–103.

inflexible focus on form, often leading to 'lost space',<sup>4</sup> 'wastelands', 'wasted space' and abandoned and dysfunctional urban spaces. In response to these conditions, a key notion, that of 'terrain vague',<sup>5</sup> coined by architect and academic Ignasi de Solà-Morales, marked a shift away from earlier negative readings of empty space and instead perceived vacancy as freedom and possibility. It represented an alternative approach to derelict post-industrial landscapes and decommissioned infrastructure works, advocating a sense of continuity rather than elimination and building-over. Notably, Solà-Morales celebrated the indeterminate character of these spaces. This coincided with a period of intense urban regeneration when large-scale projects of revitalization were pushed high on the European agenda, but such schemes were often uncritically delivered in places with special historical conditions of abandonment, such as war-torn areas. What Solà-Morales suggested is that empty spaces, acted upon by informal agencies of change, have lessons for the practice of architecture and urban design that go beyond form-making and the arbitrary imposition of transformations. He proposed that such empty spaces are live representations of time passing and that these passages leave marks on the city which should be acknowledged in expectations for the future.

Developing from the freedom and possibility implied in the theoretical adoption of 'terrain vague', recent literature on 'temporary urbanism'<sup>6</sup> and 'loose space',<sup>7</sup> 'urban wildscapes'<sup>8</sup> and urban agriculture<sup>9</sup> has continued to see the potentiality of vacant land as a container for temporary activities that may influence longer term processes of city shaping. Either formal or informal, temporariness has been noted as a characteristic of such empty space. The environmental and social importance and low management costs of these spaces have also been highlighted. For example, vacant land used for gardening and food-growing seems to follow a cyclical itinerary, supported by the public at times of social and economic crisis but disappearing in affluent times. Laura J. Lawson has termed this movement 'city bountiful', pointing to the 'subtle transformation in how we conceptualize our cities as land resources and social action' as opposed to the well-known 'city

<sup>4</sup> R. Trancik, *Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design* (New York, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Solà-Morales, 'Terrain vague'.

<sup>6</sup> J. Groth and E. Corijn, 'Reclaiming urbanity: indeterminate spaces, informal actors and urban agenda setting', *Urban Studies*, xlii (2005), 503–26.

<sup>7</sup> *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, ed. K. A. Franck and Q. Stevens (Abingdon, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> *Urban Wildscapes*, ed. A. Jorgensen and R. Keenan (Abingdon, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> A. Viljoen, K. Bohn, and J. Howe, *Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes (CPULs): Designing Urban Agriculture for Sustainable Cities* (Oxford, 2005).

beautiful’ movement at the turn of the twentieth century, which aimed at ‘reordering the city through grand plans of physical improvements and reform’.<sup>10</sup> For ‘city bountiful’, vacant land is not considered waste but rather an opportunity for food production and social engagement through the process of gardening. The temporariness associated with vacant land imbues these actions with a further sense of urgency and purpose.

The conceptualization of vacant land as a vessel for temporary experimentation and social engagement, of what could be termed ‘expectant emptiness’, has not always been straightforward. Three decades ago in his book *The Greening of the Cities*, David Nicholson-Lord contended that ‘[t]he tininess of so many sites, testimony to an erosion of the city almost geological in its gradualness, goes some way to explaining the peculiar invisibility of the issues at stake ... It takes imagination ... or a riot to remove the mental cossetting of the metropolitan commuter’.<sup>11</sup> What is important here is the implicit idea of *reimagining* empty space as a creative act. Nicholson-Lord referenced Jane Jacobs’s *The Economy of Cities* as he suggested that innovation occurs most easily in unregulated environments. He extended this line of reasoning to describe the importance of the *perception* of such environments. Typically, for example, the perceptions of a private house-builder and a community arts organization of the same urban site are divergent. For the private house-builder, empty brownfield sites are potential economic assets, but their emptiness is also implicitly complicated, associated with, for instance, contamination, legal-ownership issues and other liabilities.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, an artist, unpreoccupied by such complications, might see empty space as an opportunity for innovation and experimentation. On this basis it is therefore unsurprising that artists were among the quickest to react to the spatial implications of industrial decline in English post-war cities. Indeed, three of our historical precedents<sup>13</sup> represent pioneering community arts organizations willing to engage with communities on tight urban sites and happy to work against the grain of planning regulations and institutional structures. This group in particular, it seems, sparked the discovery and the reimagining of the short-term use of unoccupied city land in the post-war context. Our current conceptualization of empty space in the city owes much to their exploratory contributions.

<sup>10</sup> L. J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: a Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), pp. xv–xvi.

<sup>11</sup> D. Nicholson-Lord, *The Greening of the Cities* (London and New York, 1987), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Action Space (various projects, 1968–78); Meanwhile Gardens (1976–); and Hackney Grove Gardens (1982–c.1996).

### *Methodological framework*

The biggest methodological challenge confronting our study of ‘empty spaces’ is their ephemerality. In most cases the projects we survey in this chapter only lasted for a few days, months or years and are no longer in existence. The transient nature of these urban spaces is accentuated by their situation in a city with a highly mobile population. Oral testimonies to their character are easily lost after a generation, while unassuming references to their existence are covered over by piles of paper documenting far more monumental developments. And yet, despite the fact that they leave few documentary traces and even those often appear precarious and under threat, modest projects on small urban sites are still often locally remembered and, in fact, built upon by present-day initiatives. The longevity of collective memories relating to these short projects, alongside observations of their spatial legacy, substantiate their place in a spectrum of possible uses for such spaces. Contemporary project initiators, interviewed as part of our recent fieldwork in London, frequently made reference to the creative temporary use of vacant spaces in the past.<sup>14</sup> For a number of these present-day initiators, awareness of this history has acted as a source of inspiration and provided a sense of rightful cause, spurred on by connection to a longer-term legacy. This explicit link to the past has implications for reimagining empty space within the context of contemporary city design. Surveying the history of the creative use of vacant space has thus confirmed a well-known trajectory in city regeneration. The reimagining of ‘emptiness’ can be traced from the few charismatic individuals seeing the potential in empty space, usually artists or activists, to wider community involvement and appropriation and finally to the city decision-makers taking stock – and action.

Initially, we used oral accounts of interviewees from present-day projects to locate similar, indicative examples from London’s post-war history. The projects compiled in this chapter have been documented either in publications or by primary-source archival material.<sup>15</sup> The chapter therefore brings to light a number of specific alternative uses of vacant sites, situating them alongside broader narratives of urban change in order to sketch out an ‘unofficial’ history of empty space in post-war London.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Paul Richens, garden manager from the Skip Garden, London, refers to the legacy of gardening and food-growing during the war and in the immediate post-war years (interview with authors, 3 Dec. 2013). Hamish Liddle, garden club leader from Abbey Gardens, London, refers to the Plaistow Land Grabbers and the Triangle Camp, which inspired the current design of Abbey Gardens (interview with authors, 2 Nov. 2013).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., one of our original contributors mentioned Jerry Cooper of the Hackney Grove Gardens project, whom we subsequently interviewed.

### ***Post-war planning and the rise of countercultural emptiness***

The impact of World War II on both British culture and space has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, and the spirit of resourcefulness that emerged as a result of these years of dearth is especially important in the context of urban space.<sup>16</sup> Widespread practices of adaptation and flexibility in everyday life appear to have fostered a more sustained and creative use of empty urban space. Temporary use of vacant land had been pivotal to the survival of London during World War II, with initiatives such as *Dig for Victory* fundamental not only in the bolstering of morale but also in the practical provision of food for the nation.<sup>17</sup> However, in the post-war period interest in gardening and digging declined. As the city counted the cost of its bombed sites scattered throughout old housing stock and industrial land, the emphasis instead turned to reconstruction. Most post-war reconstruction in the UK was led by local authorities and in London by the London County Council (LCC, 1889–1965) and later the Greater London Council (GLC, 1965–86). Their policies were initially influenced by radical political ideas with an emphasis on the importance of the public sector rather than philanthropists, leading the processes of reconstruction through the acquisition of land and investment in housing and planning.<sup>18</sup> These policies were implemented using legislation and the power of the state, with land moving to public ownership through compulsory purchase and housing development projects receiving state funding. Despite its public emphasis, planning policy in these years did not always provide for local communities, with many sites lying derelict for decades before temporary appropriation by citizens. Slum clearances led to tensions between communities and the state, without necessarily resulting in better living conditions or housing projects. Sites were ‘cleared’ and ‘emptied’ but not always reconstructed. In fact, geographer Alice Coleman suggested that post-war planning, despite its intensive efforts and massive expenditure, led

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *The Blitz and Its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-War Reconstruction*, ed. M. Clapson and P. J. Larkham (Farnham, 2013); *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating Modern Townscape*, ed. E. Erten, J. Pendlebury and P. J. Larkham (Abingdon, 2015); *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. L. Noakes and J. Pattinson (London, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> R. Minns, *Bombers and Mash: the Domestic Front 1939–1945* (London, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> D. Bowie, ‘Working class politics in London and land, planning and housing reform’, paper presented at *Mobilising London’s Housing Histories*, conference at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 27–28 June 2013, <<https://www.history.ac.uk/podcasts/mobilising-londons-housing-histories-provision-homes-1850>>. [accessed 5 Jan. 2019]. See also D. Bowie, *The Radical and Socialist Tradition in British Planning – From Puritan Colonies to Garden Cities* (London, 2017).



to the gradual death of inner-city areas in London.<sup>19</sup>

Still characterized by haphazard post-war recovery, the decline of the manufacturing industry and subsequent loss of jobs from the early 1960s led to the progressive emptying of people from inner-city London. Between 1961 and 1981 inner London experienced a population loss of one third – almost one million people. This resulted in an unprecedented ‘freeing of space’.<sup>20</sup> In her study of land-use changes in Britain since World War II, Coleman looked at the inner London borough of Tower Hamlets and found that what she called ‘dead and disturbed space’ had tripled between 1964 and 1977.<sup>21</sup>

However, the early 1960s also gave birth to the environmental movement, with its distinct take on the protection of the planet and the shaping of cities.<sup>22</sup> As George McKay put it in *Radical Gardening*, oblivious to the ‘emptying’ trends in cities, or perhaps because of them, the horti-counterculture of this decade with its ‘articulation of “flower power”’ led to the celebration of the ‘empty space’ of the garden ‘as space of environmental consciousness’.<sup>23</sup> Abundant vacant spaces proved to be fertile test grounds for new gardening and art practices which embodied distinctly environmental ideologies rather than being purely recreational. An emphasis on ‘alternative technology’ resulted in an ‘environmentally-informed’ culture which has since become mainstream: for example, the use of the sun, wind and rivers for energy, or the prioritization of local materials and recycling.<sup>24</sup> Communal living was characteristic of the counterculture movement and interlinked with these practices, especially drawing in art collectives that advocated art in service of a social purpose. ‘Environmental activism’ and ‘sustainable practice’ are hence a clear legacy of these years with echoes in more recent urban projects.<sup>25</sup>

Simultaneously, in 1960s London the ‘Hyde Park Diggers’ were drawing on an alternative legacy from the past in direct reference to San Francisco’s ‘American Diggers’, who had themselves revived the actions of Britain’s seventeenth century ‘Diggers’. Through squatting and cultivating land on St. George’s Hill in Surrey, the earliest ‘diggers’ were radical in their protest

<sup>19</sup> A. Coleman, ‘The death of the inner city: cause and cure’, *The London Journal*, vi (1980), 3–22.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, pp. 2, 3, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 4. See also Coleman, ‘The death of the inner city’.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> G. McKay, *Radical Gardening: Politics, Idealism and Rebellion in the Garden* (London, 2011), p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, pp. 110–1.

<sup>25</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, pp. 113–4.

against a land market that increasingly locked local people out of previously common land.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, squatting was a countercultural movement across Europe in the 1960s, often involving the greening of vacant land as a way to challenge land-ownership, local government's apathy or developers' indifference.<sup>27</sup> The more recent garden projects of the Hyde Park Diggers highlighted closely linked social, spatial, health and food-production issues for urban communities.<sup>28</sup> Drawing a large group of protesters together, the diggers were self-consciously politicized in their approach to land rights and occupation. Because of the collective's size, their anti-authoritarian tactics, adopted from the original diggers, were more highly publicized than those of their environmentalist peers, although the two were linked ideologically.

Representative of the synergy between this sort of communal living and environmentalism, in the 1960s and 1970s a number of east London-based artists were living and working in overlapping circles of interest and desirous of social change in their local environments. Their subversive public art drew attention to pockets of vacant city space while reacting against the gallery system, both as physical space for the display of art and as a system of power relations. One of these early collectives, known as Action Space (1968–78), was most active within neighbourhoods in Wapping, east London, and Camden, north-west London. Led by Ken and Mary Turner, this was a group unconcerned with environmental initiatives in and of themselves; rather, it focused on cultural change through methodologies of spatial transformation and interactive art installations. The work of Action Space across north and east London embodied the radical new artistic practices of the counterculture movement, closely intertwined with a growing appreciation of vacant urban space.

The first of many community workshops was situated in Wapping. The group used pop-up inflatable structures as a means of 'filling' space and inviting inhabitation of it. These plastic forms were large-scale and purpose-designed, easily erected and deflated. Initially sited on a well-established garden in the area, the artists quickly moved their project into the adjacent derelict church and churchyard of St. John's.<sup>29</sup> This site had suffered a direct

<sup>26</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, p. 122. See also N. Awan, T. Schneider and J. Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Abingdon, 2011), p. 80; and M. A. LaFond, 'eXperimentcity: cultivating sustainable development in Berlin's *Freiräume*', in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, ed. J. Hou (London and New York, 2010), pp. 61–70.

<sup>29</sup> For further information and images, see 'Unfinished Histories' <<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/action-space/productions-and-projects/>> [accessed 5 Jan. 2019]. See also M. Turner, *Action Space Extended* (2012).

hit as a result of Blitz bombing and was not redeveloped until the late 1990s (Figure 7.1). For an initial stint of three weeks in 1968, members lived co-operatively in the vacant, damaged parsonage, improving the physical fabric in a piece-meal fashion. The group also consulted with residents at all times of the day and night, engaging them through playful structures and guided processions snaking around other local sites of interest. In their filling of space, the artists were concerned with the sustained threat posed by potential redevelopments in east London.<sup>30</sup> In this light it is unsurprising that Action Space returned to the same site for a similar period of time the following year while diversifying and expanding its utilization of under-appreciated urban space to include warehouses in Camden, too. An oral history project 'Unfinished Histories' (2012–14) noted that the group particularly used derelict buildings and abandoned lots as well as parks, streets and schools for their installations and performances (Figure 7.2).<sup>31</sup>

Although beginning under the radar and in conflict with local councils, Action Space progressively garnered institutional support. Its semi-legal squats gained acceptance and the art-centre-come-squat it created in Camden called the Drill Hall was formally used by community groups and performers of all kinds for many years.<sup>32</sup> Beginning with a small grant for the Wapping project, later residencies received increasing funding from the Arts Council. Action Space itself became a charitable trust backed by the Greater London Council, Camden Council and private trusts. This transition, from informal appropriations of land largely disregarded by authorities to sanctioned occupations of approved spaces, is notable. It marked the beginning of an artist-led change in the perception of vacant spaces by governing bodies, with financial and material support following from this softening towards such 'radical' experiments. One can thus note a precedent here to recent institutionally backed initiatives in London.<sup>33</sup>

Action Space's experimental participatory methodology initially tended to be deployed in particular locations for only a few weeks at a time, but over many years became more concertedly cyclical and therefore locally embedded, returning to the same sites several times. The success of their

<sup>30</sup> See K. Turner, 'Imaginative Eye' <<http://www.imaginativeeye.co.uk/historical%20present.html>> [accessed 5 Jan. 2019].

<sup>31</sup> For further information and images, see 'Unfinished Histories' <<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/action-space/>> [accessed 5 Jan. 2019].

<sup>32</sup> See Turner, 'Imaginative Eye' <<http://www.imaginativeeye.co.uk/historicalpresence.html>> [accessed 5 Jan. 2019].

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., the mayor of London's crowdfunding programme and the Skip Garden at King's Cross, run by the charity Global Generation and supported by developers and local councils.



Figure 7.1. St. John's churchyard, Wapping, from the air, 1922.  
Photo: Historic England/britainfromabove.org.uk.



Figure 7.2. 3 August 1970, St. John's churchyard. Photo:  
Dennis Oulds/Central Press/Getty Images.

annual inhabitations is evidenced by the eventual incorporation of their projects into existing systems of governance and the group's ability to draw local attention to the potential of empty sites. This short-term activism was intentional, conceived as a spark that might fruitfully connect communities with their 'empty' spaces, leading to greater social change. In its original form the group was active until 1978 before dissolving into several disparate strands of work.

### *Localizing emptiness in community gardens*

As indicated by Action Space's increasing engagement with institutional structures and local authorities, the relative 'lightness' of approach to empty space in the 1960s was soon to be replaced by the seriousness of the social and collective drive evident in the rise of the community-garden movement of the 1970s. Founded in 1980 as a result of this turn, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG) represented an umbrella organization for community-managed farms, gardens, allotments and other green spaces. The FCFCG itself recognized that earlier artistic groups facilitated a reassessment of empty spaces as sites of local value, arguing that the British community-garden movement 'sprang out of the rise in community awareness and activism from the 1960s counterculture'.<sup>34</sup>

Derelict 'empty' land was still in abundance in the 1970s. The UK community-garden movement might not have taken advantage of it had there not been a parallel movement already growing in the US. Across the Atlantic, temporary gardens were built in reaction to urban abandonment and as a resource against inflation. At the same time they also embodied and endorsed new forms of environmentalism and provided an outlet for neighbourhoods experiencing social unrest.<sup>35</sup> In 1973, the same year that an oil crisis and the Vietnam War tipped the US into recession, the Green Guerrillas began advocating community gardening in New York City. The term 'guerrilla gardening' stems from those days. It was coined by Liz Christy, an artist living and working in New York in the 1970s and one of the founders of the movement.<sup>36</sup> Most of these 'guerrilla' projects eventually succumbed to New York's housing development pressures, but this did not stop activists from continuing to seek out opportunities for mixing housing with green spaces in inclusive design schemes for urban communities.<sup>37</sup> In this period temporary gardens were not just about 'education, nutrition,

<sup>34</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, p. 176.

<sup>35</sup> Lawson, *City Bountiful*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Awan, Schneider and Till, *Spatial Agency*, p. 152.

<sup>37</sup> Lawson, *City Bountiful*, p. 259.

beautification and recreation’ but also about ‘community empowerment and grassroots activism’,<sup>38</sup> acting as places of free experimentation and socialization for communities under significant pressure.

Back in the UK and working in west London, sculptor Jamie McCullough rambled through the canal-side housing ruins of his local Paddington in spring 1976 with an imaginative eye for this ‘vacant’ space. His discovery gave birth to *Meanwhile Gardens* (1976–). Seeing an opportunity amidst the clearance of local derelict buildings, but in contrast to Action Space’s initially unsanctioned activities, he applied for permission from the local council to create a community garden on this fly-tipped site.<sup>39</sup> Having obtained backing for a limited-term project, McCullough received substantial support for his idea from different directions. He wrote that ‘it felt a bit like being in the middle of an imploding miracle with ideas and support and materials pouring in from everywhere’ in order to bring about significant environmental change.<sup>40</sup> Like the work of the Guerrillas, the creation of *Meanwhile Gardens* was strongly symbolic of a wider ambition for social empowerment, a motivation McCullough identified as ‘taking control of your own world’.<sup>41</sup> The artist’s vision for the four-acre site was one that engaged residents in design through personal childhood memories of ‘secret’, ‘magical’ places, while an undulating form gave rise to womb-like, protected dips where both groups and individuals could feel equally accommodated and ‘at home’.<sup>42</sup> Its construction was backed by a government employment scheme, local businesses and residents (Figures 7.3–7.4).

Although intended to be a stop-gap before a wider redevelopment on the site, *Meanwhile Gardens* has been able to secure ongoing tenure from the council as a result of its sustained use by locals. It continues to be run by a community association with charitable status. McCullough’s discovery was perhaps fortuitous, but the implementation of his vision for the site involved strategic contributions from a range of organizations and individuals, each of which needed to invest in his creative idea in order to bring it to fruition. The project’s considerable endurance has been made possible only by a collective reimagining of this empty space as ‘public’ and ‘lived-in’. Previously the site had been rendered effectively invisible to nearby residents by its inaccessibility, legally and physically. However, the adoption of the ‘meanwhile’ vision by local people and groups translated

<sup>38</sup> Lawson, *City Bountiful*, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 117.

<sup>40</sup> J. McCullough, *Meanwhile Gardens* (London, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> As quoted in Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 117.



Figure 7.3. Front cover of J. McCullough, *Meanwhile Gardens* (London, 1988).

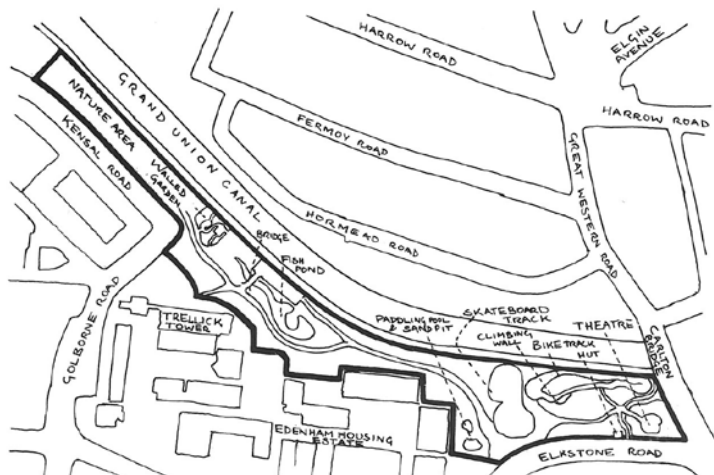


Figure 7.4. Map of 'Meanwhile Gardens' printed in McCullough, *Meanwhile Gardens*.

into a recognition of the site's 'fullness' by the local council. Its continued preservation by the governing authorities demonstrates the strength of this perceived activity and extent of inhabitation. If a site is to shake off its perceived 'emptiness' at an institutional level, the Meanwhile Gardens project suggests the importance of gathering a wide range of local supporters around the spark of an idea as early as possible. It is in the cumulative build-up of reimaginings that stability can be achieved for such empty spaces.

### ***Ecological parks and the cultivation of 'natural' emptiness***

Urban ecology developed into a recognizably distinct discipline in the 1970s and the movement of naturalists, environmentalists and wildlife conservationists supported the view that people in cities needed access, and had a right, to their own piece of the countryside. Persistent urban decline in the 1970s prompted new visions for cities and aided a change in perception that allowed 'empty' urban space to be associated with the unspoilt equilibrium of rural fields and moors far beyond city boundaries.<sup>43</sup> For new ecological organizations, the cultivation of overgrown and undeveloped empty sites made the vision of practically accessible, idealized spaces full of natural life a possible reality. They saw a different sort of potential in the pocket urban wastelands, ruins and dump-yards that peppered the urban environment. As Nicholson-Lord put it, 'ecology offered a way out of man-made aesthetics and proprietorial landscapes. It proposed filling empty urban wastes with the "real" landscapes of the countryside'.<sup>44</sup> Moving away from an emphasis on creative community participation, William Curtis Ecological Park and Camley Street Natural Park presented projects with a more definite focus on the cultivation and preservation of urban ecology stemming from these environmental roots, where 'real' landscapes were taken to mean 'natural' terrain.

Diverging from the strong social ambitions which primarily underpinned Action Space and Meanwhile Gardens, William Curtis Ecological Park (1977–85) represented one of the first attempts to create "pure" countryside' in the heart of the city for the principal benefit of nature itself alongside the education of inner-city residents in these ecological systems.<sup>45</sup> Although initiated by the Ecological Parks Trust (EPT, founded 1976) and closely associated with well-established wildlife-conservation organizations, the project has been read as 'self-consciously radical'.<sup>46</sup> William Curtis

<sup>43</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 82.

<sup>44</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 120.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 120.



was appropriated from a two-acre lorry park and derelict warehouse in Bermondsey near Tower Bridge for which the EPT was granted a short-term lease by the GLC. This consisted of five years on a peppercorn rent, but was later extended for a further three years.<sup>47</sup> It was the first space of many to be adopted by the EPT and was developed with a planting density that easily outstripped Meanwhile Gardens, for where Meanwhile Gardens claimed a concrete skate park and rolling green grass, William Curtis was carefully designed by expert ecologists to contain twenty densely programmed miniature ecosystems (Figures 7.5–7.6).<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the project was pitched more obviously to a wider city audience rather than just those living and working in the locality. After closure in 1985, the prominent inner-city site was redeveloped into the offices of the GLC, the same public body that had granted the park's first lease. The GLC's original endorsement of the scheme grew out of a developing planning strategy that sought to conserve London's ecology and habitat and to actively create new wildlife-friendly sites that were integrated into the design of the urban fabric, but this support was inevitably complicated by rising land values.

Yet this experimental project proved to be the first of many such miniature urban ecology sites set up by the EPT. The trust's aim for the project was to challenge city-dwellers to reassess the relationship between man and nature, while also acting as a testing ground for the wider possibilities of habitat creation on disused city sites. During its operation the park welcomed almost 100,000 visitors and schoolchildren. This figure supports the view that this was a very successful and mutually beneficial partnership, opportunistically spurred on by a reimagining of a previously disregarded space. And yet, in part due to its location, William Curtis appears to have been less wholeheartedly bound up with a particular local community. While the project was not primarily directed towards social transformation, it made an undeniable contribution to raising public awareness of the value of such underused slithers of land, especially in relation to urban wildlife. More importantly, it pioneered a way forward for environmentally focused groups like the EPT, adding credibility to their case for more miniature transformations on such vacant sites.

William Curtis was firmly positioned within a wider ecological movement which was well supported by the GLC. By 1982 twelve of the sixty-eight designated wildlife sites in the capital were ecological parks or nature gardens

<sup>47</sup> M. Hale, 'The use and provision of urban land for ecology field teaching: recent developments in north London', in *Land-Use Change: Proceedings of the Asahikawa-Sapporo International Symposium*, ed. R. D. Hill (Hong Kong, 1990), pp. 176–92.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 120.

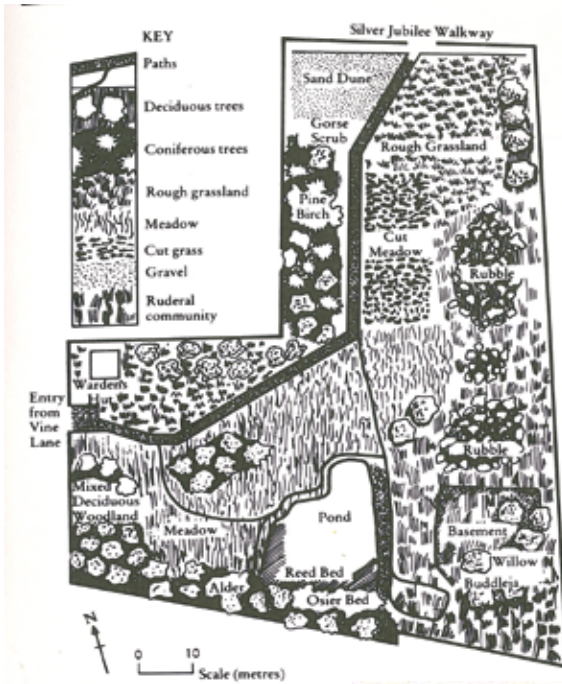


Figure 7.5. Planting plan of William Curtis Ecological Park. Image: Ecological Parks Trust, 1982 (from D. Nicholson-Lord, *The Greening of Cities*, copyright 1987, reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Books UK).

Figure 7.6. William Curtis Ecological Park from the air. Photo: David Goode in *New Scientist*, 25 March 1985.



based on this model.<sup>49</sup> Dedicated ecological professionals were included on council planning teams in order to facilitate the identification of suitable sites and encourage more of these innovative projects. However, with the GLC facing imminent dissolution and fragmentation, it was feared that these posts would be lost. The leader of the council's ecologists regretfully noted that there was 'little hope of this new ecological awareness being maintained'.<sup>50</sup> In spite of this, as William Curtis came to its planned date of closure, Camley Street Natural Park (1985 – present) began in Camden, founded on this micro-park model. In this case it was the enthusiastic campaigning of local groups such as the London Wildlife Trust (LWT) which inclined the Greater London Council to commit to the development of this particular 'in-between' space.<sup>51</sup> The two-acre site was bounded by Regent's Canal, St. Pancras Station and King's Cross Station (Figure 7.7). Hemmed in by industrial infrastructure on all sides, this location ensured the disinterest of private developers. Even so, Camley Street only narrowly escaped the fate of its predecessor William Curtis in the longer term, and remains an urban nature reserve to this day.



Figure 7.7. Camley Street Natural Park from above, showing King's Cross station and Regent's canal. Image: Google maps, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> As quoted in P. Simons, 'A city fit for wildlife', *New Scientist*, cv (28 March 1985), 30–3, at p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Kamvasinou, 'The public value of vacant urban land', p. 157.



Figure 7.8. Camley Street natural park looking towards north.  
Photo: David Goode in *New Scientist*, 25 March 1985.

So effective was the enterprise of the EPT at Tower Bridge that in the early 1980s a commercial proposal to transform the former coal yard in Camden into a lorry park was rejected by planners in favour of an ecological park. The exact impact on this decision of the active campaigning by local residents for the park is unclear, but the GLC was evidently supportive of the scheme from a very early stage. Consequently the GLC purchased the site in 1981 and was responsible for the clearing and development of it in partnership with Camden council, leading to its opening in 1985. The management of the space was undertaken by local volunteers alongside the LWT, which employed one full-time onsite warden to manage the site and organize the educational aspects of the project (Figure 7.8).

Hale states that Camley Street was a ‘direct consequence of the lessons learned’ at William Curtis.<sup>52</sup> However, despite sharing a similar ethos to William Curtis the project represented a slight shift in approach and legacy. As a result of the transformative work undertaken on the former coal yard, Camley Street achieved the official status of local nature reserve. This was a first for an ‘artificially-created nature park’.<sup>53</sup> Although William Curtis and Camley Street undoubtedly hosted plants and wildlife while they lay

<sup>52</sup> Hale, ‘The use and provision of urban land’, p. 188.

<sup>53</sup> Hale, ‘The use and provision of urban land’, p. 188.

'empty' as lorry parks and disused coal yards, it was only when there was a self-consciously designed plan for their planting and layout that they were deemed to have value as spaces 'filled up' with natural and human activity. It seems that if the original sites had been left fallow, accommodating more and more wildlife in an ad hoc fashion, they would more probably have been considered 'empty' by authorities and offered up to the highest bidder for development. A certain level of human intervention, no matter how light the touch or how wild the aesthetic, was critical in changing perceptions of these sites at an institutional level, aided by the existence of a successful precedent. Only with guidance from gardeners, landscapers and residents could nature overwhelm the 'emptiness' of an urban wasteland, leading to its establishment and preservation as a site of valued activity. Moving more concertedly out of an uncertain length of tenure to secure a longer-term future, the significance of Camley Street has also been in its longevity. It recently celebrated thirty years since opening and the collaborative venture is still maintained by a number of different organizations and voluntary groups. For institutions, empty spaces were implicitly those directionless in terms of the future, without an overarching man-made design or vision acting upon them. On the contrary, those spaces with a plan or expectation for change contributed to the idea of a landscape of potential rather than a landscape of decline.

### *The life cycle of emptiness in urban land use*

In the later twentieth century, London's status as a growing global city with ever-rising land values meant that vacant land suitable for temporary use was exceptionally scarce. Despite this trajectory and the rise of ecological initiatives there continued to be a good stock of unused 'gaps' in the urban environment of London in the 1980s, resulting in ongoing occupations by community activists. The 1980s were also characterized by an increasingly expressive global environmental awareness worked out, at least in part, through environmental art projects. One such project was Agnes Denes's 'Wheatfield – a confrontation' in 1982. Planting an entire field of wheat in downtown Manhattan, Denes transformed a landfill site which was destined for the construction of a luxury complex. In this Denes sought to raise awareness of misplaced values and the mismanagement of resources.<sup>54</sup>

By the mid 1980s ideas of environmentalism were well-recognized throughout the UK and had already made an impact on the ground, although to varying extents.<sup>55</sup> From 1974 more derelict land, once unnoticed

<sup>54</sup> See <<http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>> [accessed 18 Jan. 2019].

<sup>55</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, p. 169.

and undervalued, was formally designated as open space through purchase by local authorities. This represented a large-scale change in land use and London boroughs were equally affected by this national shift. For example, in Newham, an inner east London borough, there was an increase of one hundred per cent in the quantity of open space from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s. However, the majority of developments that occurred as a result of these official reclamations were concertedly post-industrial in intent, inclined towards recreational or amenity uses. On the whole, these increasingly substantial 'regenerations' were more commercially mainstream, in contrast to the more experimental, creative uses of alternative groups in the previous decades. These changes eventually led to tourist landscapes such as those of Covent Garden, Camden Lock and St. Katharine's Dock in London, and subsequently to gentrification more generally in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup>

In spite of this turning of the tide, local artistic and community groups continued to act in relation to small sites, clustering in boroughs which were still somewhat under the radar of developers. The radical new approach to environmental community art pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s was adopted by a range of artistic agencies, many of which were especially active in Hackney, east London, in the proceeding decades. Jerry Cooper, a designer of Hackney Grove Gardens (1982–c.1996), speaks of a feeling in the late 1970s and early 1980s that 'community projects [in the area] were sort of springing up all over the place and thriving'.<sup>57</sup> Again led by a group of artists, although also galvanized by a mandate from the local community, Hackney Grove Gardens was created on the site of a burnt-out factory by a community arts organization and co-ordinating body named Free Form, where Cooper worked. The garden was located in the shadow of the town hall and later developed into the Hackney Central Library and Museum (Figures 7.9–7.10).

For those passing by the sunken site it was evidently 'in waiting', but waiting for what? Whereas the local council saw an opportunity to develop it into a convenient car park, local residents petitioned for a landscaped garden to be carved out of the half-acre derelict basement. With echoes of Meanwhile Gardens and William Curtis, the council authorized a short-term project while it considered development proposals for its longer-term future. Constructed and designed by Free Form employees in collaboration with residents, the garden was open daily and used for community-managed events through the Hackney Grove garden group. Free Form's practice was a step away from the futuristic, fine-art aesthetic of Action Space towards a

<sup>56</sup> Nicholson-Lord, *Greening*, pp. 170–3.

<sup>57</sup> J. Cooper, interview with authors, 17 Feb. 2015.



Figure 7.9. Hackney Grove Gardens 'Work in Progress', Jan. 1983. Photo: Alan Denney via flickr.

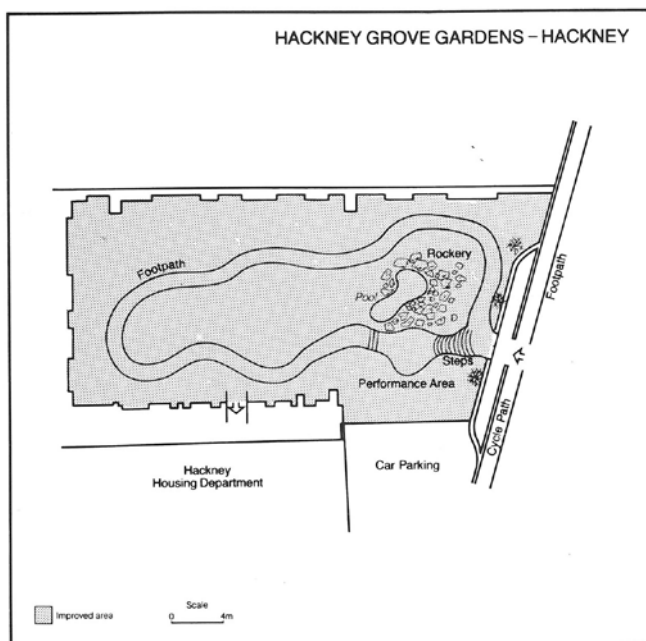


Figure 7.10. Plan drawn for case study of 'Greening City Sites: Good Practice in Urban Regeneration', Department of the Environment, 1987.

more handmade and idiosyncratic design style. Those involved often lived in co-operative local housing and their work clearly acknowledged the value of play in local communities.<sup>58</sup>

The creative practices developed by these artist-activists gained increasing recognition from governing bodies engaged with environmental reform, leading to Hackney Grove Gardens' selection as a case study for the Department of the Environment's 1987 publication *Greening City Sites: Good Practice in Urban Regeneration*. The report particularly commended the project on its value for money, noting that the constricted site 'has received a high intensity of resources, yet is cost effective because of the high intensity of use which it attracts'.<sup>59</sup> Hospital patients, school children, local workers, garden groups and youth counselling centres all overlapped in their usage of the garden. Despite this initial enthusiasm, however, by 1995 Hackney Grove Gardens was in danger of becoming 'completely overgrown' and the site was eventually redeveloped by the council as planned.<sup>60</sup> Local engagement was vital to the project's survival and when that failed the land lapsed back into disuse.

Its prominent location directly adjacent to the town hall clearly enabled the collective reimagining of the site by the community. The development of Hackney Grove Gardens also demonstrates a collaborative dynamic between artistic groups, institutions and the local community which was probably helped by a shared familiarity with similar projects in the recent past. The creation and continuation of the Gardens was only made possible through reactive dialogues between the diverse parties involved, all of which identified the derelict site as 'empty' because of its previous use and consequent disuse. Perhaps the stakes were higher because of the space's high-profile situation. Either way, the memory of the past was visibly imprinted on the site through the unoccupied post-industrial ruins of the factory. Its emptiness was potently represented and consequently actively overturned. Significantly, however, it seems that Hackney Grove fell back into 'emptiness' in the mid 1990s, its life span once more defined by its cultivation: in decline and overgrown, it was reclaimed by the council for their own redevelopment several years later.

In urban sites inhabitation as well as emptiness is cyclical in nature; the question is only the relative length of the cycle. These case studies, situated in conjunction with the broader narratives of urban change of which they

<sup>58</sup> Cooper, interview with authors, 17 Feb. 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Department for the Environment, *Greening City Sites: Good Practice in Urban Regeneration* (London, 1987), p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> M. Church, 'Magicians who can make urban gloom disappear', *The Independent*, 31 May 1995, p. 25.



are a necessary part, suggest that there has been a compression in this cyclical process as the decades have passed. In a city significantly more spatially squeezed than fifty years ago, empty spaces are less easily identified, but creative practitioners continue to seek them out and campaign with locals for periods of temporary occupation and transformation which re-substantiate the local value of pockets of 'empty space'.<sup>61</sup> Dialogue between diverse stakeholders has become ever more important in the active use and maintenance of these sites. Shared visions of potential have come to define the life cycle of spaces while the density and diversity of London's ever-changing population and built environment only serve to complicate community dynamics.

### ***Conclusion***

Against the perception of vacancy as emptiness, this chapter has attempted to offer a productive reading of 'unproductive' urban voids and to suggest that emptiness is a question of perception. Empty spaces can accommodate different types of use and are not 'blank spaces' as sometimes represented on land-use maps. This discussion has centred on a lineage of creative projects in vacant spaces in the post-war years in Britain, with a focus on London. From informal gardening and art projects in the 1960s to community gardens and the growth of environmentalism in the 1970s, and from land reclamation and environmental art in the 1980s to the mainstreaming of urban greening projects as part of the regeneration boom in the late 1980s and 1990s, there has been a historical evolution in how 'empty space' has been discovered, made visible and reimagined. As these creative projects show, a number of steps are necessary for empty urban spaces to be recognized as having potential in their emptiness. Usually this recognition comes first from enlightened champions and then from a range of citizens, eventually leading to organizations such as local authorities taking notice and enabling valuable local uses to occur. In the case of Action Space, for example, the initial counter-cultural, semi-illegal activities in empty spaces gained eventual acceptance and support by the Greater London Council, Camden Council and private trusts. In later years such endeavours became much more firmly rooted in specific local sites and communities, ensuring the support of local councils from an early stage and hence their longevity. Meanwhile Gardens is an example of this. An even larger vision, which saw empty spaces reconfigured as pieces of 'real' countryside in the city, led to the establishment of ecology parks such as William Curtis and Camley Street. These projects were purposed for the

<sup>61</sup> E.g., the Skip Garden project at King's Cross is a current example of such use incorporated within a larger-scale redevelopment project.

enjoyment and education, not only of locals, but of the wider city population too. While the location of many of these sites meant that some of the more prominent empty spaces were ultimately redeveloped (William Curtis and Hackney Grove Gardens), their legacy has lived on.

Although there is evidence that some of this history is known to the initiators of current temporary-use projects on vacant land in London, the awareness of officials and policy-makers who support such schemes is less clear. The story of emptiness in city space is often an oral, poorly documented history. While the historical legacy of the post-war projects presented here cannot be directly recognizable in the specific initiatives of the recent crisis (2008–12), it nevertheless contributes to a broader kind of collective memory. In effect, diverse groups now recognize the local value of small urban voids more often than they did fifty years ago. These often miniature, sometimes aesthetically unimpressive projects must also be valued for their role in challenging and changing attitudes towards vacant land and, more generally, in bringing environmentalism and community participation to the foreground in terms of cultural consciousness. What started as a marginal endeavour by a few pioneers has in various ways now become mainstream and accepted practice.

The relevance of this historical evolution for today's vacant spaces and contemporary city design can be seen in a number of persisting themes. One such theme seems to emerge from the fact that the discovery, reclamation and use of empty space for community activities has a significant influence on the community itself: 'Community gardens grow food [and flowers], but – just as importantly – they also grow community'.<sup>62</sup> The social links developed can then lead to tackling other issues in an area – housing, schools, unemployment, skills-training, crime and so forth. Where in Hackney Grove Gardens, for example, the local council saw space for a car park, Free Form saw an opportunity for a community garden that could connect and serve hospital patients, school children, local workers, garden groups and youth counselling. The creative use of vacant space through practices such as gardening or community art may not appear revolutionary but, more than turning everybody into a gardener or an artist, it has provoked a reimagining of the city. These projects address land ownership and community rights in a more equitable manner, beyond an emphasis on privatized public space.<sup>63</sup> Where house-builders may see only a wasted space

<sup>62</sup> C. Carlsson, *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant-Lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today!* (Edinburgh, 2008) p. 89, cited in McKay, *Radical Gardening*, p. 182.

<sup>63</sup> McKay, *Radical Gardening*, pp. 193–4. See also A. Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First-Century City* (London, 2012).

that could be exploited for profit, spaces perceived as empty have value which may be measured through community participation and satisfaction and which in turn can influence policy decisions about urban development and design. The ideological premises of value may differ between different actors and their diverse agendas, but the current emphasis on socio-economic and environmental sustainability requires a rethinking of value. Post-war planning in Britain suffered from 'the fallacy of trying to manage places and people as separate entities without recognizing the importance of their interaction'.<sup>64</sup> A more synergetic approach, giving people decision-making power and a certain autonomy in relation to the land they occupy, can lead to better environments, more socially integrated communities and less cost for the public sector.

A number of other recurring themes, from community and arts-led activism to environmental restoration and awareness and from the search for the rural in urban landscapes to urban ecology, are still relevant today. Current temporary projects on vacant land often focus on raising awareness of food production and food security and on educating about sustainability,<sup>65</sup> or on gardening and food-growing as a community activity more generally,<sup>66</sup> with some also advocating community-led regeneration and environmental restoration of abandoned landscapes.<sup>67</sup> However, today we are witnessing a further evolution towards economic opportunity and the rise of a new type of activism, that of the social entrepreneur and the culture of creative business start-ups which often intersect with the use of vacant space.<sup>68</sup> While the historical precedents examined in this chapter had a clear focus on social and environmental targets, today's equivalents integrate economic targets too, through their support for small local enterprises, manifesting the potential for spaces perceived as empty to provide financial benefits to communities.

Creative use of vacant land can help to develop an empty space into a highly valued community resource, acting as a catalyst for neglected sites to be reinscribed onto existing mental and physical maps. This visibility

<sup>64</sup> Coleman, 'The death of the inner city', p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., Global Generation <<https://www.globalgeneration.org.uk>> [accessed 5 Apr. 2019] and the Skip Garden at King's Cross <<https://www.kingscross.co.uk/skip-garden>> [accessed 5 Apr. 2019] and Cultivate London.

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., Abbey Gardens in Newham, London <[http://www.abbeygardens.org/?page\\_id=1849](http://www.abbeygardens.org/?page_id=1849)> [accessed 5 Apr. 2019].

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Gasworks Dock Partnership and their project at the Cody Dock, London <<https://codydock.org.uk>> [accessed 5 Apr. 2019].

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., the social enterprise side of initiatives such as the Cody Dock project and Cultivate London <<https://interimspacescreativeuse.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 6 Sept. 2015].

can lead to better-informed decisions: unless a local space is recognized by diverse groups it cannot be protected. Can 'empty spaces' then facilitate a variety of temporary uses for local or interest-based groups, changing over time as well as in nature? Historically, vacant spaces have acted as important pressure valves, able temporarily to accommodate and mitigate economic difficulties, environmental concerns and social unrest. Although they cannot be the solution to the long-term structural problems of the contemporary city, importantly they challenge accepted norms of value inviting assessments of land that go beyond the immediately quantifiable.

