**Findings from New Zealand’s Urban Dream Brokerage.**

**Sophie Jerram**

ABSTRACT:

Between 2013-2018, the Urban Dream Brokerage ran as an urban revitalisation platform, commissioned by four distinct New Zealand municipalities. The model: during a period of economic recession and commercial vacancy, original proposals from artists and non-profit communities were placed into urban retail sites, dependent on a broker’s negotiation. Following the closure of the Brokerage, a research colloquium was held with project makers to understand what had been created collectively as an entwinement ‘between people and space.’ Four common narratives between the project makers were found: the presence of hostile conditions for the creation of community; the opportunity for experimentation within vacancy, the cloaking of political action through art, and fourthly the observation that the revival of ‘dead’ spaces created a longer term value that was not transferred to the project creators. This article provides a quotation-rich overview of the colloquium through the frame of these narratives.

INTRODUCTION:

The Urban Dream Brokerage (UBD) was a platform in New Zealand that provided liaison between creative and private property owners, to place community and arts projects in vacant city sites. By 2012, following the 2010 Global Financial Crisis, vacancies in New Zealand’s capital city Wellington had reached near to 25% of all available retail. The then-Mayor of Wellington City, Celia Wade-Brown described the need for ‘filling the gaps of the teeth of the city.’[[1]](#endnote-29724)

The Urban Dream Brokerage service grew a network of temporary creative projects and paces. It came from work of the public art collective *Letting Space*, and was funded by municipal councils - beginning with Wellington, and expanding to three New Zealand urban centres - Dunedin, Porirua and Masterton. The projects lasted between two weeks and five years and were selected via an online decision-making tool, *Loomio,* involving artists, property owners, municipal staff and urban planners. Projects that were chosen tended toward non-commercial creative projects[[2]](#footnote-21465).

During its five years, over 190 projects were produced around New Zealand under the guise of the UDB, drawing from visual arts, musical, theatrical, design, as well as hobbyist and activist communities. An archive of these projects and description of process can be found at [www.urbandreambrokerage.org.nz](http://www.urbandreambrokerage.org.nz)

The Wellington UDB closed in July 2018, and this resulted in the closure of the service nationwide. Savvy property owners had converted office blocks into academic or residential buildings. Along with increased retail confidence, the earthquakes of 2016 put numerous buildings at risk, meaning Wellington had lost spare buildings for UDB to keep going effectively. By August 2018, the building hosting the five-year quasi-anarchist project 17 Tory Street had been sold and converted into a dog-grooming shop in a final step of gentrification.

In November 2018, an academic colloquium/focus group was run in the interest of PhD research at Victoria University of Wellington’s School of Architecture and Design, involving UDB project makers. Out of the 129 projects, 25 attended, discussing projects in Wellington Dunedin and Porirua (missing representation from Masterton). While only representing a sample of UDB projects, it was a rich, open discussion and often personally generous.[[3]](#footnote-24645)

Assistant Professor of Landscape Peter Connolly from Victoria University of Wellington helped facilitate the session. Peter asked the project makers to elaborate on the “entwinement between people and space.” The group heard stories about what was afforded by the experiences of using vacant retail spaces about what the space and projects ‘did.’ A grounded theory analysis was subsequently made from the focus group discussion, and four common narratives arose that are presented here. They are: the presence of hostility in creating community, the opportunity for experimentation found in vacancy, the operation of art as a cloak for political action, and fourthly, the recognition of the value that was created by but not transferred to, the creative project makers.

The following presents the four narratives that emerged from the Urban Dream Brokerage colloquium.

1. **Building community in a hostile environment**

*"The reality is even Wellington is dying and we don't know how to turn it around. All you have there is government, Victoria University and Weta Workshop."*

John Key, (New Zealand Prime Minister 2009-2016)[[4]](#endnote-23456)

The longest running project of the UDB was the five-year Open Source Community Gallery, at the ground-level 19 **Tory St** (subsequently known as 17 Tory Street), run with a devolved, open programme, hosting hundreds of citizen-initiated activities: art and book launches, music evenings, political meetings, theatre events, co-operative food exchange, film screenings, and regular meetings of Polynesian art makers Kava Club. Tory St had an attraction bias toward experimental and more radical political groups, but also hosted municipal events and mainstream businesses. Murdoch Stephens was a consistent contributor over the five years. He reminded us of former Prime Minister John Key’s *Thatcherite* disdain for society - and for Wellington (above).

Noting that the running of UDB took place almost pretty much entirely within the nine-year period of a National (conservative) government, Stephens suggested there was an aspect of “oppositionalism” about the project. Personally for Stephens, **Tory St** “opened up my connection to Maori and Pasifika, Queer and Trans communities; seeing them visibly in Wellington through (creative collective) Kava Club.”

On the other side of town, in the government zone, the **Hawai’ian Culture Centre** was a significant reversal of a clichéd idea of a culture; a re-presentation of a specific community. The project was “finding the voice of Hawai’i’ against the “nostalgic” tourism marketing,” suggested organiser and Kava Club member Kāwika Aipa.

 “It started as a fun conversation that we were having…... about how we represent ourselves in the CBD. Aotearoa (New Zealand) has the most Pacific people living in it. When three Hawaiians that pop up out of nowhere add to the layer of knowledge, it really helped people within institutions to have that wider discussion about Oceania. It was nice for us to have that to kind of retain a relationship, and offer our perspective of where we come from, to kind of help support Pasifica and Māori living in Aotearoa.

“It was a cool space, where we practised language and culture... At one time it was a koha massage clinic for elderly, and we had hula workshops - all the facets of cultural practice… keeping it sustainable for 30 days.”

Stella Reid describes making **The Basement Tapes** in the waterside apartments known as Clyde Quay: “I woke to the waterfront as a place for activation and engagement; the neighbours -who were very rich - above us came by and just really enjoyed the crazy sounds we were making, which was a huge surprise and they brought their tiny dogs.” Ollie Hutton of Mouthfull found similar forces in the Clyde Quay space: “it was quite odd being there with radical artist types coming in - we got all these odd looks from the rich neighbours… and the little dogs did come along...”

In Porirua, despite the large number of creative communities seeking to make projects, Mark Amery found a hostile property environment as the UDB broker for six months in 2015. This included collectively running a large two storeyed open-plan community space **The Old McDonalds**, inspired by 17 Tory Street, in what had been New Zealand’s first McDonalds. Here space was provided to develop projects including with collectives Toi Wāhine and Stronger Pacific Families and a group organising a Boatshed Festival in Titahi Bay as part of Letting Space’s **Transitional Economic Zone of Aotearoa (TEZA)** festival. The UDB brokered four other spaces, and began relationships for the future use of vacant retail spaces by community groups and Pataka Museum, in three other properties. Artspace Toi Wāhine, for example, lasted 18 months and began a community for artists that continues.

“We ideally wanted long term relationships with property owners over time, so they can start to see the benefit and it starts to change the culture...” Mark described. “You literally go out to Porirua East and go and see the dairy owner and talk about the space that he never leases out and you would go back and back and back. So, there was a constant long process with the property owners that was really tough.”

This hostility was acknowledged by Kawika Aipa, who ran a project in Porirua as part of TEZA; and is now working as with City Events (Arts, Culture & Heritage) with Porirua City Council.

1. **Experimentation and improvisation**

UDB developed and trialled ideas in highly visible spaces withnew audiences and encouraged new ways of hosting sites**.**

In Dunedin, **Frankenfoot - The Redux** (2017) creator Lou Clifton had a large high street space:

“I ran workshops... an experiment - kids’ workshops were the most inspiring and they just took off. The workshops I’m going to run next year are going to be all ages. The kids just went for it, they didn’t even let me finish speaking, they understood what they had to do immediately.”

Lou ran the workshops in a shop without installed lighting, so she improvised.

 “Our space was huge and almost completely dark except for the very centre, which was spotlit by a skylight. So that’s where we put our table. The surrounding dark space we filled with zombie trash, our Frankenfoot - mannequins and trash bags, rats and seagulls. A tiled pathway (which we used as a catwalk for participants to strut their finished Frankenfeet), led visitors from the entrance to our spotlit space. So visitors to our workshop had to walk through this dark space filled with junk to a bright white loopy creative space. Which you’d think would put people off - but because our space was urban, close to McDonald’s, next to Dunedin’s biggest mall - yeah nobody was put off.”

In Wellington, theatre-maker Stella Reid used two UDB sites. With **Mountebank** (2013) set over two stories of a vacant Dixon Street office building it was

“about breaking codified behaviours of being in the theatre... so you don’t dress up and put on uncomfortable shoes, sit in the dark and quietly think about what you might eat afterwards. But that you might return to a space, try and get into the thrill of playing detective and see something - over three levels. It was incredible to see something that large but also at filmic detail.”

For **The Basement Tapes** (2017), in a concrete space on Clyde Quay Wharf, Reid had the opportunity

 “to develop in a site that gave me breathability and liberation. UDB gave us a space that included an entire rehearsal period that was longer than we had ever had in a space that we could call ours. That completely contributed to the development of the work.”

Julia Palm from **JPalm** in Dunedin describes her UDB project in a retail space in Princes Street as helping her reach beyond her regular community: “To be in an urban space right in the middle of the city where people are coming in with McDonalds cups to ask you about your work, is just mind blowing. Like reaching beyond your community to other people that may not have seen you. And the amount of people that were just totally open to it, that was just incredible. Yeah normally it’s just you and your artist buddies, in a bunker, everyone’s dressed in black.

“One thing about retail spaces - you get a totally different audience from a gallery. Yeah (there) you have got cultural consumers coming to look at your site… but suddenly when you’re in a retail site you have drunks, teenagers... I always find that super stimulating to be in strange public spaces.”

Gabby O’Connor described her work, **Cleave (2013)** in a Manners Street former finance retail site as a ‘prequel’ to a work that was exhibited in City Gallery. She noticed the affordances of retail sites in contrast to artistic spaces.

“There was this conversation between formal art space, which has its own rules, and this informal space of the shop. I didn’t do anything to the shop site itself, we just strung a wire across it, and used the lighting as it was and existed in the space, but my intervention allowed the artwork and shop to be re-seen and reimagined by myself, the participants and the public.”

Practising the sharing of space and offering other groups space to experiment was mentioned by both Ollie Hutton (**Manifesto, 2018**) and Murdoch Stephens:

“There were 400 applications to use Tory Street over a five-year period,” said Stephens,

“It felt like a mimicking the UDB model... And we also used the language of art to justify being there, and whatever that potentially signified... but it did feel dirtier ... I liaised about 50 of the events in the time and produced 10 events myself, so I can only really speak to those - because there is loads of crazy shit happening all the time... I would cycle past and something was on and sometimes I’d stop and sometimes I wouldn’t. It was kind of chaotic, and brilliant in that way...

“So, like the UDB, we were giving the opportunity in the space for someone else to use it for free. It was called an open source community gallery.”

Ollie Hutton with Mouthfull ran the last of the Wellington UDB projects, **Manifesto,** in 2018. The group wanted to set up

“a physical space, a platform for artists to inspire each other, empower each other and just to connect this massive pool of young creative energy that we knew was present in Wellington - we had all these fingers in different holes... We wanted to focus on process as opposed to product - really just a space of experimentation and learning and making these connections with artists.

“Everything was free of charge, it was all accessible to everyone - sort of like Tory Street, ours was almost like a follow on. Anyone’s welcome; we had so many different proposals of stuff and yeah we put on about 45 events in about 2 months, a massive breadth of different activities and different people coming in and out.”

1. **The third theme emerged as one of political action, disguised**

Murdoch Stephens suggested that the line between art and political action was blurry at Tory Street. He highlighted some of its users: Generation Zero – who led the charge on a government Zero Carbon Act (enacted in November 2019); Oil-Free Wellington, protesting new oil exploration (part of new government policy); Double the Refugee Quota (also now government policy); and Peace Action Wellington. “We probably had the strongest proactive anti-war stuff we have seen in a long time with the weapons conference or weapons expo protest.”

For Jo Randerson, the ability to blend political and artistic action was important with projects **Brides**(2013), a neighbour to Parliament in Bowen House, and **Political Cuts** (2014 and 2017) set up during national election build-ups next to the Wellington City Council, and then in the heart of the civil service in the Public Trust Building.

"The core thing that matters to me… is that we are creating these temporary autonomous zones, alternative realities, these ways of behaving... demonstrating to people how it could be done. We are undervalued in the process of demonstration. People are like, ‘it’s just art’, but we are communicating on multiple levels.”

Being in the retail environment and interacting openly for Randerson is important.

“That’s the activist part of it for me...you don’t have to interact in that same expected power relationship of ‘You come in and I sell you this;’ we are asking you to open up what you could do within this space, and people get scared by that at first and you see some of them really start to enjoy that.”

1. **Reviving dead spaces is ignored and undervalued.**

What is the state of these spaces before the UDB projects take place? Kawika described the bleakness of the government streets around the **Hawai’i Cultural Centre***. “*After 5pm it’s so empty you could shoot a zombie movie because it’s so dead.”

Julian Priest, through his work with Common Ground Festival in Lower Hutt (curated by Letting Space/ brokered by About Space) spoke animatedly about his abandoned space.

“It was a bit like Dawn of the Dead - the zombie movie - where the shopping mall gets taken over by artists, so every shop was another outlet...An ‘80s shopping mall with gold palm trees… a temporary art utopia. It had this festival atmosphere... And so just for that moment it felt as though we had brought life back into the space.”

These sites’ ‘deathliness’performed like an invitation for a new kind of action - an exchange of other forms of information, and the projects brought them back to life.

Gabby O’Connor described her space as being “dead” before **Cleave**and then noted: “after our project it was rented out… it’s like we illuminated the value of the site, that had been quite unused for some time.”

The magic of transformation – the enlivenment that occurs – appeared to be based in actions that are about a freedom of interaction, rather than commerce ... being joyful with each other. Jo Randerson suggests that people can find that experience confronting.

“One woman came back (to **Brides**), and she brought her daughter in with her, so her daughter could explain to her what this was. She couldn’t understand that it was not a retail shop. And it was beautiful, this young woman taking her mother around and saying, ‘well you can try it on, you don’t have to, but you could’. This is just a really important thing for me, watching people find different ways of engaging in the space.”

**CONCLUSION**

The Urban Dream Brokerage was a municipally-funded, five year programme that assisted with transformations in four urban centres of Wellington, Dunedin, Porirua and Masterton through 190 temporary projects. With the reduction of building stock due to earthquakes and an economic upturn in the main UDB city of Wellington, the Brokerage was no longer viable as a social enterprise and the service closed in 2018.

The Urban Dream Brokerage academic colloquium of November 2018 provided an opportunity for past project makers to reflect on their contribution to the city and the contribution of their projects to the whole urban fabric. The four themes that emerged from a subsequent grounded theory analysis: that of building community within a hostile environment; allowing for experimentation and improvisation; providing a front for political action; and reviving the ‘deadness’ of cities to allow for a new form of ‘liveliness,’ may offer departure points for new forms of action, advocacy or reflection for project makers and urban observers.

That the value created by the 190 UDB actions was often transferred to private hands – by property owners later on, without any recognition - was agreed at the colloquium. In the current urban transformation model, the value creators are at a great distance from the city’s value takers. They feel at a disadvantage to those with capital, who can bid for, and hold property, independently of economic swings. The willingness by the project makers to experiment with ideas for a city’s revival is not matched with any authority beyond the crisis. The ability to hold space in the city after the recession must be built into any future community-activation project.

At the time of writing (early 2020), new central government initiatives in New Zealand are being investigated for solutions to a housing crisis and to rising property inequality. Included in these initiatives are programmes such as Community Wealth Building (such as the ‘Cleveland’ model). After years of untaxed speculation on property and a celebration of personal wealth, this state interest marks an intriguing turn away from market-driven solutions to building, toward recognising communities as potential holders of wealth. I suggest the UDB experience shows we can go beyond ‘experimenting’ with community wealth: whether in housing or in the urban centres where UDB operated, it is time to recognise in policy that artists, communities and the not for profit sector as the primary source of future ideas and value with whom which the state could partner, and into which the market might offer their services. With an historically market-oriented society such as New Zealand’s, it may some years before major changes in attitude and policy will manifest toward recognising this value.

ENDS

1. Unpublished Wellington City Council meeting March 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-29724)
2. *The Urban Dream Brokerage was run via the support of the Wellington Independent Charitable Trust. It was designed and co-directed by Helen Kirlew-Smith, Mark Amery and Sophie Jerram.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21465)
3. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations come from:

Victoria University of Wellington focus group research. (2018, November 27th). *Urban Dream Brokerage colloquium.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-24645)
4. Hallahan, Marnie, Shane Cowlishaw, and Andrea Vance. "Shearer Slams PM over Capital Dying Quip." *Dominion Post*(Wellington), May 07, 2013.

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/8639058/Shearer-slams-PM-over-capital-dying-quip> [↑](#endnote-ref-23456)