

Think pool / urbanism

Title: Urban intensification strategies and promotion of temporary uses

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Abstract:

Temporary uses occur often in areas where the previous industrial uses or uses related to the transportation infrastructures (harbours, railways) use has ended. These areas are often to be intensified and renewed for other purposes. How do the urban intensification policies treat temporary uses? What kind of strategies would be needed for promotion of temporary uses in connection of urban renewal? The text is based on the analysis of the potentials of temporary uses in Helsinki that was made as part of the Urban Catalyst project in 2002.

Text:

Urban intensification strategies and promotion of temporary uses

The Helsinki scene: Intensification of the built form

Urban policies in Helsinki follow the European trend of looking for sustainable development through compactness, based in many cases on belief instead of rational foundations. According to Breheny (1993)¹, suburban development is defined as sprawl in city policies, while the compact city is seen as the road to a good quality of life for its residents. It is sometimes more like a myth, since increased density does not necessarily result in reduced use of automobiles or reduce number of trips. The reuse of residual sites contributes to the compact city concept due to their location within the existing city structure. A general argument for accommodating development to these sites is that “they remain part of a dynamic urban environment”². So the low-density sites are considered in the compact city discourse as “empty” spaces, waiting to be refilled with new uses.

Urban intensification is an important part of the Helsinki urban land use policy. The current processes show that the type of intensification that has been introduced is more related to *intensification of built form* than *intensification in activity*. In managing the rapid growth of the region focus has been on creating land-use plans that allow constructing of new offices and high-rise housing. The effects and potentials of growth and land use intensification to “soft” social or cultural infrastructures have not been on the official planning agenda. On the contrary, the current development tends to destroy many of the soft sources of city wealth by both the permanent and temporary the cultural production activities out of the city.

¹ Breheny, M. & Rookwood, R. (1993) “Planning the sustainable city region”, In: A.Blowers (Ed.), *Planning for sustainable environment*, Earthscan, London, pp.150-189

² G. de Roo & D. Miller, “Introduction – Compact cities and sustainable urban development”. In: G. de Roo & D. Miller (Ed.), *Compact Cities and Sustainable Urban Development. A critical assessment of policies and plans from an international perspective*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2000

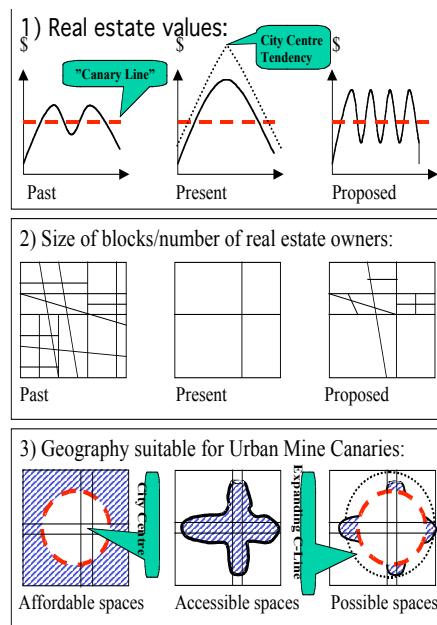


Illustration. The key elements of promotion of soft infrastructures in a city: real estate values, block sizes (land ownership) and location (Söderlind 1999).

Strategies and policies to promote the soft city infrastructures

In the discussion of possible strategies and policies to promote the soft city infrastructures (including cultural production, arts etc.), the approach presented by Jerker Söderlind³ could be useful. There the questions of *real estate values*, *block sizes (land ownership)* and *location* are highlighted as key elements. Soft infrastructures – like S&M companies linked with cultural production – are often located in central residual areas. The new development tends to push them away. If the local urban structure would contain a great variation in the real estate values (old buildings mixed with new ones), the low profit companies could stay and enrich the local company structure. Also the present pattern of landownership – with a tendency to large blocks sizes – does not support the pluralism of spatial qualities and functional activities. “A biological diversity” in the land ownership would promote the survival of temporary uses beside new exploitation. Accessibility is an important precondition for many of the cultural events and other activities organised by temporary users. The optimal geographic location for soft infrastructures would be in the fringe areas of CBD (where rents are not that high than in the absolutely core) with good public transportation systems.

The key result in a follow-up study of an inner city renewal⁴ was that *the principle of having a stake in land and property is the best way to ensure that less powerful local interests can benefit from changes in valuation as well as the uses their land can be put to*. Such stake was also proved to be able to generate resources for other non-profit activities. Having a stake in the property diminishes the risk of low-profit companies to become depended on the public or private subsidies. If they are located in a central area, the gap between the market rent and their paying capacity has almost always to be covered by subsidies. This does not support the soft activity – it is the estate owner who benefits of this.

³ For example Jerker Söderlind, “Culture as Soft City Infrastructure. Strategies for Place-making for Urban Mines Canaries”, Conference Paper, Conference on Cultural Industries in Europe, Essen, Germany, 19-21 May, 1999

⁴ H. Hinsley, “Sustainable inner city renewal”. In: G. de Roo & D. Miller (Ed.), *Compact Cities and Sustainable Urban Development. A critical assessment of policies and plans from an international perspective*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2000

The same follow-up study highlights as well a strategic approach that is based on *small-scale interventions*. This model aims to be sustainable through cycles of property markets, and to be long-term benefit to all parties in urban redevelopment through equitable growth. As typical application is mentioned the idea of “Interim Uses⁵” for empty buildings or sites as a buffer towards market cycles. The interim use has generated small-scale temporary activities (indoor sports, cultural events, eating, markets) for many local people and also attracted visitors from the other areas.

This above mentioned example shows *the potential of the involvement of local community* to urban development in residential areas. Normally the residents have strong relationship towards a place. The local community sometimes makes own initiatives concerning the development of their area and at least they are easy to get committed if a private developer or a city authority initiates a local development project. In the Finnish scene with relatively little rental apartments the residents often have as well a stake in land or property already. In a typical temporary uses scene there are though *no residents* in the (former industrial) area. The analysis proved that the relationship of temporary users with a certain place is many times vague or even accidental. The landowners are former owners (industries that have moved away) or new investors aiming to profitable new development. Who are the representatives of the community in this kind of cases? Temporary users? Municipality? Residents in the fringing blocks? How could a community gain a stake in land and property in this kind of situation?

According to a recent British study of sustainable land-use intensification⁶, the residents were more favourable to intensification when it happens on vacant or derelict land, and when the environmental quality of the host area is not so highly valued. People were more concerned about intensification where they had more to loose (amenity, property values). It was also shown that intensification was more acceptable if residents are involved in meaningful participation in the decision-making process. In the field of temporary uses this would mean that it might be difficult to get nearby residents committed to get involved to the redevelopment of residual areas. They might feel it is really not in their interest to promote the survival or establishment of temporary uses, and maybe they would also feel that a “traditional” development would affect more positively to the value of their own area.

⁵ The concept of *interim uses* is also used in the US studies of brownfield redevelopment and in handbooks of brownfield redevelopment management. What we have called as permanent uses in the UC project is named as *major uses*. Brownfield = abandoned, idled, or under-used industrial and commercial facilities where expansion of redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination.

⁶ M. Jenks, K. Williams and E. Burton, “Urban consolidation and the benefits of intensification”. In: G. de Roo & D. Miller (Ed.), *Compact Cities and Sustainable Urban Development. A critical assessment of policies and plans from an international perspective*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2000