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Kamvasinou, K.

A paper presented at AMPS Tangible-Intangible Heritage(s): Design, social and cultural critiques on the past, the present and the future, University of East London, 13-15 June 2018, and published in AMPS Proceedings Series, 15 (1), pp. 92-100.

It is available from the publisher at:

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DOCUMENTING INTERIM SPACES AS 21ST CENTURY HERITAGE

Author:

KRYSTALLIA KAMVASINO

Affiliation:

SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND CITIES, UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

INTRODUCTION

Interim spaces are a paradoxical type of urban space. I am referring here to creative temporary projects developed in vacant urban spaces, injecting them with life, dynamism and identity in the interim between more permanent developments. The power and potential of these projects and the spaces they temporarily occupy constitute a kind of intangible heritage that is carried on in subsequent generations through word of mouth, oral histories or even interim spaces that have managed to become permanent. This warrants the question whether the definition of intangible cultural heritage can expand to address an urban phenomenon that is ephemeral by nature and not necessarily tied with specific buildings or physical spaces. Often the value of interim spaces and temporary use coincides with that outlined in official heritage policy in relation to more mainstream historic environments such as environmental quality, identity, local distinctiveness, community cohesion, social inclusion, and as stimulus for new architecture¹; all of which can be traced in the contributions of interim spaces to urban life. The paper discusses how the legacy of historical temporary projects in the public realm has passed on to today's initiatives, and as such forms a kind of unofficial heritage. It also addresses the importance of documentation since interim spaces are by nature ephemeral.

The paper draws on three projects initiated during the late 2000s recession, located in East London: Canning Town Caravanserai (2010-2015), a semi-public community and events space; Cody Dock (2009-), a community-led regeneration and river revitalisation project; and Abbey Gardens (2008-), a community garden and public space. The term "interim spaces" has been chosen to connote that these were spaces waiting for development, or urban change more generally, to happen. In terms of documentation, a website² acts as a repository for a concise overview of the projects, while a documentary film,³ based on interviews with initiators, volunteers and users, presents their different characters and goals, and their power and potential in relation to longer-term sustainability. Using the documentary as a starting point, the paper traces their linkages with historical examples of interim spaces from the post-war context of London. Most historical temporary projects are long gone leaving no physical traces behind; some, however, remain and have managed to endure. The making of the documentary responds to the need to protect the heritage value of such temporary interventions even after these may be physically gone or altered.

A HISTORY OF INTERIM SPACES

Historically, the fields of architecture and urban planning are preoccupied with filling in "vacant land," transforming the empty into the built.⁴ "Vacant land" is an urban design term referring to unbuilt, leftover or derelict land.⁵

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Vacancy can evoke the fear of failure, lack of productivity and waste if one focuses solely on economic value. But vacancy also embodies latent potential which can turn it into a valuable local asset for communities.

The terms “interim,” “interwhile” or “meanwhile”⁶ refer to the short-term use of vacant land for purposes other than its official long-term designation. In recent years in the UK, interim uses have frequently been sanctioned and licensed, as in the projects captured in the documentary “Interim Spaces and Creative Use” (2017). This has often been in response to conditions of recession that have slowed down more permanent, planned development.

The history of interim use goes back at least to the late nineteenth-century, when projects initiated by wealthy philanthropists in the US cities of Detroit, Philadelphia and New York aimed at social reform through cultivation of vacant land to support food growing for the urban poor.⁷ The twentieth century witnessed the “Dig for Victory” campaigns during the two World Wars, the 1970s activist projects and Guerilla Gardening as a form of resistance to urban decline and abandonment⁸ and the 1980s environmental awareness projects on vacant development sites such as Agnes Denes’ New York “Wheatfield – A confrontation” (1982).⁹

In the 1990s the focus turned to entrepreneurial and training programs of community “greening”¹⁰ and the rise of bottom-up and insurgent planning, through temporary appropriation of “idle land and buildings.”¹¹ In the 2000s temporary use projects were characterized by recreation, community food security and food growing, job training and education¹² while contributing to social cohesion and the resolution of community conflict.¹³

London has had a peculiar position in this history due to its high land values and global city status which meant that vacant land was exceptionally scarce.¹⁴ Nevertheless, temporary uses such as community gardens thrived in the 1970s¹⁵ while temporary community-led land reclamation in the 1980s led to more permanent uses.¹⁶ The heritage value of such projects encompasses both their social and their environmental contribution and has been a guide for more recent interim projects.

In contrast to their historical precedents, which were often unsanctioned and against official policy, or even to the more traditional developers and landowners reluctance to allow temporary use on their sites, because of fear of liability or of setting a precedent difficult to overcome, the late 2000s interim projects were officially sanctioned through the introduction of the Meanwhile lease (2009), in an attempt to counteract the effects of the recession – stalled sites, hoardings, slowed down development. Temporary use was encouraged and supported in order to activate space.

In the course of the ten years since though, temporary use has moved even further from its origins in necessity and survival, recreation and environmental sustainability, to become commercialized, hip and trendy, and is now expected as the first step to attract people in any new development: Pop-ups pop up everywhere. This is a paradoxical turn in the history of temporary use and emblematic of the conditions of neoliberalism.

The importance of temporariness in the city has been explored in a body of literature that focuses on the phenomena of “temporary urbanism” and “loose space” and their links to city development¹⁷ however there is little research looking at the importance of temporariness from a heritage perspective. Temporariness enables a wider spectrum of creative and entrepreneurial uses to those acceptable in formal urban spaces, which often “outlive the [temporary] sites and remain as a long-term legacy.”¹⁸ Hence temporariness can produce environmental quality, identity, local distinctiveness, community cohesion, social inclusion, and act as stimulus for new architecture, all key characteristics of heritage value as outlined earlier. However, very little of the history of temporariness in London has been documented or published, George McKay’s 2011 book on “Radical Gardening” and David Nicholson-Lord’s 1987 “The Greening of the Cities” being notable exceptions, while Bishop and Williams in “The

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Temporary City” capture some of the more recent incarnations of temporary use. The projects presented in the documentary, and the historic ones they are compared with in this paper, go beyond designated uses for vacant sites, and showcase the positive role of temporary vacancy in the urban cycle.

TRACING THE LEGACY

I will be rewinding back to the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s to trace possible links with the micro-history of practices and ideologies associated with interim spaces and creative use, and the particular conditions under which these developed, to try to paint the landscape of intangible heritage I am referring to. From the early 1960s, marred by haphazard post-war reconstruction, the decline of the manufacturing industry and subsequent loss of jobs, London witnessed a progressive emptying of people from the inner city.¹⁹ These conditions led to the emergence of the horti-counterculture movement of this decade, which, as McKay puts it, reacted to decline by reworking vacant space through gardening and practices which have since become mainstream, for example, the use of the sun, wind and water for energy, and of local materials and recycling.²⁰ Communal living was commonplace, and art collectives that advocated art in service of a social purpose flourished.

One such radical collective was Action Space (1968-1978), who introduced temporary spatial transformation and interactive art installations in derelict buildings and abandoned lots as well as parks, streets and schools in Wapping, East London and Camden, Northwest London.²¹ A recent experimental film project at the University of Westminster’s Ambica P3 Gallery (2015) revived their contribution and reaffirmed their “contemporary relevance”²² with regards to “pertinent issues around public/private space, individual/collective creativity, community and responsibility, emancipation and play.”²³

Although initially bottom-up and at loggerheads with local councils, Action Space gradually became a Charitable Trust and secured the support of institutions such as the Greater London Council, Camden Council and private trusts.²⁴ This trajectory forms a useful legacy that informs and guides recent institutionally backed initiatives in London.

Fast forward to 2010, Canning Town Caravanserai wins one of the sites at the competition *Meanwhile London: Opportunity Docks*. The proposal aimed to turn the large stalled site into a temporary micro-scale urban “oasis.”²⁵ The site was part of the Town Centre planned for Canning Town and included a block of flats that were demolished before the start of the project. The project was led by Ash Sakula Architects who envisioned a wide range of “trading, making, cooking and eating” activities that would engage both locals and visitors during the summer of the Olympics (2012).²⁶ The goals of the project included local skills’ development through the provision of training workshops, fostering community through food growing spaces, and even ticketed events.

After its first year, the need for a more sheltered and enclosed structure for activities led to the construction of “Flitched” through a design competition which was launched in November 2012 and encouraged multidisciplinary teams to reconsider construction waste and the upcycling of materials. The construction phase attracted a lot of interest from architecture students and recent graduates from the UK and abroad, who participated as volunteers in the project, forming a particular community of interest. This community was connected not only in physical space but through social media such as Facebook, while the project was also documented on a website. Such media gave the interim space an extended life both in time but also in space, in terms of its reach to people world-wide while creating a “myth” enhanced by carefully selected photographic representations, the inclusion of self-portraits of the people engaged with it over time, and commentary. Although the project terminated in 2015, its online presence still carries on, emphasising its conceptual dimensions that can be applicable in other places, too.²⁷ (Fig.1)

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The initiators argued that such spaces are needed “as an alternative to public spaces offered in new developments, which are too focused on consumption, but also to parks, which are less attractive for those who don’t have dogs or children. They are also important in terms of a ‘methodology’ for future projects to “prove an impact” and test whether there is a particular need.”²⁸



Fig. 1 Canning Town Caravanserai

Rewinding back to the 1970s, the project brings to mind a similar site characterised by housing demolition, which however had a much longer-term fate. In West London in 1976, sculptor Jamie McCullough initiated Meanwhile Gardens on a derelict housing site next to the Grand Union Canal. He applied for permission from the local council and secured financial support from a variety of governmental and private local sources, including businesses and residents. Meanwhile Gardens embedded a strong ethos of social empowerment through engaging residents with the design process. Spaces were based on residents’ childhood memories and dreams, while undulating forms created intimate spaces for groups and individuals to feel “at home.”²⁹

Meanwhile Gardens, as the name aptly suggests, was meant to be an interim space on a temporary permission before a wider redevelopment on the site but has managed to endure and continues to be run by Meanwhile Gardens Community Association, a registered charity. Its heritage value lies thus not only in its green credentials but also in the strength of its perceived social use and popularity which led to its preservation by the local authorities, confirming its influence at both local and institutional level. It was also one of the few projects of the time to be captured on a 1981 Channel 4 documentary by Steve Shaw,³⁰ reaching further audiences beyond the local.

In a similar manner, Cody Dock, a contemporary project initiated by and involving local artists and moorers in 2009, engaged the support of Newham Council and private sponsors to secure a 999 years lease for the local community to develop the site through interim use in a slow, organic, community-led manner. This is not however just a public space or art project but involves a plan for urban regeneration through social enterprise, environmental reclamation and jobs creation in the long run. It does so through temporary projects utilizing the space, including events and workshops. (Fig 2) In this sense, it is not unlike another well-known project, the Coin Street Community Builders development, whose model in the 1980s also included the appropriation of derelict land on the South Bank for incremental development featuring small independent retail shops and cooperative housing, instead of wholesale property-led development.

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Fig. 2 Cody Dock

Cody Dock points to a lineage of art groups involved in urban change. Throughout the 1980s regeneration, local art groups continued to act in small sites, particularly in boroughs which had not yet attracted the interest of developers, such as Hackney in East London. Led by a community arts organisation named Free Form, and following a strong mandate from the local community, Hackney Grove Gardens was created in a 1982 as an interim project with official council support on the site of a burnt out factory near the town hall.

Hackney Grove Gardens gained recognition from governing bodies engaged with environmental reform, and was selected as a case study for the Department of the Environment's 1987 publication "Greening City Sites: Good Practice in Urban Regeneration." Its heritage value was documented for posterity, even though it eventually declined and was replaced by the Hackney Central Library and Museum in 1996.³¹ Last, the legacy of the work of artists in public space and community gardens is also present in the more recent Abbey Gardens. This is also the only example where the element of heritage is clear in the history and status of the site: one of only two Scheduled Ancient Monuments in Newham, it contains the remains of a twelfth-century Cistercian abbey where monks once ran a kitchen garden. The Friends of Abbey Gardens was formed in 2006, and commissioned an arts project entitled "What Will The Harvest Be?" as the first step of turning the site into a public space and productive garden.³²

Indicating a less obvious element of heritage, the design of Abbey Gardens makes reference to the history of the nearby Plaistow Triangle. To overcome the contamination of the soil, the artists, who were both garden enthusiasts, designed 30 bespoke raised beds in a formal, triangular layout inspired by the local "Plaistow Landgrabbers," an early 20th century land squatter group whose "Triangle Camp" picture is emblazoned life-size on the Abbey Gardens shed.³³ The history of interim space and its political message lives on in contemporary interventions, despite its erasure from formal urban space. "Layering" becomes a successful practice in safeguarding ephemeral heritage, while the sociality of the space constitutes its production of "new heritage." (Fig. 3)

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Fig. 3 Abbey Gardens

THE HERITAGE ELEMENT OF INTERIM SPACES

Through historical and contemporary examples of creative interim use of vacant urban space in London, one traces the post-war history of vacancy in London, and the contribution of temporariness to urban change. The making of the documentary “Interim Spaces and Creative Use” responded to the need to acknowledge and protect the heritage value of temporary urban interventions even after these may be physically gone or altered. It also led to finding out about a largely undocumented post-war history of interim spaces in London.

Arguing for the heritage value of interim spaces requires “an acceptance that the whole temporary project is not tied to a specific piece of land but rather to a specific time period;”³⁴ that ephemerality is worthy of conservation through appropriate documentation, if its contribution to urban change is significant and with lasting results, and if it is representative of specific historic conditions. Even more so if it persists -despite the erasure of physical space- in the form of social space and environmental legacies enduring in communities.

Ephemerality poses a big methodological challenge: “The transient nature of [interim] urban spaces is accentuated by their situation in a city with a highly mobile population,” such as London.³⁵ Despite this, some are still locally remembered and influence present-day initiatives. Their mark in collective memory constitutes evidence of their heritage value that goes beyond their purely spatial legacy.

Knowing the radical contribution of interim space in the production of the city is crucial in critically assessing contemporary agnostic and anodyne or market-led pop-ups and recognising the difference between commercial top-down or co-opted interventions and genuine bottom-up practices embedding social values, as well as potential synergies between the different actors, from community organisations to local councils to landowners.

Acknowledging ephemeral and interim urban spaces as part of heritage ensures that valuable community spaces do not get lost but are documented and revisited for future generations and build a legacy worth following and sustaining in collective memory and practice. This requires a rethink of the methods of documentation and particularly the criteria for ensuring the value of such spaces, as their relatively short-lived existence may be a barrier to dispassionate evaluation. Documentation is however becoming

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significantly easier nowadays than it was in the 60s and 70s due to the Internet and social media, and the popularisation of technologies such as video capture, digital photography and smartphones. There are of course other risks associated with these technological advances. However the plurality of data available in digital form may ensure a more multifarious overview of the heritage value of such ephemeral urban interventions which is critical for the longer-term production of the city.

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