

The City and Complexity – Life, Design and Commerce in the Built Environment

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APPROPRIATION, INTERACTION AND CONFLICT IN TEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACE

Author:

CARLES MARTINEZ-ALMOYNA GUAL

Institution:

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

INTRODUCTION

Temporary interventions in public space are becoming important tools for rethinking and changing urban environments.¹ They prompt a more democratic approach to change because they facilitate knowledge around participation, appropriation and use of public space.² From a case study approach, this paper will describe how temporary interventions can respond to new democratic needs while progressively generating new social life and a sense of place.

This research will consider the Tory Street temporary project as a case study from which to extract applicable knowledge. The Tory Street project was the product of a partnership between Landscape Architecture/School of Architecture/Victoria University of Wellington (SoA/VUW) and Wellington City Council (WCC), New Zealand. Using participatory processes, the parties collectively designed and implemented a temporary intervention with local stakeholders. Research around new ways of decision-making and use of public space was developed from the case study.

The analysis methodology of the use of a temporary public space innovates by using parametric data to highlight how time, environmental conditions and spatial components shape the type of users and activities. Through practice-based research, this paper showcases how the space was colonized and how a progressive sense of place was experienced. It presents how tensions arose between different types of users and how conflicts were minimized by introducing changes to the space. Finally, this research demonstrates the value of temporary interventions for developing more democratic approaches to urban change.

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1. THE TORY STREET CASE STUDY

The Tory Street project highlights the work that the landscape architecture programme of VUW has been developing over the last few years, exploring the possibilities that real projects offer to universities in terms of education and applied research. The methodology developed was conceived as an evolution of previous projects. This project facilitated the development of social capital between the community, local government and a tertiary institution.

1.1 Partnership between the university and local government

Partnerships between universities and communities are valuable personal and collective experiences where learning is maximized and economic interests either do not exist or tend to be secondary.³ Partnerships are also useful instruments for generating shared ideas that can be carried through to implementation following participatory design methodologies.⁴ By facilitating different and subsequent partnerships, a methodology can be developed over time by the university, seeking to maximize the outcomes for communities, students and academics.⁵

The goal of the partnership between SoA/VUW and WCC was to work together to propose a joint project that delivered a temporary, small scale intervention in Tory Street, Wellington. Tory Street is a strategic axis of Te Aro, an urban fabric that has elevated socioeconomic activity and the potential to become pedestrian-dominant in the near future. The concept behind the project was to utilise the expertise of SoA/VUW to run a participatory project in which the parties collectively designed a temporary intervention with local stakeholders in lower Tory Street. The agreed design was implemented by WCC with the assistance from SoA/VUW. Most of the elements were relocated and reused when the implemented design was removed. Research around the project has been developed by SoA/VUW.



Figure 1 – workshop with local community, construction, opening event (from left to right)

1.2 Experiencing practice-based education and research

Partnerships allow universities to expand its social responsibility and facilitate the learning of new ways of understanding citizenship through collective experiences, activating bottom-up approaches to decision making.⁶ At the same time, partnerships enable practice-based education and research. Students can begin to develop skills relevant to practice, exploring links between speculative and pragmatic approaches to design with non-technical audiences. Students can also learn about new professional identities underpinned by civic engagement and social responsibility. New roles that are emerging and starting to be relevant in landscape architecture, such as facilitator, educator, mediator, collaborator, activist and builder, are experienced through these types of projects.⁷

In contrast to practitioners, universities interested in practice can develop research around processes, methods and performance of implemented projects.⁸ University has both the time and access to resources

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for developing research after implementation, something that practitioners rarely have. Research from the Tory Street temporary project was developed into two different directions: how the design was conceived, implemented and adapted (the participatory process), and how the temporary space was used (an assessment of public life). A brief description of the research is described in this paper.

1.3 Developing a participatory project

The design process started through different workshops with the local community, where students developed their initial proposals, getting feedback and considering the aims and needs of residents and business owners. Following these workshops, other workshops were organized with wider public to discuss the future of Tory Street and the future of the central city as a whole. Eleven teams of students developed different designs to concept design stage. These final designs were presented to the public at an exhibition and disseminated through the media. The public voted for their favourite proposal either at the exhibition or online using social media specifically arranged for this process. The participation through voting was one of the highest that WCC has ever had for similar projects. The winning proposal was developed by a team of students and teaching staff and supervised by WCC officers. During the final design stage, further feedback from local community was received through different events. The eleven concept designs, the detailed design and most of the construction documentation were developed as part of a university course.

1.4 Reclaiming public space from cars

The design aimed to provide a sense of place to the street by prioritizing pedestrian space and creating a destination for relaxation, play, shopping, eating, forum and education. The design reduced traffic flow to a one-way lane, removing onsite parking except for three loading zone areas. The driving lane included a chicane for reducing speed while creating three different areas for pedestrians, two adjacent to the intersecting streets and one in the central area. This street layout allowed the expansion and integration of the sidewalks with the reclaimed public space.

The central area of the street, flanked by an existing fence, was conceived as a flexible space to attract a wide range of users and activities. The two other areas were focused on hospitality and recreation. Located in one of these areas was a container housing information related to the project, where the public could provide feedback. Local businesses were assigned outdoor spaces that they could occupy. Paint and planter boxes were displayed throughout the three different areas, providing continuity to the project. In the central area different typologies of platforms were located with the aim of facilitating social interaction and flexibility by providing a wide range of spatial settings.

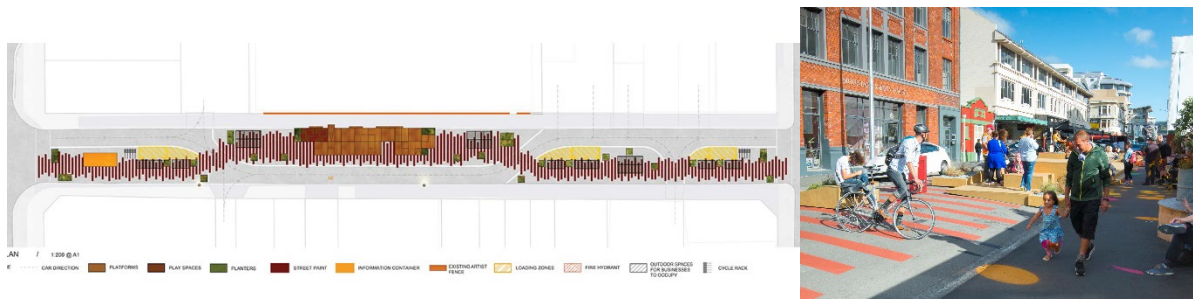


Figure 2 – Overall plan and central area (from left to right)

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2. THE VALUE OF TEMPORARY PROJECTS

Compared to permanent interventions, temporary projects in public space have specificities concerning the way public space is designed, constructed and used. A brief summary of the particularities of temporary interventions will be discussed in this section by relating those to the case study.

2.1 New ways of designing: adaptability and engagement of the local community

Public engagement tends to be stronger in temporary projects because they are usually conceived for testing. Consequently, design processes and implemented designs are more flexible and adaptable.⁹ In order to maximize the success and the impact of temporary projects, it becomes essential to establish special importance to the engagement of the local community during the whole lifespan of the project, from preliminary design to post-implementation.¹⁰

The engagement of the local community in the Tory Street project followed different stages: participation, delusion, conflict, consensus and full engagement. The design development was really successful, with most community members involved in the participatory design process. As a consequence of a delay in the implementation and a lack of communication during that period when implementation was stalled, momentum was lost and several community members reacted negatively to the project when construction started. This negative reaction was aggravated after implementation and started to become a political issue at city wide scale when the conflict was taken up by the local media and city councillors. The designer (VUW) and the project manager (WCC) reacted quickly and responded to the conflict. Several changes to the already installed-design were made in agreement with the sector of the community that was against the project. In addition, WCC agreed to invest more resources to improve the management of the area such as cleaning, enforcing parking regulations and mediating with disruptive uses of the public space.

The changes in the space were introduced after four weeks of the design being implemented. These changes were related to impeding skateboarding on the platforms of the central area, slowing the traffic by introducing speed bumps and upgrading the loading zones by expanding their area and improving signage. Changes were successful and conflicts were resolved, with a vast majority of the local community fully engaged during the final stage of the implemented design. When the project was removed, the relocation of the planter boxes and platforms into different spaces in Wellington garnered involvement from other community groups and reinforced the engagement of local communities throughout the project.



Figure 3 – Informative/feedback container, central area and relocated planter boxes (from left to right)

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2.2 Learning from collaboration and participation

Temporary projects contribute to different ways of understanding urban change by implementing ideas and learning from them. They enhance collaboration because they minimize risks, resources and time frames.¹¹ Communities, designers, urban planners, public administrations, companies, artists, universities and activists can collaborate through temporary projects. Partnerships can be a useful way to formalize collaboration and facilitate the success of a project.¹² The Tory Street partnership was a completely new experience for both partners. Before this project, SoA/VUW developed participatory projects with communities and WCC developed similar projects using its own resources or contracting. The Tory Street project acted as a catalyst for participation, with an immense number of actors involved throughout the process, including university staff, students, council officers, politicians, volunteers, local community, community groups and the public. The peculiarity of the partnership made the learning component especially relevant. The faculty was able to develop practice-based research and students learned through experience many skills related to practice such as participatory design methodologies; how to do presentations for competitions; how to interact with media; or how to develop a design through to implementation. The council learned important lessons related to the need to improve local engagement by establishing personal and regular interaction with the local community, especially before, during and after construction. The council also learned ways to better communicate the objectives of a temporary project through the media in order to improve public engagement and support for urban change. Finally, the public had the chance to participate in the development of a temporary project and influence the debate around the future of the area.



Figure 4 – On line voting, project dissemination, students during construction (from left to right)

2.3 Low cost, new aesthetic and specific ways of constructing

Costs in temporary projects tend to be lower than in permanent interventions because they avoid major infrastructural interventions and try to maximize the impact of the 'new' public space while minimizing the use of resources.¹³ This low cost spirit together with the requirement that all design elements are removable impact the range of construction systems and materials, shaping a specific aesthetic. This new aesthetic in public space is still going through a process of assimilation by the public.¹⁴ It already has many supporters, especially due to values related to more sustainable approaches to urban change, but many users still do not engage with temporary projects due to the fact that 'look cheap'.

The Tory Street project minimized costs successfully, especially considering the large area that was transformed. The only costs during the design process were related to the organization of participatory events. There were no design fees because the project was the product of a partnership with a public tertiary institution. Several strategies were used in order to reduce the costs of construction. The design was conceived for easy assembly, transport, dis-assembly and relocation of the different design

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elements, facilitating a quick and efficient construction processes. Sponsorships and WCC resources were used to cover most of the material costs.

The palette of materials of the project was limited to timber, paint and planted areas. Different sponsors donated most of the paint and timber. Most of the plants used in the project were transplanted from WCC parks and gardens and kept in WCC nurseries, where the planter boxes were assembled. Platforms and planter-boxes were modular and adaptable, using recyclable and standard materials from the NZ timber industry. The temporary project was designed to be ultimately adaptable, easily removable and able to be re-sited into different locations. Platforms and planter boxes were donated by WCC to different associations and placed in different areas of Newtown, Wellington.

2.4 Temporariness, new social life and research

Following a strategic approach, temporary interventions tend to be placed in areas that do not have relevant social life.¹⁵ They are used for transforming spaces where there are no pre-existing patterns that determine how users experience the space. Therefore, temporary interventions facilitate knowledge of different ways of spatial appropriation. They also enable observation of interaction and conflict between users that experience public space differently. As a consequence, temporary projects present excellent opportunities for developing research around the use of public space.¹⁶

Research was developed for analysing the public use of the Tory Street temporary project. The flexible space placed in the central area of the street was targeted for developing research. The focus of the research was to assess how activities were developed as conditioned by time factors, environmental conditions, spatial components and types of users. The research objectives included the assessment of:

- the parameters that condition the use of public space in Wellington, by analysing a temporary case study
- the public activity that the temporary case study facilitated
- the success of concrete aspects of the design for promoting different activities
- the impact of the changes introduced in the space during its lifespan.



Figure 5 – Central area before and after the introduced changes (from left to right)

2.5 Developing knowledge around the use of public space

The aims of the research were to demonstrate the success of the temporary public space and to extract applicable knowledge useful for other projects. The applied methodology aimed to contribute to building new knowledge by exploring data management and production of graphic information. The different categories of analysis (time, environmental conditions, space, activities and users) were broken into different subcategories. These subcategories were parametrized using specific software, producing independent digital data that was possible to edit and interrelate. Interrelating the different categories

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determining certain scenarios allowed the generation of specific data and graphic information, such as 2D/3D maps, tables, graphs, etc. Importantly, interrelating categories facilitated reflection and production of findings related to the impact of the project in terms of public use.¹⁷

From the range of research findings, it was possible to observe how:

- Patterns of use and a progressive sense of place are built over time in new public space, especially during certain periods, such as lunchtime, after work hours or weekend mornings.
- Pedestrian patterns are changed by temporary projects, improving the walking and cycling experience by modifying regular journeys in urban fabrics.
- Temporary public space can respond to the needs of children and families in dense urban environments, improving their quality of life by creating new areas where formal, informal or incidental play can be experienced.
- New public space is really attractive for developing urban sports such as BMX, parkour or skateboarding, but these activities tend to create conflicts with other types of users and local communities due to the way the public space is used.
- Gender conditions the use of public space in terms of amount of users, the type of activities that are developed and the way that these activities are developed. There are less females in public space but they socialize more than males, especially during certain periods.



Figure 6 – users by gender, total users, users at lunchtime (from left to right)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Temporary interventions in public space are an emerging interdisciplinary research area. Our public spaces are increasingly temporary, and the theories, principles and tactics with which we designed public space in the past, need to evolve. Temporary projects present excellent opportunities for developing new knowledge around urban change. They can facilitate learning of more democratic approaches to decision-making, where public engagement is considered a key element that spans the whole length of a project and not just a trendy formality that is done at the beginning. Temporary projects also provide opportunities for educating citizens about more sustainable urban environments, testing ideas through collaboration while experiencing a phased approach to urban change. At the same time, temporary interventions facilitate research around the use of public space, not just for assessing the performance of specific projects, but more importantly for learning about patterns of use and conflicts in public space, providing knowledge for designing more inclusive urban environments.

This research aims to contribute to the debate around the validity of temporary interventions for reshaping urban environments. Developed from University, this research demonstrates that by adapting roles associated to practice, universities have the opportunity to contribute to the discipline by developing research that practitioners usually cannot do due to knowledge, time or funding constraints. Ultimately, this research aims to showcase that by practicing, universities can complement practice.

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