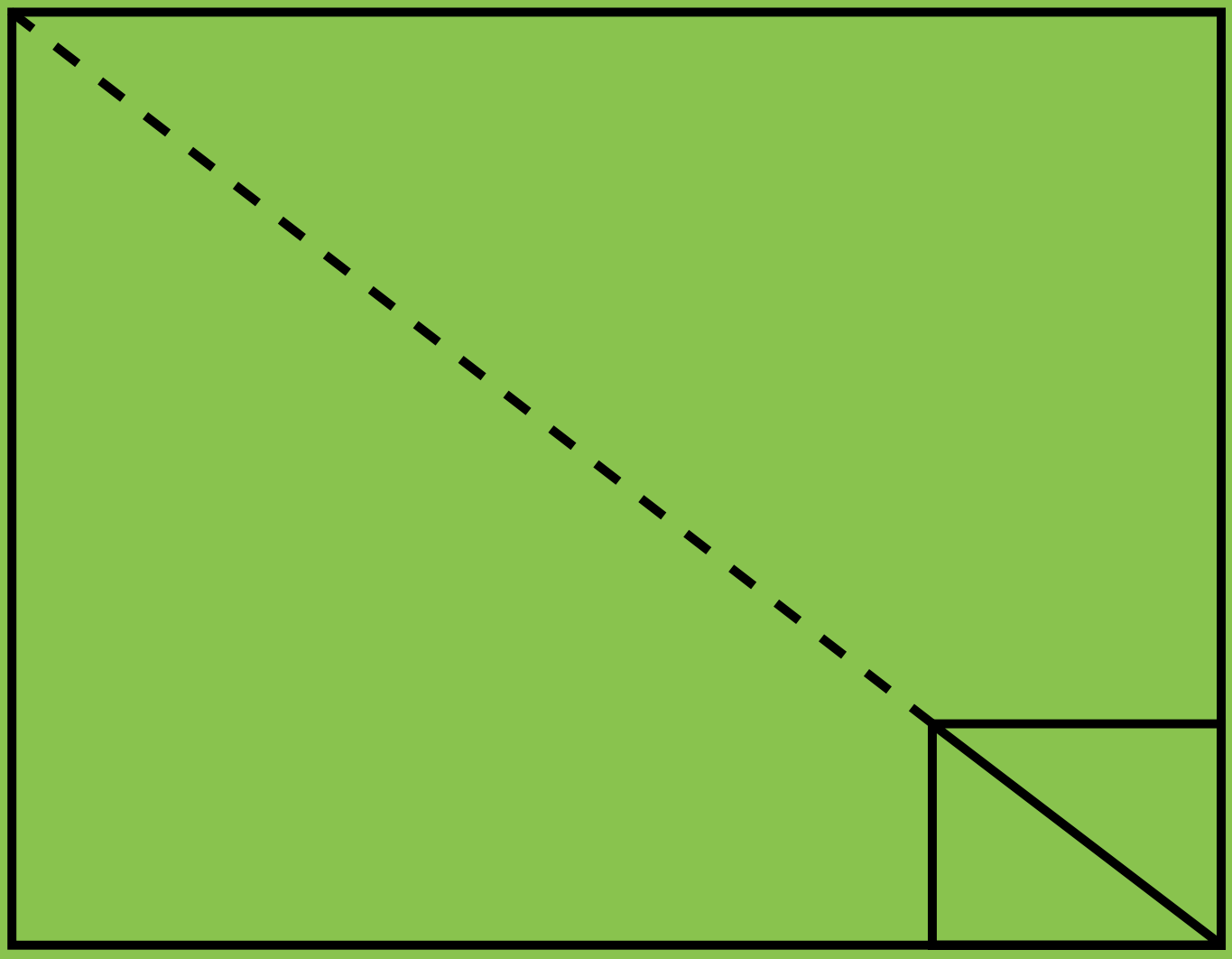
Pop Down:
How can local authorities facilitate meanwhile use for long-term community benefit?



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10% of the year-long placements is dedicated to a Research & Development programme to share new knowledge and practice across authorities. This Practice Note is one of the outputs of this programme.

POP DOWN
How can local authorities facilitate meanwhile use for long-term community benefit?

INTRODUCTION

This Practice Note is based on research carried out as part of a year-long placement in the London Borough of Croydon. It explores strategies that local authorities can use to ensure meanwhile use schemes benefit local communities in the medium to long term. The research took place between April 2018 and March 2019 and was focused on London Boroughs, given the shared policy context. Findings and recommendations may be useful for planning authorities beyond London, who are invited to help test, develop and improve the findings and recommendations put forward in this Practice Note.

CONTEXT

Meanwhile use can be a powerful tool for local authorities (Authorities) to create temporary or short-term value from underused or unused land and buildings. Together with adaptive reuse of existing structures, meanwhile use can provide opportunities for community formation and interaction, or trial new uses such as affordable workspace. However, for some communities the term has come to be associated with gentrification and disenfranchisement.[1] There is a risk of opposition to new uses arising where meanwhile is not developed together with the local community, where existing communities are displaced as an outcome of meanwhile use projects, or where there is a disconnect between a short-term use and longer term outcomes.[2]

This Practice Note explores how Authorities can develop or facilitate meanwhile use projects to benefit existing communities for the longer term. Drawing on insights from a series of walking tours, roundtable talks and workshops organised by the author, the Practice Note sets out some of the key challenges Authorities face when facilitating meanwhile use and presents findings and recommendations to help guide Authorities and communities developing this type of use.

[1] architectural-review.com/essays/changing-places-reuse-of-obsolescent-buildings-in-south-london/10040102.article.

[2] latinelephant.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/The-Case-for-Londons-Latin-Quarter-WEB-FINAL.pdf

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF MEANWHILE USE

1. For Authorities

Many town centres suffer from low vacancy rates, reflecting a wider slump in the retail sector.[3] Meanwhile use projects offer a way of addressing this issue and experimenting with new uses. However, meanwhile use projects can be hard to get off the ground for Authorities. There are multiple reasons for this including an inflexible use-class system,[4] difficulties in incentivising landlords, and the financial burden faced by non-charitable, meanwhile activities liable for business rates.[5]

As a consequence, Authorities requiring short-term, flexible solutions risk being dependent on long-term financial models and inflexible planning measures. In London, securing funding outside of competitive mechanisms such as Cultural Enterprise Zones, the London Borough of Culture initiative, and Good Growth funding can be difficult, particularly where teams do not have prior experience applying for funding.

College Square. Meanwhile-use scheme developed by Croydon Council.

[3] centreforlondon.org/publication/meanwhile-use-london/
[4] planningresource.co.uk/article/1489026/shop-frontages-policy-dropped-new-framework
[5] centreforlondon.org/publication/meanwhile-use-london/

2. For Communities

Meanwhile activities should be based on serious engagement with existing communities and would-be stakeholders in the formative stages of strategy development and design. When this does not happen, it can leave communities feeling disenfranchised and forgotten.

“It’s not for us” is a sentiment often expressed by respondents participating in the research carried out for this Practice Note.[6]

But temporary use can also help foster new communities or nurture existing ones. The networks of artists formed through projects such as Platform Southwark,[7] and South Kilburn Studios[8] - and the friendship groups that have grown through initiatives such as Loughborough Junction Farm,[9] the Croydon Art Store,[10] and the King’s Cross Skip Garden[11] - all attest to that. A longer-term vision should always be in place for community-driven meanwhile use projects. Where this isn’t the case, communities formed around the temporary provision of spaces can find themselves left in an isolated position after the project has finished.

Dreamwhile workshop. Participants were asked to draw their ideal meanwhile use for their area.

6 Testimonial from youth workshop conducted by the author.
7 platformsouthwark.co.uk
8 architecturefoundation.org.uk/programme/2011/south-kilburn-studios/
9 loughboroughjunction.org/projects/loughborough-farm-a-patchwork-of-community-growing-spaces
10 croydonartsstore.art/?view=calendar&month=10-2019
11 kingscross.co.uk/skip-garden

FINDINGS

The following findings are based on insights from a series of sessions organised by the author with local community groups and Authority officers. The findings provide guidelines for Authorities developing meanwhile use for communities and for the longer term.

Questions Not Answers

The power of temporary interventions lies in asking questions, not answering them. Solution-based approaches to meanwhile use can lead to a distracting focus on certain sectors, such as retail, where high buy-in for activation may hamper the feasibility of projects. Smaller scale projects that ask questions, reveal needs, or highlight opportunities are often easier to facilitate and can generate valuable insights that can lead to positive, longer-term change, for instance by providing a proof of concept for funding applications new projects.

Early Engagement

It is important to establish, at inception stage, the role of public engagement in the meanwhile use strategy. Agreeing structured and equitable protocols with communities during the pre-delivery phase can be a collaborative and effective way of managing and maintaining meanwhile use.[12] Community buy-in can also help frame practical issues of management and maintenance once the scheme has been delivered.

Testing, Testing

Part of the utility of meanwhile use schemes lies in testing ideas.[13] Successful tests can inform longer-term strategies for new social infrastructure, affordable workspace provision, and public realm improvements. Schemes should always be developed with a comprehensive evaluation and monitoring strategy and use a solid evidence base to compare results.[14] A solid evidence base will speak to council decision-making processes and can help secure commitment from senior staff and Members.

[12] Scotland's 'Community Right to Buy' law is an example of a large-scale protocol that might support the community ownership and management of a long-term space. City-scale campaigns in Scotland such as Glasgow City Council's 'Stalled Space Initiative' exemplifies a way of supporting short-term community-led projects. "The Portas Review: An Independent Review into the Future of our High Streets" (2011) also makes a number of recommendations for greater regulatory flexibility for retail a "Community Right to Try" policy.

[13] See 'Erith Conversations' from DK-CM and The Decorators meanwhile use strategy for Erith town centre, 'Erith Meanwhile' (2016). Conversations and oral histories can be a particularly important resource that inform equitable change in permanent or temporary projects.

[14] Guidance documents such as We Made That's 'Streatham Street Manual' and 'What Woolwich Wants' exemplify large scale place-specific evidence bases for potential permanent or temporary interventions, however for smaller a survey or structured observation may serve just as well.

In the Know

The local knowledge of residents or businesses is an important resource when developing meanwhile use. Knowing which neighbours can provide temporary storage, who in the area can lend certain materials, and where existing community activities are focused is essential. Drawing on the local knowledge of council officers can also help ensure uses are placed in suitable areas. Authorities should consider formalising the process for gathering this type of information. This will aid matching appropriate spaces with potential occupants for new meanwhile projects.

The Right Way to Go

A clear exit strategy is vital for meanwhile uses developed for community benefit. Creative ways to empower communities and enhance local forms of governance should be targeted from the outset of the project. The Town Team formed as a result of The Decorators' 'Chrisp Street on Air' project in Popular, and the LJ Works enterprise hub developed after public works' involvement with the Loughborough Junction Farm,[15] are two examples of meanwhile use projects benefiting local communities in the longer term. What happens to the physical structures of a scheme after a project is over is also important and local upcycling should form part of a project's aims from the outset. Examples of groups that facilitate this include Opalis in the UK,[16] Rotor Deconstruction in Anderlecht,[17] and Material Mafia in Berlin.[18]

[15] publicworksgroup.net/projects/lj-works-1663
[16] opalis.co.uk/en
[17] rotordc.com
[18] material-mafia.net

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings discussed above, the Practice Note presents initial recommendations for facilitating longer-term meanwhile use. The recommendations are targeted at the Greater London Authority and Local Authorities respectively.

Who: Greater London Authority
What: Set Up A Meanwhile Advisory Unit
How: There is a need for a city-wide advisory team to guide and support Authorities in London looking to develop or facilitate meanwhile use. Such a team should:

– Help frame temporary projects as cost-effective ways of testing uses that can benefit the local community in the longer term.
– Record and disseminate best practice. This can be done through Authority-exclusive platforms to ensure sensitive information around budgeting, funding applications, and internal resourcing is shared appropriately. Non-sensitive insights can be shared more openly through informal workshops such as the Public Practice R&D workshops or Interborough 'Walking Tours'.
– Connect Authorities with good practices. In a similar way to the GLA's Architecture Design and Urbanism Panel and Specialist Assistance Team, the unit could recommend pre-procured practices who have demonstrated an ability to work productively with local communities.

Who: Authorities
What: Develop 'Potential Mapping' Sessions Internally
How: 'Potential mapping' sessions were conducted as part of the research undertaken for this Practice Note. These sessions demonstrated the intimate knowledge officers and members of the public have of their local area. Potential Mapping can:

– Identify appropriate spaces. Vacant retail space or areas earmarked for construction may be appropriate, as well as underused public realm, public assets, and private buildings whose owners are known to the Authority. A large physical map that can be added to incrementally – or a shared online map link – is a useful starting point for mapping exercises. [19]
– Reveal knowledge gaps. The process of mapping spaces may also reveal potential knowledge gaps within the team. Knowing where the team lacks knowhow can in turn inform the choice of external organisations called in to deliver or facilitate meanwhile uses.

[19] See the google open source map of Croydon Canal- bit.ly/2pdOwPH - and other open source mapping projects.

– Provide a base for community input. If digitised, the maps can be added to in an open source manner by local residents, for instance by appending photos, comments, and audio to geotagged locations.[20] Databases like these may also prove a firm evidence base for future evaluations.

NEXT STEPS

The research showed Authority demand for a meanwhile use platform to share and disseminate past experiences, present undertakings, and future projects. Further research should explore how a minimal viable version of such a platform could be set up and tested.

[20] Similar to the GLA's Cultural Infrastructure Mapping and Research project, see: london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/cultural-infrastructure-toolbox/cultural-infrastructure-research-and-mapping

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However, for some communities the term has come to be associated with gentrification and disenfranchisement. There is a risk of opposition to new uses arising where meanwhile is not developed together with the local community and for the longer term. This Practice Note explores how authorities can develop or facilitate meanwhile use projects that create lasting benefits for existing communities.

Drawing on insights from a series of walking tours, roundtable talks, and workshops, the Practice Note sets out some of the key challenges Authorities face when facilitating meanwhile use and presents findings and recommendations to help guide authorities developing this type of use.

#Meanwhile #Engagement #CommunityLed

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