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10 Experiencing interim landscapes: ephemerality and place-making

Krystallia Kamvasinou

Introduction

A mobile educational garden on the Kings Cross development site (Skip Garden). A 5-year temporary project on a development site (Canning Town Caravanserai). A 999-year lease for slow, community-led development through temporary interventions on the banks of the River Lea (Cody Dock). A public space, community garden and art project on a disused heritage site (Abbey Gardens). An urban farm and social enterprise in various sites in Hounslow (Cultivate London).

How is ephemerality defined in each case? How is the condition of ephemerality conducive to place-making? Through empirical research and literature review, this paper aims to theorise the perception and experience of place as conditioned by ephemerality. Landscape history has engraved itself deeply in the collective cultural memory of peoples and nations. From Persian to Japanese Gardens, and from the French Baroque to the English Picturesque, the grand regional landscape traditions have left their mark on the land and many of their notable outputs have been preserved as heritage for people to enjoy to this day. However, more ephemeral landscapes have been perhaps a lesser footnote in the history books. Historical narratives tend to focus on grand events presented in a deterministic manner and obeying chronological order, but such history usually bypasses smaller, incremental, cyclical or ephemeral occurrences that define ‘alternative modes of thought and action’ (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2017: 1872). In this essay I am looking into five cases of temporary landscapes on vacant land, their stories and how they define ephemerality as an alternative creative condition, with a socioenvironmental legacy and heritage value that stays on in communities.

Vacant plots are a familiar image for most of us: fly-tipped pieces of land behind hoardings - often decorated through nature’s ability to reclaim even rubble - which eventually get built but spend some time as black holes in the urban environment. Sometimes they take on creative interim uses that allow for a reimagining of waste, empty space and vacancy. Recent debates in the urban planning and architecture fields interrogate the value of temporary uses of vacant urban land or underused space. See (Németh and Langhorst, 2014), (Reynolds, 2011), (Tonkiss, 2013), (Klanten and Hübner, 2010). Such debates have been fuelled by the 2008 recession during which a number of initiatives in the UK and London in particular tried to bring back life to stalled development sites and other underused spaces¹. Their outcomes are creative projects that temporarily insert life, dynamism and identity on sites in-between more permanent developments. Some of that legacy may remain even after they are gone and form an intangible heritage for subsequent generations or be integrated in the future life of the site.

In urban design, the term ‘vacant land’ refers to unbuilt, leftover or derelict land. See (Kamvasinou, 2011). It is a contested term, as it can be associated with failure, lack of economic productivity, and waste. It is the task of the fields of architecture and urban planning, it seems, to overcome these negative connotations by replacing the wasted and vacant with the built. But vacancy can also have positive potential. The notion of ‘terrain vague’, introduced by Spanish architect and academic Ignasi de Sola Morales (1995) in the mid 1990s, acknowledges the power of vacancy to promote freedom, flexibility and openness. Under this prism, the informal reclamation of derelict post-industrial landscapes

and decommissioned infrastructure works, by people and nature, can be read as powerful new landscape identity, celebrating their indeterminate character. Indeterminacy - a quality usually overlooked in designed landscapes - has often enabled significant identities to emerge, albeit temporarily, in lands considered outside the boundaries of planning, derelict or leftover.

Vacancy and indeterminacy go hand in hand with ephemerality. But history books normally focus on permanency or major events. Very little of the history of interim use in London has been documented or published, George McKay's (2011) book on *Radical Gardening*, Jamie McCullough's *Meanwhile Gardens* (1988) and David Nicholson-Lord's (1987) *The Greening of the Cities* being notable exceptions. The interim projects presented here showcase the positive role of ephemerality in the urban cycle and allude to an intangible cultural heritage not necessarily tied with specific buildings or physical spaces. Their inclusion in a book such as this also addresses the importance of documentation of their ephemeral existence.

Five ephemeral landscapes

I visited the five cases that will be discussed on various occasions as part of a research project² from 2012-2014. All were initiatives that started in 2009 and some of them are still ongoing. The research methodology included on-site filming and interviews with initiators, volunteers and users, site surveys, and a public workshop open to all participants, while research outputs included academic publications, an open access website that acted as a repository of project summaries (See Interimspacescreativeuse.wordpress.com), and a short film (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pawuz4siovI>).

Skip Garden, Kings Cross: Ephemerality as mobility

July 2013. We approach the site from Kings Cross, having just passed over the familiar cut of Regents Canal and the newly operational Granary Square with its playful dancing fountains. Ten years ago this was a wasteland. Right next to the Granary Building an oversized industrial shed gives way to a green and pleasant hoarding. A sign awaits in front of an opening in the hoarding through which we get a glimpse of a yurt, portacabins, a wooden shed, a polytunnel and a number of planted skips, all different colours. It is summer and the café is serving home-made snacks and drinks. A number of young people and some families occupy the sunny enclosure of the so-called garden. We take a walk around the skips and discover a surprising variety of plants growing in them, including fruit trees. 'My basic job is to make sure the garden is productive. And producing crops on a regular basis for the kitchen that we now have' says Paul Richens, the Garden Manager (Richens, P., Interview with author, 03/12/13). The Garden is run by Global Generation, an environmental charity educating on sustainability.

Most people are moving to cities, so why not do systems where even people with very little skills can actually ... still grow in containers...understand how that works and what you need to do for it. And so here with all the containers and everything else I'm actually, hopefully, showing people. [...] the best comment I ever had was, well if you can grow that in one skip, my back garden is bigger than your skip, you know, I can do that. And I thought, that's exactly what I want to hear (Richens, P., Interview with author, 03/12/13).

<<Figure 10.1 near here>>

The landscape is unashamedly ‘ramshackle and makeshift’ (Solomon, R., Interview with author, 16/01/14), compared to the polished and manicured public spaces elsewhere in the new Kings Cross Central development. Rachel Solomon, the Youth Manager, explains:

We’re contrasting with somewhere that’s very slick and beautiful [...]. But at the same time, our approach is still professional, we still have professional spaces but in the way that we do them [...] It’s finding what works for official public realm and what works for a space like this’ (Solomon, R., Interview with author, 16/01/14)

Based on a reciprocal agreement with the developer, the garden boasts to be the birthplace of the inception of the Meanwhile lease³ but the price for its longevity on one of the largest development sites in Europe is its mobility: the garden has to be portable and ready to move every time the construction proceeds to the site it temporarily occupies. Ephemerality here has an enabling quality: to ensure such a project is allowed on a prime location development. Mobility necessitates that the garden be planted in skips and relies on structures that can be moved relatively easily. Although the sites that the garden occupies are ephemeral, its presence has a level of permanence through the networks of people and the business connections it has established that have provided jobs to young locals as it continues to move around the development site 10 years after its initiation. Now in its fourth site, signs of this permanence are starting to emerge: a group of designed structures by architecture students dominate its latest incarnation. An activator and place-shaper in the earlier stages of the development, when its contribution really mattered in order to bring people into a site with a dubious reputation, it has now been relocated at the very back of the site as commercial uses have been introduced that may be more mainstream attractions for many social groups. Still, there is a good balance between the developers’ official ‘place-making’ and the Skip Garden’s ‘place-shaping’, making this a good example where the private and voluntary sector worked synergistically rather than in opposition. Its twilight gardening workshops continue to bring together varied people from the local community to garden enthusiasts to business employees from the occupiers of the surrounding new buildings. The Skip Garden now forms part of tourist tours from all over the globe. This is an enduring ephemerality with a long-lasting philosophy and impact within an overall landscape of major urban change.

Cody Dock, Newham: Ephemerality as slowness and emergence

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There is something eerie in the quiet atmosphere of the dock. Two boats feature on the bank of the River Lea, like they have landed there after some sort of biblical cataclysm, and now stand disconnected from their natural element, the water below. One is a community boat: it hosts music nights, daytime events and on Friday evenings there are pub nights. In the middle of the dock a geodesic dome covering a floating stage leaves things open to the imagination. Elsewhere on the banks you notice nature’s regeneration: with the help of committed volunteers the previously contaminated land now boasts with reeds. Opposite the dock, a gasholder stands tall reminding us of the area’s industrial past. Further south you can make out Canary Wharf towering over the Isle of Dogs; ‘the site provides a nice view for Canary Wharf to see how the other half lives’ are the words of one of the first volunteers involved in initiating the project (Neilson, L., Interview with the author, 11/10/2013). Here however is the landscape of a long-term, organically produced regeneration. Reflecting the history of the

industrial site and the environmental reclamation of the river, the project is gradually opening up this previously inaccessible, brownfield site to contribute to a continuous riverfront walk on the River Lea. It engages with artists and moorers who support ephemeral activities such as art workshops, or educational activities with local schools in exchange for space: mooring spaces or artists studios. One experiences the place as a calm, riverside space providing access to nature and alternative lifestyles. Behind the scenes, the Gasworks Dock Partnership works with the community and particularly local schools educating young children on the importance of the river environment with its rich habitats for birds and plants (Myers, S., Interview with the author, 12/09/2013). It provides accessibility to the River Lea and promotes the understanding and protection of local biodiversity and ecology. It also works with local businesses that support the project financially through awaydays and sponsorships. Regular events bring communities together, especially in the summer. Despite securing a 999 years lease, this is slow place-making, to allow the place to emerge incrementally and organically, for the community to enjoy over the long-term (See <https://codydock.org.uk/>).

Canning Town Caravanserai, Newham: Ephemerality as experimental methodology

The Caravanserai was a 5-year interim project (2010-2015) on a vacant ex-housing urban block, and the winner of a Newham council-initiated competition for ‘Meanwhile London. Opportunity Docks’ (2010), with a proposal aimed to turn the large stalled site into a temporary micro-scale urban ‘oasis’ (Ash, C., Interview with the author, 6/12/2013). This was a strategic site, destined for redevelopment, as part of the Town Centre planned for Canning Town. The project was led by Ash Sakula Architects and was originally envisaged as a wide range of ‘trading, making, cooking and eating’ (Ash, 2012: 27) activities that would engage both locals and visitors during the summer of the London 2012 Olympics. The vision for the project included local skills’ development through the provision of training workshops, fostering community through food growing and gardening spaces, and even ticketed events.

This was a place that mainly engaged temporary communities of interest such as architecture students and recent graduates involved in building ‘Flitched’: the result of a design competition in November 2012, this was a structure covering part of the Caravanserai site, made out of upcycled construction waste and providing a sheltered and enclosed space for the winter months. As a place, Caravanserai also engaged artistic companies and provided entertainment experiences for visitors and those attending events. This interim space was not however without its challenges. A more limited experience perhaps was shared with locals through allotments and food growing workshops; engagement with local communities was harder without the help of a local community organisation. The necessary hoardings all around (as this was a semi-public space to be locked at night) also significantly compromised the experience for the accidental passer-by. Once inside the site, the ingenuity of the structures testified to the high levels of creativity invested, but the spaces they defined were seldom used to their full potential.

<<Figure 10.3 near here>>

Ephemerality here can be seen as experimental methodology, to ‘prove an impact’ and test whether there is a particular need (Ash, C., Interview with the author, 6/12/2013). There is no doubt that with more time and resources this approach would have reached its full potential as a place-making tool; as an experiment it fluctuated between energising the site and struggling for attention. It will be interesting to see if its experimental ethos can or will be

replicated elsewhere, or if it has left a conceptual legacy. Certainly, Caravanserai's web presence captured its ephemeral moments of site activation for posterity. The initiators argued that such spaces are needed as an alternative to public spaces offered in new developments, which are too focused on consumption, and also to parks, which are less attractive for those who do not have dogs or children (Ash, C., Interview with the author, 6/12/2013). Canning Town Caravanserai ended in 2015 but the site was still unbuilt in 2019.

Abbey Gardens, Newham: Ephemerality as heritage

At first, it looks like an inconspicuous landscape next to Docklands Light Railway (DLR) lines, a low-key residential area, and light industry. Taking in the landscape from the DLR bridge, however, one is surprised by its form and vibrancy: colourful planting tended to by many devoted volunteers. The triangular layout of the raised garden beds makes reference to local history: the nearby Plaistow Triangle in the early 20th century had been squatted by a group of unemployed men whose picture is now printed life-size on the Abbey Gardens shed. This layer of relatively recent history coexists with official heritage: the site contains the flattened remains of a 12th-century Cistercian abbey having acquired thus the status of Scheduled Ancient Monument. History repeats itself: monks once ran a kitchen garden here. Formal and informal layers of history are represented in the garden. Layering here is a design approach that builds on the ephemeral lives of the site, and produces yet another layer, but one that looks set to last: initially a temporary arts project, commissioned in 2006, the site has now been established as a local public space and community garden and is still going strong in 2019, thirteen years later.

<<Figure 10.4 near here>>

An engaging public space, enjoyed by locals but also by more distant garden enthusiasts, it is run by the Friends of Abbey Gardens and Newham Council. Gardening and food growing workshops help to maintain a beautiful garden and the artistic touch with the unique design of the beds and the oversized printed archival photograph on the shed make it quite memorable. Regular events emphasise this experience (See <http://www.abbeygardens.org/>).

The garden has contributed to place-making in the neighbourhood, as previously it was a fly-tipping site. Well-known and appreciated by the community and acknowledged by Newham Council as a public space, it can serve as a model for other small/medium scale leftover spaces in other neighbourhoods. It demonstrates that the heritage of 'interim space and its political message can live on in contemporary interventions, despite its erasure from formal urban space' (Kamvasinou, 2019).

Cultivate London Brentford Lock, Hounslow: ephemerality, spatial temporariness and temporal continuity

Like the Skip garden, Cultivate London temporarily occupies available land but on different development/vacant sites. This spatial temporariness is however underpinned by continuity of activities. Cultivate operates as an urban farm and social enterprise (Attorp, A., General Manager Cultivate London, Interview with the author, 24/9/2013). Working with young, unemployed or vulnerable people and people on probation, it provides training on how to cultivate plants, edible or decorative, to sell in local markets. It temporarily transforms unused, small or medium scale vacant sites, which are in the process of being redeveloped, into productive landscapes and places of education for the communities they serve. The place

experience is thus that of a working, productive, utilitarian site. A landscape that does not care too much about aesthetics or design but works with whatever is available, whether abandoned structures from a site's industrial past, or more practical ones such as polytunnels. Plants are in abundance and that makes the experience pleasant and much like visiting a plant nursery - but visitors are scarce. For those who are involved in training and volunteering, the experience is certainly rewarding and working outdoors contributes to feelings of well-being, active living and connecting with nature (Hurwood, G., volunteer trainee and apprentice grower, Interview with the authors, 11/2/2014; Connor, S., volunteer trainee and apprentice grower Interview with the authors, 11/2/2014).

<<Figure 10.5 near here>>

Cultivate London activates spaces that are otherwise waiting dormant; however this does not necessarily amount to place-making as the public are not invited in, and the spaces are only really open to those involved with cultivating. Nevertheless, it contributes to utilising unused stock and vacant land in a city where land is in high demand, instead of letting it lying derelict and wasted.

Conclusion

The experience of interim landscapes has been multifaceted and varied, not least due to the nature of such landscapes and the way ephemerality has been configured in each case. Mobility, slowness and emergence, experimentation, intangible heritage, or spatial temporariness have been key themes in the five cases examined and doubtless in many others. These themes tell the story of landscapes emerging without landscape designers, a story largely untold and scarcely documented in the past. The way ephemerality is experienced by different social groups and is reflected in place-making is testimony to the diversity and continuous change characterising our cities in an age of globalisation. Interim landscapes show ways that we can respond to such change. Each one constitutes a spacio-temporal, site-specific, tactical landscape intervention; collectively they mark an urban phenomenon that leaves a longer-term legacy with its socio-environmental contributions. And while in the past such contributions might not have left any tangible traces, today the web and digital media ensure that such ephemeral urban interventions are adequately documented and inform the future production of the city. Writing about interim landscapes in this book also means that their value is not lost but is noted and revisited, leaving a legacy for future generations worth following and sustaining in collective memory and landscape practice.

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¹ See for example the Site Life campaign led by Property Week, and the Mayor's Capital Growth initiative in London (both initiated in 2010).

² The research project 'Interim spaces and creative use' was funded by the Leverhulme Trust with £45,000 over a period of two and a half years (1/10/12-31/3/15).

³ The Government's official sanctioning policy for temporary uses. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/meanwhile-use-leases-and-guidance-for-landlords>.