

# Learning from temporary use and the making of on-demand communities in London's Olympic 'fringes'

## Abstract

Community-oriented temporary uses are a subset of interim use in vacant urban spaces, alongside creative and commercial practices. Its proponents argue that they can inform more incremental and residents-led local urban development. Under urban austerity, however, temporary uses can become vehicles for the short-term and conditional delivery of social benefits. In this paper, I analyse a community-oriented interim use project commissioned by a public development body as part of the London 2012 Olympic Games urban regeneration program. Drawing upon policy analysis and interviews with planners, policymakers, architects and community members, I unravel competing discourses, positions, power dynamics and temporalities, and their relationship to the Games' legacy. The paper contributes to debates about the normalization of temporary urbanism and pop-up geographies in times of urban austerity, shedding light on the potential long-term implications of the logic of "on-demand communities" in urban development and planning.

**Keywords:** London 2012 Olympic Games, interim uses, on-demand communities, pop-up geographies, urban regeneration

## Introduction

Short-term commercial and non-commercial uses of vacant buildings and land have always been part of the cultural and economic landscape of cities; however, it is only recently that temporary uses have come to the foreground as a distinctive interdisciplinary field of practice between architecture, the arts, planning and policymaking (Haydn & Temel, 2006; Bishop and Williams, 2012; Henneberry, 2017). Within this field, community-led spontaneous (Deslandes, 2013) and unplanned (Oswalt, Overmeyer & Misselwitz, 2013) approaches to transforming the city sit alongside, and have been increasingly supplanted by, more institutional and planned interim use schemes (Andres, 2013; Madanipour, 2017) promoted and funded by national and local governments and organizations. As temporary and interim projects become accepted policy tools for urban regeneration (Reynolds, 2011), critical urban scholarship has identified a significant alignment of temporary use policies with the neoliberal discourse and practices of 'creative cities' (Mould, 2014; Harris, 2014; Peck, 2011), particularly at times of high vacancy linked to the global financial crisis of 2008

(Tonkiss, 2013). The proliferation of temporary projects has been celebrated as a manifestation of grassroots ‘tactical urbanism’ and makeshift approaches. To critics, however, the inclusion of interim uses and projects in urban policy has transformed them into a strategic tool, belonging to the ‘new vernacular’ of post-recession Creative City policymaking (Mould, 2014; Harris, 2015). Interim uses have been used as tools for urban place marketing, aimed at gaining competitive advantage in dynamics of inter-urban competition and as such can be seen to mark a new ‘urban frontier’ in processes of privatization and market-led urban redevelopment (Colomb, 2012a; 2012b).

Supporters of temporary uses of vacant spaces have contrasted these critiques by reclaiming their potential as sites for experimenting with socially and environmentally progressive urban practice. The arguments often highlight how temporary uses, both formal and informal, can promote alternative social, architectural and political urban practice, transforming the ways in which cities are imagined and produced. To socially-engaged architects and urban design practitioners, temporary uses can enable the production of more environmentally sustainable and participatory ways of designing, delivering and organizing space (AAA, 2007; Petcou & Petrescu, 2015). From short-term urban gardening to social projects in large vacant buildings, and from institutional commissions to community-run initiatives and social enterprises, the blurring of boundaries between traditional interim uses and more participatory and transformative ways of spatial production may be “a key characteristic of temporary urbanism” (Bishop & Williams, 2012, p.6). Shifting the focus, some scholars have opted for a thematic approach based on what users *do*: reclaiming, transgressing, contesting, appropriating, uncovering, pluralizing (Hou, 2010). The dichotomy between temporary and permanent has also been challenged. In her analysis of temporary uses of vacant spaces in Berlin, Karen Till proposes the term ‘interim space’, placing the focus on the ways in which urban initiatives, and their communities, evolve and exist in the fluid space-times of the city (2011). The position of local users and communities is therefore key to understanding the potential for promoting projects that are more responsive to local needs and resources (Till & McArdle, 2016). Examining community involvement is central to the promise of informing local urban development and policymaking, and can bring to light underlying assumptions, concerns and even contradictory value claims.

In this paper, I analyze the imagined and actual role of community-led interim uses through the study of the commissioning of a temporary youth center on a vacant plot of land, as part of interim use programs in the areas surrounding the London 2012 Olympic Games site. The paper aims to contribute to debates about the emergence of temporary urbanism and pop-up urban geographies at times of austerity (Harris, 2015), and specifically about the potentially long-term implications of temporary community-oriented projects for local urban development. By contrasting temporary use mechanisms and the promise of long-term social benefits, it raises significant questions about the normative and exclusionary logic of ‘on-demand community’ in neighborhoods already characterized by social deprivation.

### **Interim uses, austerity and ‘on demand’ communities**

Debates around the role of interim and temporary uses of vacant land and buildings have come to the forefront since the global financial crisis and subsequent diffusion of forms of ‘austerity urbanism’ (Peck, 2012; Tonkiss, 2013). Vacant spaces have been argued to be key sites from which to understand forms of urbanization emerging from the territorializing of the global financial crisis (O’Callaghan, Felicianantonio, & Byrne, 2018) and the practices that inhabit them, which can offer important insights into shifts in governance and political responses (García-Lamarca, 2015; Martínez & García, 2015). Scholars engaged with new urban practices under austerity have highlighted how temporary uses become practical and symbolic sites of negotiations across a range of institutional and non-institutional stakeholders (Jimenez, 2013). In a broader reevaluation of ‘makeshift’ urban practices (Marrero-Guillamón, 2014a) as spaces of incremental and processual city making, it has been argued that temporary uses of vacant spaces can become devices for experimentation, collective learning and urban prototyping (Ziehl & Oßwald, 2015; Madanipour, 2017). In post-2008 Dublin, Till and McArdle have proposed the notion of *improvisational city* to encompass the creative modus operandi as a ‘making do’ with what is available (Till & McArdle, 2016). In their analysis of temporary uses of vacant spaces through artistic and social projects, they stress the transformational potential of such practices and their radical openness to engagement with place. The *improvisational city* emerging through often short-term practices highlights the possibility of non-market base values and of

coming together to “share responsibility for place-caring and social sustainability” (Till & McArdle, 2016, p.47).

The sharing of responsibilities and the transformative potential of social interim uses requires careful analysis of the conditions within which they develop, as well as the agendas of the different actors and power relations. As argued by Lauren Andres in her comparative study of Lausanne and Marseille, temporary uses have the potential of transforming urban development dynamics towards more community-oriented approaches (Andres, 2013). To assess this potential, however, it is necessary to analyze the specific distribution of power between sets of stakeholders in the emergence of “multistage governance arrangements” (Andres, 2013, p. 760). In British cities affected by decreasing public spending, the question becomes particularly significant with regards to the role of community groups and voluntary organizations in the design and delivery of public services (Featherstone, Ince, Mackinnon, Strauss, & Cumbers, 2012). Local authorities becoming ‘agents of austerity’ have been argued to engender new partnerships and collaborations with service users and civil society groups as part of their strategies for managing and administering budget cuts (Penny, 2016). Greater responsibility of users and civil society groups in the maintaining social programs at times of shrinking local budgets has been argued to belong to a shifting urban entrepreneurship agenda at times of recession and austerity (Lauermann, 2016).

A critical stance towards community involvement in temporary uses demands attention to the temporalities of participation in the design and delivery of interim uses as a significant component of the power relations at play (Tonkiss, 2013). Community-oriented temporary uses place the emphasis on the involvement of users in some or all phases of the projects. Tactical forms of organizing in emerging ‘pop-up geographies’, however, rely on the mobilization of users at short notice and for short or uncertain periods of time. Borrowing a concept from studies in flexible and casual labor, the logic of temporary uses parallels that of ‘on-demand’ labor (Malin & Chandler, 2016), based on notions of networked connectivity that presupposes both mobility and flexibility (Ferrerri, 2015). As has been argued by Blokland and Savage, ideals of networked urbanism often neglect to consider barriers to participation and the privileging of exclusionary social capital that exacerbate, rather than address, existing social and spatial inequalities (Blokland & Savage, 2008). Interim uses produce normative narratives about individuals and groups engaging in community-led social provision at times of budget reductions and the push towards entrepreneurialism. Complying with

logics of ‘on-demand’ connectivity to partake of the social benefits of the Games’ legacy raises wider questions about conditionality of welfare in urban redevelopment after sporting mega-events (Paton, 2018) and the normalization of “the idea that some claims to space are provisional and temporary” (Harris, 2015, p.595).

In this paper, I understand community-oriented temporary urban projects as produced through power relations accompanied by competing agendas and value claims articulated by policy actors, professionals, residents and community groups. To offer a thick account of these relations and claims, I draw on discourse analysis of key planning policy documents, participant observations and in-depth and repeated interviews with officers from the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) and key individuals directly involved in different stages of setting up the temporary community center.<sup>1</sup> The paper is organized as follows: in the first two sections I present an overview of the history and context of the interim use agendas in the area surrounding the London 2012 Olympic main site. In these, I show how interim use programs were used by the LLDC to promote connectivity between existing and new neighborhoods, and to generate ‘testing sites’ for design agendas and the wider regeneration objectives. I then zoom in on the case study of a youth-oriented temporary community hub in order to offer detailed examination of the tensions that emerged in the implementation of the design and development agendas. Building on local concerns and observations, I highlight how existing social and spatial inequalities intersected with the dynamics of temporary commissioning and the outsourcing of risk. I discuss the elusive longer-term social benefits allegedly to be achieved through interim uses, and draw out the wider implications of an ‘on-demand’ logic of community participation. In the concluding section, I argue that community-oriented interim uses should be understood as a highly problematic vehicle for delivering the social benefits of urban regeneration, whose conditionality on compliance with a ‘pop-up’ logic risks furthering existing social and spatial marginalization.

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<sup>1</sup> On-site research was conducted between June 2014 and May 2015, complemented by archival and follow-up interviews in 2016 and 2019. In this paper, I draw directly and indirectly on interviews with three LLDC officers from the Design and Physical Regeneration team, two workers at The Yard Theatre, a local youth worker, a former local councillor, one of the architects of Hub67 and a volunteer member of the Hub67 steering group.

## **‘Stitching the fringes’ before and after the Olympics**

As has been widely argued, the Olympic bid was publicly justified through the promise of regenerating a derelict and neglected area of East London. The discourse of post-Olympic legacy benefitted from a long-term portrayal of the Lower Lea Valley and its surrounding urban areas, spanning three different London boroughs, as an urban ‘edgeland’ (Davis and Thornley, 2010; Davis, 2016). As early as 2005, the Valley was identified as a strategic area for urban development, as demonstrated by the establishment of the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC) (Poynter, 2009). In 2012, some of the LTGDC’s functions and assets were taken over by the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), which replaced the Olympic Delivery Authority and the Olympic Park Legacy Company. As London’s first Mayoral Development Corporation, it was tasked with planning and delivering the legacy of the Games and combined functions and powers of its predecessors, such as the assembly and management of vacant land, with new powers inherited from local government. This included the responsibility for local planning well beyond the boundaries of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP), including Hackney Wick and Fish Island, from which it is separated by the Lee Navigation canal.

Temporary projects have had a longer trajectory as urban design tools in the areas within and adjacent to the Games’ main site, with deep roots in the history of the organization and its staffing. Many officers in the LLDC had previously worked at Design for London, a team within the Greater London Authority that played a central role in the development of an urban policy discourse around temporary uses in the capital, under the leadership of Peter Bishop (see Bishop and Williams 2012). After the disbandment of Design for London, several planning and urban design officers moved to the Olympic Park Legacy Company and then to the LLDC, in what one of them described as a ‘transfer of team’ (Interview, 15 July 2014). The continuity of approach to local development and introduction of socially-oriented temporary projects in planning derived from their previous experience in the area, particularly through a program of small-scale architectural, planning and design interventions in the areas adjacent the QEOP, as surveyed in the publication *Stitching the Fringes: Working around the Olympic Park* (Design for London, 2013). The program spanned five areas: to the west of the Park, Hackney Marshes, Hackney Wick and Bromley-by-Bow; to the east, Leyton and Stratford. Interventions varied and ranged from physical

improvements in the public realm and green landscaping to pop-up reuse of front shops and the establishment of new venues for the arts and creative industries, such as the White Building, in Hackney Wick.

In the publication, the Lower Lea Valley was described as a ‘tear in London’s fabric’ which required ‘stitching’ through targeted interventions on the landscape (Design for London, 2013, p.15). The overall pro-growth purpose of the program was clearly stated in the Mayor of London’s Forward to the document, which described local development in these areas as ‘central’ to the realization of the ‘real promise’ of the 2012 Games: neighborhoods such as Hackney Wick and Fish Island “must grow and improve in parallel with those in the [Olympic] Park. [They] cannot feel like they are on the edge, looking across at something new. Instead they must be a central part of the transformation” (Design for London, 2013, p.4). In this way, naming the entire area as ‘fringes’ discursively constituted it as peripheral in two ways; in relation to the city’s core, and, more locally, to the Olympic main redevelopment site. The metaphor of ‘stitching’ extended beyond physical redevelopment to its residents who were presumed to be both spatially and socially disconnected. In urban regeneration discourse, depictions that devalue existing residents and spatial uses is a common mechanism used by both public and private agencies to justify the need for redevelopment, generating marginalization and territorial stigmatization of working class spaces such as formerly industrial areas and council housing estates (Slater, 2018). The production of spatial stigmatization has been a common feature in redevelopment through mega-sport events (Paton, 2018); in the run-up to the London 2012 Olympic bid, it has been argued that the marginalization of inhabitants and prior uses of the Lower Lea Valley had suited arguments in favor of the compulsory purchase of land and property, including of publicly-accessible private land such as the Manor garden allotments (Davis & Thornley, 2010; Raco & Tunney 2010).

The ‘stitching’ metaphor persisted in the LLDC’s approach towards the neighborhood surrounding the main site, and in the justification for promoting temporary uses, after the Games. In the words of an officer, the key purpose of commissioning interim uses was about “trying to make it all feel like one place rather than two places” (Interview, 15 July 2014). In this phase, the LLDC commissioned and supported temporary uses through calls for proposals and small-scale funding aimed at so-called as Grass-roots Interim Uses Projects (London Legacy Development Corporation [LLDC], 2014), most of which were to be placed around new mobility

infrastructures, which included the development of public transport links as well as green pathways and the construction of new bridges. Strategically located temporary uses played both a practical and a symbolic role of bridging across areas that had been separated from the main site by an insurmountable and heavily militarized fence: “those are routes that are unfamiliar at the moment and that need to become part of people’s local mental map of the place and by lining these routes we can shorten the distance, the sort of mental distance, between here [Hackney Wick] and here [Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park]” (Interview, 15 July 2014). Small urban design interventions were meant to involve community groups in the development of activities and projects that animated new landscapes and signpost new paths (Ferreri & Trogal, 2018). Beyond this spatial use, in the early phases of the post-Olympic legacy interim uses were also deployed, for the first time, as ‘testing sites’ for community-oriented activities, as I examine in more detail below.

### ***Learning from Others: interim uses as urban ‘testing sites’***

The idea of deploying community-oriented interim uses as planning and policy ‘testing sites’ was a key component in the local development strategies of the LLDC. In 2012, the Corporation commissioned a series of research reports from a range of organizations and researchers titled *Learning from Others* (LLDC, 2012). The 7-volume publication was delivered in 2013 for internal distribution and policy guidance, and covered a range of topics such as ‘Live Art and Performance Projects’, ‘Delivery and Financial Models for Interim Projects’, ‘Local and Community Projects’, ‘Material Recycling and Reuse Projects’. The reports used case studies from London and other global cities to present recommendations and ‘lessons’ for the delivery of the Olympic legacy. Its significance was twofold. Firstly, it introduced community-oriented temporary uses as a subset of ‘interim uses’ practices, and as different from temporary commercial leases, such as for parking, storage or private events, which have become customary in large scale long-term development. Secondly, it promoted the idea that interim uses could act as ‘testing sites’ and “be used to test design agendas” (LLDC, 2013c, p.7). As stated in the first volume of the report:

Interim uses are a key ingredient to evolving and applying long term strategies to specific areas for a specific purpose and group of people, and are therefore an



opportunity for the LLDC to *test* and build its long-term aspirations through a meaningful interim phase. (emphasis added, LLDC, 2013c, p. 7)

In practice, the notion of *testing* meant that some of the key elements in the Olympic legacy agenda could be ‘experimented with’ through temporary commissions and projects: both in terms of new architectural and design approaches to physical redevelopment, and in terms of new approaches to ‘grass-roots’ urban design and delivery of socio-economic regeneration programs. This was particularly valued in relation to the delivery of community facilities required in the planning permission for the Legacy Community Scheme and would be achieved by focusing on uses that promoted the regeneration objectives of “sports, healthy living, arts and culture and community engagement” (Interview, 15 July 2014).

To LLDC officers, the program offered a valuable opportunity for undertaking “different types of interim use experiments” and for them to “take risks” (Interview, 2 September 2014). The risk-taking dimension of interim uses was understood both in terms of new design approaches and in relation to process-based collaborative design and governance, in partnership with local groups, organizations and urban professionals. According to the *Learning from Others* report, one of the benefits of interim uses is that “projects can be easily created and collaboratively delivered by the community, young professionals and the public and private sector, allowing a healthy mix of different people involved in the place shaping of an area” (LLDC, 2013c, p.7). Partnerships between public and private sectors, community groups and professionals were presented as a desirable ‘healthy mix’ for delivering community facilities. The loose usage of the language of risk and testing appears to apply a design and architectural framework to the delivery of social benefits and community engagement, with problematic deterministic undertones as the fringes that needed stitches become experimental site for social and architectural ‘tests’. The notion of testing points in the direction of what Lauermaun has described as a shift within entrepreneurial urbanism, characterized by the emergence of the mechanism of ‘policy experiments’ in parallel to conventional growth politics and involving “a variety of metrics for evaluating entrepreneurial ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in terms other than local economic growth” (2018, p.214). In what follows, I draw on the planning and delivery of Hub67 to examine tensions emerging between the official urban agenda, with its specific metrics,

and the professionals and community groups that constituted the ‘grass-roots’ counterpart of the commission.

### **Vacant land and setting up a temporary community hub**

To residents, the idea of setting up a community hub originated in 2010 when the organizers of the annual Hackney Wick Festival won the Big Local, a community award funded by the National Lottery and managed by Local Trust. This was awarded to community groups in the UK with the aim of supporting residents “to make [their] community a better place to live, changing things for the better” (Big Local, 2014). With money from the fund, the organizers set up the ‘Wick Award’ and led a local consultation to decide how to spend it.<sup>2</sup> As narrated by the former chair of the Hackney Wick Festival and youth worker, the results of the consultation were clear: a “community hub, particularly for young people, was something that was coming up again and again” at a time when the area was increasingly witnessing the opening of “eateries, the cafes, those kind of places that the average Hackney Wick residents can’t afford or don’t identify with” (Interview, 17 July 2014). Despite the Big Local funding, finding a local venue where a youth center could be established proved difficult: “that all went very wrong. We didn’t really have a venue, we couldn’t find anything”. For two years, she arranged meetings with civil servants, local politicians and officers from local councils to garner support for the center. One day she was approached by an LLDC officer at a local community event and told about their decision to commission a temporary purpose-built youth center on a vacant plot of land, property of the Corporation.

Accounts of temporary and interim uses often present vacant spaces as spontaneous ‘interstices’ in cities, and limited scholarship has to date presented in-depth analysis of the politics of vacant production (O’Callaghan et al., 2018). To avoid a tabula rasa approach to temporary uses, it is important to briefly explain the history of the site on which Hub67 was built. The land, at 67 Rothbury Road, was one of seven plots and buildings acquired by the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC) in summer 2010. The plot had been purchased from PricewaterhouseCoopers, who became administrators to the property after the previous

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<sup>2</sup> Wick Award. Retrieved from <http://wickaward.co.uk/>

owner, land trading company Rock Investments, filed for bankruptcy in 2009 following the global financial crisis. The purchase was accompanied by a £3m investment by the LTGDC into improving access to and through Hackney Wick, through the redesign of alleyways, paths, pedestrian bridges, new lighting and surveillance of public spaces, delivered in conjunction with the London Development Agency and the Olympic Delivery Authority. Prior to the acquisition, the land had been occupied by a warehouse that since 1999 had hosted the studios of Bangla TV, later relocated to Pudding Mill Lane.

The vacant plot was located a few hundred meters from the exit of the Hackney Wick Overground station and on the pedestrian route along White Post Lane towards the popular Queen's Yard and the White Building, a temporary art studio and exhibition space refurbished as part of the *Stitching the Fringes* program and owned by the LLDC. As reported by *The Estates Gazette* in 2010, the LTGDC chief executive wanted Hackney Wick to emerge “from underneath the shadow of the Olympic stadium to become the next *destination* for creative industry creation and growth after the 2012 Games” (emphasis added, quoted in Norman, 2010). The vacancy of the plot of land on which Hub67 was built was thus the result of both the east-ward expansion of London's urban growth strategy, through the LTGDC, the Olympic bid and the establishment of a post-Games Mayoral Development Corporation, and of the effect of the financial crisis on speculative real estate investment. In 2011, an Outline planning application submitted to the LTGDC proposed the construction of a mixed-use development of over one hundred flats, 6,000 sq. m. office space and 1,500 sq. m. retail, indicating a clear public-led policy direction for the development of the formerly light-industrial area and low-income residential area.

While the application was undergoing planning scrutiny before being granted, the LLDC was approached by a series of private companies seeking to lease the vacant site and establish temporary food and retail outlets, in the expectation of high footfall in the area during the London 2012 Games.<sup>3</sup> Officers working in urban design proposed, instead, to “let it for free and do a ‘meanwhile’ competition” (Interview, 15 July 2014). As narrated by a member of the team:

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<sup>3</sup> The high footfall did not materialize because Transport for London decided to alternate traffic at Hackney Wick Station to control passenger flow during the Games.

We thought, we have got these sites, wouldn't it be great to do something that was more open to the community? That made the most of it and met our objectives and our priority themes? That looked at animating routes, ultimately, in the longer-term, into Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park? [Something] that came and was grown from the local community? And had maybe a different offer than some of the other projects that we've been doing, like the White Building, which was more for the artistic community and creatives? (Interview, 2 September 2014)

In the positive narrative of the officers, the 'meanwhile' use would be offering something distinctively different from other artistic and 'creative' temporary uses that the Corporation had already supported in Hackney Wick. Beyond 'animating' routes into the QEOP, and meeting the 'priority themes' of the Legacy, the program was to involve a 'local community' understood as distinct from other local artistic and creative communities. Such a distinction shows the establishment of temporary uses as a vernacular of creative cities policies (Mould, 2014), as well as a clear separation, in LLDC's vision, between different inhabitants and uses of the neighborhood, which, nonetheless, positions both on the same plane, regardless of social inequalities. Two months before the London 2012 Games a call was put out for the three-month use of one part of the 67 Rothbury Road site, and was won by Frontside Gardens, a temporary volunteer-run skate park assembled through recycled materials.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the following year, a call for tender was put out for the land beside the skate park, whose lease had been extended.

### *Young people and the 'two communities'*

Originally, the hub was to be built during spring and summer 2013, but the project was delayed by logistical and legal issues internal to the LLDC and it was only in late autumn 2013 that a selection of socially-engaged architecture and design studios were invited to tender for a temporary community hub (LLDC, 2013b). The winning architectural project was centered on two elements: a participatory design process that would involve future users and on a sustainable approach through the re-use and repurposing of existing materials from the Games, mainly the metal containers and

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<sup>4</sup> Frontside Gardens was presented as a positive case study in 'Interim Uses' section of the LLDC Local Plan (2015).

fences. These two components motivated what the Hub67 architect defined as ‘a pragmatic’ approach to the proposal:

given where we are and given what we got, the whole premise being [that we] need to reuse and [given] the uncertainty of what we were really going to be [re]using [...] the detail and the niceness would be in the detail rather than in the actual form. I liked the idea that you find some cabins and stack them up on top of each other and say this is a community center, [and] now we are going to make it nice. That tends to be our approach (Interview, 17 July 2014).

Given the community-led consultation exercise of 2011 and the identification of the need for a community youth center, the architects at Hub67 expected to be connected with an already-established youth group ready to engage in the design and decision-making process. Their original plan was to present a simple design “and then get the community in to make it their own” (Ibid), using participatory architecture to encourage community involvement in the project.

The initial youth group, however, was no longer active. The long delay between the consultation, the offer of the site in 2013 and the actual beginning of design in spring 2014 had negatively affected the participation and interest of local young people and youth workers. During this time, attempts had been made to set up a mobile youth club with the aim of building a potential user group to be involved in the design. As explained by the former chair of the Hackney Wick Festival, many venues around Hackney Wick had offered spaces, but their uncertain and flexible availability over time was disruptive to the process of developing a consistent youth group:

[...] we needed to develop some consistency. We needed to have stuff happening at a time when they knew that it was happening. We couldn't shift things from one week to the next because on an outreach basis we didn't have that sort of relationship with them. So, we needed to be able to say to them, pitch up on a Tuesday night, wherever it is and will see you there. And that wasn't possible because of the shifting nature of a lot of stuff that happened in the Wick (Interview, 17 July 14).

The second issue affecting participation and interest in the design process had to do with the actual building location. In her view, drawing on her experience as a youth worker, the ‘two communities’ that needed to be connected were not the old and the

new neighborhoods in the QEOP, as was the objective of the LLDC, but rather the two socially, culturally and economically different communities within Hackney Wick itself. Apparent to local residents at the time was the separation between the communities living in council housing, such as the Trowbridge Estate and the Eastway Park Estate in the northern part of the Wick Ward, and the ‘creative’ area, south of the railway line, where most cafes, restaurants and nightlife venues were located. The relationship between the residential side and the creative areas was, in her opinion, ‘very limited’ because of the unaffordable prices of food and beverages and because young people tended to be “intimidated by these spaces”. It was for this reason that they had plan a youth hub, which was intended:

for people who haven't made a lifestyle choice to live in Hackney Wick, but who have no choice but to live in Hackney Wick [...] This isn't another trendy venue where you can get a flat white or a flapjack... it really is about people who I think have been left behind (Interview, 17 July 2014).

The physical and cultural distance between the two areas, cut by a railway line, was an issue of concern as Rothbury Road site offered by the LLDC was located in the southern ‘creative’ side of Hackney Wick. In 2014, concerns were expressed that this might constitute a barrier to participation as “it might be [too far] and there will be people who will have problems getting there” (Ibid), as it was ‘not uncommon’ for teenagers to have never crossed ‘the Wick’ beyond the railway station.

### *Externalizing risk*

Hub67 was a key project within the LLDC’s Grass-roots Interim Uses program. To the Corporation, it exemplified the two main values ascribed to temporary uses, as ‘testing’ new approaches to urban design and to working with local communities:

From a design perspective [...] more ambitious, creative, recycled, reused, up-cycled approaches. From a community perspective, it is about trialing and piloting models, new approaches, new kinds of facilities, which is exactly what Hub67 is aiming to do. And it's always about doing that in a temporary, kind of light-touch way, where we can take a few more risks and we can try things out (Interview, 2 September 2014).

In the experience of the Hub67 architects, however, the risks of repurposing and reusing existing materials fell mostly on them, due to the discrepancy between the unpredictability of innovative designs and institutional demands of the LLDC. To begin with, the decision to extend the temporal length of the project to over two years meant that the construction had to be subjected to building regulations and the formerly temporary and makeshift structure had to be anchored by deep cement foundations (Ferrerri & Lang, 2016). Secondly, although the containers had been assembled for short-term summer use, the LLDC required the building to have full certification for thermal efficiency, so the architects had to rethink their approach to repurposing. The tendering requirements of the LLDC, moreover, meant that the building specifications agreement shifted the risk of experimenting with recycled materials from the organization to the suppliers, in this case the architectural studio. As explained by the architect of Hub67 “it’s all about liability, [about] who will take on the risk of reused stuff” (Interview, 17 July 2014). At the same time, the experimental character of the project made it valuable to the studio, despite their expectations of making a loss, or at most to break even with costs. As explained by one of the architects:

to prove that the LLDC can produce something with recycled materials, there should be real life building contracts in order to make this happen, and so I hope at the end we could sit down and say, ok, we’ve learnt this and this and this, and we are not going to do again like this, or we will, and that it does become constructive (Ibid).

For the architects, the value of the project thus resided in the chance of testing an approach with and for the LLDC through yet untested design processes revolving around the sustainable reuse of existing materials. The delivery of the building would become tangible evidence of how it was possible ‘to change the way we build buildings’ with the possibility that the lesson could inform future LLDC commissions and building contracts. The building was finally completed in November 2014 and opened to the public in the middle of December 2014.

Beyond the construction, the governance and funding structure set up a model that too involved a degree of risk for community groups involved in the project, as common in urban entrepreneurial models. The LLDC had provided the plot of land, managed its commission and funded the construction of the building. During its first year, it was also involved in its management, setting Key Performance Indicators such

as “opening hours every week, number of visitors through the doors, number of community groups supported by use of the space” (Interview, 2 September 2014). Setting indicators clearly shows that despite the rhetoric of a ‘grassroots’ space, the management framework of the Hub was substantially top-down, and followed corporate standards of performance assessment. This was matched by a mixed funding approach, through which the Wick Award was asked to contribute part of the salary of the only full-time paid staff. Moreover, in the management and funding structure there was an expectation that Hub67 would achieve financial sustainability by its second year, and the possibility that alternative income would need to be sought through commercial hire of the venue had already been written into early drafts of Hub67 Management Plan in 2014, framing a strong push for an entrepreneurial and self-funded approach to the delivery of the activities in the medium term, which members of Hub67 steering group<sup>5</sup> saw as highly unrealistic (Interview, 10 November 2014). In May 2016, as the center’s lease continued to be extended, the LLDC finally gave the management to The Yard Theatre, an independent pop-up venue and theatre group based in nearby, ‘creative’, Queens’ Yard.

### **‘Seeding’ long-term uses**

Besides offering the opportunity for new architectural design and community-oriented approaches, the Hub67 was presented by the LLDC as a ‘prototype’ for delivering longer-term regeneration benefits. The LLDC had justified building a temporary rather than a permanent community youth facility in Hackney Wick as a question of building a social infrastructure before the actual building: “what we don’t want to do is to build a community place, a youth club, a community hall, [which] then just sits empty because there isn’t anyone who identifies with it, or knows it’s there, or feels any ownership of it” (Interview, 15 July 2014). The future of these temporary community-oriented experiments, however, was beginning to be publicly questioned, for instance in the context of public examinations of the local development plan (see LLDC, 2013a). As an officer commented: “people are realizing that interim uses are all very well, but it is disappointing when they finish”, so the LLDC was keen to

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<sup>5</sup> The governance of the centre involved a multi-stakeholder management structure and a voluntary steering group composed of residents, local and non-local professionals as well as the Hackney Wick Festival committee.



experiment with “using these sites as opportunities for seeding long-term uses” (Interview, 15 July 2014).

Rather than ‘seeding long-term uses’ in the areas where the projects were set, the officers imagined the seeding as part of the design of new neighborhoods on the QEOP site, where facilities would be moved to after an ‘incubation’ period in Hackney Wick. When asked for details, the ‘seeding’ was explained through another metaphor: that of a ‘stepping stone’ towards the new developments in the Park: “[Hub67] is meant to be a place or a facility that people feel ownership of and then could *hopefully transfer*, like a pop-up. We can't carry lock stock and barrel into the park, but at least, whoever is running it, and the user groups, can *transfer* in” (emphasis added, Ibid). Stepping on the interim uses, user groups and the hub managers were imagined hopping over the canal to the newly developed neighborhoods. The stepping stone metaphors could not offer a clearer vision for the logic of pop-up networked and mobile connectivity, which the local users would ‘hopefully’ able to comply with.

The idea that the social infrastructure of Hub67 could ‘transfer’ so easily was met with skepticism and described by people involved in its steering group as ‘really unrealistic’. As evidenced by the experience of trying to set up a pop-up youth club, young people found themselves marginalized by the local geographies of the ‘creative industries’ and by their relative spatial isolation in the northern part of the Hackney Wick Ward, and would be unlikely to be able to move their activities elsewhere. The transferring scenario showed a potential lack of understanding of the human investment and commitment required to build a youth community facility “it’s not as simple as just picking something up and moving it somewhere else” (Interview, 17 July 2014). The idea of moving a community club away from its neighborhood raised questions about the involvement of local residents, community groups and potential other welfare and public sector officers, in contrast to the temporally limited investment of a development company:

From a political point of view, with a small p, I think it can be quite challenging for people like the Hackney youth services and the [local] councilors ... not for the Legacy Company because I genuinely don't think that they need to have that on-going investment in it. You know, they do their bit, it's a pop-up and they go away again. (ibid)

In addition to being a challenge for formal infrastructures of public and community support, the ‘pop-up’ imaginary of an interim use project can foreclose involvement as “it can be a bit of a get out. If something is not permanent, it could mean it's not needed. It's not relevant”. A stark juxtaposition is made between the rootedness of Hackney Wick’s long-term residents and local authorities, and a ‘pop-up’ development corporation, whose investment in local regeneration was to be time-limited. In relation to the specific needs of young people in low-income areas, “making a temporary provision [...] is actually quite irresponsible”. The temporary nature of the social benefits was remarked upon by local campaign groups, such as Save Hackney Wick, which challenged the idea that Games’ legacy was ‘improving historically deprived areas’. They pointed out the lack of replacement, in the local plans, for the functions of Hub67 once the lease of the land ended (Save Hackney Wick, 2018). The difficulties in promoting the participation of young people in the programming at Hub67 could also be ascribed to fissure between ‘on-demand’ and ‘pop-up’ approaches and the temporalities of creating a consistent group. As concluded by the authors of the Wick Award Big Local report in 2016, despite the center being in operation for over a year, “none of the young people [interviewed] mentioned Hub 67” (p. 34); the authors recommended a specific outreach program on the Trowbridge Estate and in the surrounding area.

The lease of the management to the Yard Theatre led to the creation of The Yard’s Young Artists Program, which enabled to a more sustained approach to young people and youth-oriented activities. At this moment in time, the program involves 75 children and young people from the ages of 4-19. As was observed by youth workers in the initial phase of the hub, participation of local teenagers was difficult to generate and sustain. Awareness of barriers to participation, as well as of the distance between the ‘two communities’ led to a strategic approach, as explained by a Yard Theatre local coordinator:

Because there has historically been a lack of provision for young people in this area, it is a long-term project to bring people from the local area in. So, we have played a long game. In our primary years, from 4 to 11, we work in partnerships with the local primary schools [...] and we offer the activities through the schools’ clubs provisions, so every week our artists go out and collect children from the schools and bring them to the hub. The idea being that we build connection with these young people [...] so

that in 5-year time, we will have local 15-year-olds involved too, because they have gone through the process with us. (Interview, 18 February 2019)

Despite the longer-term strategic planning, the future of the youth activities and of the center remains highly precarious, as the management lease for Hub67 has only been renewed until the end of 2019. The original plan to relocate the center across the canal by 2017 was delayed. In 2019, it appears that the relocation might not take place because the site of the new neighborhood, Sweet Waters, is currently being redesigned as Clarnico Quay, a temporary ‘creative’ site to be managed by a temporary use company called Makeshift, in a further extension of the temporary urban paradigm. The possibility that youth-oriented activities may continue at The Yard Theatre main site is also very uncertain, as the planned demolition and redevelopment of Queen’s Yard will likely result in the relocation of the theatre (Interview, 18 February 2019). The shift in the management of the center demonstrated the alignment between the imaginary of a pop-up community infrastructure and cultural practices of temporary uses built around flexible and short-term planning. But the desire to develop a long-term program responsive to the needs of local young people reveals the limits of a precarious infrastructure based around on-demand connectivity. Without a promise to relocate the Hub67, and with the main theatre site under threat of residential development, the vision of seeding long-term uses in the neighborhood appears at best uncertain.

### **Learning ‘on-demand communities’**

‘Grassroots’ temporary uses in the neighborhoods surrounding the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park were commissioned as sites for experimenting with new forms of producing urban spaces, both architecturally and in terms of community engagement. As the case of Hub67 has shown, translating the rhetoric of experimentation into practice created tensions not just in terms of complex contractual negotiations (Raco, 2014) but also, importantly, in terms of the needs and temporalities of its direct beneficiary in the local resident community. The self-organized approach to identifying limited resources for social programs and fundraising for it at the national level, initiated and undertaken by volunteers in the spirit of the “powerful spatial imaginary” of austerity localism (Featherstone et al., 2012), met the insurmountable hurdle of a lack of institutional support to develop continuity of use. Under these conditions,

establishing a relationship with the LLDC as one of the main landowners in the neighborhood was a necessary tactic for gaining access to space. According to the metrics of experimental entrepreneurship, the case of Hub67 could be interpreted as a successful one: proactive civil society organizations deployed entrepreneurial and flexible tactics to gain community facilities, generating new governance and management models for the delivery of a social program. This was largely due to the involvement of the Yard Theatre, itself a successful example of a pop-up and self-funded cultural venue. The governance model set up by the LLDC through its interim use commission, however, ultimately revolved around the externalization of part of the funding and management risks to community and artistic organizations, making it a highly precarious arrangement.

Beyond the immediate concerns of the architectural design, and the question of young people's participation, the LLDC also externalized the political responsibility for the longer-term needs and expectations of its users. To those involved in Hub67, the longer-term horizon continues to be dominated by the likely replacement of social and community activities by more profitable residential uses, making visible a fundamental chasm between the rhetoric of community-led temporary use and the experimental and pro-growth urban agenda of the LLDC. The proposed regeneration benefits of the youth center were fundamentally conditional on the acceptance of its future uprooting and its intended temporary beneficiaries as not worthy of long-term investment, unless they themselves became mobile and transferrable. The idea of negotiating social benefits through interim uses reproduces imaginaries of 'drag and drop' temporary and pop-up urbanism (Harris, 2015) predicated on a normative fantasy of spatial mobility and flexibility that excludes large sections of the urban population, let alone young people from low-income backgrounds. In relation to their needs, Hub67 presents a case of welfare conditionality, where provision of a public service becomes dependent upon compliance with specific patterns of behavior: acceptance of 'on demand' social connectivity and resignation to its eventual transfer elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, the favored vehicles for the construction and management of the community center were projects belonging to creative cities' tactical urbanism, such as self-organized pop-up theatres and temporary architectural projects. In a further extension of interim uses' 'creative' vernacular (Mould, 2014), excluded low-income communities are asked to learn from precarious creative practitioners and be ready to be summoned when and where needed, accepting that (social) collaborations will be

pre-emptively short-term. The institutional incorporation of community-oriented ‘grass-roots’ temporary uses could thus play a highly problematic role in ushering in and normalizing new precarious ways for local communities to gain social benefits at times of austerity.

## **Conclusions**

Community-oriented temporary uses are emerging as a subset of interim use practices in vacant spaces, alongside but distinct from creative and commercial practices. In the context of urban austerity policy, they become vehicles for delivering social benefits, normalizing exclusionary logics of ‘on-demand connectivity’ and temporal foreclosure. Such a normalization becomes particularly problematic in the case of community-oriented interim uses, commissioned by a public development body under an ‘urban regeneration’ agenda, in an area already marked by the production of negative imaginaries, displacement and exclusion (Davis 2014; Davis and Thornley, 2010; Watt 2013). Beyond the specificities of Hackney Wick and of post-Olympic development, it points to the possibility of a wider deployment of community-oriented temporary and interim uses as a useful planning tool to “lubricate structural changes and its associated risks” and normalize “an attitude that takes inequality for granted” (Madanipour, 2018, p.1106).

To conclude, three significant issues emerge for critical urban geographies of community-oriented temporary use policies and practices at times of austerity. The first concerns the vision of temporary and interim projects as ‘testing grounds’ for regeneration agendas. The language of ‘tests’ and ‘prototypes’ reveals an underlying experimental entrepreneurial approach to local planning and community participation, which often relies on devaluing existing residents and users and disregarding their longer-term needs. Underneath the language of experimentation lies a fundamental retreat from any attempt at long-term investment into areas of high deprivation, while temporary places for welfare provision, such as container and pop-up housing, are on the rise (Harris, 2015). The second issue concerns the idea of temporary community projects functioning as ‘stepping stones’ for potential other places and users. In this problematic notion, ideals of transferrable social infrastructures become normative in pro-growth strategies that openly disregard multiple forms of social disadvantage and the complexities of developing community-led spaces and provision. In the case of “people who haven't made a lifestyle choice to live in Hackney Wick”, the only

proposed option for negotiating social benefits from the post-Olympic redevelopment is through (borrowing Emma Jackson's phrase) 'fixity in mobility' (2013). The notion of pop-up transferability shows a profound disconnect between the application of temporary use discourses in planning and the social dynamics that make possible meaningful community engagement over time. Finally, while the idea of an *improvisational city* raises the hope of more incremental, sustainable and community-led urban policymaking, its inclusion in an experimental entrepreneurial urban agenda appears to be introducing new models of exclusionary governance and more uncertain public service delivery. Temporary community spaces such as Hub67 become the visible, architectural embodiment of broader anticipatory politics of service withdrawal in austerity UK, particularly affecting young people (Horton, 2016). As community-oriented temporary uses become more established, residents and community groups may find themselves increasingly entangled in precarious, entrepreneurial and 'on-demand' engagement with public institutions while at the same time facing the impossibility of laying claim to social services and places in the long-term.

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