

# Public space lessons

## Land in limbo: making the best use of vacant urban spaces



**Across our cities lies a land resource, derelict and neglected, frozen between long-term uses — land in limbo. Sometimes it sits where old buildings are being demolished to make way for new; elsewhere it is simply empty land that has been left to ruin. Either way, it falls prey to blight and the detritus of city living — shopping trolleys, old bedsteads and dumped cars. But it doesn't have to be this way.**

According to the National Land Use Database, brownfield land in England stood at some 62,000 hectares in 2006, with just over half of that classed as derelict or vacant. That's the equivalent of around 60,000 football pitches. In a country where open space is at a premium, this land represents a wasted opportunity. As large-scale regeneration schemes such as those in preparation for the 2012 Olympics move forward, it is more important than ever that temporary sites offer more of a contribution to the quality and character of the local environment.

To achieve this, mindsets need to change. We need to move from denial and neglect to

positive recognition and creative management, with constructive, creative examples that lift the spirits and that move well beyond the common but bland, uninspiring response of 'turf and tidy'.

### **An important issue at last**

Chris Baines, a CABI Space enabler and an expert on interim uses of temporarily vacant urban open space, says there is now finally recognition of the importance of land in limbo. On big regeneration projects, where the timescale for building may be as much as 10-20 years, there has been a 'warm reception' to the stimulus that land sitting in waiting offers. Its role in

promoting environmental protection has come to the fore, informing work on flood protection, for instance. There has been a dramatic change, in particular, towards the significance of the heat island effect, where urban areas average higher temperatures because of building density. 'These kinds of issues are roaring up the agenda,' says Mr Baines, 'and it is having an effect on the way policymakers and politicians view the open spaces in urban areas.'

### **Obstacles**

#### **Complex and confusing land ownership**

One of the biggest barriers of all is uncertainty of land ownership.



Marsh land used as dumping area

Denton Marshes, Kent © Mark Ellis and Ashley Bingham, A&M Photography

**'Local authorities and communities rarely challenge non-committal neglect, unless it threatens to harm public safety'**

Confusing or complex ownership may be the main reason why sites are left unused in the first place. And, since positive interventions often need permission from the owner, this can make interim use more difficult, along with acquiring grants, getting insurance cover and responsible risk management.

### **Reluctance to encourage positive short-term use**

Landowners may resist the idea of authorising public access to their land since this may impose a greater duty of care on them and could mean it will be harder to change its use further down the line. Clearly defined short-term licensing or leasing can alleviate this problem.

### **Neglect is an easy option**

There is little in the way of formal direction or guidance on treating interim vacant land, and landowners only have a duty of care to maintain land in a safe and reasonable condition. Local authorities and communities rarely challenge non-committal neglect, unless it threatens to harm public safety.

### **Fear of anti-social behaviour**

Vacant sites lend themselves to unofficial uses like vehicle parking, dirt bike riding, fly-tipping and mobile home encampment if they are not protected and effectively managed. Often, attempts to deal with this result in rough, 'ditch-and-bank' boundary treatments and aggressive notices. Sites tend to be cleared only when the public outcry reaches a certain level. Consequently, entire neighbourhoods can be affected by poorly thought-through design solutions — or problems are simply moved on elsewhere.

### **Rigid land-use planning**

Recent changes to spatial planning policies call for land-use policies to be more dynamic. Yet there is still a tendency for firm and

inflexible designations to be used in urban areas. Such plans can be reviewed from time to time, but it is still difficult to accommodate short-term land uses when individual sites have been officially identified with a particular future use. Development control needs to encourage interim uses for land which will provide wider benefits, without compromising long-term alternatives.

### **Disjointed development processes**

Demolition and redevelopment are usually two uncoordinated processes, with different contractors dealing with site clearance, enclosure, preparation and redevelopment. This makes it difficult to consider the possibilities for interim land uses or temporary interventions.

### **Inflexible funding**

There is a tendency to spend any available money on capital works with physical outputs, but in fact much of the potential in temporarily vacant landscapes is best realised through revenue support. They can also benefit greatly through the work of skilled social facilitators such as rangers, play leaders and education officers. Organisations such as Landlife, Groundwork and the more urban of the Wildlife Trusts are effective utilisers of such resources, although the funding of staff working on temporary sites is difficult. Community and not-for-profit organisations can access landfill tax credits and charitable trust awards, while lottery funds, European and central government grants are available to local authorities. This mix of resources means cross-sectoral partnerships can spring up to foster opportunities. Private or corporate owners of such land may need professional support and encouragement in order to capitalise on such collaboration.

## **Case study 01: Creating wildlife habitats**

**William Curtis  
Ecological Park, London  
Timescale: 10 years**

William Curtis Ecological Park was a trailblazer in bringing ecological diversity and interest to an urban area — with all of the educational benefits that brings. 'It's something that was hugely influential', says Mr Baines. 'For a whole generation of urban campaigners and ecologists the park was the pivot point.' The site was a redundant lorry park designated as demolition land on the River Thames at the southern end of Tower Bridge, now replaced by the Greater London Authority's headquarters. The one-hectare site was ecologically rich — it boasted 348 different kinds of plants, 31 bird species and was a breeding site for amphibians and aquatic insects. The success of the scheme was borne out by visitor numbers — some 15,000 each year, many from local schools. 'Thousands of kids had their first and sometimes only experience of being shown nature,' says Mr Baines. Others inspired by the scheme included Camley Street, a nature reserve at nearby King's Cross by Regent's Canal. Created from derelict land and opened in 1985, it has since become internationally acclaimed. At William Curtis Ecological Park issues included the need to train teachers in how to get the best out of the site. It was enclosed to minimise out-of-hours access; there was a need for continuous funding for an educational ecologist/site warden and, when the site was eventually needed for redevelopment, there was public opposition.



Attractive temporary annual flower planting for a cleared site in East Lancashire

CABE

**‘Councils in particular are recognising that both temporary and permanent green open spaces have a valuable role to play in delivering environmental protection, nature conservation, healthy recreation and higher property values’**

### **(Not) great expectations**

All too often, urban open spaces get the ‘mown grass and tidy’ treatment. This reflects a perceived aversion to landscapes which offer adventure, excitement, close contact with wildlife and a focus for collective community activities. The problem appears to be that such creativity is regarded as risky. Many interim spaces have become popular and naturally attractive local short-term assets.

### **Local support is crucial**

CABE Space enabler Annie Coombs, working in Lancashire on a potential landform for a derelict site, says that what are often complex initiatives are challenging, take time and can be hampered by their departmental cross-cutting nature and local authorities that are stuck in their ways. In Burnley she has created a matrix for the time period and a type of landscape treatment that could be involved, a practical tool for local authorities to use. ‘Getting the local authority on board is crucial,’ she says, as is the extent and source of the funding stream.

‘The councillors might worry that doing interim work might cost more money than just leaving it, but I think it’s fair to say that you can work the finances so it doesn’t cost more and you get benefits in community engagement and generally making the area look better.’

### **Answers**

#### **Manage expectations**

It is crucial to communicate design and management intentions, emphasising the temporary nature of a site and explaining its landscape treatment. That way, the narrow image politicians and the public hold of what a successful urban landscape is can be widened, while local concerns may, for example, be best handled by more traditional boundary treatments. It is also sensible to emphasise some of the more subtle outcomes of a positive adoption policy, such as increased biodiversity, more stimulating play, storm water flood protection or even the containment of fly-tipping. Here, cash does not have to be king. Landscape treatments are, unfortunately, often permanent

and expensive, especially since funding streams favour them, percentage-based consultancy fee structures encourage them and politicians favour them as ‘impressive statements’. There is, therefore, a need to raise awareness of the genuine cost-effectiveness and merit of short-term landscape treatments and temporary uses as viable, popular alternatives.

#### **Set interim landscapes within a strategic framework**

Land in limbo needs to be firmly integrated into a strategic land use framework — a challenge, since vacant sites are not permanent or predictable but are too significant to be disregarded. Councils in particular are recognising that both temporary and permanent green open spaces have a valuable role to play in delivering environmental protection, nature conservation, healthy recreation and higher property values. Land in limbo can help in all of these areas — acknowledging this in green space strategies helps to secure management resources.

### **Modest management intervention**

Sensitive, low-key intervention can often help reduce negative and anti-social land uses and enhance the benefit that such land has to offer. As a bare minimum, it might be worth giving people access simply to enjoy the space, while a policy of positive signage and better information about the planned end use may be enough to increase public access and enjoyment whilst minimising misuse. Because they are temporary landscapes, expensive interventions are generally inappropriate and more active management of sites can be very cost-effective.

### **Positive supervision and a swift response to misuse**

Access to sites by vehicles represents one of the biggest problems and excluding them is often key to success in foiling abuse. Typically, ditch and bank boundaries are used to protect sites, but there is potential to provide more attractive edge treatments that look good and keep out cars, dumping and so on. It is also wise to establish a reputation for prosecuting abusers and making sure the waste management authority includes temporarily vacant land in its schedules for regular inspection and cleansing.

### **Manage the people as well as the land**

When legal responsibilities for sites are acknowledged, this inevitably triggers the need for a risk assessment. This in turn tends to impose constraints on the land's casual use — which may eliminate the unique qualities that are so characteristic of unofficial access. There are ways around this, however, often through a combination of sensitive professional supervision and community participation. Pensnett Chase in the Black Country

achieved local nature reserve status thanks to a similar joint management approach. A number of sites in and around the area have been redeveloped as a result. One way of encouraging more active use is through employing facilitators to adopt a play-leadership role, to organise wildlife monitoring or to stimulate educational use by schools and colleges in the local area. Other ideas may include artists in residence creating temporary artworks to brighten up the neighbourhood; the temporary turfing over of an area to host 'little league' sports days or an allotment or city farm adopting a temporary site for a few growing seasons as a way of lifting awareness of locally grown food.

### **Work with the natural process of landscape change**

Natural regeneration can be slow and messy, but there are short cuts to speed up the process. Very colourful hardy annuals sown directly onto poor soil or demolition rubble will help to compensate for loss of natural plant communities such as native cornfield annuals and ruderal weeds. Where the land is expected to be vacant for more than a single growing season the choice for planting is greater — work by the University of Sheffield, Landlife and Green Estate Ltd has shown how colourful and attractive herbaceous perennials can prove cost-effective and popular. If the site is due to be vacant for three or four years, that time period is long enough to justify introducing woody species of pioneer trees and shrubs, and these can produce significant landscape impact, even though they may eventually need to be removed. 'Woodland' planting of this sort can offer screening and shelter as benefits, while it can also be harvested as biomass wood fuel or converted into charcoal if there is local demand for renewable energy.

## **Case study 02: Recycling**

Trafalgar Dock, Liverpool  
Timescale: 2 years

An example of a viable aid to sustainable development. A redundant Merseyside dock and demolished warehouse site became an effective site for recycling demolition aggregates from an inner-city redevelopment site 2km away. The two-year use was the result of landowner Merseyside Docks & Harbour Co, developer Grosvenor Estates, recycling contractor PP O'Connor and planning authority Liverpool City Council working together. The need to deliver recycling in an efficient way is climbing up the political agenda. The idea that you might have a temporary migrating facility for recycling within the urban context is something which needs to happen much more, says Mr Baines. But the obstacle to it, generally speaking, is the length of time taken by the Environment Agency to grant licences. Other key issues faced by the scheme included careful traffic and site management to minimise impact for neighbours and the requirement of planning permission and a waste licence. However, the scheme enabled a substantial reduction in landfill and consumption of virgin aggregate. 'They had to think laterally about how to avoid thousands of lorry movements through the city to take the demolition stuff away and thousands more to bring new construction materials back in. So finding a temporarily available site in Trafalgar Dock so close to the city centre has made a big difference to the actual environmental footprint of the aggregate recycling.'

### Encourage urban wildlife

Wildlife often enjoys the most productive feeding grounds and safest sanctuaries where temporary 'wildspace' connects with other elements of the green infrastructure network. Colourful annuals, for example, might support large populations of pollinating insects and seasonal flocks of seed-eating birds, while herbaceous flowering grassland communities are an ideal habitat for small mammals and their more spectacular predators.

### Easing the funding gap: promote functional use of green space

Public and private resources can be released by encouraging more functional uses of land in limbo:

#### Sustainable urban drainage

Wetland plant communities can be particularly successful, especially as they establish rapidly, can migrate successfully from site to site if left to ebb and flow and can serve an important environmental function

by filtering dispersed pollution or contributing to sustainable urban drainage by moderating the impact of localised flash flooding.

#### Crop production

In New York City, a community action group has been growing fruit and vegetables on one temporary site after another for the past 30 years. This practice is uncommon in the UK. Yet there is a long tradition of bee-keepers producing some of their best honey from the flowers on vacant urban land and city farms occasionally harvesting fodder from temporary grasslands.

#### Local enterprise

Parking is a common temporary use, but there are more environmentally attractive options available, such as encouraging the production of nursery stock that could be used for planting the permanent landscapes of surrounding developments. Other ideas range from farmers' markets to car boot sales, adding colour and life to otherwise lifeless temporary open spaces, or architectural

salvage operations adjacent to both the source and market for recycled products. All could deliver local skills and products which outlive the sites and remain as a long-term legacy.

### Precious untapped resource

Ultimately, land in limbo is a precious, untapped resource, which can substantially add to our enjoyment of urban areas, while at the same time improve visual appearance and potentially aid the fight against global warming.

'Once you recognise that land in limbo is a resource, an asset rather than a liability, then actually it's inexcusable to simply be in denial about it and do nothing about it,' says Mr Baines. 'The truth is that most local authorities are in denial about what happens in this landscape. They are culpable if they don't take it seriously. It is where the best of times and the worst of times happen and it offers



Livestock grazing in North Sheffield

Green Estates

**'There is a long tradition of bee-keepers producing some of their best honey from the flowers on the vacant urban land and city farms occasionally harvesting fodder from temporary grasslands'**

a range of possibilities for responding positively to the impact of climate change. Land in limbo can play many roles — from being where floodwater can go to more subtle ones like people not needing to get in their cars to take their dog for a run. Even though they don't own it, land in limbo is still a public asset.'

It is, says Mr Baines, time to change the prevailing mindset about such sites, not least because some of the benefits often last long after the initiative has reached the end of its natural life. 'The temporariness of this landscape is its strength. It allows you to be braver and more innovative because you know it is not going to be a permanent physical white elephant or legacy.'

For Peter Neal, head of public space at CABI, land in limbo is an incredibly important albeit ephemeral resource. 'They are spaces that have an immense amount of flexibility in the way urban neighbourhoods change,' he says. 'It's quite easy to have static schemes and static land uses but actually neighbourhoods change in a far more dynamic manner and some spaces can be used more creatively and more imaginatively in the short term. People are not thinking creatively enough about these spaces and there is an often misplaced concern about health and safety.'

Barriers to developing such sites, such as mindsets and fear of risk, need to be overcome. Temporary uses such as markets and festivals can be as popular as other short-term proposals and should serve to enhance communities socially and environmentally. 'Not all public spaces have to be there forever', Peter Neal says, 'but we should seek to make them as attractive, exciting and interesting as possible.'

### Land in limbo: a checklist to make it work

- Is the site timetabled for a particular future use?
- Is the end use to be open space or built development?
- How does the site sit within the strategic green space network?
- Who owns it? Check on site ownership with local planning office, Land Registry, or immediate neighbours.
- Is there insurance cover for public access?
- Are there existing licensed users?
- Do previous planning conditions apply?
- How does the site relate to its surroundings?
- Are adjacent sites due to change?
- Existing vegetation is a good guide to surface contamination. Professional investigation and laboratory analysis of soil is recommended before disturbing the site.
- Underground service routes and overhead power lines need to be accurately located.
- Establish a comprehensive stakeholder list and consult early.
- Being flexible to stakeholders and the land's function can help realise a wider range of resources.
- Plan for the temporary nature of the site's use and manage expectations accordingly.

### Case study 03: Agriculture

Various former housing sites, North Sheffield  
Timescale: 2-8 years

This was an educational programme to bring farm animals into the heart of an urban community. Demolished housing sites across the city were treated with a surface layer of top soil and oversown for use as short term grazing pasture. Moveable electric stock-proof fencing was then installed and cattle were loaned for a temporary period from Whirlow Hall Farm Trust — an educational trust — and grazed through the summer months. The project was run by Sheffield City Council in combination with land manager Green Estates and Whirlow Hall Farm Trust for between two and eight years, depending on the site. The scheme raised a number of issues for those considering similar initiatives. First, the quality of the restoration of the site was important; second, it was necessary to ensure that there was tight supervision of the demolition contractor, in order that there was appropriate soil cover and minimal soil compaction. And third, it was necessary to contain livestock effectively, using 'robust' animals. Few examples of this kind of scheme exist in the UK. In the Netherlands, however, says Mr Baines, there is a much stronger tradition of city farms as a cornerstone of the education process. 'But the Sheffield example does have that as part of its objective — it's not there to produce beef and dairy products for Sheffield. It's there to produce attitudinal change.'

## Useful Contacts

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<b>Federation of City Farms &amp; Community Gardens</b>	The GreenHouse Hereford Street BRISTOL BS3 4NA	0117 923 1800 www.farmgarden.org.uk
<b>Groundwork UK</b>	Lockside 5 Scotland Street BIRMINGHAM B1 2BR	0121 236 8565 info@groundwork.org.uk www.groundwork.org.uk
<b>Landlife</b>	National Wildflower Centre Court Hey Park LIVERPOOL L16 3NA	0151 737 1819 info@landlife.org.uk www.landlife.org.uk
<b>Urban Wildlife Network</b>	c/o National Wildflower Centre Court Hey Park LIVERPOOL L16 3NA	www.urbanwildlife.org.uk

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Vacant urban open space is a valuable resource — but it's often overlooked and underused. These derelict and neglected spaces, frozen between long-term uses, are wasted opportunities. *Land in limbo* looks at how to transform these spaces into public assets. It outlines the obstacles faced, the actions required and the benefits to be gained from bringing vacant land back into use. *Land in limbo* is a useful reference for local authorities, landowners and regeneration professionals as well as a call for a change in approach towards valuable vacant sites.

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