

ARCHITECT/DESIGNER AS ‘URBAN AGENT’: A CASE OF MEDIATING TEMPORARY USE IN CITIES

NEGOTIATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, urban transformations have required new work approaches and roles for architects and designers. These expand beyond the design of physical objects, buildings or urban plans, to include the mediation of more complex and controversial processes and collaborations. Negotiation among various kinds of actors has become central, and this challenges traditional expert roles and power relations in architecture and design. This paper draws upon two cases of professional experience and ‘research through design’ to elaborate the role and work of architects/designers in mediating the temporary use of space. Temporary use is becoming a central and strategic component of urban development today, and it involves direct engagement of citizens and various local actors. In recent research, the importance of ‘mediators’ or ‘agents’ for temporary use has been identified but not explored in greater detail. We draw on participatory design and architecture discourses to conceptualize the architect/designer’s role in mediating temporary use, taking the concept of ‘urban agent’ as a point of departure.

INTRODUCTION

Urban planning is struggling to cope with a range of new urban phenomena. Societal and environmental challenges are impacting cities in various ways that call for more flexible planning and strategies for adaptable use of buildings and spaces (f.ex. Mäntysalo et al 2015, Krueger & Gibbs 2007). This puts pressure on traditional modes of urban planning and on business-as-usual prioritization of newly-built developments. Temporary use of space (TU) – understood as “temporary activation of vacant or underused land or buildings with no immediate development demand” (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila 2012: 30) – is becoming increasingly recognized as an approach to more flexible and resource-efficient urban development. Researchers recognize many potentials and benefits of TU as an agile approach and as a platform for active and direct engagement of locals (f. ex. Lehtovuori & Ruoppila 2012, Oswald et al 2013). Planning for TU work, however, far exceeds the traditional competencies of professional architects (Oswald & Misselwitz 2004) and there is a need to better understand their work and role in planning for TU.

‘Mediation’ is a term used in previous research to describe the emerging role of architect/designer specialized in TU (f.ex. Oswald et al 2013). The term articulates the need for interaction among potential users, property owners and public authorities. However, we argue that this term does not fully capture the socio-spatial complexity and controversial, power-related aspects of the architect/designer role in TU.

Mediation of temporary use involves complex forms of negotiation among stakeholders with diverse interests at stake within power-laden processes of setting priorities and making decisions. Some discussions within contemporary participatory design and architecture discourses provide relevant characterizations of such work, particularly where such discussions overlap. The collaborative, dialogic and controversial nature of this

work is partially addressed within participatory design (PD), for example in contemporary discussions of PD work involving ‘things’, ‘infrastructuring’ and ‘agonistic space’. TU work also expands beyond the traditional role of a spatial designer, architect or planner, and challenges typical power relations and expert roles within planning and real estate management. Contemporary discussions of agency, power and expertise in architecture discourse are relevant here.

Drawing from such discussions in contemporary PD and architecture, our point of departure is the term ‘urban agent’ which we consider to be more apt than ‘mediation’, in capturing the complexity of the architect/designer role in TU. Oswalt and Misselwitz (2004) originally used the term ‘urban agent’ in the context of the temporary use of Palast der Republik in Berlin. In architecture discourse, the notion of ‘agency’ has further been developed to articulate issues of power and expertise in architecture (Awan et al 2011). Related concepts such as the ‘double agent’ and ‘urban curator’ are also relevant. Bridging across such discussions in PD and architecture here, we discuss examples and implications including power-related aspects of the architect/designer work and role in TU.

Methodologically, we draw in this paper upon personal experiences of professional work in TU. Two cases from the work of the first author – hereafter referred to as “I” – from the Helsinki urban region elaborate the work of mediating temporary use and implications for roles. These cases are now being incorporated into my doctoral studies following a ‘research through design’ approach (Koskinen et al 2011). This paper, thus, is a first elucidation of professional practice in terms of some relevant literature and preliminary analysis.

ELABORATING THE WORK AND ROLES IN MEDIATING TEMPORARY USE

To further exemplify the architect/designer role in TU, my own professional practice has included a variety of tasks, concerns and issues. This includes building, selecting and sustaining actor networks and empowering them to build their activities, negotiating with a variety of stakeholders over controversial issues, enabling and coordinating the temporary use of space, taking care of public communications and running various related workshops. This work is riddled with contradictory and competing interests. Throughout, issues of power are implicit in how selections, interpretations, priorities and decisions are made, how goals are aligned, by whom, and for what/whose benefit.

Below we will discuss this work and role in relation to concepts from PD and architecture. These concepts are helpful to understand and explore themes and issues, which have emerged from preliminary analysis of cases from my work practice in TU. These include the open-ended, complex and controversial nature of the work as well as issues of power, agency and expertise.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE WORK OF MEDIATING TEMPORARY USE

In mainstream participatory design, work is often characterized as facilitating participation processes with end-users in product or service design projects. However, some contemporary approaches within PD discuss more open-ended processes characterized by long-term collaboration and complex negotiation with various kinds of stakeholders and conflicts of interests (f.ex. Miettinen & Hyysalo in review), particularly as PD overlaps with design for social innovation (Hillgren et al 2011, Mazé 2014). It is in these discussions that the concerns of temporary use overlap with those of PD, and PD becomes relevant for conceptualizing the work of mediation in TU.

To grasp the *open-ended and processual* nature of PD work, recent discussions involving Actor Network Theory have conceptualized the social as well as material design work and the expanding spatial and temporal scale of PD. Ehn, for example, has discussed a shift in design from ‘objects’ to ‘**things**’, referring to the etymology of the word from Pre-Christian Nordic governing assemblies. Things, as socio-material assemblies of humans and non-humans around matters of concern or controversies (Ehn 2008), can also characterize the networks, collaborations and negotiations central to TU. While related to material/spatial design concerns, the work of TU is also social in its network building, communicating and negotiating.

The notion of ‘**infrastructuring**’ has been developed in PD to further articulate an open-ended approach. Infrastructuring is seen as an ongoing process of building long-term relationships and collaboration with various stakeholders and aligning participants and resources around shared things (Ehn 2008, Björgvinsson et al, 2010). In the context of Malmö Living Labs, Björgvinsson et al argue: “Infrastructuring entangles and intertwines potentially controversial ‘*a priori* infrastructure activities’ (like selection, design, development, deployment, and enactment), with ‘everyday design activities in actual use’ (like mediation, interpretation and articulation), as well as ‘design in use’ (like adaptation, appropriation, tailoring, re-design and maintenance)” (Björgvinsson et al 2010: 3). This characterization is also apt for TU and further highlights the controversial nature of the work.

Concepts such as ‘**agonistic space**’ further clarify this issue, in which design/architecture has a role in addressing *controversies* rather than achieving consensus (Mouffe 2000, Björgvinsson et al 2010, Hillgren et al 2011, Keshavarz & Mazé 2013). In TU, mediation involves handling controversies among multiple stakeholder groups, each pursuing different narrow interests. In creating the conditions for TU, which in Finland is an emerging practice, various controversies often need to be overcome. Thus the mediator has a leading role in driving processes of

selection, interpretations and interventions, and steering the stakeholders' interactions and views. Whether or not the work succeeds in producing a concrete outcome, it always involves discussion and debate among different parties, which may through time lead to new understanding, new policies and practices.

While 'things', 'infrastructuring' and 'agonistic space' are particularly useful in elucidating the social work of PD and TU, further dimensions of power, material and spatial issues are at stake. For example, discussions of agonistic space elaborate the *non-human entities and agencies* in the work of handling contrasting views and agendas. In PD, 'non-human actors' are typically design artifacts, for example as used in design games (f.ex. Ehn 2008). TU, however, requires a broader understanding of the non-human aspects. Besides design materials or physical spaces, in TU, regulations and policies are key non-human participants. These can often be very controversial as there are no regulations tailored for temporary use in Finland. Thus, the interpretation of regulations (done by humans) becomes an important – and powerful – aspect in the work of TU.

These outlined concepts are useful to elucidate the complex socio-material work of mediating temporary use. It is much more than facilitation or mediation, but a complex, open-ended, and controversial process, involving the creation, interpretation and steering of diverse publics, human and non-human actors.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE 'URBAN AGENT' AND OTHER POTENTIAL ROLES

From an architectural point of view, temporary use challenges a traditionally space-centered understanding. Like contemporary PD, TU is also a socially, culturally and politically engaged practice. Within recent alternative architectural discourse, relevant conceptions of practice are emerging.

The primarily spatial expertise of the architect/designer is challenged in formulations of their role as '**urban curator**'. In contrast to the traditional work of master-planning, Petrescu (2005) sees participatory architecture and planning as a curatorial practice. She argues that the urban curator is a mediator rather than a master, whose role is to connect and align interests. Further, Schalk describes how, in urban curating, "the role of the architect has shifted from the creator of objects to the mediator between actors, forces, processes and narratives" (Schalk 2007: 159). Seen as 'architect-user' the architect may even lose control and become one of the participants (Petrescu, 2005). Such concepts further develop the mediation by articulating power-related issues of expertise, mastery and control.

Complementing our point of departure in the term 'urban agent', notions of '**spatial agency**' further articulate agency itself. Elaborating this via interpretations of Actor Network Theory and Giddens (1987), Awan et al (2011) shift attention from the spatial product of architecture to politically and

socially-situated processes. Dictionary definitions of 'agency' point to the capacity of an actor to act in a given environment, or the capacity of exerting power. The 'spatial agent', on the other hand, is defined by Awan et al as "one who effects change through the *empowerment* of others, allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as a result of reconfigured social space" (Awan et al 2011: 32, our italics). Thus, the concept of 'spatial agent' broadens the role not only in terms of the social and political context of the work but also regarding whom architects serve as agents, including the agency of those others.

Architecture differs from design in that its roles and responsibilities are not only regulated by tradition and culture but also by professional and legal codes. For example, the UK definition of architect's role, as stated in the Client Architect Agreement, is to "*act* as the client's *agent* for the project and as required under the selected building contract" (Dodd 2011: 55, our italics). The formal import of the architectural role entails particular attention to and theorization of roles in architectural discourse (Mazé 2007), in which issues of expertise and power are explored and debated.

The responsibility of the architect as 'spatial agent', for example, is argued to include others than the paying client. To challenge the formally-defined role of the architect, Dodd (2011) and Muf (2001) have further developed the notion '**double agent**' to depict their daily struggle between delivering outcomes to a paying client and pursuing other socially, politically and culturally-relevant goals. This articulation is an important characterization of the actual work of the architect/designer (especially in the context of TU), that is, simultaneously working on commissions from clients and, at the same time, working on behalf of others that are sometimes opposed. This notion, thus, further elucidates the complexity and politics of agency, and complicates the role of architect/designer as both an 'activist' as well as an 'entrepreneur' (Muf 2001, Dodd 2011).

EXPERTISE AND POWER IN MEDIATING TEMPORARY USE

The mediator of temporary use does not don either the mantle of "the expert" nor the "professional" in a traditional sense. For example as concerned with 'things', 'infrastructuring' and 'agonistic space', mediating TU involves complex and controversial social, spatial and regulatory work in a process that is open-ended and involves diverse actors, agencies and expertise.

The role and responsibility of the architect/designer in such work exceeds that of formal definitions of the architect/designer role. As will be further elaborated through cases of temporary use below, many kinds of expertise are required, including that of a spatial designer, co-designer, negotiator, communicator,

advertiser, legal expert, digital engineer, urban planner and so on. The different kinds of expertise of participants and actors in the process must also be valued, without undermining certain professional competencies that are needed. Building on the term 'urban agent' as introduced in TU discourse to deepen and expand the notion of 'mediation', discussions of 'urban curator', 'spatial agency' and 'double agent' further elaborate how the architect/designer must negotiate issues of expertise and power in their work.

Through these discussions, the expanded nature of TU work can be articulated along with the role of the architect/designer, both in terms of what is the context of design, whom the architect/designer serves as an agent and what kinds of expertise are needed.

CASES OF KALASATAMA AND KERA: EXPERIENCES AS 'URBAN AGENT'

Examples from two cases below further elucidate the different concepts and roles discussed above. In addition, they further specify different tasks related to the mediation work, thereby addressing certain typical problems or gaps that I have identified in my analysis of temporary use within urban development.

The cases discussed here from the urban region of Helsinki are: Kalasatama Temporary (2009-11) in Helsinki, and Temporary Kera (2016-) in the city of Espoo. Kalasatama Temporary revitalized a former harbor outdoor area through temporary use while a large-scale residential and mixed-use neighborhood construction was started (see Lehtovuori & Ruoppila 2012, Vestermann Olsen 2017, Hernberg 2012). Temporary Kera is an ongoing project that aims to breathe new life to a logistics and business area of Kera, built in 1970-1990s, where the vacancy rate of offices is high.

These cases are from my own work as an architect/designer, in which I have worked professionally with urban development and temporary use for over 9 years. These projects have been brought into my PhD research, conducted through retrospective reflection (upon Kalasatama) and qualitative methods of documentation (in Kera). In my ongoing research, I follow a methodology of 'research through design' informed by qualitative research (Koskinen et al 2011) to analyze my own work practice. Both reflections and documentation (including notes, audio, photo and video recordings) are the basis of descriptions presented here. The discussion is based on preliminary reflection and analysis, which will be further theorized in a doctoral research context. In presenting examples below, I have used headings phrased in verb form. Thus, I try to formulate the work and role as active tasks through which I relate to the literature and concepts from PD and architecture discussed above.

KALASATAMA: BUILDING NETWORKS AS URBAN CURATING/INFRASTRUCTURING, NEGOTIATING CONTROVERSIES IN AN AGONISTIC SPACE

One of the main tasks in these TU projects has been to identify, select and connect actors and potential users of space into networks, and facilitate its long-term development. This has similarities to 'infrastructuring', where long-term networks are sustained, and the collaborative platform-building of 'urban curating'. In parallel, the mediator role has involved handling controversies between various parties, which relates to the concept of 'agonistic space'.

In **Kalasatama Temporary**, Part Architects, where I worked at the time, acted as a coordinator of temporary use of a former harbor area. The project was commissioned by the city of Helsinki.

Part's strategy, as coordinators of temporary use, was to create an enabling infrastructure, which would include minimum necessities for local people and urban groups to start organizing activities and then take responsibility of their own projects. Participation was launched through a public ideation brunch, in which 400-500 people took part. Then we started building a network of actors by contacting local urban groups that we had identified being active at the time. We helped them to organize the first public activities in the harbor. This work was not only social but also involved basic physical structures necessary for the activities: a water tank for urban gardeners, recycled marine containers to provide indoor spaces, electricity for events. Our aim was to create a snowball effect: through the initial events, people started visiting the harbor and got inspired, then more people wanted to start running activities, and Kalasatama gained popularity.

The nature of this work was new for municipal departments and constructors involved, but it also challenged our expert roles as architects. The event-like and spontaneous manner of the activities was rather unfamiliar to urban planning, and the construction department had to be convinced not to treat the whole area only as building site and make the place safe for visitors. Thus our mediatory role involved continuous negotiations. We facilitated communication between the temporary users and public authorities, but also negotiated between different municipal departments, and questioned certain conventions or interpretations about policies or land use. In many occasions the spontaneous character of the activities was difficult to match with the slow, risk-avoiding culture of the public administration. In this way, TU became not only a platform and infrastructure for collaboration between the actors, but also an agonistic space among a larger group of stakeholders, where various controversies over policies and conventions were handled.



Figure 1: The ideation brunch in Kalasatama was for most people their first chance to visit the empty harbor. Photo: Part



Figure 2: The opening of Kalasatama pedestrian and cyclist route in 2010.



Figure 3: Urban art projects, like this one by Napa Illustrations, were one of the first ways to invite people to visit the harbor.

KERA: DOUBLE AGENT NEGOTIATING OVER CONFLICTING INTERESTS AND POWER IN AN AGONISTIC SPACE

A core role for the mediator of temporary use is to mediate between the potential user and property owner, take care of contracts and build trust, responding to the needs of both parties (f.ex. Oswald et al 2013). This can sound like the role of a traditional real-estate agent but, in my experience, this mediating task is more complex. It involves various kinds of stakeholders who have conflicting interests but also unbalanced power relations.



Figure 4: Self-built skate park in Kalasatama. Photo: Johannes Romppanen



Figure 5: Solar Kitchen Restaurant served food prepared with solar cookers. Photo: Johannes Romppanen



Figure 6: Opening of 'Ihana' container café in Kalasatama.

The **Temporary Kera** project is commissioned by the city of Espoo and run by my company Urban Dream Management. Kera is a quiet business and logistics area, which in future will be undergoing new development. Through temporary use, local actors are invited to revitalize the area before the long-term development takes place. The buildings in Kera are owned by private investors, which brings many challenges compared to publicly owned spaces. A common interest among property owners, potential users and the public sector is not always easy to find. In Kera, the negotiations

concerning the possibility of temporary use have proven to be challenging. TU as an approach differs from the traditional real estate business logic both in the sense of financial concerns and human resources operating small or short-term contracts (Hernberg, 2014). The municipality has a strong mission and understanding concerning the socio-cultural benefits of TU but in the end, property owners have the power over deciding whether the spaces can be opened for TU and for what price.

The stage of negotiation in Kera can be described as ‘agonistic space’, where the ongoing discussions hopefully will grow seeds of new approaches in futures, even if Kera would fail in temporary use. In building these negotiations, the mediator has an important and not neutral role in many respects: selecting who will be invited and which views are present, steering the discussion and thus influencing how the issues will be handled. People with different kinds of power take part: ownership of space, expert or leader position through their work roles, power over urban development, and so on. On the other hand, the potential users of space can only employ their agency if accepted by the property owners and if they have enough financial means, even if their potential would be recognized by the municipality.

KERA AND KALASATAMA: NEGOTIATING WITH NON-HUMAN ACTORS

A further important aspect in bridging PD and TU is the role and type of non-human actors involved. The public sector usually plays an important role in temporary use, either as client (as in both cases here), in some cases property owner (as in the case of Kalasatama) and always as provider and interpreter of *regulations and policies* that provide constraints for TU regarding health or safety issues, fire escapes, air conditioning, or the purpose of space, for example. These regulations and policies are powerful non-human actors. As there are no regulations concerning the “temporary” as such, regulation is subject to interpretations, which vary between municipalities and between individuals.



Figure 7: Street view in Kera. Photo: Susanna Ahola



Figure 8: Empty warehouse in Kera.



Figure 9 + 10: Besides negotiating with real estate owners, the mediation work in Kera has involved participatory workshops with potential users and other experts.



Figure 11: 50 people participated first Temporary Kera workshop, which was held in one of the empty buildings in the area. Photos 8-11: Johannes Rompanen

The Kera project involves negotiations about one typical bottleneck for temporary use: the official definition of the purpose of space. The municipality has collected considerable fees for changing the purpose of space in the documents, for example a warehouse space into sports use. For most temporary users, who are in need of affordable space, the fees will become an immediate barrier. Through this project, negotiations have been started between different municipal departments to discuss principles for dealing with this issue. This is also a typical controversy between municipal departments: the ones driving TU and the municipal building authority that controls the fees and permissions.

The architect's expertise typically includes responsibilities for following and applying building regulations. However, the mediatory work of TU involves not only knowing about regulations but also using this knowledge to question and develop current regulations, as there are not yet common policies for TU. If new regulatory policies are achieved, this can have an important systemic impact.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, the point of departure for exploring the new work and role of architects/designers in mediating temporary use is the concept of 'urban agent'. PD discourse helps to conceptualize the work practice of mediating TU and architecture discourse to elucidate the expanded and socio-material as well as spatial role of the architect/designer. Through reflection on my own professional and research practice, I have articulated common issues across different discourses, which can provide conceptual as well as practical for TU as an emerging and expanding field. My empirical experience as a practitioner has revealed perspectives upon some theoretical gaps that are not yet fully recognized, well-understood, or bridged across relevant literatures.

Participatory design discourse helps to understand the work of mediating temporary use as a complex, dialogic practice, which deals with not only collaboration but also controversies, in an open-ended process. On the other hand, TU contributes to the contemporary PD discussion of a complex, spatially and temporally extended field of practice, in which the extent of participation is much broader than facilitation and where further meanings of 'non-human actors' are involved.

Architecture discourse further helps to understand how the new roles for architects/designers are developing and expanding beyond the legally-defined or traditionally-understood roles. This discourse opens up questions of agency, power and expertise. The mediating practice involves negotiation between various actors who have different power positions, and on the other hand the potential actors who can only use their agency in this context if given access to spaces. The

mediator of temporary use has to serve different "clients", not only the paying one, but also influence the views of the powerful stakeholders in order to empower the powerless ones. The mediator's role is far from neutral, instead the mediator is actively pursuing certain goals (mostly but not only those provided by the client), through careful planning and preparing of negotiations, workshops and communications, through making selections in network-building and through interpreting regulations.

The analysis and conceptualization here is preliminary and much more knowledge is needed to understand the phenomenon of temporary use and the challenges and opportunities it brings to urban planning. TU offers a direct channel of engagement compared to traditional and prescribed ways of participation in planning, which have often been criticized as tokenistic (Arnstein 1969, Till 2005, Boenstra & Boelens 2011). Moreover, TU can be seen as an arena of fundamental reinvention of urban values (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila 2017, Harvey 2012). Therefore the work of TU can be seen as an inescapably bound up in challenging and changing the traditional power relations in urban planning and opening up new ways for bottom-up development complementing those that are traditionally top-down and 'master'-planned.

In this context, the urban agent's role is necessary. Through handling controversies, the typical dynamics in the real estate or urban development process can be challenged and changed. The mediation of temporary use may open up urban or real estate development to new kinds of groups and empower new actors to use their expertise and exert their agency. There are also limits to the architect/designer power – final power over decisions still typically remains with property owners or municipalities. As understood in the concept of 'agonism', however, the possibility for those previously unseen and unheard to reconfigure the process is not only a basic condition of democratic participation (Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013) but is an opening for TU to redesign the conditions for architecture and planning.

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