

information and analysis regarding temporary uses – duration, location and benefits. It is estimated that 250 temporary use projects are currently underway in England, in every region of the country, and the majority of them are occurring in urban spaces in deprived areas. These project spaces tend to be used by social enterprises, development trusts, local community or voluntary groups for periods lasting from a few weeks up to five years, with many of the projects relocating to other temporary or permanent spaces once the current unit becomes unavailable. Nearly 75 per cent are in vacant retail units, but other types of empty spaces are increasingly finding new leases of life, including offices, vacant lots, empty homes, pubs, car showrooms, garage forecourts and stalled building sites.

A wide range of uses take place within these meanwhile spaces, with the creative industries leading the way (art and culture related projects total 56 per cent of meanwhile uses). At the most basic level, these uses seek to reduce the blight of vacancy, but most achieve much more, creating new enterprises, skills, capacity and destinations.

Temporary spaces offer a stepping-stone for start-up businesses and entrepreneurs, enabling them to take risks with ideas and potentially enter the commercial market with an established business. They also offer the opportunity to activate sites while they lay dormant to create community activity and open space instead of the typical hoarded blight. Once such example is a delayed shopping centre development site in the centre of Bradford (see panel). We were delighted when pressure by local people, in the form of an Art Attack led by Spartacus, brought retail developer Westfield, Bradford council and arts organisation Fabric together to create an urban garden – with support from Meanwhile.

The Lewes Road Community Garden, near Brighton, came into being when a group of local people became so fed up with the blight of abandoned fridges and debris they instigated a community clear-up, planning to use the space as a growing area. The garden went from strength to strength as a venue for parties, film viewings and a place for the community to interact – so much so there were many sad faces when site owner reclaimed the site for development.

This highlights one key issue: does temporary use that integrates with the community merely highlight the void it



Across England, meanwhile projects are turning neglected spaces or stalled development sites into animated community spaces, in Lewes, (top), and in Bradford

replaces, and leave a hole in the locality's character when it is removed? What local people achieved on Lewes Road was truly fantastic, and although the space is no longer available, the project will continue through the friendships that have been formed. Now that the group have created a precedent for transforming a space, with careful planning the hard work can be transplanted to new sites as they become available.

We urge the coalition government to continue to support the Meanwhile Project. The model leases for land and stalled sites produced by the Meanwhile Project enable the creation of food growing, gardens and play spaces, boosting the confidence of all concerned.

Meanwhile activity is relevant to urban design practice in that it focuses on the ingredients that contribute to a sense of place, form and functionality. It is important to consider the wider responsibility of urban design as a means of understanding and improving the built environment so that we may seek to create places that serve the people that use them. It is the nature of urban environments to change and evolve over time, and we should support this process rather than restrict it. The high street has suffered as a result of the recession, but neither have retail-dominant town centres always been successful. Urban design may help to make difficult decisions of where to focus or shrink commercial areas going forward, perhaps encouraging a re-categorisation of the planning system to allow for more flexible grouping of what happens at ground level. This could allow a design for a certain looseness of uses with primary commercial activity focused in particular areas and other community facing uses such as doctors, dentists, architecture practices, workshop spaces, galleries, libraries, pubs, cafes gravitating towards secondary commercial areas where a buzz of innovation is intended.

In recent years investment in the built environment has been plentiful and it is likely that as the UK recovers from the credit crunch and recession and moves into an era of debt reduction, it will be some time before regular six figure masterplans and multi-million pound regeneration schemes are considered the norm. Where scarce resources and attentions are focused will be doubly important therefore and the prospects for direct action are palpable. Meanwhile as a concept has the potential to take hold of the Big Society notion and guide it to support the