Session 16

Co-Producing Urban Resilience
Co-Producing Urban Resilience
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ABSTRACT This paper addresses contemporary processes of resilient co-production within the city. Focusing on the case study of a project called R-Urban, it aims to present a bottom-up framework for urban regeneration initiated by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa). It addresses questions raised in implementing the R-Urban strategy in the Parisian suburb of Colombes, advocating new roles for architects and planners. This strategy explores possibilities for co-producing urban resilience by introducing resident-run facilities that form local ecological cycles and engage in everyday eco-civic practices that will eventually conduct to the emergence of networks of urban commons. The paper demonstrates that progressive practices of collaboration and new tools adapted to our times of economic crisis are conceivable on a small, local scale and can gradually scale up to wider co-produced strategies of resilience.

KEYWORDS: Co-production, co-produced urban regeneration, right to resilience, micro-social and cultural resilience, commons, commoning.

The co-produced city
Co-production has become a buzzword in our times of austerity: it posits the necessity to engage citizens personally in the provision of public services no longer provided by the welfare state. If co-production is currently seen as an economic and social solution to this problem,¹ we also understand it as a shift in the power relationships revolving around services and production. In urban transformation, co-production can also become a political project rooted in Lefebvre’s idea of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Citizens have the right to occupy space and decide how it is developed, managed and used. Also, given the imperative to adapt and find solutions to the long-term environmental and economic crises societies face today, cities and citizens need to become more resilient in order to adjust and thrive in rapidly changing circumstances. This ambitious co-production project should involve the entire urban population and needs ideas, tools, space, time and agents. Can architects be such agents? What tools can be used at times of crisis and scarcity? How can progressive practices be initiated while acting on a small scale? How can civic cultures of collaboration be reactivated and sustained in economic, environmental and social terms?

R-Urban, an agency of co-produced urban regeneration
These are some of the questions we tackled with R-Urban. New co-produced resilient
approaches to urban regeneration are desperately needed. R-Urban is an open-source strategy enabling residents to play an active part in changing the city while also changing their ways of living in it.

This strategy creates a network of citizen projects and grassroots organisations around a series of self-managed collective hubs hosting economic and cultural activities and everyday practices that contribute to boosting resilience. The network starts at a neighbourhood level, by setting up a local network and progressively scaling up to city and regional level.

R-Urban involves residents, local authorities, public organisations, professionals and civic stakeholders taking various responsibilities in the project's governance. In contrast to other regeneration projects, architects and planners become initiators, facilitators, mediators and consultants. This leads to more effective, faster and more sustainable implementation, allowing for greater participation of non-specialists in co-producing it. The projects are conceived as processes that result in a physical transformation of urban contexts, and the emancipation of those living in them.

R-Urban is part of a tradition of modelling resilient development starting with Howard’s Garden City (Howard, 1889) and Geddes’s Regional City (Geddes, 1915), and continuing today with the Transition Town (Hopkins, 2008). But in contrast to these models, R-Urban is not a direct application of theory, but tries to develop exploratory practice and theoretical analysis, each constantly informing the other.

As opposed to the Garden City concept, R-Urban does not propose an ideal, but deals with the collapse of modern urban ideals, and failures in addressing the future. Also, R-Urban picks up from the Regional City concept the idea of regional dynamics, but in this case using bottom-up initiatives of local residents. The R-Urban transformation is realised by investing in temporarily available spaces and creating short-term uses able to prefigure future urban developments.

R-Urban also incorporates many Transition Town principles, although it negotiates its own ‘town’ (e.g. a block, neighbourhood or district). No pre-existing communities are targeted; instead, new communities formed through the project agree on their own rules and principles. With its civic hubs and collective facilities, R-Urban tries to lend visibility to the networks of solidarity and ecological cycles it creates. Architecture plays an important role here: that of hosting and showcasing resilient practices and processes, and of rendering tangible and concrete what would otherwise remain a discourse. Positioning ourselves (and the project) theoretically between political ecology and Marxist and Post-Marxist sociology and politics, we took inspirations from social theorists and philosophers like Guattari, Gorz, Lefebvre, Harvey, Negri and Holloway that we have constantly challenged by the reality of our active research approach.
R-urban in Colombes

In 2011, R-Urban started in Colombes, a suburban town with 84,000 residents near Paris, in partnership with local authorities, organisations and residents.

Colombes offers a typical suburban mix of private and council housing estates. Suburbia is a key territory for R-Urban: although specific to a modern conception of city, it is one of the most crucial territories to be regenerated in the interest of resilience. Colombes is confronted with economic deprivation and youth crime, typical of large-scale dormitory suburbs and the consumerist, car-dependent lifestyle in more affluent suburbs with generally middle-class populations. Colombes nonetheless also has a number of assets: despite a high unemployment rate (17% of the working population, well above the national average of 10.2% in 2012), Colombes features approximately 450 local organisations and an active civic life.

We have contacted the local municipality in 2009 and a number of local organisations with the R-Urban strategy and applied together for a Life+ partnership to be funded by the EC.

In its initial four-year period, the project was meant to create a network around a number of ‘collective hubs’, each serving complementary functions (i.e. housing, urban agriculture, recycling, eco-construction, local culture), that bring together emerging citizens’ projects. With welfare services being withdrawn, these collective facilities host citizen-run services that play a strategic part in locally closed economic and ecological cycles.

In order to identify appropriate locations within available plots in the city, a participative mapping process has been initiated which conducted to the shortlisting of there locations for the construction of the three first hubs: Agrocité, Recyclab and Ecohab.

Agrocité is an agricultural unit comprising an experimental micro-farm, community gardens, educational and cultural spaces, plus experimental devices for compost-powered heating, rainwater collection, solar energy generation, aquaponic gardening and phyto-remediation.

Agrocité has been built in 2012-2013 on a plot situated in the core of a social housing estate the Fosses Jean neighbourhood, with a local eco-construction company and using local materials (reused windows and cladding elements issued from eco-construction, recycled brick drying panels, straw for insulation from local farmers). Currently, Agrocité runs as a hybrid structure, with some components of social enterprise (e.g. the micro-farm, market and cafe) and others connected to the user organisations (e.g. the community garden, cultural and educational spaces) and local associations.

Recyclab is a recycling and eco-construction social enterprise unit comprising facilities for storing and reusing locally salvaged materials, recycling and transforming them into eco-
construction elements for self-building and retrofitting. It has been installed on an existing road that was closed and transformed into parking. The spatial condition of this location has challenged the architecture of the recyclab which was designed to be dismantled quickly in case of energy within the public servicing systems of the road (sewage, electricity, etc). The unit itself is made out of reused containers on the top of which we have placed a number of prefabricated wooden huts, realized also with reused wooden cladding, whose geometry has been carefully informed by the shape of the street tree canopies. Recyclab host co-working workshops for makers and designers and a participative workshop open to residents for repairing and small DIY sessions.3

Ecohab was planned to be a cooperative eco-housing project comprising partially self-built and collectively managed ecological properties, including shared facilities and schemes (e.g. food cultivation, production spaces, energy and water harvesting, car sharing). The seven properties included two subsidised flats and a temporary residential unit for students and researchers. Due to the change of municipality in 2014 the construction of Ecohab has been temporarily postponed.

R-Urban’s collective facilities are intended to grow in number and be managed by a cooperative land trust that will acquire spaces, facilitate development and guarantee democratic governance.4 Networks and cycles of production and consumption will emerge as the basis for a circular and ecological economy connecting the R-Urban collective facilities and the neighbourhood, and closing chains of demand and supply as locally as possible. The strategy which has clear and simple principles, can be as such propagated regionally and even at bigger scales. A number of municipalities have shown interest to develop such projects in Ile de France region (ie. Bagneux, Gennevilliers). Also, the art and architecture practice ‘public works’, who is our partner in the R-Urban project in London, is currently developing a connected project in Hackney Wick: R-Urban Wick.5 Its first facility is a mobile production and recycling unit: Wick on Wheels (WOW), which encourages residents and local artisans to produce, reuse and repurpose.

R-Urban sets a precedent for a participative retrofitting of metropolitan suburbs where the relationship between the urban and rural is reconsidered. It endeavours to demonstrate what citizens can achieve if they change their work routines and lifestyles to collectively address the challenges of the future.

The ‘right to resilience’

‘Resilience’ is a key term in the context of the current economic crisis and lack of resources. In contrast to sustainability, which is focused on maintaining the status quo of a system without necessarily addressing the factors of change and disequilibrium, resilience addresses how systems can adapt and thrive in changing circumstances. Resilience is a
dynamic concept with no stable definition or identity outside the circumstances producing it. It is adaptive and transformative, inducing change that harbours potentials for rethinking assumptions and building new systems (Maguire and Cartwright, 2008). Although the current resilience discourse is not to be embraced uncritically without paying heed to the sometimes idealistic comparison of social and biological systems and their adaptability to engendering wellbeing, the concept of ‘resilience’ itself has the potential to include questions and contradictions addressed in terms of political ecology.6

R-Urban creates the conditions for citizens’ ‘right to sustainability’ to be exercised, to both consume sustainability (provided by the remains of the welfare state or bought from private providers), and to produce it (allowing citizens’ involvement in decision-making and action).

A politico-ecological approach like that of R-Urban will not just positively propose ‘improved’ development dynamics, but also question the processes that bring about social injustice and inequitable urban environments. We take here a Marxist line with David Harvey (2008) who argues that the transformation of urban spaces is a collective rather than an individual right, because collective power is necessary to reshape urban processes. Harvey describes ‘the right to the city’: ‘it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city’ (Harvey, 2008: 23). In this sense, R-Urban facilitates the assertion of this ‘right’ through appropriation, transformation and networking processes, and the use of urban infrastructures. However, R-Urban perhaps differs from Harvey in scope, as it does not seek to institute a large-scale global movement opposing directly the financial capital that controls urban development, but instead aims to empower residents to propose alternative local projects, and to foster networks, testing methods of self-management, self-building and self-production. In this respect, R-Urban is perhaps closer to a more locally embedded idea of ‘the right to the city’, as proposed by Lefebvre. Lefebvre imagines a locally conceived emancipatory project, emphasising the need to freely propose alternative possibilities for urban practice in everyday life. He proposes a new methodology, ‘transduction’, to encourage the creation of ‘experimental utopias’. Framed by existing reality, this would introduce ‘rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia’ as a way of avoiding ‘irresponsible idealism’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 129-130). Lefebvre underlines the key role of urban imaginaries in understanding, challenging and transforming urbanity and opening the way to a multiplicity of representations and interventions. From this perspective, R-Urban is a ‘transductive’ project, both rigorous and utopian, popular and experimental. It is based on the aggregation of many individual and collective interventions which complement each other, forming metabolic networks that stimulate circulatory changes while simultaneously informing one another. Such networks will accommodate multiplicity and valorise imagination at all levels.

R-Urban could hence be suspected of aligning itself opportunistically with the ‘Big
Society’ principles recently proposed by the UK’s Tory prime minister, David Cameron, to implement ‘the idea of communities taking more control, of more volunteerism, more charitable giving, of social enterprises taking on a bigger role, of people establishing public services themselves’ (Cameron, 2011). But the essential difference is that R-Urban is not responding directly to the onset of the financial crisis and is not embracing a programme of economic resilience in which the state is absent: such a programme would explicitly promote reliance on unpaid work to mask the disappearance of welfare structures and the massive cuts in public services. R-Urban questions the state’s power in terms of its role and responsibility. Local authorities and public institutions are integrated in the strategy as equal partners, assuming the roles of enablers, sponsors and administrators. In addition to urban residents and civic organisations, public institutions are invited to take part in this experimental utopia, and to challenge their routines. It is not only the residents who must ‘change themselves by changing the city’, as claimed by Harvey (2008), but also the politicians and specialists presently in charge of a city.

As such, R-Urban is not only about grassroots innovation to meet social, economic and environmental needs, but also about political critique and ideological expression, affirming the necessity of new social and economic agencies based on alternatives to the dominant regime. R-Urban puts new democratic tools in place: forms of self-governance supporting the emergence of different kinds of economic organisation. These are all part of a cooperative civic land-trust, which will democratically govern the entire R-Urban project.

Unlike other initiatives exclusively dealing with resilience from a technological and environmental perspective, R-Urban advocates a general change in how we do things, in order to change our future. R-Urban proposes new collective practices, which, in addition to reducing the ecological footprint, also contribute to reinventing near-at-hand relationships based on deciding collectively, sharing spaces and grouping facilities, rules and principles of cohabitation. The transformation needs to take place on the micro-scale of each individual, each subjectivity, to build a culture of resilience. As Rob Hopkins puts it, ‘resilience is not just an outer process: it is also an inner one, of becoming more flexible, robust and skilled’ (Hopkins, 2009: 15). The ‘culture of resilience’ includes processes of re-skilling, skill sharing, social networking and mutual learning. These micro-social and micro-cultural practices, usually related to individual activities (e.g. food cultivation and waste collection, car-sharing, exchanging tools and skills with neighbours), elicit attention to the innovatory potentials found in everyday life. R-Urban maps this local capacity to transform in detail, but also the administrative constraints that block it, proposing ways of bypassing them by way of restated policies and structures.
Commons and commoning

The issue of commons lies at the heart of discussions revolving around co-produced democracy. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) define commons as something that is not discovered but produced biopolitically:

We call the currently dominant model 'biopolitical production' to underline the fact that it involves not only material production in straight economic terms, but also affects and contributes to producing all other aspects of social life, i.e. the economic, cultural and political. This biopolitical production and the greater number of commons it creates support the possibility of democracy today. (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 9-10, author’s translation)

A sustainable democracy should be based on a long-term policy of commons as well as the social solidarities understood as such. ‘Creating value today is about networking subjectivities and capturing, diverting and appropriating what they do with the commons they give rise to’ (Ravel and Negri, 2008: 7, author's translation). According to Ravel and Negri (2008), the revolutionary project of our time is all about this capturing, diverting, reclaiming of commons as a constitutive process. This is a reappropriation and reinvention at one and the same time. The undertaking needs new categories and institutions, new forms of management and governance, spaces and actors.

R-Urban endeavours to co-produce this new infrastructure. The facilities and uses proposed by R-Urban are shared and propagated on various scales, progressively constituting a network that is open to various users and includes adaptable elements and processes based on open-source information.

Rather than buying it, the R-Urban land trust currently established in Colombes bypasses the fixation on notions of property and negotiates land for (short and long term) uses rather than ownership. The ‘right to use’ is an intrinsic quality of commons, as opposed to the right to own. As in previous projects, a specific focus here is on urban interstices and spaces that evade financial speculation, if only temporarily. This is also the position of Holloway (2006) who concludes that ‘the only possible way to think about radical change in society is within its interstices’ and that ‘the best way of operating in interstices is to organise them’ (Holloway, 2006: 19-20, author’s translation). This is exactly what R-Urban does: it organises a range of spatial, temporal and human interstices and transforms them into shared facilities, it sets up a different type of urban space, neither public nor private, to host reinvented collective practices and collaborative organisations, it initiates networks of interstices to reinvent commons in metropolitan contexts. This type of organisation involves forms of commoning, ways of ensuring the expansion and sustainability of the shared pool of resources, but also ways of commonality as a social practice.
R-Urban's future

In the coming years, we will nurture diverse economies and initiate progressive practices in R-Urban's network in Colombes. However at the moment with the change of municipal political orientation from left to right, we have to renegotiate the municipal support for the project and also the future location of hubs. We have designed R-Urban to be a process that can grow with time, being easy to appropriate and replicate. We will be testing it for a while, before leaving it to burgeon by itself. Will it succeed? For how long? These questions are to be answered in a few years’ time. For now, it is a visionary attempt to realise more democratic processes of resilient suburban regeneration, to potentially be followed up by others in similar contexts.

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References


Notes

1 Co-production is receiving ever-greater attention in policy-makers’ speeches and think tank reports. They are aware that ‘co-production has emerged as a critique of the way that professionals and users have been artificially divided, sometimes by technology, sometimes by professional and managerial practice, and sometimes by a spurious understanding of efficiency. It provides an alternative way for people to share in the design and delivery of services, and contribute their own wisdom and experience, in ways that can broaden and strengthen services and make them more effective’ (Boyle and Harris, 2009).

2 For more information, see http://r-urban.net.

3 This concept is similar to the ‘Fab lab’, short for ‘fabrication laboratory’, a small-scale workshop equipped with
various fabrication machines and tools enabling users to produce ‘almost anything’ (Fab lab, n.d.).

4 For more information about the R-Urban cooperative land trust, go to http://r-urban.net/en/property.
5 This collaboration is supported by the Life+ programme in a partnership between aaa, the City of Colombes and public works.
6 We are here joining the ranks of political ecologists who criticise the superficial understandings of politics, power and social construction popularised in resilience rhetoric (see, e.g., Hornborg, 2009: 237-265).
ABSTRACT This paper discusses the need for research at the interfaces of alternative architectural practice and legal, regulatory and procedural frameworks of the construction industry in order to improve the reach and influence of alternative approaches. Investigation into design participation and alternative practices in architecture has developed methodologies to democratise the design process by better engaging user groups and investigating potentials for self-organisation in the production of the built environment. No longer do architects merely impose their own vision of form on inert urban matter. Architects have begun to understand the built environment as a complex ecosystem which has grown up without a blueprint; where the role of architectural design is to facilitate a form of urban growth that is driven from within. The scarcity of development land and the time and cost associated with regulatory approval has placed the ability to build or adapt well beyond the reach of many citizens. However, initiatives such as Self Build, Live Projects and other bottom-up building practices develop strategies and methodologies that build local resilience. As yet, the reach and influence of these new forms of urban development has been limited. Can these methodologies be made to fit within a dominant system of development driven by neoliberal economic policies favouring short-term economic gain? With the emergence of the community asset as a new form of ownership, development may begin to realign its priorities in favour of longer term social gain. Is there evidence that our complex regulatory systems are suffocating the underlying forces of self-organisation that shape our towns and cities? What are the obstacles that must be overcome in order to make new forms of urban development possible? Is there a case for change in regulatory control in order to stimulate sustainable urban renewal and build local resilience? Through a review of case studies in urban self-organisation, the paper will identify how access to sources of capital, productive labour and governmental power are limiting citizens’ ability to influence the built environment and reducing our capacity to self-govern.

KEYWORDS: Alternative practice; design participation; new community institutions; new forms of governance; urban self-organisation.

Introduction

“The principle difficulty is the time it takes to persuade institutions, local authorities and funders to support proposals” (RUSS, 2014, p.14). This quotation sums up the motivation for this paper: to discuss the obstacles which stand in the way of a new approach to urban development termed ‘self-organisation’. The key characteristic of self-organisation is that it emanates from its subject, meaning that the key stakeholders are internal users who
constitute elements of a pre-existing community or urban ecology. Another characteristic of the approach is the willingness to cultivate new forms of urban development which do not follow pre-existing models.

Since the 1960’s urbanists have argued that the effects of external intervention in complex urban systems are unpredictable: ineffective at best; destructive at worst. This explains a gradual movement towards systems in which urban development comes ‘from within’. But, a logic which understands cities as naturally self-organising systems, free from external control, ignores the politicised nature of these systems and the control which governmental and capital interests exert over them.

This paper is interested in the new roles for architects working within alternative practice as agents, advocates or facilitators of self-organisation. I will argue that legislative and economic control stifles self-organisation by creating obstacles which reduce the capacity of the urban system to govern itself, suffocating the organic growth of our towns and cities. I will go on to argue that architects – amongst others – can play a role in overcoming these obstacles, facilitating new forms of bottom-up urban growth.

**Alternative practice**

The term ‘alternative practice’ has been used to describe a broad field of architecture and urbanism concerned with the transformative potential of spatial praxis as a form of participatory democracy. These ‘alternative’ practitioners are interested in the role architects or urban planners might play in bringing about social or political change.

The project Spatial Agency describes how self-organisation in architectural practice is radical in nature because “it does not simply suggest participation in something that is controlled elsewhere…” (Awan, Schneider and Till, 2011) as is often the case where public consultation is forced upon a project through governmental regulation,“...but actively establishes the desire and need for a transformation in the first instance, before acting on it” (ibid). As a project of micro-political tactics, self-organisation seeks to enable citizens to transform their environments using mechanisms that are embedded within their own locality. To achieve this, alternative practices have designed processes which facilitate a collective production of space.

As yet, these practices only exist at the periphery of the architectural profession and the vast majority of actors involved in the construction industry do not recognise their practice as a social or political one. Rather, the mainstream view understands construction as an industry and development as a commercial activity; the built environment is simply the product of these technological and economic sciences. This dominant system of
development operates with its own logic and according to its own set of values, primarily motivated by a desire to accumulate private wealth.

Alternative practices allow community groups to self-organise by enabling them to be their own developers. Through temporary use projects or through shared ownership of community assets, there are growing opportunities for people to take control of their own environment and envision development that does not have to follow conventional frameworks.

**Self-organisation in urban systems**

Jane Jacobs (1961) argued that the kind of deductive reasoning adopted by modernist planning was incapable of supporting the complex, layered characteristics of communities. She observed how the zoning of cities had separated out land uses which previously overlapped both spatially and temporally. These urban systems had grown up organically over time in response to a complex and changing set of conditions. They supported vibrant and diverse communities where more intense social interactions were created by increased density and a mix of different uses at different times of the day.

Juval Portugali describes the three main features of self-organisation: "first that they are open systems, i.e. that they are dependent on their environment, second that their behaviour can be creative or inventive in response to their environment and third that they are complex both in terms of the number of parts and the non-linearity of cause and effect" (Portugali, 1999, p.51). Prigogine and Stenger’s dissipatively self-organising systems describe dynamic orderings that maintain themselves through continuous exchange with their environments (Bujis, Bol, Teisman & Byrne 2009, p.99). Similarly, Cilliers is interested in the “property of complex systems which enables them to develop or change internal structure spontaneously and adaptively in order to cope with, or manipulate, their environment.” (1998, p.90)

Portugali states that “a central question is how to plan and design cities in light of their nature as bottom-up self-organising systems” (2013, p.4). The mere recognition that urban systems display self-organising characteristics cannot address the problem of the exteriority of the urban strategist. The claim that “the planning and design of artefacts are direct manifestations of humans’ chronesthetic memory”, and that “humans are, in this respect, natural planners and designers” (Portugali, 2013, p.3), is used to suggest that we can all enjoy equal influence over the built environment. This fails to recognise that professional planners and designers are paid for by dominant governmental or venture capitalist power structures. Despite this, Portugali’s observation about chronesthetic memory - that is, our
ability to use past experiences to anticipate future events - seems particularly pertinent. This ‘natural’ ability to think about the future with reference to the past could be understood as the key ingredient of self-organisation in establishing a desire or need for transformation, regardless of the particular formative context. We must stop asking how we can plan for self-organisation and ask how we can provide the tools to enable it.

The legal, regulatory & procedural framework of the construction industry

In order to influence the built environment, self-organising groups (like any other urban developers) need access to certain resources, namely economic capital, productive labour and governmental power. Disjunctions between capitalist and self-organised urban reproduction are revealed at the interface with legal and regulatory frameworks, which place constraints on how these resources can be accessed.

With the steady rise in privatised procurement of public services and infrastructure in the UK, ever more complex legal and regulatory frameworks and procedures have emerged in an attempt to guide the free-market to serve public interests. A new service industry has developed in which specialist lawyers, accountants, contractors and technical designers are consulted to navigate this regulatory landscape. This creates a formative context which biases the outcome of the negotiations between developer, consultant and regulatory authority. These roles co-determine one another, such that their dependency on one another begins to define their structure and their values. The values of professionals tend to align with those of the developer and the content of regulation becomes focused on yield and profit. Through their co-dependency these legal and regulatory frameworks, which exist ostensibly to constrain the dominant system, also serve to protect it from transformational alternatives.

There is a need to develop and implement alternative models for these frameworks which will enable self-organising processes. The following sections discuss a number of different ways in which urban self-organisation is being restricted by frameworks which control access to the resources listed above.

Access to governmental power

“The Government has set out plans in the Localism Bill to revolutionise the planning process by ‘taking power away from officials and putting it into the hands of those who know most about their neighbourhood – local people themselves’. Alongside this, the government aims to create the freedom and the incentives for those places that want to grow to do so, and to reap the benefits.” (TCPA, 2011, p.1)
This is a bold claim for any of the established UK political parties to make and it is not clear if this revolution would serve a right-wing or left-wing agenda. At the time of writing, we are approaching the next general election, so we are yet to see what kind of powers, if any, are to be handed over, and to whom they are to be handed. Many people will be pessimistic that there is any real motivation within the mainstream political parties for changes which will bring about a fairer and more sustainable society. Rather, these policies appear to fit with a neoliberal agenda which is moving towards ever greater reliance on, and de-regulation of, the private sector, founded on a belief in free-market economic policies as a universal remedy.

There are clear instances of this government policy failing. Just this year, a petition to save a row of shops and businesses from demolition in Sheffield demonstrated enormous public resistance to a mediocre re-development scheme. In response to the proposition that local people were not being represented by their councillors, several local councillors claimed to be powerless to stop the development. Councillors Rory Munn and Bob Johnson both agreed that “if there were any opportunity for us to refuse this application we would have done” (Three Docuteers, 2015). Councillor Ibrar Hussain added: “everybody wanted to save this site but the problem was planning laws” (ibid.). In this case, councillors had the power to refuse the application, but had been advised that if they did so, it could be overruled at appeal stage and that this would cost the council £67,000 in legal fees. Clearly, the balance of power here was set between an elected council, the recommendations of senior officials within the local authority planning department, and the planning inspectorate. Despite the overwhelming public support to preserve a valuable existing community space, their elected local representatives were unable to exercise their powers to overrule the recommendations of planning officers.

Let us suspend our disbelief and assume that the above policy statement expresses an intention within the government to redistribute power in society in order to improve citizens’ ability to participate in and exercise influence over the development of our built environment, and that the government will offer the freedom and incentive to do so. How then, might this power be transferred? Community Land Trusts are a useful example.

Community land trusts (CLTs) were established in UK law by the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 for the express purpose of furthering the social, economic and environmental interests of a local community by acquiring and managing land and other assets. Amongst other suggested benefits, rental tenures could be better protected and local communities could effectively share in the profits of the development, which might otherwise go into the hands of a ‘developer’. Another key facet of CLTs is that open membership has
the ability to regulate who can buy or rent the properties and how much is charged. This has created a new form of ownership - distinct from private and public ownership - which has the potential to radically change the way land is developed and managed.

Based in the London Borough of Lewisham, one such group, the Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS), have obtained a grant from the Homes & Communities Agency to help realise their plans. Although they have been able to advance their proposals in some detail thanks to input from experts in the field, they are encountering excessive delay and incurring additional cost as a consequence of regulatory procedures imposed by the local authority.

The legal department of Lewisham Council have insisted that the project be put out to competitive tender through an OJEU process. Given that there is no known competition for the site, this would appear to be an unnecessary and excessive administrative procedure. According to the CLTs’ legal advisors, there is no requirement by law to run an OJEU process in this case\textsuperscript{11}. It is possible that the local authority feel they need to show that the sale of the land has been carried out in a fair and open manner. However, in so doing they risk alienating the membership of the CLT and draining its limited resources. There is a sense that this is a scheme that has a great deal of support in the local area, and yet it is failing to receive the support it needs from the legal and regulatory framework, which governs it.

\textbf{Access to sources of capital}

Thus far, the most visible way in which the Localism Bill is being implemented is through a series of financial incentives for local authorities, developers and individuals to increase housing supply, but critics have already identified a number of fundamental flaws in these schemes. The £500m 'Get Britain Building' scheme provided recoverable finance to support the completion of private sector developments that had stalled following the financial crisis of 2008. This project is to continue with a new fund of £525m rebadged the 'Builders Finance Fund'. This propping-up of the private sector by the state highlights the fragility of a housing policy which relies so heavily on the private sector to meet housing demand.

The ‘Help-to-Buy’ and recently announced ‘Starter Homes’ & ‘Help-to-Buy ISA’ schemes improve access to finance and offer discounts to first time buyers. However these schemes can only be of benefit to a narrow section of society who fit within the eligibility criteria. Those in the greatest housing need still have very little opportunity to access public capital in a way which allows them to exercise choice. The uncontrolled rental market tends to create a second class of citizens who do not enjoy the freedom and security that home-ownership brings, resulting in the break-up of local communities as members are pushed out by rising prices.


In Lewisham, Community Land Trust RUSS’s self-build development is founded on the principle that it will provide a mix of tenures at permanently affordable levels\textsuperscript{12}, by setting rents and sale prices themselves and with 30% savings - achieved through the ‘sweat-equity’ of self-builders and the sharing of the residual profits of the trust.

Despite the availability of grant funding from central government, this development – which will provide 100% affordable housing - feels that it is better off sourcing capital from elsewhere\textsuperscript{13}. The current regulations set by the Homes & Communities Agency (or by the Greater London Authority in London) are likely to have been developed around the existing private sector model for the supply of affordable housing and may not be appropriate for CLTs. RUSS member Kareem Dayes points to a lack of UK-based lenders set up to finance community building projects. RUSS needs agreement from Lewisham council on the sale price of the land before they can secure funding, but they cannot secure funding without agreement from the council on the land value.

Access to sources of productive labour & technical expertise

“It is our experience that self-build can start to go wrong when the self-builders feel alienated and not in control of the design and building process. It would be tragic to fall into the same trap that organisations fell into in the 1990’s by wishing to control the process too closely rather than providing a level of support that enabled self-builders to get on with it.” (RUSS, 2014, p.14)

That public money should pass directly through disadvantaged communities and back into large multi-disciplinary consultancies and contracting companies is a concern for any project which employs self-organisation as a tactic. Bottom-up, community driven projects can become victims of their own success. Acquiring the funding and approvals necessary to get on site requires an increasing investment in their consultant team. Public sector agencies exert control by setting requirements over the labour/ technical services which a project must employ to realise their objective. For instance, Heritage Lottery Fund projects insist on the use of consultants who fulfil pre-qualification criteria which may seriously limit the options of the client group to select a consultant team. The criteria tend to favour larger consultancies who are often structured around the dominant system of private sector driven development. This creates a formative context which can pre-determine the processes and outcomes of the design process, imposing normative solutions upon the project rather than finding solutions that are embedded within the locality or that respond to the actual social constitution and dynamics of the community.
This trend is described by Walter Menteth (2015) as ‘Hidden Architecture’ where architectural services are introduced to public sector projects as a second- or third-tier sub-contractor to larger developers or contractors. This is understood to “reduce open competition, access and choice for the public” (Menteth et al, 2015, p.2). It further reduces the ability of architects to act in the interests of the community because they draw their income through the developer or contractor.

Although they have been developed primarily as an educational tool, university-based ‘Live Projects’ can be seen as a way of redressing the restricted access of some communities to the productive labour and practical and imaginative tools that are necessary to influence their environment. When Live Projects are successful they can promote a democratic and self-organising approach to the reproduction of space whilst strengthening the communities with which they collaborate. Students are not paid for their services but instead reap the rewards of a rich educational experience. Live Projects can also catalyse the establishment of resilient communities which endure long after the end of the short project. Because they are normally student-led projects which focus on collaboration and participation, their approach is often unencumbered by deterministic procedures of professional practice, and they often generate highly responsive and innovative outcomes.

Similarly, urban practitioners and community art projects are often able to operate independently of institutions and governance structures. Groups like City Mine(d) operate around projects which may not be focused around architecture, design or construction but which are primarily focused on the reappropriation of public space. These organisations tend to act as a facilitator who adopts or is adopted by a community to develop or embody a collective imagination to find solutions to urban problems. At the intersection of art and politics, artists, alternative architects and other urban agents are paid - if at all - either by arts funding organisations, local authorities or community organisations.

The method of reward for these services is often downplayed, but it can go a long way to explaining the nature of the relationship between the ‘facilitating urban agent’ and the community itself. Authorities may view experts or agents within the community with suspicion because of the power associated with those experts' knowledge bases, and their autonomy from sources of funding and regulation. With increased importance being placed on community-led design, community project management services are becoming a growing area of specialism within the wider marketplace for construction industry services. However, if this growth is driven by government regulation (and paid for by private developers) it is likely that such community involvement will amount to little more than an illusion of participation in a process which is actually being controlled elsewhere.
Conclusion

This paper has identified four different types of obstacles to urban self-organisation.

**Ineffective democratic systems**

As the demolition at Division Street shows, elected representatives do not have the power they need to represent the interests of their constituencies. We need to find ways to invigorate current processes to allow democratic imagination and vision to flourish.

**Restrictive procedures**

Existing economic risk management and blind and uncritical conformity with procedure obstructs new forms of development directly and indirectly. Procedures enforced by funding bodies restrict access to productive labour and professional expertise which may render community projects impotent when they become subsumed within a regulatory system which does not share the same values or objectives.

**Inadequate legal & regulatory frameworks**

The procedures and controls that are necessary to protect the public from private sector development do not appear to be appropriate for groups founded on principles of community interest, such as community land trusts. Current frameworks have not yet adjusted to these new forms of development, and are creating obstacles to their success.

**Release of control by governance structures**

There is a need for governance to recognise that self-organisation cannot be pre-planned and must be understood as a bottom-up phenomenon. There is a need to promote a widespread understanding of the benefits of self-organisation and to find ways to relinquish control without jeopardising the ability of the state to limit abuses of the built environment by capital interests.

The examples discussed here were selected because they cross boundaries between three spheres of influence. First, the construction industry: constituted by its investors, developers, contractors and consultants.\(^17\) Secondly, the state: constituted by elected central and local governments, their unelected advisors, civil servants, NGOs and QUANGOs.\(^18\) Thirdly, the public: constituted by a diverse and interdependent citizenship or urban political ecology.\(^19\)

Architectural methodologies which support bottom-up design processes will continue to be restricted unless they engage with each of these broader spheres of influence. It is
possible to conceptualise them as ‘disciplines’ which tend to operate with a degree of separation from each other. As a broad church situated across the arts, humanities and sciences, architectural practice has a unique perspective on the ideas surrounding urban self-organisation and has the potential to work across the boundaries of these disciplines. There is a need for further research into the challenges faced by self-organising communities and their alternative practitioners to find ways of making these new modes of urban reproduction more influential and inclusive.

By understanding self-organisation as a means of combatting the homogenising forces of capitalism, it is possible to consider alternative practice as a tool for exploiting and widening cracks in the dominant system of development. In contrast to this ‘anti-capitalist’ perspective, supporters of a strong but neutral state can observe how local communities are being encouraged to occupy sunny plots fertilised by supportive public policies.20 This polemic attempts to underline the politicised nature of space as a financial commodity, where organic growth is only permitted within precisely defined limits. We need to accept the visionary nature of the task before us: of supporting urban self-organisation and contributing to a credible long-term trajectory of transformation.21

References


Notes

1 Urban self-organisation becomes quickly politicised when we consider the actual constitution of any given community - how they define their boundaries and the way in which their membership is controlled, either actively or passively. Community is understood here as an element within an inter-dependent urban political ecology where local issues become regional, national and global ones.

2 The term ‘growth’ is problematic and it is clear that many urban centres in Europe have begun to shrink in physical size, or in population, so that their challenge is not one of growth but decline, and how urban areas can be resilient to changes which bring about different types of growth and shrinkage. In this text, growth is synonymous with transformation in the reproduction of the many constituent parts of the ‘built’ or ‘urban’ environment, which, following Lefebvre (1970), is understood as a dynamic field of social relations and social production.

3 Spatial Praxis: Following the work of Hannah Arendt in her 1958 work *The Human Condition*, where praxis is an everyday political action, “spatial praxis” is used here to signify a form of democratic and participatory action which re-appropriates public space.

4 Spatial Agency is an Arts & Humanities Council funded research project that has assembled an expandable database of architectural projects which demonstrate a transformational intent and is critical of conservative approaches to architecture (Awan, Schneider and Till, 2011).

5 Micro-political tactics: Following Michel De Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life, (1988), tactics are distinguished from strategy in that they are employed from a position of subjugation within a dominant system.

6 The project Spatial Praxis attempts to assemble for the first time, a database of organisations, projects and events which present new approaches to architectural/spatial practices which do not fit with the traditional roles of the architect as either academic or professional.

7 Following Roberto Unger in “False Necessity”: to the three resources of capital, labour and governmental power, could be added “practical and imaginative tools” or the power to imagine or envision the future. Although beyond the scope of this paper, this can be seen as another important resource for self-organising groups, which is frequently embraced in alternative practice where events, actions or projects catalyse a collective imagination.

8 Public interests such as environmental and social sustainability, affordability and space standards in the housing sector and various minimum requirements for public facilities and services

9 formative contexts which bias the outcomes of the everyday social negotiations and conflicts we undergo in determining our social future (Unger, 1987: 33)

10 Specialist planning lawyers may also be consulted in these situations to advise on the likely outcome at appeal. Contrast this with the powers granted to the Mayor of London who is able to overturn planning decisions with scant regard for planning policy. In practice, these decisions have been made in favour of big-business and against the local planning authorities recommendations: for an example refer to Fruit & Wool Exchange, Spitalfields: http://www.bbc.co.uk/uk-en-england-london-19896394. [accessed 12 April 2015].

11 Information based on a meeting with Kareem Dayes held on 3 April 2015. Kareem has been a founding member of Self Build group RUSS since the group formed in 2010.

12 The government definition of a Community Land Trust is “a non-profit, community-based organisation that develops housing, workspaces, community facilities or other assets which remain in the public sector and which are made available at permanently affordable levels and which is controlled by the residents, local people and the council.”
13 In the RUSS’s Church Grove project, the mechanisms for controlling sale and rental levels and the mix of the residents are driven by the need for the community to adapt to change in the long term and ensure that all residents have a stake in how the CLT is managed. In RUSS’s report, they state that “the GLA Affordable Housing Grant will not be applied for, to allow the group to set rent levels that are affordable for each member of the community.” (RUSS, 2014, p.14) Because of the strings attached to grant funding available through the HCA, RUSS have decided to pursue a self-financing approach by obtaining a mortgage that will be serviced by rental income.

14 As Walter Menteth states in relation to public procurement in the years 2008 - 2014, “48% of opportunities are now in ‘hidden architecture’ where the facilitator, developer or contractor is asked to provide the design services. Of the sample extracted the hidden market provides some of the most notable in scale, value and range. These can only be accessed by architects as tier 2 or tier 3 sub-contractors if at all. This has reduced open competition, access and choice for the public.” (Mentheth et al, 2015).

15 http://liveprojectsnetwork.org/.

16 A summary of the governments policies on community led design: “The government is creating opportunities for communities to shape the design of their areas. New neighbourhood planning rules are helping to achieve this, as is the Localism Act 2011 requirement that developers involve communities at the pre-application stage of large schemes. To complement this, the National Planning Policy Framework encourages councils to favour schemes that have been designed in collaboration with communities.”


17 Primarily concerned with construction as a commercial activity which makes profit.

18 Primarily concerned with policy, law, procedure and regulation.

19 A social body whose concerns are plural but who all share in, or lay claim to urban space. Following Heynen, Kaika & Swyngedouw (2006), this sphere of influence is understood as an Urban Political Ecology, which recognises the social, environmental and economic interdependency of a local and global ‘public’.

20 To expand on this analogy, the dominant system of urban reproduction could be likened to a field that has been concreted over, where organic growth is restricted by an absence of light, air and water. The surface above is purified and abstracted, clean, uninterrupted and disconnected from its context; ready for imposition from above. Governmental initiatives like CLTs are very small, very neat, precisely defined planting beds cut into this monolithic slab, where organic growth is encouraged by financial incentives, but where the seeds and the fertiliser are imported from elsewhere. Alternative practices may locate cracks in this concrete structure and over time work to break through it. Their task is much harder and at greater risk of failure, being consistently uprooted by the diligent gardener-oppressor. The organic growth that rises from below will naturally attempt to occupy the abundant fertility of the planting bed, but may suffer the same fate because it is not the right kind of growth.

21 In the late 1980s Roberto Unger wrote of how social theorists had thus far failed to provide any credible long-term trajectory of transformation, resulting in a “bastardised and paralysing conception of political realism: a conception that dismisses far-reaching reconstructive ideas as utopian fantasies and immediate, partial reconstructions as reformist tinkering” (Unger, 1984: 39).
Rebuilding Over Time: The Christchurch Convention Centre and The Commons

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ABSTRACT In 1997 the NZ$15 million Christchurch Convention Centre (designed by Warren and Mahoney Architects) was opened. In March 2012, it was demolished. The building was one of over a thousand buildings in the Christchurch Central Business District that were damaged during the earthquake sequence that affected the city between September 2010 and late 2011. This paper will examine the design and construction of the new Christchurch Convention Centre in contrast with The Commons, a temporary community project located adjacent to the former convention centre’s location. The new Convention Centre Precinct, also designed by Warren and Mahoney with Woods Bagot Architects (between its Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne offices) is expected to cost over NZ$500 million. The developments in Christchurch provides an opportunity to contrast the development of public projects with different levels of engagement by its citizens.

The current machinations of the two projects are viewed with respect to emerging discussions in architecture and urban theory that refer to the “civic economy”, which identifies a transition in the delivery of civic infrastructure beyond traditional models of market, state or community. By comparing these two projects, this paper will analyse the transitional period of Christchurch towards recovery, as an opportunity to move from top-down delivery to participatory and incremental models in order that architecture and urbanism can strengthen its civic purpose. The emergence of temporary (or transitional) projects in post-quake Christchurch help to articulate an emergent set of practices that anticipate changes happening to other cities in the twenty-first century.

The essay finishes with a speculative proposition; what would happen if these two modes of urban development – the short-term civic and the permanent economic - were to co-exist in a place, and what might this look like?

KEYWORDS: Master planning; temporary architecture; civic economy; transitional architecture; Christchurch.

It was the second quake

At 12.51 pm on 22 February 2011, a massive earthquake shook the City of Christchurch in New Zealand. It was not the first, but one of over 13,000 that jolted the city and its rural surrounds between September 2010 and the end of 2011. 185 people were killed as a result of the 6.3 MI February quake; ninety percent of houses were damaged. As a result, a national state of emergency was declared, the military was called in, and the central
business district (CBD) was cordoned off from Christchurch’s citizens. They were not to re-enter without official permission for over two years while over seventy percent of CBD building stock was being demolished.

In response to the natural disaster, the national government established the Christchurch Earthquake Recovery Agency (CERA) that took over the recovery strategy of the city, including its urban planning. On 30 July 2012 – sixteen months after the February 2012 earthquake - a bold new plan to rebuild the central city was announced by CERA. Dr Ryan Reynolds describes this period of planning that occurred after the earthquake but before reconstruction plans are realised as a kind of post-city and pre-city (Reynolds, 2014). Within

Fig. 1. With good humour, anonymous Christchurch citizens have awarded demolition sites with accolades. Woods, Rueben. 2012. Best Demo [photograph].
The future

Sixteen months after the February 2012 earthquake, the national government of New Zealand, under the auspices of CERA, revealed a visionary blueprint for rebuilding the CBD and its surrounds. The focus of this blueprint is to create eighteen major anchor projects, which includes a convention centre, sports stadium, performing arts centre, and precincts of innovation and health (Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, 2012). Within the past three years since the earthquake, there has only been minor instances of public engagement with these projects.1

A key project in the recovery plan for the city is the Christchurch Convention Centre. It is significant because of the amount of public funds (NZ$284 million) being dedicated to the project. It is being administered by Christchurch Central Development Unit (CCDU) under CERA, which has promised to bring millions of dollars annually through visitor expenditure. Under this process, the extraordinarily powerful Christchurch Earthquake Recovery Act gives the minister in charge exemptions from any consenting or consultation processes. The brief, the design specifications, and the business case for the convention centre have been not made available to the public despite the public investment and civic language surrounding its conception – as it will “meld city life” and be a “symbol for the city and its people and must reflect the identity of its place” (Woods Bagot, 2015).

The Christchurch Convention Centre also takes a prime position in the CBD being built between the Avon River and Cathedral Square, taking up two important city blocks. Kirsty White, urban designer of “global design and consulting firm” Woods Bagot reflects on the design: “The idea is that typical convention centre functions; the exhibition space and the plenary space are wrapped with local uses and local amenity” (Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, 2014). After three years, there is a lack of public information available to suggest how this will occur. There is a concern with the rhetoric of the proposal and the final outcome. For example, originally “roof top gardens overlooking Cathedral Square for public uses, views of the Southern Alps, a public winter garden” were proposed (Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, 2014). They are no longer visible in the available renders. The convention centre will be complete in 2018 and this lag between planning and
completion is reflective of most anchor projects. By mid-2015, only one of the eighteen projects has been realised from the city blueprint. Some, like the new stadium, are possibly over ten years from completion.²

![Image of Christchurch Convention Centre](image_url)

Fig. 2. Visualisation of the Christchurch Convention Centre from the Avon River. Woods Bagot. 2014. Christchurch Convention Centre [architectural render].

The present

In the time that many anchor projects are under planning and construction, hundreds of provisional projects have emerged throughout the city to contribute to its rebuilding (Freerange Press, 2012). A first wave of temporary projects occurred as a quick response to the lack of water, toilets, and other public amenities and essential services that enable cities to function.² The next wave of short-term projects to follow, however, was driven by different sets of needs such as the desire to remember the city, engage in its remaking, and to form new ways of interacting with the unfamiliar and broken landscape.

It is productive to view this interim period of Christchurch with its abundance of temporary projects in light of writings in architecture and urbanism discourse around temporary use of vacant properties, which has been thoroughly investigated over the last decade in European and North American cities (cf. Haydn and Temel, 2006; Wainwright, 2010; Stealth.Unlimited, 2010; Colomb, 2012; Bishop and Williams, 2012; Tonkiss, 2013; Oswalt et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2014; Németh and Langhorst, 2014). Within the framework of urban planning, temporary use is the time period between where a property ceases its prior function and is waiting to be redeveloped for its maximal utility and/or profit (Weber, 2002). Urban Catalyst documented temporary-use in Berlin, Germany, over a decade and identified many different types of temporary uses in their publication *Urban Catalyst: The Power of Temporary Use*, which include: cultural venues, co-working facilities, neighbourhood hubs, artistic
installations and leisure spaces (Oswalt et al., 2013). Temporary-use is recognised (and celebrated) for the opportunity to re-imagine in a “time and space for alternative forms of development and for users from outside the dominant planning and ownership framework” (Stealth Unlimited, 2010).

The increased study of temporary-use in wealthy economies reflects larger structural changes to these locations under the process of neoliberalisation (cf. Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Keil, 2009; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Weber, 2002; Short and Kim, 1999). In parallel to the potential of temporary use that operate outside the demands of property market cycles, under neoliberalisation, temporary-use projects can also have the opposite effect in assisting the calibration of the urban environment towards economic growth. Temporary-use projects can add other sorts of value to a site – by providing site surveillance, maintenance, cultural amenity and manufactured participation - that later gets cashed in for an increased return when the property is flipped or developed. Fran Tonkiss warns that the creative incubator or pop-up can quickly turn into a developer demonstration project or land grab (Tonkiss, 2013). risk producing amiable conditions for long-term development through improving the amenity of an area (Arbus et al., 2014) but without their presence, the presence of the groups that came together to create them or the issues that brought the parties together. The risk is that they become “a victim of their own success” (Tonkiss, 2013). Geographer David Harvey discusses a similar problem when talking about the public investment in large projects and how they “… are allocated to produce something that looks like a common but which promotes gains in private asset values for privileged property owners” (Harvey, 2012). Both transitional and more permanent projects use the rhetoric of the common good, but the common good is not one thing; it is multiple and contested.

Neoliberalisation has undergone continuous critique due to its uneven allocation and distribution of resources towards citizens. Parallel to this critique is an interest in architecture and urban discourse to locate precedents that assist in imagining other ways of social and economic organisation to address this uneven distribution. In the publication Compendium for the Civic Economy architect Indy Johar optimistically marks out a transition or shift with the emergence to a new type of paradigm. His publication refers to this as the “civic economy”, which is “an economy that combines the spirit of entrepreneurship with the aspiration of civic renewal” (00://, 2011). British Prime Minister David Cameron writes in the introduction of the publication, “We’re only going to make life better for everyone in this country if everyone plays their part – if change in our economy and our society is driven from the bottom up” (00://, 2011). While this can be read as austerity-driven rhetoric, one thing is notable in the call for the civic economy is that society is becoming more open and social in
terms of how society collaborates and communicates (00://, 2011) even if these means are sometimes susceptible.

A shift towards the shared enterprise of production has ramifications for the built environment beyond new typologies for architecture to give form (such as sustainability centres or fablabs) to new models of ownership, organisation, resourcing and delivery (Tonkiss, 2014). The purported emergence of a new type of economy and its shared modes of production also requires new forms of institution to guide this process because “many of our public institutions and public organisations were born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bourgon, 2011). This presupposes that the binary between citizen-led and government- or developer-driven temporary-use may be more blurred or less important than the governance models in place for their creation and management.

The period after the quakes and before the stabilization of the city-form in Christchurch provides an opportunity for new types of organisations, networks and institutions to emerge - such as within the process of creating temporary-use projects - as it may offer particular examples and benefits to shepherd in this “civic economy”, which was recently highlighted by a letter from local and international activists to the Mayor of Christchurch (despite the danger for projects to be used as a form of “austerity urbanism”). They surmised that “The advantage of this approach is its ability to test out and prototype ideas in the physical world; act as an interface with the local neighbourhood; open up the process to the wider community; and experiment with new forms of institution building, exploring how governments, developers and citizens might work together better” (Moore et al., 2014). The awareness of temporary-use and its benefits in testing new modes of operation has seen temporary-use projects emerge in architectural and urban design as a tool for planners, developers and citizens, including in the recent rebuilding of Christchurch, New Zealand.

**The common**

While an anchor project like the convention centre may take six years to realise, a public space called The Commons appeared on an important city site – opposite the site of the old convention centre – within a few months of the building’s demolition. In late-February 2012 the former building on the site – a hotel – was demolished, and the Christchurch City Council (CCC) cancelled the lessee’s hold to re-establish ownership of the land. The council approached local non-government organisation (NGO) Gap Filler – that has been activating temporary vacant sites since the first quake in September 2011 – to take over the management of the site and its programming. This shared enterprise of community organisation and local government shifts the creation of public space from a top-down model of producer and consumer to one that is collaborative.
In the past three years Gap Filler has facilitated over 100 temporary projects with dozens of community organisations, including different experiments of temporary occupation at The Commons, such as art installations, sports events and performances. In the management of the site, even its guiding principles are provisional. Its website states: “Key stakeholders on this site have developed a set of values and principles by which they wish to be bound in their operation, activation and management of this site” (GapFiller, 2015). Organizations involved with or located onsite include Gap Filler, Life in Vacant Spaces (Livs), Greening the Rubble, Festival of Transitional Architecture and Commons Food Collective, which have all emerged post-earthquake around temporary projects. Some are formalised as umbrella or community trusts; others, like Commons Food Collective, are loose groupings; many receive local government support. These organisations represent a surge in new organisations engaged in the creation of the city, albeit provoked by a disaster, and reflect Johar’s call for a renewed civic spirit of heightened collaboration in the creation of the built environment where the distance between user and producer is reduced. The image below show members of the public, rather than contractors, carefully helping to roll out the new turf that replaced a previous large project. (The Pallet Pavilion.) This illustrates one of the ways in which the roles of space-makers and space-users are mixed in this kind of civic project.
This civic nature is evident in temporary experiments at The Commons. One of these projects was a large temporary pavilion made out of blue shipping pallets, which occupied the site between October 2012 and May 2014. Aptly named the Pallet Pavilion, it provided an important performance space for community groups and artists while venues across Christchurch were being repaired. “The space has been open for a summer and has had over seventy events and approximately 25,000 people pass through it” (Bennett and Halliday, 2013). While the project was created to last for one summer, due to its popularity it lasted two years - led by a public refinancing campaign on crowdfunding website PledgeMe - before the ongoing costs and maintenance (including expensive 24-hour site surveillance in case of fire) required its deconstruction. The project was carefully dismantled and almost all the pallets were returned to circulation and the concrete foundation (itself recycled from a demolitions building) was given to nearby farmers to re-use as bridges. The Pallet Pavilion illustrates Gap Filler’s particular approach to community design: the Pallet Pavilion was the result of active participation and commitment from interested citizens rather than capital investment. An immense amount of volunteer labour drives these projects, with the Pallet Pavilion alone requiring, and attracting, more than 2600 hours of gifted skilled and unskilled labour from 80 volunteers and 40 businesses (Pallet Pavilion, 2015).
The transitional

In architecture and urban theory, temporary-use is the term adopted to describe the temporary projects witnessed in Christchurch. However, locally, these projects are referred to as transitional. The word transitional was first used in the context of temporary postquake activities in the 2011 Christchurch City Council Central City Plan that was drafted after the quakes before being superseded by the larger CERA led plan. The word transitional is preferred over the term temporary as transitional acknowledges that a short-term and small-scaled project is an intermediate step that contributes to the long-term development of the city. This positive model, where the state (or local council) creates conditions favourable for temporary use via legislation or assistance (Tonkiss, 2013), has seen CCC establish a number of programmes such as the Transitional City Project Fund to assist in brokering sites, navigating regulations and providing funding. The local council also directly funds the organisation Life in Vacant Spaces (LIVS) that brokers vacant sites and empty buildings with people looking to create art projects, small businesses and cultural events.
The present and the future

The approach to the realisation of the Christchurch Convention Centre and The Commons appear as polar opposites. The convention centre is a slow, long-term and expensive project planned by the government with the business community that lacks sustained engagement with local residents, but meets the needs of increased visitors to the city and the flow-on effect of increased economic revenue. In juxtaposition, The Commons and its cavalcade of temporary projects are quick, short-term, agile and cheap that address short-term needs of locals, but is not built on a long-term sustainable business plan. Both will be places of assembly for different scales, types and functions of diverse groups – that cover the spectrum from businesswomen to bohemians. But they are two different forms of city-making solving very different types and scales of problems. The Christchurch Convention Centre addresses economic growth as its first priority while temporary (or transitional) projects address the immediate need of providing social spaces, which can create civic meaning and form outside of typical planning and property frameworks. It is tempting to conclude that the two modes might comfortably fit together and support each other, however this may not be the case.

Following the comparison and critique of these two projects and their different time-frames, scales, processes and purposes, a speculative question is raised; what kind of building and activity would result if the two modes were to start engaging with each other?

The advantage of temporary, or transitional, projects is that they can avoid the slowness of large projects and engage immediately with the site and potential users. In the context of Christchurch, transitional projects have re-connected citizens with a broken city by providing spaces for social production – eating, meeting, talking, sleeping, and praying. Imagine if the Christchurch Convention Centre started with a small-scaled transitional project to engage the local community to provide a space to address the immediate concerns of its citizens who lack social spaces. This could inform some of the future spaces to be integrated into the final outcome, which is promised in its desire for “local uses and local amenity.” This sees a transitional project move beyond the notion of a project contributing to the social and physical well-being of a city to its large-scale planning, or even its economy. However, this requires government and business to have a planning vision that allows for more risk and experimentation in the design process. This also entails more political risk as experimentation inevitably introduces the possibility of failure, even if this failure is small and leads to improved outcomes.

New forms of participation or co-governance are also implied if the projects are to overcome the risk that a temporary project could “serve as a thin PR exercise and provide planning alibis for the speculative developments that follow” (Tonkiss, 2014 167) This is embedded in the potential of transitional projects beyond its temporary nature, program,
scale or iterative design approach. The strength of these projects depends upon the close cooperation of citizens with the support and enablement of local government. This is a planning vision by government that is kept in check by its citizens who hold it account by working closely together.

**Conclusion**

The comparison of the Christchurch Convention Centre and The Commons highlights that there are many different ways to make and inhabit space in a city. In the twentieth-century the discipline of architecture and urban planning has implicitly favoured more stable and permanent forms of building and construction (Bishop and Williams, 2012) that privilege already a powerful political and economic constellations of actors. Temporary-use projects, labelled as transitional projects in Christchurch, demonstrate a way where architecture and urban design can be considered as an iterative process that opens up a flexible approach to building of cities with its citizens. The interim period provides a gap whereby these projects can rethink market-driven notions of time and use, and in doing so provide a moment to re-imagine the city with different coalitions of people and things. Connected to a large-scale project, it also champions an adaptive approach that can improve the lumbering pace of large projects that disconnect the citizens of a city from the delivery of a project many years later. Experimentation and refinement can also mitigate the massive capital risk to the public inherent in large projects.

Temporary and transitional projects have connected diverse people together after the natural disaster towards a city of increased collaboration, communication and co-creation. This reflects Johar’s declaration that there is an emergence of other ways of organising the economy in the production of space. In Christchurch at The Commons, this includes crowdfunding and land stewardship. Integrating temporary projects into more speculative and spectacular long-term plans for a city may be a risky tactic for a citizen, alderman or developer because the pop-up project can be shut-down or hotwired. However, what could be riskier than rethinking the structuring of the urban environment is to do nothing at all.

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Notes

1 Young people were asked to help design a larger playground; submissions were accepted for the large transport plan and a small part of commercial development in the south of the center; and one small part of the public park along the Avon-Otakaro River was opened for feedback, and the new library led by the CCC has also had public input.

2 However some like a temporary shopping centre and a temporary stadium are likely to stay for several years yet.