# Rethinking urban transformation: Temporary uses for vacant land

Jeremy Németh [a,*], Joern Langhorst [b]

[a] Department of Planning and Design, College of Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado Denver, CB 126, PO Box 173364, Denver, CO 80217-3364, USA
[b] Department of Landscape Architecture, College of Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado Denver, CB 126, PO Box 173364, Denver, CO 80217-3364, USA

A B S T R A C T

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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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 303 315 0069.
E-mail addresses: jeremy.nemeth@ucdenver.edu (J. Németh), joern.langhorst@ucdenver.edu (J. Langhorst).

[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 (Schroeppel, 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

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[5] Many see temporary use 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.

fact an indication of healthy growth patterns. According to this theory, cities have a cyclical existence of production, growth, waste and shrinkage. The appearance of vacant land thus signals that the city is just in one stage of this natural cycle.

## Views of vacant land

Historically, scholars and planners have viewed vacant land as a problem that must be "fixed," but the upsurge in vacant land as a result of ongoing deindustrialization, as well as the challenges associated with planning in the context of "shrinking cities" has given rise to approaches that consider vacant land as a resource, one that can even provide opportunities for transformative social and ecological processes.

Community gardens on single and multiple lots, small-scale urban agriculture projects, and adaptive reuse of buildings and lots for small (and often alternative/creative) business ventures are all taking place on vacant land. These uses also provide social spaces that accommodate a wide range of community activities and perform as a new, or supplementary, civic infrastructure. And in those sites that have been abandoned for longer periods of time, vacant land can provide a range of ecological services: cracks in the pavement and degraded impervious surfaces begin to enable storm water infiltration, emergent vegetation serves to mitigate heat island effects and improve air quality, certain new plant life remediates soil contamination, and, aesthetically, such sites can counter the appearance of blight, but not always. Vacant land can be both an opportunity and a problem, as Table 1 displays.

Rather than focus on how to prevent vacant land – although an important pursuit indeed – we are interested in exploring instead the potential for vacant land for several main reasons. First, vacant land represents tremendous opportunities for smart growth principles like infill, brownfield and greyfield redevelopment, and the creation of open and green space in dense cities (Bowman & Pagano, 2001; Peirce, 1995; Schilling & Logan, 2008). Second, vacant lots that are completely abandoned do, indeed, begin to attract trash, debris and often create a negative ripple effect on adjacent or nearby properties; thus, exploring the opportunities for vacant lots is a key endeavor for redevelopment planners (Accordino & Johnson, 2000; Burchell & Listokin, 1981). Third, vacant land can bring together disparate parties, including homeowners, neighborhood advocates, fire departments and realtors, around shared interests to address perceived negative externalities (Hou, 2010). Fourth, vacant land tends to concentrate in neighborhoods with disproportionately high levels of marginalized populations, a condition typical in (but not exclusive to) struggling Rustbelt cities like Detroit, Cleveland and St. Louis (Langhorst, submitted for publication). In these contexts especially, rallying around vacant land concerns can expose and address issues of social and environmental injustice. Fifth, scholars point out that the rise of the so-called "shrinking cities" like Detroit, St. Louis, Akron, and Stockton, Modesto and Phoenix, mean that more vacant land will materialize in

the coming decades (Hollander & Németh, 2011; Pallagst, 2008). This issue clearly deserves concerted attention.

## Addressing urban vacant land

Cities adopt a number of approaches for dealing with vacant land. In their US-based study of cities that that lost the highest population from 2006 to 2009, Németh and Hollander (2012) detail the variety of strategies adopted by a cross-section of cities (see Table 2).

Some of these strategies have proven more successful than others (Schilling & Logan, 2008), but what is interesting is the range of suggested permanence of each intervention. Some, like the Adopt-A-Lot and the Clean and Green model invite temporary uses, like grazing horses or recreational uses, while others, like Active Demolition and Lank Banking, are really about a longer-term, even permanent "fix," to the traditional real estate development process. Yet since vacancy is mediated by ownership and developability *at any one moment*, vacancy is always a temporary condition. Also revealing is that very few of these more "permanent" strategies are adopted, even in cities experiencing such serious population loss, which is likely due to institutional and financial barriers mentioned earlier. It is for these reasons that we argue it valuable to explore vacant land interventions with temporary solutions.

## Temporary use model

In our increasingly complex urban world, "no single master plan can anticipate the evolving and varied needs of an increasingly diverse population or achieve the resiliency, responsiveness and flexibility that shorter-term, experimental endeavors can" (Arieff, 2011). Indeed, the predominating capitalist development models will always be characterized by boom/bust, decline/growth cycles. What Harvey calls the "spatial fix," or the fixing of capital to a particular place, is never absolute or permanent (2006). In addition, components of urban built systems often have projected shelf lives of 25–50 years or less before significant repair or replacement is anticipated. Return on investment is frequently 10–15 years or less. Finally, significant lag time exists between development intent, planning, and the implementation of physical change (often in excess of 5 years).

To constructively and pragmatically address the disconnect between the perception of a certain permanence of physical interventions and the actualities described above, we suggest to open urban vacant land to forms of uses and occupations that are temporary (often very short-term), creating immediate and intermediate benefits that are contextual and flexible, and support an incremental process of urban transformation. This will reassert the role of the temporal, which Lefebvre (1996, 1991) and Soja (1996) argue has been traditionally undermined in discussions of the city in favor of a focus on spatiality.

Much ink has been spilled on the recent upsurge of food trucks, "pop-up" shops, alleyway block parties, urban gardens, impromptu

**Table 1**
Views of vacant land.

|            | Opportunity | Problem |
|------------|-------------|---------|
| Political  | Ripe for improvement, dependent on new uses instrument to alleviate patterns of uneven development | Perception of urban blight, city down on its heels, result of uneven developmental patterns, systematic disinvestment, marginalization of whole neighborhoods and demographics |
| Economic   | Easier land assembly, lower development costs (based on existing infrastructure and economic incentives) | Diminished revenue, ongoing costs (tax liabilities, maintenance), liabilities from environmental impacts, lowers surrounding property values |
| Social     | New public or communal spaces in privatized city, community initiatives | Appearance/image (broken windows are sign of social breakdown) |
| Ecological | Non-human (natural) processes reestablished or created a new, habitat, infrastructural performances provided by emergent ecologies | Environmental hazards, contamination environmental justice issues |

**Table 2**
Vacant lot strategies in shrinking cities. Source: Németh and Hollander (2012).

|            | Adopt-A-lot | Clean and Green | Side lot transfer | Active demolition | Land bank |
|------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| Akron      | No[a]       | No              | Yes               | Yes               | No[b]     |
| Cleveland  | Yes         | No              | Yes               | Yes               | Yes       |
| Dayton     | No          | No              | Yes               | Yes               | Yes       |
| Atlanta    | No          | No              | No                | No                | Yes       |
| Bakersfield| No          | No              | No                | No                | No        |
| Denver     | No          | No              | No                | No                | No        |
| Fresno     | No          | No              | No                | No                | Yes       |
| Las Vegas  | Yes         | No              | No                | No                | No        |
| Memphis    | No          | No              | No                | No                | Yes       |
| Stockton   | No          | No              | No                | No                | No        |

[a] Only on government-owned land.
[b] Land bank is under development in Summit County.

theatre stages, dumpster swimming pools or even riverside "beaches" along the Seine. Most of these initiatives are bottom-up, of limited and local scope and impact, and, at least currently, more exception than standard practice. We do not suggest to change this; instead we argue for a more systematic inclusion of temporary uses into existing planning and design instruments to realize the latent potentials of vacant urban lands as an important resource (Bishop & Williams, 2012).[7]

Temporary uses can take many forms. In our cursory review of existing programs, most of which we find from existing catalogs like Bishop and Williams' *The Temporary City* (2012) and Haydn and Temel's *Temporary Urban Spaces* (2006), we find that temporary uses fit into one of two categories. In the first category are programs in which no permanent changes to existing surfaces and structures occur. The temporary uses leave no traces that cannot be easily removed. Impacts, if any, are fully reversible with no or very little effort. If physical elements are involved in the use, these are removable and not permanently attached to surfaces or structures. In the second model, we see changes to existing surfaces and structures. These might involve the alteration or removal of existing buildings and structures, the removal of pavement and other impervious surfaces, changes to the micro-topography of a site, or the construction of new structures of varying scales.

## Conditions for temporary use

We does not aim to provide a step-by-step guide for implementing the temporary use model in vacant lots; instead, given the preceding discussion, we aim to understand the conditions for which temporary occupation or use might be more or less appropriate (see Table 3). We do not mean to suggest that any individual parcel or neighborhood or city will fall into one category at any one time: on the contrary, most places will fall in one column in some categories and the other in other categories. To this end, and more generally, we argue that any attempt to implement temporary uses needs to be grounded in the specific conditions and processes of a particular location at a particular time.

## Assessing the temporary use model

Bishop and Williams (2012) consider temporary uses "a manifestation of a more dynamic, flexible and adaptive urbanism, where the city is becoming more responsive to new needs,

demands and preferences of its users". We contend that there are indeed many benefits to a temporary use model, but also acknowledge that there are drawbacks that can be significant. Such benefits and drawbacks can be political (administrative and/or procedural), economic, social and/or ecological. Obviously, such categorization itself has its downsides, as it tends to ignore the multivalency, multiple agency and potential synergy of temporary uses. Put another way, what stands as a benefit in one category might be construed as a drawback in another.

### Political (procedural, administrative)

Temporary uses are, in general, flexible and responsive to changing conditions and demands. This is particularly advantageous if political and economic conditions are uncertain, and cause a reluctance to enter potential long-term commitments, responsibilities and liabilities. Temporary use practices shine a light on traditional regulatory and planning systems that are based on the perceived primacy of stable and certain environments for investment as well as the avoidance of conflicting land uses. These practices force us to question whether these traditional regulatory and planning systems, designed to minimize open-endedness, are really functioning in ways that engage new flexibilities in the development process (Bishop & Williams, 2012, pp. 4 and 21). Reynolds (2011) suggests that existing zoning and planning frameworks *by themselves* are not necessarily a hindrance to the development of temporary uses, but that it is the "conservatism and (lack of) capacity of professional advisors and city governments to take them up" (Bishop & Williams, 2012, p. 43). The necessary paradigm shift from "permanent" to temporary uses might take considerable time to enter the regulatory toolbox, but as temporary use projects become more successful, they may slowly find their way from cutting-edge practices into the educational and professional mainstream.[8] Conversely, the pressures created by rapidly transforming (and shrinking) urbanities, such as Detroit and Youngstown in the US, might increase the willingness to entertain non-traditional approaches and implement the changes to legal and regulatory systems much faster.[9] A paradigm shift may be aided by a creeping transition in the prevailing perception of urban vacant land and temporary uses; some argue that reserving particular land uses for the future of a site "may be acceptable in the countryside, but surely not in the middle of cities. The default position should be to allow any legally and socially acceptable use on vacant space"

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[7] This will require a change in the processes and structures of urban planning and design: IBA Emscherpark (international Building Exhibition) as a model, a 10-year, 4 billion DM (about 2bn US) process for the social, economic, cultural and ecological conversion of the Ruhrgebiet area in Germany. The project ran from 1989 to 1999 and the IBA employed a distinct process: it provided an "open forum," combining a top-down with bottom-up approach, promoting public–private partnerships, and decentralizing planning and design decisions (Langhorst, submitted for publication).

[8] Ideas about urban planning and design as a more flexible and incremental approach are not new, but their implementation has been mostly limited to few signature projects, such as the IBA Emscherpark in the 1990s (see note above).
[9] The discussion of shrinking cities often includes the potential for land banks, large-scale property swaps, urban homesteading and development right swaps. Berrizbeitia (2001) provides a summative evaluation of the limits of engaging uncertainty and open-endedness in spatial planning and design processes.

**Table 3**
Conditions appropriate for temporary use.

| General categories | More appropriate for temporary uses | Less appropriate for temporary uses |
|---|---|---|
| Ownership of land | Public ownership | Private ownership (*unless vacant too long) |
| Role/influence of the city | Lack of (or poor efficacy of) public investment or incentives | Traditional planning tools successfully encouraging private investment |
| | Slow-growth/declining cities | Growing/vibrant cities |
| | Trial and error, flexible approach embraced | Top-down, master-planning |
| | Socially progressive goals (inclusion, diversity, access) | Pragmatic, financial/economic goals only |
| General economic climate | Low private development interest | High private development interest |
| | Times of "disruptive, stressful, social and urban change" | More stable, predictable times |
| | Exploit uncertain transitional period | Immanent redevelopment likely |
| Development potential of the space | Long-vacant land or structures | Recent vacancy; likely to redevelop quickly |
| | Vacant land/abandoned structures | "Underutilized land" (awaiting planned development) |
| | Areas with high risk of decline and "contagion effect" | Areas of stability |
| | Non-corporate, low-capital businesses or investors likely | Corporate developers, big business, municipal "growth regimes" |
| | Smaller scale | Larger scale |
| | Leftover/remnant parcels, small, fragmented spaces | Larger, continuous spaces |
| | Higher use value | Higher exchange value |
| | Areas seeking redevelopment, attraction of new residents and businesses | High-profile, central tourist areas |
| | Active community/residents/non-profits/small investors | Top-down, corporate interests |
| Potential uses of the space | Events/programmatic uses | Fixed infrastructure, buildings |
| | "Soft content" | Inflexible built form |
| | Desire/need to break from mono-functional environments | Already diverse, multi-use environments |
| | Desire to encourage/create new meanings, functions, identities, and relationships for/of a space | More stable, secure areas |
| | Test unfamiliar or potentially controversial ideas | "Proven" solutions, uses |
| | Educational tool to prove investment potential of certain uses/spaces | |
| | "Tactical" unsanctioned and transgressive uses, frequently by marginalized demographics, subcultures (e.g. squatting, skateboarding, emergent artists...) (De Certeau, 1984) | "Strategic" sanctioned uses catering to preferred/privileged/mainstream demographics (De Certeau, 1984) |

(Reynolds, 2011). Nonetheless, an often-overlooked barrier in the implementation of temporary uses may lie in inept, criminal, inadequate or simply rule-bound land-record systems.[10]

We believe that facilitating temporary uses in a more widespread manner requires significant changes to regulatory processes that govern land use and development in order to increase comfort levels for landowners, developers and regulatory agencies. This will involve shifts in how liabilities and responsibilities in land and real estate deals are managed. All of these changes are time consuming and potentially expensive processes if managed through traditional bureaucratic channels.

The temporary use model has the capacity to expose the ongoing conflicts and contestations between competing value systems, interests, agendas and stakeholders, be they economic, social, ecological or cultural. Rendering visible the hidden mechanisms and machinations in the production of urban space can be instrumental in managing competing agendas and interests in a more just and equitable manner, addressing conditions of uneven and unjust development (Harvey, 1973, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Smith, 1984; Soja, 1996, 2009). The process of implementing this model both requires and facilitates the inclusion of diverse voices: aside from the opportunity to involve thus far marginalized communities and interests, it also helps to overcome the sectoralized approaches and conceptions[11] of urban vacant land that often inform the organization of broader governance and decision making systems.

In addition, the experimentation and reversibility that temporary uses afford enable a much more incremental and flexible approach. The fast testing of models and approaches allows one to reverse course before it becomes a widespread practice with its own inert momentum. Similarly, temporary uses generally mean fast results, producing much faster gratification for local stakeholder groups.

If temporary uses and occupations operate long and successfully enough to become a neighborhood asset, any attempt by land owners and developers to develop the site in the future[12] will likely be met with resistance by community members. This significantly increases the risk to future development plans incurred when explicitly permitting or tolerating temporary uses.[13] Similarly, although temporary uses can empower marginalized individuals, groups and communities, the redevelopment of sites to accommodate more profitable uses for the landowner can victimize said communities and exacerbate previous experiences of disempowerment and victimization.

*Economic*

One of the most significant advantages to temporary uses is that no new land acquisition is necessary, eliminating the need for often contentious, long and expensive negotiations over property rights. The reversibility of uses, in particular if they do not involve any or only moderate and easily reversible physical change, might compel property owners to allow temporary occupations by right. Temporary uses are also generally inexpensive to implement yet can generate revenue very quickly, benefitting landowners and developers[14]

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[10] The role of insufficient or biased land record systems in hindering redevelopment has become apparent in "shrinking cities" such as Detroit and post-Katrina New Orleans. Property records for disenfranchised neighborhoods are often disproportionately inadequate or manipulated, and the inability to identify or contact property owners, or holders of development rights, may prevent any kind of sanctioned reuse, even if temporary and short-term.

[11] Reynolds (2011) and other authors suggest that the inherent conservativism of regulatory and planning agencies in defending their tradition sphere of influence is one of the most significant obstacles to the implementation of temporary uses.

[12] Presumably in ways more profitable to land owner and holders of development rights.

[13] The sustained exercise of uses or occupation might in fact establish the basis for adverse possession.

[14] Conversely, the modes of value extraction, in particular the ways in which the last value is extracted from a property, may incentivize property owners to abandon a property and leave it in decline.

and creating business opportunities for groups that would normally be excluded from occupying vacant land as they lack the capital necessary to engage in more formal, permanent leasing activities.

From a short-term economic perspective[15] there is very little downside to allowing temporary use on a vacant site, as long as such use can be quickly replaced by more profitable uses. Landowners and developers benefit from temporary occupations that also serve (or agree) to maintain the lot, which could otherwise be costly and time consuming. Yet from the perspective of the individuals or groups engaging in such temporary uses, there is very little investment security. While the investment (and loss thereof) may be insignificant in economic terms, it might become a liability in political terms if the displaced activities are valued in the surrounding communities. Exacerbating this risk to a developer are laws governing rights of use and property, such as public access easements, rights of way and adverse possession. In many cases these issues could be addressed by negotiating contracts with the necessary stipulations. Nonetheless, this raises concerns that such stipulations may stifle some of the creativity and spontaneity that is so critical to the success of temporary uses (Bishop & Williams, 2012, p. 4).

### Social

Temporary uses can activate unused sites, show initiative and progress, and quickly alter the perception of vacant land as derelict, blighted and neglected. The positive activity and perception of vibrancy can quickly create positive attention to abandoned or stalled development sites, significantly increasing their visibility and agency within a neighborhood. With their fast production of tangible results, temporary uses can catalyze communities around common goals that serve local needs and not external interests and agendas.[16] The presence of tangible results also creates more buy-in and sustained involvement rather than the short-term activation of community that is typical, for example, in land-use conflicts around locally unwanted land uses (LULUs).

As mentioned above, temporary uses may empower thus far marginalized communities and instill in them a sense of participation in the creation of "place," as the traditional regulatory and planning systems and rules governing land tenure excludes them from many forms of land use and occupation. Franck and Stevens (2007) introduce the concept of "loose space," investigating the capacity of urban spaces to accommodate a range of uses and occupations, many of these temporary or informal in nature. Although many examples of temporary use are considered "activist" or "counter-cultural," activities such as urban agriculture are quickly losing their transgressive image, legitimizing the people that engage in such activities. This legitimization – whether welcomed or not – is challenged if temporary uses are suspended in favor of more profitable endeavors, defeating the hopes of communities frequently already victimized by the processes of uneven development, and conceivably disenfranchising them even further from participating in the discourses on the future of their neighborhoods (Langhorst, submitted for publication).

### Ecological

Urban vacant land holds significant potential to accommodate a wide range of non-human systems that can facilitate significant benefits to urban agglomerations, such as providing habitat, improving microclimate and stormwater runoff. Most of these benefits and infrastructural performances are directly related to vegetation that might develop due to a cessation of maintenance regimes. Temporary uses frequently have a very low impact on emergent successional vegetation, and can even increase vegetative cover on sites used for community gardening or tree farms, both common temporary uses.

Because the temporary use model engages with individual sites as one part of a larger system, the potential functions and performances of vacant land increase significantly: the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Looking at the overall distribution and patterns of vacant land is a precondition to understand and realize its potential as a resource, to identify its operations and interfaces with other urban systems, and to activate it as part of the broader urban infrastructure. Consequentially, the temporary use model needs to operate on multiple scales, from an individual lot to a block to a neighborhood to a city-wide or even regional scale (as is the case with land banking at the county level). This multi-scalar approach has so far mostly been practiced in the context of stormwater management[17] and to open space and greenway systems.[18] The current discourses on "landscape as infrastructure "start to emphasize the ability of even small parcels to produce significant benefits if they operate within a system that connects them to other lots with similar functions and performances (Poole, 2005a, 2005b). Any such exploration of urban vacant lands on a lot, neighborhood and city scale might also require a process that combines top-down (city/regional scale) and bottom-up (local/neighborhood scale) analysis and action, requiring a reconsideration of the current districting and sectorialization of political and planning authority.[19]

Overall, the temporary use model carries definite potential risks and benefits. The social and ecological benefits to a city are clear and compelling and can be realized in the shorter term. Economic benefits to a city might take longer to assess and are significantly more responsive to the exigencies of overall broader fiscal and investment climate. The political benefits are harder to both demonstrate and measure and depending on socioeconomic circumstances, political leaders might be either lauded or maligned. Indeed, the widespread temporary use of vacant land may present real costs for public officials, especially as these practices represent an implicit critique of traditional regulatory systems and the real estate development process. All benefits and drawbacks are highly dependent on the particularities of distinct locations at equally distinct points in time.

### Conclusion

With attention to minimizing the drawbacks and maximizing the benefits, the temporary use model may offer a promising alternative to the traditional approaches to urban vacant land. Cities are in a constant state of flux, and mediate a wide range of often conflicting processes, agendas, interests and values: "The city is never an end state but is perpetually evolving" (Bishop & Williams, 2012, p. 19).

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[15] In economically uncertain times short-term perspectives tend to take precedence, allowing developers and landowners to gain at least some value from their properties. They see the time a site lies fallow as "an opportunity to market a site or to start to change the image of an area, or even as a chance to gain some political capital with the local planning authorities" (Bishop & Williams, 2012, p. 43).

[16] Squatting is a particularly interesting and potent activity with a long tradition. Squatting can generate temporary housing opportunities as well as facilitate the emergence of artistic and craft communities (the role of artist squatters in occupying abandoned industrial and warehouse spaces is often the first step in the revitalization, redevelopment and ultimate gentrification of neighborhoods). Squatting in public open spaces, as witnessed in recent "occupy" movements, may have impacts on the political construction and agency of public space.

[17] The cities of Seattle and Portland, Oregon have programs that exploit even small "leftover" spaces for stormwater infiltration and flood mitigation.

[18] See e.g. the proposed conversion of former railroad tracks in Atlanta, Georgia into a greenway and open space system.

[19] The International Building Exhbition (IBA) Emscherpark in the Ruhrgebiet area of Germany is a classic example of this approach, implementing a 10-year process for the economic, ecological and social conversion of a post-industrial metropolitan region.

Spatial planning and design fields have traditionally been occupied with trying to exercise control and limit the inherent uncertainty and open-endedness of urban transformations. Yet such top-down control has tended to result in monochromatic developments exorcised of difference or identity. Responding to the inherent uncertainty of the post-Fordist city, Simon Hubacher (1999) introduced the concept of "weak urbanism" to explain how many urban regulatory systems have depended on certainties that, in the end, are elusive. Instead, Schuhmacher and Rogner (2001) argue, many important urbanization processes seem to occur outside of or even in opposition to structured planning and design endeavors. As such conditions and processes change rapidly, it may be time to rethink decision-making structures around urban development. As former Curitiba Mayor Jaime Lerner argues:

> The idea that action should only be taken after all the answers and the resources have been found is a sure recipe for paralysis. The planning of a city is a process that allows for corrections; it is supremely arrogant to believe that planning can be done only after every possible variable has been controlled (in Lydon et al., 2011: 2).

Indeed, programs and proposals that rely on producing more permanent and profitable uses that require a significant investment of time and political, social and fiscal capital are perhaps inappropriate in a context wherein "the long-term economic or social benefit cannot be guaranteed" (Lydon et al., 2011: 1).

We identify a need to develop models of urbanization that are more reflexive and responsive to such fluid conditions. A temporary use model might just serve as an instrument to encourage more realistic, pragmatic, and incremental approaches to urban transformation,[20] moving outside (or even in parallel) to our institutional tendency to master plan larger inflexible projects based in idealized models of urban systems. Indeed, taking into account the fourth dimension, time, is a necessary first step, although most urban planning strategies are still strictly three-dimensional (Bishop & Williams, 2012).

The temporary use of vacant lands may also offer a rich and diverse territory within which to accommodate testing of a wide range of uses and processes and their effects. This territory may thus offer a more rigorous understanding of the operations and agencies of particular interventions, produce empirical data, and would allow to quickly correct approaches if they fail to produce the anticipated results, or create negative side effects. In this context, spatial planning and design could begin to operate more in terms of a continuous editing process of urban transformation, rather than relying on the radical and complete transformation based in far-reaching ideas and ideologies du jour, as evidenced in many models for urban renewal (Langhorst & Kambic, 2009).

In another way, the temporary use model also emphasizes the need to overcome the traditional sectorialized and centralized planning and implementation processes. One might argue that it is precisely this compartmentalized approach to planning that has contributed to the proliferation of urban vacant land in the first place. In fact, in order to facilitate temporary uses, the whole range of systems, interests, processes and conditions involved needs to be engaged, a range that far exceeds the expertise of any one field or profession.

We argue that it is shortsighted to view vacant land as problems only and ignore their potentials as significant contributors to the functioning of urban systems. One of the most obvious and frequently overlooked potentials of urban vacant land is its potential to operate as a system that facilitates, provides or accommodates critical infrastructural services that are comparatively expensive to produce artificially. This concept of "landscape as infrastructure" has numerous benefits in terms of ecological processes (see Poole, 2005a, 2005b). Individual lots can provide infrastructural functions, such as storm water infiltration, but their efficiency increases exponentially if they are engaged as a system of vacant lots, taking advantage of their capacity to form productive and performative networks within urban fabrics.

Urban vacant lands can also operate as a critical instrument of social and environmental justice, empowering marginalized and disadvantaged communities and neighborhoods. High concentrations of vacant lots impact transitional neighborhoods, especially those disproportionally affected by processes of deindustrialization (Hutton, 2008; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). Such neighborhoods are most often characterized by an absence of open space and of natural features in the first place, along with the presence of hazardous environmental conditions, industrial operations, major thoroughfares and other LULUs (Heynen, Perkins, & Roy, 2006). The ability to occupy and use open space for all kinds of activities empowers individuals and communities to increase their quality of life and assert their "right to the city," both in physical terms and in terms of access to decision making channels (Harvey, 1973, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Smith, 1984). Additionally, the ability to have an aesthetic experience of non-human processes and their physical manifestations (e.g. vegetation, birdsong), is critical to develop attitudes and insights that can shape environmental values and actions (Hester, 2006; Matilla, 2002. Langhorst, submitted for publication).

In this regard, urban vacant land may render visible the role of the neighborhood resident as co-author of the spaces and places they inhabit and as empowered participants in urban development processes. The temporary use model has the potential to re-center urban vacant land as a critical element of the processes that create urbanity and urban life. Considering the projections that suggest a vast majority of people living in urban agglomerations in the near future, it seems that temporary uses on urban vacant lands might soon be viewed as both a pragmatic and ethical mandate.

The temporary use of urban vacant land is not a panacea to create resilient, sustainable, socially and ecologically just cities. Nor can it be ignored that there are significant economic and political interests that oppose temporary uses. In order to explore and realize the potentials of urban vacant land it is critical to situate efforts at temporary use in the particular social, economic, political and ecological contexts, and pay particular attention to political and economic agendas that may in fact instrumentalize such efforts and perpetuate the market-driven redevelopment that extracts value and disrupts and disempowers local communities.

## Acknowledgements

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[20] See Wright (2003).

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