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Transformation of Urban Vacant Lots for the Common Good: an Introduction to the Special Issue

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Vacant land is a common condition in urban areas across the globe. Individuals, organizations, government agencies and scholars across the world are advocating, transforming, and governing urban vacant land in many different ways. This special issue builds on the *Vacant Acres Symposium* that was hosted by 596 Acres and The Tishman Environment and Design Center in New York, NY in April 2014, to understand the multiple ways in which these activities are taking place and share the lessons they offer by tapping into the knowledge and experiences of practitioners and scholarship focused on the work of transformation.

Keywords

Urban vacant land, transformation, community access

Vacant land is a common condition in urban areas across the globe. While not consistently defined or systematically tracked in all cities, existing estimates indicate that vacant land often comprises substantial portions of urban land area. In United States cities with populations greater than 250,000 people, the proportion of vacant land has varied between 12.5 and 15% of total land area since the 1950s (Bowman and Pagano 2004), and in major South American cities, recent vacant land estimates have varied between 4.6% (San Salvador, El Salvador) and 44% (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) (Larangeira 2003). The emergence of vacant land can be driven by disinvestment, suburbanization, industrial decline, contamination of land, outmigration, land market failure, and public acquisition for future development (Wood 1998; Bowman and Pagano 2000). It can arise in concert with both urban shrinkage and expansion. In shrinking cities, vacant land often emerges in city centers, whereas expanding cities may use annexation to acquire vacant land at urban outskirts, as a strategy for accommodating future growth. Approximately 40% of European cities are losing population and experiencing demolition, de-densification and the emergence of brownfield sites (Haase et al. 2014), similar to many post-industrial United States cities such as Detroit, Michigan and Baltimore, Maryland. By contrast, the growing city of Phoenix Arizona reported 43% land vacancy after its population increased by 55% and land area by 30% between 1980 and 1995 (Pagano and Bowman 2000). In addition to growth and shrinkage, land policies such as property taxation can have an important influence on the extent of urban vacant land (Morandé et al. 2010). Although often considered anomalous, and associated with *emptiness*, "dead land," (Berkman 1956) and other negative terms that connote pestilence or lack of productivity, growing scholarship and practice show that communities use, manage, plan for and otherwise engage with vacant land in a variety of both systematic and ad hoc ways that represent a pluralism of values.

Vacant land and unoccupied structures are often considered both a cause and consequence of blight, disinvestment, lost revenue, filth, safety hazards or crime in urban environments, as well as a barrier to urban revitalization (Berkman 1956; Greenberg et al. 1990; Goldstein et al. 2001). In this view of vacant land as a vicious cycle, it is considered an economic failure that begets additional problems. City policies such as building maintenance codes – which require safety or aesthetic upkeep, and tax sale processes – which enable local governments to sell properties with delinquent taxes, are common ways of managing problems linked to vacant land and buildings (Accordino and Johnson 2000). In addition, cities may use urban growth boundaries to encourage infill development, tax policies to encourage development on vacant land (Goldstein et al. 2001) or greening to reduce the negative appearance of vacant land and related consequences on property values until it can be put to a more long term use (Heckert and Mennis 2012). These policies are all intended to mitigate urban disinvestment cycles by converting *dead, purposeless* land into productive use.

In contrast to this view of vacant land as a cause and consequence of urban ills, an alternative perspective views vacant land as a resource that can help cities meet social and environmental goals, or be otherwise beneficial to local communities that are able to identify ways to access unused land. In this view of vacant land as an opportunity for community benefit, it is often seen as a temporary condition, or "aberration of the urban landscape" that can be used strategically in the short term (Drake and Lawson 2014). For instance, in the United States during economic downturns and World Wars I and II, gardening in vacant lots was seen as a way to improve nutrition and encourage unemployed people to be more self-reliant by providing aid in a way that is less demoralizing than direct subsidies (Drake and Lawson 2014). In Cape Town,

South Africa, where access to land is strongly linked to economic opportunity and approximately 27,000 parcels were estimated to be vacant in 2002, urban land reform strategies have been proposed to benefit the poor (Brown-Luthango 2010). In addition to providing food, a way to enable labor productivity, or direct access for housing and economic opportunities, vacant lands can also be sites for ecological productivity, to enhance biodiversity, support endangered and beneficial species, and provide ecosystem services (Foster 2006; Gardiner et al. 2013; Kremer et al. 2013; Haase et al. 2014), though unmanaged early successional vacant land is often negatively perceived by communities as weedy and unkempt (Gardiner et al. 2013). In all these instances, the *empty* or *unproductive* aspects of vacant land are temporary conditions that will ultimately be remedied – either by creating permanence of utility through the intervention itself, or by temporarily intervening until the marketplace allocates a 'higher and better use' to the space.

A third, emerging perspective described in a special issue of the journal *Cities* (Pearsall and Lucas 2014) and other recent scholarship, is one in which vacant lands are not only byproducts of regular boom/bust, decline/growth cycles inherent in capitalist economies (Németh and Langhorst 2014), but also crucial interstitial, "loose space" sites for non-capitalist commodity production (Drake and Lawson 2014; Desimini 2015). In other words, vacant land may be seen as a structural phenomenon, inherent in urban economies and essential to some urban communities. In this view of vacant land, its empty and ephemeral qualities create the possibility of landscape values that are different from dominant or mainstream ideals and may foster creative or unanticipated social and ecological opportunities, thereby engaging marginalized communities (Foster 2014). It has been suggested that vacant land not be permanently designed or developed, but used to help cope with the impermanence of capitalist development models (Németh and Langhorst 2014) by accepting emptiness as a design possibility to support creative activities (Foster 2014) and by integrating into urban planning a notion of long-term ephemeral spaces, where multiple and changing uses can exist over the long term (Desimini 2015).

This special issue builds on the *Vacant Acres Symposium* that was hosted by the organization 596 Acres and The Tishman Environment and Design Center and took place at The New School in New York City on April 23 & 24, 2014, by fleshing out this pluralism of perspectives on vacant land through experiences of practitioners and conceptual and empirical scholarship. Papers address issues related to community-driven transformations and long-term community access to land. Similar to the *Vacant Acres Symposium*, papers are organized around three major themes central to the facilitation of transformation – identifying opportunities, gaining access to long term land tenure and long term management of vacant land.

FACILITATING TRANSFORMATION: OPPORTUNITY, ACCESS, LAND TENURE, AND MANAGEMENT FOR LONG TERM COMMUNITY VISION OF URBAN VACANT LAND

Identifying Opportunities

Community projects to reclaim vacant lots come about for a variety of reasons and under a variety of circumstances. Some begin when a community group or individuals identify an unused space as being unproductive or harmful to the neighborhood. Others may begin by the

identification of a missing social or ecological function, as when the community comes together to develop a desired green space, playground, meeting or performance space. For example, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the organization Cities without Hunger[1] is motivated by the need for food production in poor neighborhoods. The organization identifies potential spaces, such as rights-of-way beneath electricity lines, and acquires permission to use them for food production. Prinzessinnengarten[2] in Berlin was conceived as a project to connect social and ecological activities in a free, open and collaborative way. Searching for a site that can help achieve these goals, the founders gained temporary access to a city owned abandoned site in Moritzplaz.

Variations of these examples, in which community groups or individuals identify an appropriate space, potential uses and users, are common approaches for initiating the transformation of vacant land. Accessibility, transparency and availability of information about vacant land are essential in identifying these opportunities. Relevant information that may or may not be available to communities includes ownership of the lot, the condition of soil and structures, and zoning and restrictions that might exist on its use. Tools that provide access to information about vacant lots, such as the signage and online mapping platforms developed by the organization 596 Acres[3] give individuals and community groups access to the contextual information they need to more easily evaluate the potential for transformation in lots of in their communities. Transparent, easily accessible, systematic, and clear information about the status and availability of lots also encourage community members to engage in the process of articulating needs and possible uses, and begin to organize to access vacant land.

Gaining Access To Long Term Land Tenure

Because urban vacant land is so often conceived of as a temporary problem, many on the ground transformation efforts begin as formal temporary projects (e.g., community gardens engage in a one to three year lease with a city agency) or informal occupation of unused land in which case the project is inherently temporary, lacking a legal foundation to determine its longevity. The absence of secure, long-term access to urban vacant land presents a barrier to successful, lasting transformation. In many cities where land vacancy is prevalent, land banks are forming as a way to strategically address widespread vacancy and provide mechanisms to identify and transfer ownership to appropriate individuals or groups for redevelopment. However, while land bank models are showing success in many cities, their ability to steer redevelopment towards community needs and to promote development that is based on community vision depends to a large extent on whether the policy and planning mechanisms underlying their formation favor community driven development (e.g., Philadelphia Land Bank 2015). New urban land trusts, such as Land Trust for Louisiana's Urban Land Conservation Initiative, Baltimore Green Space, and NeighborSpace in Chicago work to secure permanent ownership of urban vacant land for the purpose of allowing community groups to continue the projects already begun. Urban land trusts

[1]Based on presentation by Thiago Soares Barbizan at the Vacant Acres symposium. See Cities Without Hunger website- http://cidadessemfome.org/en/

[2] Based on presentation by Marco Clausen at the Vacant Acres symposium. Clausen is a co-founder of Prinzessinnengarten.

[3] See 596 Acres online mapping tools in NYC, New Orleans and Philadelphia at http://596acres.org/en/resources/other-cities/ and https://github.com/596acres/django-livinglots/blob/master/README.rst

retain ownership of the land and provide many services related to land ownership such as property taxes (or exemption), and insurance costs. Another mode of support are nonprofit organizations such as the Garden Justice Legal Initiative in Philadelphia and Community Law Center in Baltimore that provide free legal services that help organizations understand the legal context of land they are interested in transforming. Achieving secured long-term access opens the possibility for communities to envision long-term uses.

Establishing Long Term Land Management

In addition to identifying available urban vacant land and its potential uses, and securing access to land, long-term land management is a crucial aspect of turning vacant acres into community resources. The common perception of urban vacant land as temporary and transient is an obstacle to development of long-term visions of vacant lands as spaces that can provide important ecological, social and cultural services to communities. For example, long-established community gardens can decline when key personnel retire, and organizers may struggle to find new leadership. New projects tend to benefit from the enthusiasm of their creators only to dissipate when those creators move on to other new and exciting projects. Enduring visions for vacant land require mechanisms to ensure the continuous management and functional operations. The experiences of vacant land practitioners suggest that long-term management depends on levels of community engagement and support for activities taking place, continuous access to information and resources needed for the activities, and resources from broader networks. These conditions also influence the likelihood that the form and uses of vacant spaces will evolve in a manner that matches changes in community structure and preferences over time. Developing support networks through collaboration with similar organizations within the locality or across cities, connecting to city government programs, utilizing legal support organizations and working with conservation organizations such as urban land trusts help to ensure better access to resources and information, provide relief in times of fluctuation in volunteer commitment, leadership transitions and resource scarcity, increase efficiencies and empower advocacy efforts.

Drake and Lawson (2014) argue that continuous use of land by communities should be treated as a signal that the land is not vacant. Individuals, organizations, government agencies and scholars across the world are advocating, transforming, and governing urban vacant land in many different ways. It is the motivation behind this special issue to understand the multiple ways in which these activities are taking place and share the lessons they offer by tapping into the knowledge and experiences of practitioners and scholarship focused on the work of transformation. While the contexts in which these practitioners work may vary, the premise of offering collaborative, open and inclusive access to vacant land in cities is shared by many. The two-day symposium – *Turning Vacant Acres into Community Resources* – from which this special issue emerged, engaged for the first time an international group of advocates, policy makers, grass roots organizations and other stakeholders in sharing their experiences facilitating community access to urban vacant land. Here we continue to deepen the conversation. Approaching urban land vacancy as a long-term, structural phenomenon that is here to stay in one form or another, this special issue brings together knowledge from research and practice about the long-term use of urban vacant land for public and community purposes. By giving voice to scholarship and practice that highlights the common good arising from urban vacancy, we hope to help build a more permanent space, perceptual and tangible, affirming the commons right to these interstitial and creative spaces.

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