

## Transient Places: The Public Benefits of Short-Term Artist-Led Spaces

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the role of transient artist-led spaces in Ireland, and looks to discern whether short-term initiatives may become a strong model for sustaining artist-led activity in Ireland. It focuses on identity of local places for individuals and societies, and the role that artist-led initiatives have in altering this identity.*

**Keywords:** Artist-led space, transience, place, identity, urban development

### Introduction

Artist-run spaces fit all kinds of models...They are little pockets of activity that serve particular audiences at particular times, filling gaps and holes for all that the art-world fails to provide. Sometimes they are meant to be temporary, and other times they can grow to become professionalised institutions that a later generation of artists define themselves against. (Satinsky, 2009, p.4)

The goal of this research is to explore the nature of transient artist-led spaces in Ireland under the theme of place-making, and to discover whether transient spaces have a unique ability to form an identity of place that more permanent spaces do not. This exploration will be carried out through an analysis of the role of people and location in giving an identity to a place, with the example of Granby Park in Dublin offered as a case study. Past research into urban development and the role of artistic projects will be discussed, taking into account the nature of transient and permanent urban spaces, urban planning, and how artist-led spaces contribute to place and identity in cities.

The first section will discuss in more detail how places develop social identities and what role cultural spaces can play in urban areas. Place-making is a key theme in the development of an identity of place, and it is through individual and community engagement with place that this identity is formed. The artist-led model is one example of place-making, as artist-led initiatives often use old buildings with distinct identities which have formed as a result of use or association, and which are then repurposed as artistic or cultural spaces.

Situated within this context, the second section will explore the role of transient artist-led spaces in Ireland, using the example of the artist-led pop-up park Granby Park in Dublin in 2013. In the context of this essay *transient* artist-led initiatives will incorporate art projects that have a *defined start and end date* and operate in places of urban significance, as distinct from spaces that are set up with no specific beginning and end at a particular point in time.

The Irish context seems particularly relevant in the current climate. After the sudden recession in 2008, Ireland faced an abundance of empty buildings and spaces. These disused buildings lacked function and so contributed to an identity of place that reflected the landscape of post-recession Ireland, becoming landmarks that represented the end of the construction boom. Recently renewed development has begun to take place across Ireland, and in this climate the role of changing identities of many of these buildings will come into question. These spaces, which function as urban landmarks, are prime locations for place-making artist-led

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initiatives.

Although often transient due to the unstable nature of low-rent occupation of premises, the model under which these spaces are established is different, as they do not set out to be transient projects with a specified start and end date, and as such do not fit the transient model as initially described. This notion will be explored further in the following sections.

## 1. Urban Places and Cultural Identity

This section will explore the abstract concept of identity of place, in order to develop an understanding of how the identity of places can influence a local society. It will analyse the idea of transient places and will draw from recent urban geographical history in order to analyse the potential for artist-led spaces to have an influence on local groups in urban areas. In particular, it will deal with 'place-making', a concept that determines how people create identities for places based on their social or community role.

### 1.1 Place and Place-Making

Place as a theoretical concept is broadly understood but somewhat difficult to define. Yi Fu Tuan suggests that 'An object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind' (1977, p.18). Recent theories on 'place-making' show how societies can change the identity of a place through their own engagement with it (Andres, 2013; Haydn and Temel, 2006; Ley, 2003). Place-making is a phenomenon that comes about both through individual and social engagement with a location, creating an identity through engagement or activity that is not usually connected with the function(s) of that place.

Place-making involves community or individual engagement with the formation of the identity of a place (Healey, 2009). This can include community engagement with the development of plans for redevelopment of a place, or a community repurposing a place to be used in a way that was not necessarily intended. Artist-led projects can become examples of place-making processes where, for example, old factories or business premises are re-appropriated as art spaces, changing the role of the place for a local community or group (Bishop and Williams, 2012).

It is often argued that identity of places are formed through individual or social memory and experience (Tuan, 1975; Relph, 1976). Both terms are related to one another – the experience of a place helps to form place-memory, and this in turn develops an identity of place (Augé, 1995; Cresswell, 2002; Tuan, 1977). A group or community's active role in how a place is developed, for example through participation in public debate on local governance, is key to community understanding of place, particularly in urban areas (Mouffe, 2001). Public artist-led initiatives can bolster this community engagement, and can subsequently influence place-making, particularly in urban areas. Sharon Zukin provides a summary idea for the overlap between culture, identity and place in social theory, whereby 'place expresses how a spatially connected group of people mediate the demands of cultural identity, state power, and capital accumulation' (Zukin, 1991, p.12).

### 1.2 Urban Places

Taking the definition of a place as a location with a specific context or identity, urban areas can be particularly interesting examples of the interplay between place and space. Urban areas are divided into collections of localised places, and the interplay between public and private

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place is significantly pronounced in urban settings (Relph, 1976).

Michel de Certeau explores the concept of perceptions of identity in the urban landscape by addressing the participatory role of the observer in forming the identity of an urban place. Through visual mapping and moving through urban areas, an individual creates a personal identity of a city that relates to their own understanding of that place (1984, pp. 91-102). Marc Augé argues that modern urban developments such as shopping centres create anomalies on the urban landscape that lack specific identities as each is arguably a carbon copy of the last (1992). As such, Augé believes that these anomalies do not act as places because they do not add to a social experience of the urban landscape. By observing how repetition can cause anonymity of place-identity, the potential for artist-led projects to have a major influence on an otherwise unidentifiable urban landscape can be illustrated.

The cultural scene in a city is an important contributor to how residents develop an identity of a place (Zukin, 1989). Community engagement with an artistic space alters the social and cultural understanding of this place, and can contribute to the cultural economy of an area (Jacobs, 1961; Lloyd and Clark, 2004). Control or governance over how a place is run or managed can also affect place-making for community groups. The inclusion of community as part of the decision making or policy making process has in the past built stronger ties between communities and local places (Mouffe, 2001). This inclusion of community can strengthen the development of place identity by forming a relationship between community and their own autonomous control over a place. This is relevant particularly in urban regeneration, where communities can be involved in taking abandoned or derelict sites and creating something new from them, contributing to place-making.

### 1.3 Place-Making: Urban Artist-led Initiatives

Although many initiatives can be described as artist-led (for example public artworks), artist-led initiatives here are defined as places that are altered or changed through artistic intervention and lead to an altered identity of place. In urban environments these projects often involve artists using, or repurposing, disused or public spaces that can interrupt the regularity of perceived functional urban locations. Transient artist-led initiatives run for a finite amount of time, planned in advance of the project taking place, and lead to an altered perception of place by those impacted or conscious of the initiative. Included in this definition is leadership: artist-led initiatives are established and governed by artists, which can be important when considering community engagement in place-making.

Currid comments on urban artistic environments, stating that '[i]n this nexus of people and place, art and culture have received increasing attention as important contributors to urban and regional development' (Currid, 2007, p.455). By repurposing an existing place for cultural output or cultural gain, artist-led spaces can redefine the purpose and subsequently the identity of an urban place, which can have a knock-on effect on urban planning and often an increased economic value of urban locations (David and Foray, 2003; Krivý, 2013).

Generally artists occupy areas that have cheap rent, although recent studies have also shown that areas with high crime or social and economic diversity can also attract artists 'because these places serve as a mark of social status and inspiration' (Grodach et al., 2014, p.2823). As artists subsist on low incomes, they move into low-income areas with cheaper property prices and set up studios and galleries that begin to develop the cultural value of an area. Artist Grayson Perry described artists as the 'shock troops of gentrification', summarising this perspective:

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We're the first people to go we like this old warehouse, yeah we need a cheap studio. You know so that's what happens - artists move into the cheap housing and the cheap spaces and they make them...you know they do their work and they're quite cool and a little bit of a buzz starts up. And then maybe a little café opens up and people start saying, 'Ooh, that's kind of interesting, that area where those artists hang out. I think I'm going to go down there' (Perry, 2013).

Perry here introduces the idea of an overlap between artistic activity and urban development. Gentrification is an urban phenomenon that involves the rejuvenation of post industrial urban spaces that have fallen into disuse and disrepair. Prior to rejuvenation, Florida (2002) notes that there is often artistic activity and/or residence of these spaces not least because of low rents and ease of urban access. Ley develops this point in his final summary of the connect-edness between art movements and gentrification, with a particular influence on the cultural economy of artist-led spaces, stating that

the artist's very presence, the deployment of a critical aesthetic disposition on the streets of old neighbourhoods, has become a principal tool for goading on gentrification, thereby lining with gold the pockets of buyers and sellers in the inner-city property market. (Ley, 2003, p.2542)

The combined effect of artistic and cultural association with places, and the gentrification of these locations, leads to rising land values, rental charges and increased economic wealth which becomes directed to the property developers, civic boosters and city planners. The negative effect of this is that low-income residents, including artists, are often forced to leave these areas in the wake of gentrification.

#### 1.4 'Transient' Artist-led Initiatives

Transience is naturally a problematic phrase. Arguably all ventures are transient, as they will all begin and end at some point. As such, this paper will define transience in art projects as a project that is established with a finite beginning and end, that is planned before it is created.

The use of spaces by artists as temporary places for exhibitions, workshops etc. has been common internationally over the last three decades (Andres, 2013; Haydn and Temel, 2006). Typically these uses take place in times of economic downturn or in areas of cities that have become less occupied (Bishop and Williams, 2012). Transient artist-led initiatives in contrast are finite in their initial planning – they do not set out to establish 'permanent spaces'. In this way they can become associated with urban development, not through their incorporation into an urban landscape, but through their use as place-making developments for local communities.

Community development of place-making can often be dependent on a local community having some level of control over how a local place is developed. This influence can include active participation in rejuvenating or creating a place, and engaged roles in governance or planning on how a place will be established and run. Artist-led spaces, organised by members of an artistic community, contribute to the development of identity and memory of places. In Ireland, the recent abundance of disused or vacant properties has led to a large number of places that do not serve a public or community function located in central urban areas. The development of artist-led initiatives, as discussed above, can then assist in rebuilding a sense of place through place-making techniques.

## 2. Artist-led Initiatives in Ireland

In Ireland, artists in urban areas in recent times have established projects such as the collaborative initiatives in Limerick that included Ormston House, Faber Studios and Occupy Space in the last decade. Although disjointed by location, these places collaborated on exhibition displays, group governance and funding initiatives, creating a linked artist scene in unoccupied

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industrial or commercial spaces in Limerick city (Conlon, 2012). The collaboration of artists in rejuvenating abandoned areas and working toward establishing a cultural scene helps drive artist-led initiatives. However, there is a marked difference between establishing a cultural scene and developing a transient project, and the long-term effects of more permanent projects can be detrimental to a cultural community (Florida, 2002).

Many artist-led initiatives are established with no finite beginning or end. An Irish example of this is MART, an artist-led initiative that was established in 2006 in Galway, and set up a 'permanent' space in Dublin in 2013. The Galway incarnation of MART involved events held in different locations. Its relocation to a permanent space did not result from strategic planning, but from a spontaneous reaction to the possibility of opening a permanent gallery space. Permanence was secured through ongoing rental payments, which in turn created a more tangible and fixed space for this artist-led initiative in Dublin city (MART, 2014).

Although MART has continued to stage events, including pop-up shops, gigs and exhibitions, the current aim is to retain a permanent artist-led initiative in the Irish capital. This can be viewed as a developmental step in moving away from the transient model, which arguably can promote place-making through a different method of community engagement and participation.

### 2.1 Granby Park in Dublin as Transient Artist-led Initiative

In 2013, Granby Park was established as a 'pop-up park' by Upstart, a group that stage events and happenings in Ireland (Granby Park, 2013). Granby Park was an ambitious project, led by Upstart's core group of administrators and artists, and contributed to by a voluntary community group of over 1,000 members. It was situated on a derelict building site in the area of Granby Road/Parnell Street in central Dublin which had fallen into disuse and disrepair. The park was open from 20 August–20 September 2013, a time-frame set and vigilantly adhered to by Upstart.

During its one-month run, Granby Park's schedule included workshops, music shows, art projects and community activities that were organised voluntarily. The local community were invited to participate in the events of the park as participants, volunteers, facilitators and artists. Other events were facilitated by non-local artists and practitioners. This created a sense of community engagement and collective activity that constructed a temporary identity from an altered use of place. This was achieved by artistic activity and engagement with individuals and groups from the local community, as well as the general public.

Community engagement in the planning and implementation stage, through surveys and suggestion boxes, ensured that Upstart, the artistic community and the local community were all active participants in the governing decisions during the ongoing run of events at the park. This created a localised public sphere, where debate about events and organisations were actively encouraged.

Those who attended Granby Park were not just the local residents and community groups but individuals and groups drawn from a broader area. The event was highly publicised and attracted large audiences as both spectators and participants. Through this, Granby Park was transformed for people both locally and from broader regions into a place of activity for a strictly defined time-span, and encouraged physical communication between a local neighbourhood and a broader outside group.

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## 2.2 Advantages of the Transient Model

In recent years artist-led initiatives have been criticised for following a set of governance rules that derive from the management of historical artist-run spaces (Shaw and Ramsden, 2007). This criticism has been aimed at art spaces that seek to establish permanent bases, ultimately imitating the systems of governance that exist in permanently established art spaces. There has been ongoing criticism of the diminishing role of the public in how places are developed, citing a decline in a political and democratic public sphere as a reason for this (Mouffe, 2001). However, transient and event-based initiatives offer models of public engagement that work outside of these restrictive systems of governance because they do not look to establish the stability of a long-term project.

The Granby Park pop-up park introduced mixed art forms into a disused building site and created a place that was in stark contrast to the one that had been in situ prior to the park's opening. The constant engagement of both the local and the artistic community in the organisation and running of the park contributed to a situational democratic public sphere. Pluralistic points of view were key to the central organisational structure of Granby Park. This allowed for a sense of community ownership, which helps develop a place identity through community participation in governance (Provisional University, 2013).

The specific temporal restraints of Granby Park, incorporating a large degree of fore-planning (2 years) with a short execution time of 30 days, meant that the nature of the event was fundamentally different from that of many other more permanent urban artist-led spaces (Hade, 2013). Although exhibitions can change regularly in a museum or gallery space, the identity (and associated conceptualisations) of place in a museum remain the same for a visiting or engaging public. If identity of place is established through meaning and experience, an event-based model implies a different experiential perspective than a less transient model in terms of place-making – one that is malleable and more immediately responsive to the needs of its public.

The short-term experience of a place relates to the idea of place-memory (Lewicka, 2008). The formation of place-memory can be developed even through transient engagement with a place, such as with Michel de Certeau's gaining an understanding of a city while moving through and observing it. With place-memory, social memory and personal memory are intertwined, where an individual response to a place becomes part of an overall social understanding of that place (Hayden, 1997, pp.44-8; Lewicka, 2008). This place-memory is far more localised (and indeed embodied) than the general place identity of a city, and thus cultural initiatives which activate the formation of place-memory (even in transient ways) can be key in reshaping the individual and collective identity of urban places.

## 2.4 Contrasts with the Non-Transient Model

The short-term benefit of transient art spaces can have long-term effects on the economic state of an urban area. Lauren Andres, using Lefebvre and de Certeau's theories on place as based on experience of a city through active engagement and human mapping, described the social benefit of short-term cultural projects in post-industrial European cities (2013). She showed how urban development can be led by planned short-term artistic activities, but also highlighted the importance of collaborative public planning in the long-term successes of artistic projects. The conclusions of her research highlight the role of power relationships in the long-term maintenance of urban places; she points out how La Friche in Marseilles which, although not without its own problems, granted further autonomy and decision-making to the local public in the urban development of the area. This collaborative effort allowed artist oc-

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cupants and local tenants to have some level of control over how the area was transformed during the urban development stage. This, she argues, had a benefit for the development of an identity of place in La Friche that outweighed those of other cities where urban planners developed culturally-rich areas without consulting or granting autonomy to local groups or people (Andres, 2013, p.771-772).

A parallel can be drawn between La Friche and Temple Bar in Dublin. Temple Bar was originally developed to be a cultural hub in Dublin City centre during the 1980s and 90s. A collective of planners and involved parties oversaw the development of the area, including urban planners (business developers, public services) and cultural partners (artists and cultural professionals) (McCarthy, 1998). This long-term relationship between the arts and urban development in a central locale helped to create and maintain the cultural places in Temple Bar, including Temple Bar Gallery and Studios and the Project Arts Centre. This system has been described as 'urban stewardship', where a certain degree of autonomy of control is afforded to the cultural bodies involved in planning to help direct the development of the area (Montgomery, 1995). However, the development of Temple Bar has been criticised due to the continued diminishment of artistic activity in the area. In 2013 the Temple Bar Cultural Trust, a body involved in planning for Temple Bar that has included artist members since the original developments in the area, began to be folded up. The following period also saw the closure of long-running semi-permanent spaces Monster Truck Gallery & Studios and The Exchange.

This echoes the importance of collaborative and community management in urban development around artist-led areas, and highlights the fragility of this relationship when the collaborative element is removed. The hypothesis that emerges is that the eventual development of cultural spaces into the permanent model can create a public alienation due to a lack of community engagement in programming or procedure.

### Conclusion

Considering comparatively the examples of transient and non-transient artist-led spaces discussed, Granby Park engaged in community place-making through community engagement and development of experience and identity. This was achieved through the democratic governance of this artist-led initiative which allowed for local community involvement in the developmental processes of this space. This democratic engagement was also seen in La Friche's more long-term plans, but in this instance the problems encountered by La Friche (in terms of the alienation of one community from another) have not occurred. Or rather perhaps because of the temporary nature of this pop-up event, the conditions do not exist which allow them to occur.

Conversely, the problems associated with the long-term decline in artistic and community involvement in the Temple Bar area seem directly related to this idea of local community involvement in governance: a failure to sustain community engagement culminates in place identities that have an otherness or dislocation with the people who live near or pass through them.

Community co-creation of a transient place like Granby Park allows for the development of a cultural place identity that is temporary, but continues to function as part of the space's place-memory. Conversely, Temple Bar's originally planned and managed cultural place-identity has receded in the wake of gentrification, as it has become a central tourist zone more associated with social and retail offerings. Although its place-memory as a cultural quarter persists and is maintained by its remaining arts centres, this identity and memory will continue to erode if tenants depart and cultural activities reduce.

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However, the place identity temporarily applied to Granby Park was not permanently allocated to the space, and so regardless of what the (currently) derelict building site becomes, it may not be *called* a cultural space, but it will be notably be *remembered* as one. This is perhaps the crucial point: that cultural place-memory is not necessarily contingent on permanent infrastructure or design, and transitory projects may equally (or even more effectively) support cultural experience.

Finally, community identity of a place stems from collective involvement in specific place-making activities. Granby Park was built by a community (of artists, organisers, cultural practitioners, volunteers and local residents) who created an identity of place for the derelict site that did not exist previously. With more permanent art spaces this community involvement is often reduced over time, something that is apparent in Temple Bar and also in visitor numbers in regional art spaces or large galleries, although the latter discussion is perhaps for another paper. However, the place identity that was formed and cultivated by the individuals who conceived, developed and experienced Granby Park demonstrates the value that transience as a structuring principle may have, if we aspire to seed 'pockets of activity' across our cultural landscape.'

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