Learning form tactical approaches to urban voids

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Preface

This contribution fits in the project: 'The Role of Temporary Use of Voids in Urban (Re)development', a PhD research supported by Inoviris in the framework of Prospective Research for Brussels 2008. In this project we claim that it is it possible to steer, influence and/or trigger urban transformations by means of temporary use of vacant city spaces (urban voids). We are investigating if proposals for the elaboration of innovative urban development strategies could be derived from temporary projects.

The conflict of contemporary urban (re)development

In the current post-industrial society urban planners and designers are regularly faced with uncertain or unpredictable situations and have to take into account an almost uncountable number of actors and influences. Urban (re)development according to the principles of the 'blueprint planning' (in which one starts from an initial 'tabula rasa' situation and works in a linear way towards the realisation of a pre-conceived final plan) has proven to be unworkable in practice. As a reaction the focus shifted towards 'development planning', in which the creation of plans is seen as a process of consensus building amongst different social actors.

Citizen participation is also integrated in this approach. Nevertheless, when citizens are invited to participate to official urban (re)development projects in accordance to the institutionalised procedures, they are often expected to enter a long term process in which they have to react to proposals concerning interests disconnected form their own and at a scale for which they have little feeling. On one hand this can bring about feelings of demotivation and frustration, resulting in the loss of interest for official participation processes. On the other hand it appears that citizens more and more often refuse to wait for official invitations to express their opinion and to

influence the design/creation of their environment. As a result a broad range of urban activism is emerging worldwide. These alternative urban interventions arising from an engaged civil society typically operate outside the standard modes of the design process and emerge organically rather than from a hierarchical centre[1].

In this a conflict between the traditional, systematic or steering way of urban development (that regulates the use on the medium or long term) and the need for more contemporary, flexible and spontaneous ways of developing that can respond more swiftly to changes and the demands of society, comes to light.

Introducing urban voids

Due to social and economical developments, the space surrounding us is continually subjected to adaptations. In an urban context however, this process is often confronted to the inertness of the built environment, resulting in 'interruptions' of the continuity of the urban fabric. This becomes obvious for example in places of conflict, deterioration and/or vacancy. Today for instance, the transformation of the city from an industrial node to a node of knowledge has resulted in the withdrawal of production units from the city centres, leaving behind numerous voids. Re-appropriation and reincorporation of these spaces is time-consuming. First of all our society doesn't always have well-defined purposes for these places. But even if there is a clear plan, the realization of any spatial redevelopment project is always preceded by a (sometimes very lengthy) phase of conceptualization, negotiation, planning and preparation, before the actual realization on site can start. On top of that implementation of plans can easily be delayed due to financial, social or other reasons.
This is why there will always be a number of urban spaces that are temporarily 'in transition'. These are the places we are focusing on: abandoned by their previous use(r) and not adapted to the demands of the current society, these places seem unsuitable or undesirable in the mainstream economic cycle. Because of this, they often (temporarily) slip out of the main urban actors' notice and are left behind with little or no use - we could therefore say that they are 'temporary out of use'. They consist of large or small scale places, public or private and built or un-built, which are

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[1] freeassociationdesign.wordpress.com (accessed 24.02.2012)

in some kind of in-between phase - a pause - in functionality. Therefore these spaces can be described as 'pause-land/spaces'[2].

Conceptual framework

The notions of emptiness, vacancy or desertedness have always been fascinating to mankind; therefore the concept of 'void' has already been attributed countless different meanings in spatial and other contexts.

In describing 'urban voids' as being places that are overlooked by the mainstream actors, we can relate them to the concept of 'heterotopia'. This term was originally coined by Michel Foucault (1967) to describe places that are 'in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect'. These places are - as opposed to utopias - 'places that are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality'[3]. Several theoreticians have expanded on this notion, for example stressing that heterotopia offer opportunities for interaction with 'the other', where the unknown (and threatening) can become more understandable (Hajer, 1996) and that they offer room for dissidence and negotiation of difference, thus becoming 'testbeds for change' (Shane, 2005).

On the other hand, in describing 'urban voids' as being in an in-between phase, we can link them to the concept of 'liminality'. Derived from the Latin word 'limen' - meaning threshold -, this notion is used in anthropology to describe the ambiguous phase of initiation rites, when the ones being initiated are making the actual transition between states: they left their previous state (of not yet being a member) but did not yet reach the next state (of being a member). Authors like Sharon Zukin (1991) and Richard Sennett (1990) have applied this concept to spatial theory, pointing out the possibility of 'liminal spaces' to bring together a diverse range of people and activities, resulting in valuable exchanges and connections between them (Carmona, 2010).

Finally, in describing 'urban voids' as spaces that (temporarily) seem have little or no function, we can also focus on their 'openness', linking them to the concepts of

[2] This term is a free translation of the Dutch term 'pauzelandschap'. According to Iris Schutten (2010) the term was introduced by Jan de Graaf and Bart Bomans in 2005, in a supplement entitled: 'In de Tussentijd', that appeared to the magazine: 'Blauwe Kamer, Tijdschrift voor landschapsontwikkeling en stedenbouw' 4/2005. De Graaf had nevertheless already used the term before (in a different context and related to different issues): in an article entitled: 'De charme van een pauzelandschap', that appeared in: Archis 5/2001, p. 58-62.
[3] translations by Jay Miskowiec, www.foucault.info

'thirdspace' by Soja (1996) and 'terrain vague' by Sola-Morales (1997). Soja has updated Lefebvre's concept of the spatial triad (perceived, conceived and lived space; Lefebvre, 1991) with his own concept of spatial trialectics (first, second and thirdspace). He describes 'thirdspaces' as places that are at the same time real and imagined. Soja's articulation focuses on a politically charged dimension of thirdspace as a space of resistance to the oppressive power structures that are associated with the ideologies of secondspace. According to Soja, thirdspaces 'are the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation and emancipation' (Camp). Architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales has coined the term 'terrain vague' (also used by Lefebvre (1991)) specifically to describe the residual spaces of the post-industrial city. He sees a strong relationship between the absence of use and activity, and a sense of freedom and expectancy. By this relationship, the 'terrains vagues' imply an evocative potential: they are spaces of pause, void, and absence, but also of promise, possibility, and expectation.

Tactical urbanism and temporary use

As mentioned earlier, quite recently we observed the emergence of a broad range of urban activism emerging worldwide. These civil initiatives oriented towards spatial planning and urban redevelopment, aim at 're-conquering' the city from institutional and economical organizations by mobilizing the bottom-up energy of the city and enabling citizens to take part in the shaping of their daily environment. They believe that the dynamism created by this network of weak and everyday users, might be able contribute to the reconstitution of urban life in areas, where official (traditional) planning strategies do not seem to offer adequate solutions anymore. In this context we can for example refer to the work of Urban Catalyst (www.urbancatalyst.net) from Germany, the atelier d'architecture autogérée (www.urbantactics.org) from France, Stalker (www.osservatorionomade.net) from Italy, Op Trek with the Laboratorium van de Tussentijd (www.hoteltransvaal.com/lab/) from the Netherlands, Supertanker (www.supertanker.info) from Denmark and Rebar (rebargroup.org) from the United States. To refer to this broad range of alternative urban interventions arsing worldwide today that are attempting at answering the need for more contemporary, flexible and spontaneous ways of developing we will use the term 'tactical urbanism'. The use of this term is inspired by a piece of writing by Rebar (2010) saying that *'In contrast to technocratic urbanism, there exists a set of people, processes, and places that we would characterize as user-generated urbanism. This is the urbanism*

of the **tactician**, *those devising temporal and interim uses, and seeking voids, niches, and loopholes in the socio-spatial fabric. These processes are made evident in circular, hybridized, and overlapping patterns of resource consumption and tend to foster a diverse, resilient, social ecology.'* It also follows the distinction between tactics and strategy as applied by Michel de Certeau to describe the behaviour of people and institutions. According to de Certeau a tactician, unlike a strategist, depends not power or financial resources to achieve his goal, but instead makes use of external forces (visitors, media, ...) and specific circumstances, manipulating them in order to achieve his goal. He is motivated and wants to work hard, even with limited resources, for the realization of his plans (Arlt, 2006).

An investigation into the approaches and methods employed by these actors, that we then could call 'tactical urbanists', reveals that 'temporary use of urban voids' is one of the tools that is commonly adopted by them. The potential of voids to act as 'heterotopia', 'liminal places', 'thirdspaces' and/or 'terrains vagues' is then exactly what they are taking advantage of.

Urban planning approaches to temporary use

Although temporary use is not really a new phenomenon, it is nevertheless receiving a growing attention in the contemporary urban planning context. Policy makers and planners are more and more interested in the possibilities of temporary use to revitalize the city and to influence, steer or initiate urban transformations. Different approaches to the phenomenon have lead to a quiet extensive terminology and a great diversity in practices; we will briefly review some examples.

In a study called '*De Schaduwstad*' (shadow city) Urban Unlimited Rotterdam Collective (2004) studies a number of cases of what they call 'freezoning' in Brussels and Rotterdam. From these cases they formulate some (rather conceptual) recommendations on how policy makers could deal with this phenomenon. In the study Urban Unlimited refers to the work of Hakim Bey (1991) entitled 'T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism'. According to Bey T.A.Z. are spaces that escape formal structures of control. To create them one has to concentrate on the present and to release his mind from the controlling mechanisms that have been imposed on it. In this way a new territory of the moment is created open for individual creativity and thus for real empowerment.
In a project called 'Guide to Open Places' set up in the framework of the 4th

International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (September 2009 to January 2010). the ETH Zurich launched the term 'Open Places'. They use this term to describe places that neither dominate the user, nor dictate a societal function and that have a certain radiation that stimulates because its definition is vague and modifiable, so that the user has the opportunity to actively define and utilize the place. Interesting to their approach is that, in order to find a large collection of Open Places, they created an interactive, digital map to which all the visitors of the website: www.open-places.com could contribute. In this way they are tapping into the knowledge of users worldwide.

From 2001 to 2003 the European Union supported an international research project in which an interdisciplinary network of twelve partners from five European metropolises (Helsinki, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna and Naples) analysed several projects of temporary use. In this project temporary users were named 'Urban Pioneers'. The project revealed that besides offering opportunities for all kinds of citizens to more actively take part in and contribute to urban life, temporary use of under or disused urban spaces can also contribute significantly to the future developments of the sites themselves (Overmeyer, 2007).

In the work of the Copenhagen based action and research network Supertanker an interesting reference is made to the 'Porous City' concept, introduced by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis while describing their impressions of Naples in 1925. Supertanker interprets this concept as pointing 'at an openness where "one can read what has never been written" or the unexpected can happen in a movement where the physical and social space uses each other to form new hybrid life forms' (Brandt, 2009). They say that in a normal, result-oriented, project with tight timelines and benchmarks, this would never be possible, therefore they plead for what they call a 'porous architecture', in which unfinished and open structures lend themselves to appropriation and experiment.

In the same spirit we can also refer to the work of Andrea Branzi (2006) on 'weak urbanism'. Branzi refers to the theories of Zigmunt Bauman, who introduced the term 'liquid modernity', observing that the 'solid bodies' (the references, frameworks, instruments…) from 'the first modernity' have become obsolete, fragile and unusable in the contemporary society. According to Bauman the operative void that results is filled by spontaneous actions, local initiatives, constant reform and the destruction of all chains. The flexibility of the system has thus become *the product and sediment of freedom expressed by human agents*'. Relating these theories to architecture and urbanism Branzi states that the component 'time' needs to be considered as '*a variable in an imperfect and incomplete equation that adapts itself to change*'.

Adopting this idea will allow us to build in a reversible and transversable way, free of insurmountable borders, so that our designs will be more suitable for a time that changes and a society that renews itself.

Finally in the work of Farone & Sarti (2008) the idea of an 'intermittent city' is introduced. As a result of the precarious character of what we called 'pause-land/spaces', users of these spaces often become 'temporary users', being forced to move when the locations are somehow re-integrated into the mainstream urban fabric. In this manner temporary use is creating a continuously changing network of spaces, emerging as a kind of parallel city. The constant inclusion and exclusion of urban pause-land/spaces into this intermittent city, by individuals or groups, can time and again convert spaces into arenas where - according to Soja (1996) - resistance to the oppressive power structures becomes possible and where thus, amongst others, the inclusive and sustainable character of the city can be questioned.

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Brussels ambitions for instance as 'the capital of Europe' are very big. This becomes apparent amongst others in the 'Brussels International Development Plan' (IDP) (Brussels Capital Region, 2007). But before Brussels will be able to call itself a worthy Capital of Europe the city will have to take up this role also on the cultural and social level. Actions will have to be taken to - as it is formulated in the IDP - ensure the well-being of all citizens by minimizing the current social and spatial inequalities and by reinforcing the social cohesion.

Interesting initiatives of tactical urbanism and temporary use can also be found in Brussels for example through the work of City Mine(d) (www.citymined.org), Recyclart (www.recyclart.be), Disturb (www.disturb.be), Constant (www.constantvzw.org), Le début des HARICOTS (haricots.org) and of course also OKNO (okno.be) and the Time Inventors Kabinet (timeinventorskabinet.org).Their approaches could give a hint on how Brussels could take a few first steps towards realising these high ambitions in a flexible and spontaneous way and using of the potentials that are embedded in the city today. Examples will be given in the projects discussed next.

Collective Garden of Tour & Taxis - Le début des HARICOTS
(www.haricots.org/jardinscollectifs/tt)
On the huge vacant site of Tour & Taxis (destined to be redeveloped as an entirely

new urban quarter) a cooperative of volunteering neighbourhood inhabitants, supported by the non-profit organisation Le début des HARICOTS managed to negotiate the temporary use of a dilapidated green area. They cleaned the site and rearranged it as a local organic garden. The participants are collectively cultivating vegetables and fruits in an organic way, based on ideologies related to local and sustainable food-production. The project also aims at contributing to the local fauna and flora and the urban biodiversity. At the same time the garden acts as an educational and awareness rising centre as visits and courses are being organised for school children and visiting organisations. But at the place is also a social meeting space: it allows neighbourhood children to safely play outdoors and through the communal gardening the ties between the neighbours are being reinforced, increasing the understanding of the other, resulting in a greater tolerance and respect.

Precare - City Mine(d)
(www.precare.org)
The Precare project arose from the City Mine(d) collective's own search for an affordable working space in the city of Brussels. In the framework Precare City Mine(d) took on mediating role between owners of vacant buildings and organisers of artistic and social initiatives looking for an atelier and/or office in Brussel. They also provided juridical and administrative support. The project was ended in 2010, but the know-how remains available through the website. The project aimed at a more efficient and more inclusive use of space in the city.

Connected Open Greens - Annemie Maes
(opengreens.net)
This project researches different bottom up approaches for designing human environments that have the stability and diversity of natural ecosystems, through the project the connection between people, technology and the possible applications of the rooftop gardens is being investigated. Natural processes (like composting and organic gardening) are being introduced in a creative mesh network that combines natural and artificial elements into one media-ecological system. Through the project the question 'Can this evolution be generated, controlled, enhanced or imagined in artworks?' is being investigated.
In the framework of the project several rooftop gardens have been set-up in the city

of Brussels. Besides being beautifully designed spaces, these are also interesting sites for research on renewable energy systems, energy efficiency, food/gardening systems, natural building, rainwater harvesting and urban planning along with the economic, political and social policies that make sustainable living possible and practical. The gardens are moreover carefully monitored using several data collection technologies. The data of these long-term observations is stored in the Open Green Database, covering and revealing information on all elements of the Open Green rooftop gardens in numbers, text and images. In this way the generated knowledge is made available and shared worldwide.

Conclusions

Learning from tactical urbanism approaches - and in particular their use of and approach to temporary use of urban voids - we could draw the following conclusions on the benefits of this approach for urban development.
Temporary use allows to quickly put un-/underused hard and soft city infrastructure (buildings and knowledge of the citizens) into use with a minimal of investments. It can also offer less established/dominant actors the opportunity to participate to the shaping of urban space. As a result of this broadening of the participation of different users (including the current surrounding residents) a greater support for redevelopment projects could be created. By offering moreover an incremental way of working, temporary projects can create laboratories where future plans can be tested in an informal manner. Temporary activities can also add programmatic diversity on the sites, thus enrich the possibilities for future developments projects. In this way they can offer alternatives when the traditional planning solutions seem to fail. Finally, by creating networks of users and projects (earlier identified as the intermittent city) temporary projects can contribute to the effective use and sharing of the bottom-up energy and dynamism that is available in cities.

From this we can conclude that optimal support, by policymakers, and active integration, by planners and designers, of a temporary and tactical approach can indeed lead to better integrated and more sustainable urban (re)development.

A precondition would then be that our cities would bear enough room for experimentation. Policy makers and designers should therefore recognise the value of pause-land/spaces for the city and acknowledge the potential of temporary use projects to make valuable contributions to their future urban projects. When an urban

space becomes available (even though only temporarily), the possibility of temporarily using it should become evident.

Professionals need to consider temporary use projects as an obvious part of the spatial planning and design process. This will help them to recognize that the full time span of an urban (re)development project starts from the conceptual phase and from the first moment they are introduced to the project area or site. As opposed to starting from the moment the realisation on the site begins. Planning should be understood as an open process, allowing for evolution and contradictions, and not imposing a pre-determined, polished final result.

Following Lethovuori (2010), we could conclude that spatial planning must become an enabling urban practice, a research interpreting possibilities, foregrounding symbolic layers, refining atmospheres, finding actors and giving them a voice. Consequently those who have traditionally been considered as the 'professionals' will now have to allow others on what they were considering as exclusively their area of expertise. Are we ready for this? The architect en theoretic Ignasi Solà Morales (1997) formulates it in this way:

"What is to be done with these enormous voids, with their imprecise limits and vague definition? Art's reaction… is to preserve these alternative, strange spaces… Architecture's destiny [by contrast] has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order, and form, the introduction into strange space of the elements of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal."

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