==Research Proposal:== Digital Social Networks and the Temporary Reconciliation of Abandoned Urban land

==Key words==

Networks, community, location, temporary, connectivity, geospatial

Introduction

Of the total land area in the UK, less than a third is classified as urban (populated areas irreversibly built upon and of over 10,000 people) however, according to the Office of National Statistics, at least 60 per cent of the UK's population is now concentrated into these areas (Pateman, 2011). As a direct outcome of the current economic climate, there is now a constantly growing resource of abandoned, derelict and underdeveloped land throughout the urban environment (Taylor, 2008). These vast tracts of land are located within existing, well established communities where there are complex interconnections and social networks already at play (see Collis, C. & Nitins, T., 2009; Shirvanee, 2007 and Berry, 2008).

Traditionally, social networks and community groups share a common connection with the place that they live (local resources, environment, society, etc) and have been rooted there since time immemorial. With the advent of the internet and mobile digital technology there has been a shift in how we communicate with one another, as 'we move through spaces that are [increasingly] networked, [and] where our movements can be tracked' (Berry, 2008). Digital Social Networks (DSNs) are able to build on existing friendships and common connections. Whilst true that DSNs have shown a tendency to build on existing relationships rather than forge new ones with unfamiliar people (Boyd and Ellison, 2010 and Takhteyev, Gruzd and Wellman, 2011), where there are common goals, views and extended social connections, DSNs have remarkable capacity in the immediate dissemination of knowledge, manpower and experiences.

Research Background, Objectives and Justification

Research Topic Background

The research project has been chosen as a reaction to the increasing number of stalled development sites that are becoming commonplace, within the fabric of the urban realm; with DSNs chosen as the tool to re-imagine abandoned construction sites due to their rising importance in existing 'offline' social networks, and for those residing specifically in urban localities (see Boyd and Ellison, 2010; and Berry, 2008). These abandoned development sites are not only a visual blight on the surrounding locality but present a drain on all socio-economic resources. Of the total 1,028,214 ha of urban land, as defined by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), within England there currently lies about 62,000 ha of Brownfield land; with a further half of that currently lying in a completely static state, classed as derelict or vacant (Kelly, 2011). With a great many developers, as O'Rourke (2011) states, 'drawing in their horns and development programmes put on hold or sites mothballed.' There have been four or so past decades of sweeping and unprecedented urban transformation within the UK and Europe that has left a lasting, polarising image of the city and the social, economic and spatial conditions within it; certain cities and areas an unrepentant regeneration and in others, vast discarded areas left to ruin (Misselwitz, et al, 2003). These areas are best described by Sébastien Marot (1999 p.46) when;

"The spaces around buildings and every other construction area are viewed as little more than empty, leftover areas, void and forgotten. Such spaces may be considered necessary components of any city…"

The risk is that with these far-reaching swathes of regeneration and privatisation, the modern city is losing some fundamental features of urbanity: ease of access, freedom of choice and the intermixing of people and activities (Franck and Stevens, 2007) and 'potentially endangering what

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one might call a >sustainable mix<'
(Misselwitz, et al, 2003). If this un-
utilised land was brought back into the
public realm, not only would it benefit the
community at large, it could potentially
enable a whole raft of governmental bodies
and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)
to promote and fulfil their environmental
protection and enhancement strategies,
policies and targets (Taylor, 2008).

Terms of Reference and Objectives

For the purposes of this report, the terms
abandoned land and 'spatial niches' are
restricted to abandoned land within the
urban realm and will include such sites
as: derelict and indeterminate land,
stalled construction sites (where no
building has occurred) and underdeveloped
land; with these areas generally
'characterised by a period of no formal
use (time gap), which follows the end
of a previous use period' (Misselwitz,
Oswalt & Overmeyer, 2003). Also, for the
purposes of this report, the term urban
realm/locality is in line with the Office
for National Statistics (ONS) definition
of Urban: areas of settlement irreversibly
developed and built upon, with populations
of over 10,000.

Social networks are, historically, an
'offline' circle of friends and work
colleagues who share common viewpoints
and connections; where people would
meet periodically and have face-to-
face contact. They have great lobbying
power when the amount of people has
reached a critical mass, as in the case
of 'previous international citizens'
groups and social movements [building
a] constituency for each separate
issue, year by year and country by
country, in order to reach a scale
that [is able to] make a difference'
(Avaaz, 2011). However, following the rise
of the internet, and secondary thanks to
mobile digital technology, traditional
social networks have become digitised.
DSNs have become even more powerful than
traditional 'offline' social networks, in
the fact that they are neither constrained
by locality nor timeframes. They are
extremely dynamic, instantaneous and able
to evolve and build momentum rapidly (Boyd
and Ellison, 2010 and Shirvanee, 2007).

DSNs have become the ubiquitous go-to
channel of communication for advertising
companies; where the 'like' feature on
Facebook enables such companies' unlimited
access to your personal information. The
aim of the research project is to explore
the potentials of DSNs and mobile digital
technology to garner support and gain
momentum, in the temporary, creative
reconciliation, management and use of
abandoned land. The research also aims
to understand how the geospatial nature
of DSNs may enable a faster execution
of local, national and international
governmental and NGOs directives and
policies.

Listed below are a number of objectives
that the research aims to accomplish:

- To develop ideas and principles that
  could be applied to certain programmes
  of activity in the reintegration of
  abandoned land into the public realm.

- To develop an understanding of the
  roles digital social networks and geo-
  located media play in disseminating
  knowledge within existing social
  networks and communities.

- To understand the role that temporary
  uses of land play within the social
  fabric of urban localities and how
  they can be integrated into current
  management strategies.

- To test the effectiveness of DSNs
  and mobile geospatial technology in
  addressing the speed of reintegration
  of abandoned urban land back into the
  public realm.

Theoretical Basis for the Research

Current Research

The temporary reuse of abandoned land brings with it social, economic and environmental benefits. These benefits are far ranging but are generally concerned with elements of place making and the strengthening of community bonds to their locality and context (Greenspace Scotland, 2010). However, the benefits are also economic in nature, with abandoned land reintegrated into the public realm the overall capital investment into the site is lowered (Taylor, 2008). Through increasing the use of the site and creating visual signs of its use, there is a direct reduction in maintenance costs and security, as a result of the passive surveillance the site accrues. 'Vacant sites [tend to] lend themselves to unofficial uses like vehicle parking, dirt bike riding, fly-tipping and mobile home encampment' (Taylor, 2008), and the use of 'ditch-and-bank' solutions to secure these sites often affects the neighbourhoods in which it sits.

With temporary use of abandoned land, it begins to function, not only as a community resource for recreation (both passive and active) but also, as an ecosystem resource; reintegrating the land into the surrounding ecological networks and green infrastructure. Further benefits of the temporary use of abandoned land can be in the integration of appropriate Sustainable Urban Drainage systems, filtering dispersed pollution into and from the site whilst mitigating the impact from surface water run-off and localised flash flooding (Taylor, 2008). Abandoned land can be further utilised as a teaching resource, in the training of traditional and new environmental and conservation skills. It can also be integrated into the school curriculum through initiatives like the Forest Schools Initiative (Greenspace Scotland, 2010); where school classes are taken outdoors to explore the environment to increase understanding and appreciation of trees and wooded areas.

The first obstacle to solving the problem of reintegrating abandoned land is the entrenched view that landscape scale interventions should concern themselves with tangible outcomes, where there is a 'tendency to spend any available money on capital works with physical outputs' (Taylor, 2008). Whereas temporary uses of abandoned land can be set up with the most minimal amount of capital and can, more crucially, allow the dynamic nature of the urban realm to be realised. As a product of this, there is a concern that the 'traditional instruments of […] urban planning are increasingly unable to address […] new challenges' (Misselwitz, et al, 2006), and a certain degree of flexibility within planning designations and future use is required to better serve the communities within it (Taylor, 2008).

Statement of Research Hypothesis

Having undertaken an initial review of the current research, it is now apparent that there is very little research within the subject of temporary installations within abandoned areas of land, and the use of digital social networks to reintegrate them. The research shows that temporary use of 'spatial niches' increases the amount of 'creative capital' within a city and engenders societal/community shifts from cultural consumption to cultural production. This is where goods produced have a higher symbolic, rather than functional, value (i.e. art) and these in turn have 'an important role in the creation of lifestyles and trends' (Misselwitz, et al, 2003). With the increasing importance and contemporary use of DSNs throughout all facets of urban dwelling, this platform of communication has become the tool in the dissemination of knowledge and could potentially be utilised in bypassing of red tape applied to 'spatial niches.'

As a result of these initial findings the research hypothesis that will underpin the ongoing project will be:

'By utilising digital social networks and mobile geospatial technology, local actors and key agents will be able to speed the reintegration of abandoned land back into the public domain'

Choice of Research Approach

The research project will attempt to obtain data from both qualitative and quantitative methods. The research project will firstly seek data from qualitative methods, ascertaining data from interviews and then seek to substantiate this with quantitative data gained from exploratory case studies; with the data gathered from these methods underpinned by a comprehensive literature review. Conducting a series of interviews will help to underpin the subsequent case study, or studies, with professional viewpoints, theories and opinions of various interested actors and key agents within the subject matter. With the undertaking of an explorative case study or studies, set within definite spatial and temporal parameters, able to actively test these ideas and theories, on the ground. However, analysis of both sets of data will be largely qualitative. For example, content analysis of interviews (bringing new variables to light), grounded theory techniques (interpreting theories from data) and, perhaps more importantly, triangulation of data gathered from other multiple methods onto the research question/hypothesis, providing supportive evidence for a particular theory (pers. com. Andy Boorman, 29/12/11).

Interviews

By conducting interviews the project will be able to capture in-depth qualitative data, yet will be flexible enough to allow for the further exploration of tangents on points raised. Throughout the interview process, the management of ethical issues (gaining access/lack of anonymity/leading the interviewee/facilitating honest and open answers) will be the critical to a successful outcome with identifiable quality data (O'Leary, 2010). The research project will be based around this initial gathering of data, through interview, which will enable a more thorough testing of the project in the undertaking of explorative case study/studies.

Exploratory case studies

There is no precedent to what the project is aiming to understand and as case studies enable research into contemporary phenomenon within the context of its happening (pers. comm. Andy Boorman, 14/12/11 and O'Leary, 2010) this form of research will be integral to the final outcome of the research project. By utilising case study research the hypothesis can be tested thoroughly as it will involve prolonged engagement and in-depth exposure with the site. It will also enable the triangulation of other data collection methods and provide supporting evidence for the research hypothesis and existing theories. By using case studies the research project may also be used collectively to form a basis for new theories and generate new understandings (O'Leary, 2010). The data required from the case studies will be in the form of statistical analysis: hits or 'likes' to a particular social networking site via site links and notices or by total numbers of planning applications/objections on the target site during the testing timeframe.

Anticipated use and value of research findings

The research findings have the potential to underpin emerging social trends in community engagement and empowerment. The importance of the research is highlighted by the apparent lack of linkages from the creation of digital social networking and real time, on-the-ground action in the reintegration of abandoned land. The findings of the research will enable a better understanding of the population demographics of those interested in the subject matter, potentially making the industry more dynamic and help explore issues such as: what is the number of people that are needed to become interested and active within the community in order to initiate action, how best to utilise DSNs as site specific catalysts to generate interest and activate abandoned land, create new linkages between spaces and create community action on contemporary land management issues and also, can dynamic, temporary use of abandoned land create a new awareness of regeneration and land management issues?

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