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Viewpoint

Flexible spaces as a “third way” forward for planning urban shared spaces

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1. Introduction

Once the site of a small but active urban scene, downtown Christchurch, New Zealand, tends to be quiet most evenings, since the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes flattened much of its center. And while a scattered handful of clubs, restaurants, and cafés continue to draw nightlife downtown, Christchurch's dominant features are now the vast number of compromised structures and vacant lots where earthquake damaged buildings once stood.

This setting made the scene at Christchurch's “Dance-o-Mat” one evening in the Fall of 2016 all the more incongruous. In a field of rubble where a high-rise once stood, the Dance-O-Mat is an oasis of light, sound, and motion in the midst of an otherwise inanimate nocturnal urban landscape. Created by “Gap Filler” a local non-profit group dedicated to bringing life and art to the city's numerous empty spaces, the Dance-o-Mat consists of an open-air dance floor with floodlights and loudspeakers, a mirror ball, and a re-purposed coin-operated washing machine sporting an audio jack. Inserting a $2NZD coin into the slot of the washing machine activates the lights and speakers, allowing users to plug a music player into the system for an impromptu public dance party. This particular Saturday night has seen half a dozen local teenagers, a pair of international artists, a family from the US with two small children, and a mob of jovial North Islanders all sharing the floor, dancing to a mix of hip-hop, classic disco, and Japanese lounge/techno in an increasingly interactive, ebullient, and multi-generational street party. And this evening is no anomaly. This experimental project is currently seeing almost 2000 activations per year and may become an international franchise with new Dance-O-Mats in Canadian and Australian cities (Gates, 2015).

While unique, the Dance-O-Mat is emblematic of a new generation of what we describe as “Flexible Spaces” in cities with a surplus of underused, abandoned, or vacant space, along with a need for urban revitalization. Such experiments are often characterized by their limited duration, temporary use of borrowed land, and experimental, community driven design and operation. This study interrogates the possibility of using such “Flexible Spaces” as tools for pursuing a third-way of engaging in urban planning for shared space, instead of conventional expert-led and procedural-participatory frameworks.

Specifically, we propose a framework for creating Flexible Spaces that are minimally regulated, reconfigurable and democratically available on a rotating basis to individuals and groups who wish to use those spaces for activities of a limited spatial and temporal tenancy. By enabling a broad range of users to engage in the ongoing creation and management of the built environment, free from most of the traditional processes of land use regulation, Flexible Spaces potentially offer a new approach that can sidestep many longstanding shortcomings of planning. We address these shortcomings in Section 2. Section 3 outlines what a coherent approach to planning through Flexible Space might look like, based upon a set of conceptual guides. Section 4 examines how Flexible Space can help address the endemic problems of planning. Finally, Section 5 offers a series of empirical case studies to illustrate how and why these conceptual guides can offer a new, “third way” to plan.

2. The problems with planning

Traditional planning seeks to base policy decisions on processes that go beyond political exigency or executive authority. Although there are a number of well-established contemporary approaches to planning, they are distinguished by where they place ultimate discretion over the analysis and evaluation of policy decisions, generally within two distinct frameworks; the expert-led and the public participation models (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Day, 1997; Fagence, 1977; Innes, 1996; Juarez & Brown, 2008). In expert-led frameworks, decision-

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making is based on urban planners' expertise; whereas public participation frameworks are intended to generate opportunities for citizens and communities to express their needs and offer their knowledge with planners mediating those processes.

In countries of the core, dominant planning approaches have evolved in response to broader social dynamics. The post-World War II faith in science and expert knowledge led to practices that vested authority in professional planners (Brooks, 2002; Filion, 2001; Taylor, 1998). The subsequent backlash against the worst of 1950s and 1960s expert driven planning – including urban renewal and dysfunctional modernist "vertical slums" – reflected a broader challenge to the post-war status quo and the disempowerment of marginalized populations. Critics of conventional approaches excoriated the anti-democratic vesting of authority in planners, and the resulting class and racial bias animating much of their work (Harvey, 1978). Planning education began to rethink planning as a tool for providing communities both a voice in the policy decisions affecting them, and an opportunity to share their knowledge of their own neighborhoods and needs (Brooks, 2002). The resulting procedural-participatory model rapidly gained political momentum as a vehicle to incorporate stakeholders into the decision-making process (Arnstein, 1969; Brooks, 2002). Under this model, governments describe major projects in early planning stages, and give citizens opportunities to provide feedback throughout decision-making, development and implementation. The planner's resulting role has shifted towards the 'mediator expert', combining the interpretation of citizen feedback with support of community decision-making (Campbell & Marshall, 1999).

Notwithstanding planners' best efforts, the procedural-participatory model has, in practice, fallen short of its ideals of opening up urban planning to those who have long been excluded due to a lack of economic, cultural and/or political power. It often fails to enhance public participation, include disfranchised communities, or create meaningful opportunities for their input, (Carson, 2011; Day, 1997; Juarez & Brown, 2008; Reddel & Woolcock, 2004). While planners and theorists have attempted to address these shortcomings by proposing intensive communication, collaboration, and deliberation processes (Anderson, Cissna, & Clune, 2003; Campbell & Marshall, 1999; Dennis, 2006; Forester, 1999), wealthy, well-connected, and/or well-organized stakeholders [referred herein as "elites"] nonetheless remain able to drive planning outcomes (Maginn, 2007) reinforcing the sense that planning simply serves to legitimate the preferences of powerful stakeholders (Carr, 2014). Additionally, the tendency of individuals to reject uncertainties associated with changes to their environments has made "NIMBYism" – the insistence that change happen "not in my back yard" – inescapable, impeding essential policies and investments (Barlow, 1995; Devine-Wright, 2009; Lake, 2007).

The coexistence of these two paradigms has led to a structural contradiction within planning practice. Notwithstanding the ostensible dominance of the procedural-participatory model, the expert-led approach continues to pervade the planning profession (see, e.g., Ellis, 2005). And while public input based processes remain "best practices" (Slater, 1984), planners simultaneously incorporate those approaches with expert-led practices at a variety levels (Brody et al., 2003) with planners and policy makers able to vary the discretionary authority vested in the public (or even sub-groups of the public) depending on when and how each approach is mobilized (Carr, 2014). By enabling planners to shift discretionary authority between the public, elites, and other stakeholders on an ad-hoc basis, contemporary planning often combines the worst of both approaches, putting the public through intensive processes while disregarding their input when it is not aligned with the interests of more powerful constituencies (Carr, 2012). Moreover, a growing literature affirms planners' longstanding complaints that politicians often undermine even the best designed planning processes (Anderson et al., 2003; Carr, 2014; Cuthill, 2004; Innes & Booher, 2004).

It is unfair, however, to lay the blame for planning's ills entirely at the feet of individual planners, or the planning discipline. Because planners occupy an uncomfortable space between the governed and those who govern, it is unsurprising that they often have limited influence on either. Indeed, it has been argued that even though politicians, the public, and even planners themselves have seen planning as a flawed project, contemporary approaches persist because they enable elected officials to enact policy while avoiding the wrath of powerful stakeholders (Carr, 2012) and the greater voting public (Carr, 2014).

Further critiques of planning are rooted in forces as broad as the working of real estate markets, and as intimate as those of human psychology. Given the permeability of planning to politics, it is unsurprising that Marxist critics have treated planning as a tool of capitalism, while highlighting the inability of conventional planning to alter existing land use patterns driven by capital investment (Harvey, 2003). Moreover, there is a growing concern that stakeholders are often poorly situated to meaningfully participate in planning, as humans often fail to accurately predict whether planning outcomes will be satisfactory once implemented (Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989). In turn, this tendency may be seen as fueling NIMBY resistance to even the most democratically and carefully articulated planning outputs.

These critiques indicate the extent to which contemporary planning suffers from a host of largely unresolved structural problems. These include:

1) The tendency of planners to pre-determine outcomes, bringing their own biases and predisposed approaches to planning exercises;
2) The failure of urban planning to integrate truly democratic representation in decision-making;
3) The tendency of economic, political, and cultural elites to overly influence planning outcomes;
4) The inability of stakeholders to accurately envision how they will be impacted by proposed planning outcomes;
5) The inescapability of NIMBY resistance;
6) The failure of elected officials and other governmental actors to translate planning outcomes into policy;
7) And the limits that logics of private property and capital investment place upon planning.

Accordingly, any alternative to conventional planning approaches should seek to address some, if not all, of these entrenched problems.

3. Flexible Space defined

Our proposed elements for a definition of Flexible Space were developed through an extended series of observations in a variety of international contexts, including site visits in Australia and USA and extended periods of residence in Japan and New Zealand. We have drawn upon our experiences to analyse a range of flexible spaces emerging in different cities across diverse socio-cultural, political, economic, and environmental contexts.

Based on our analysis of the case studies outlined below, we offer the following characteristics of Flexible Space as a starting point for envisioning how consciously created environments that integrate alternative approaches to tenancy, use, exclusivity, and imagination might address some of the failures of conventional planning. Flexible Spaces are intended to offer reconfigurable, rotating, non-permanent, non-exclusive forms of land use that enable a broad range of spatial experiments. For convenience, we describe individuals or groups who exercise a period of management over Flexible Spaces as "activators", and those for whom the space is created and/or who end up using the space as "users". Additionally, some Flexible Spaces may need 'administrators': individuals or groups who intermediate between potential activators, users and other parties, such as landowners or governmental authorities. Ideally, activators and administrators are part of the communities where Flexible spaces emerge, endeavoring to address recognised problems felt by the broader community. We offer the

following seven characteristics as guidelines for creating spaces that allow activators and users to plan by doing.

A) Fixed, non-renewable, spatio-temporally limited tenancies. Flexible Spaces should be characterized by tenancies long enough to enable development, modest investment, use, continuity, and promotion, while still being finite. Without suggesting minimal or maximum periods of tenancy, the appropriate durations will depend on the broader context for the space, regional social and economic dynamics, and even the proposed uses. It is hard to imagine a tenancy of less than two weeks or more than a year at most being feasible. Too short a time would prevent activators and users to fully explore a use, and longer tenancies might suggest a degree of permanence that undermines flexibility, and could encourage primarily profit-focused projects. Instead, the goal should be to allow enough time to enable development, use and exploration while maximizing opportunities for subsequent experimental uses and maintaining a sense of immediacy.

B) Shared tenancies. Activators' tenancies should rarely be exclusive. Ideally, multiple activators will simultaneously use and share a given space. This may take the form of concurrent use of the same or overlapping spaces, or of different activators' uses alternating over time. The goal is to explore the benefits from potentially complimentary uses that are otherwise precluded by exclusive approaches to property. Ideally, bringing together multiple visions for a space will allow the function of that space to evolve, refine, and hybridize.

C) Reconfigurable space. To the greatest extent possible, Flexible Spaces should be changeable. While proscribing materials and designs is beyond our scope, certain commonalities can be listed. Materials should be movable, flexible, multipurpose, and without predetermined function. The cable reel, collapsible theatre riser, folding chair, shipping pallet, shipping crate, jersey barrier, oil barrel, industrial scaffold system, and shipping container all typify the components that can help structure and enable Flexible Space due to their fungibility, recyclability, durability, scalability, accessibility, malleability, and flexibility. While Flexible Space offers opportunities and challenges for activators and designers alike, it is essential that objects created or modified for a given Flexible Space do not foreclose alternate future uses.

D) Minimalist regulatory frameworks. The function of Flexible Space is to enable user and activator innovation. Any regulatory framework governing a Flexible Space – whether required by a governmental agency, cooperative, property owner, or hosting organization – should be minimal. Ideally, it should be limited to:
   1. Ensuring compliance with relevant health, safety, environmental, and criminal laws;
   2. Providing fair, open, and democratic processes for choosing a succession of activators and setting appropriate spatio-temporally bounded tenancies;
   3. Ensuring the ongoing availability and viability of the Flexible Space.

These three functions are intended to protect users and activators, while maximizing opportunities for them to create, evolve, and experience beneficial uses. And because Flexible Space is inherently experimental, it must also be a space for potential failures and the resulting lessons, such that even struggling uses normally have the chance to run their tenancies.

E) The requirement of new uses. At the conclusion of a tenancy, the replacement tenancy should be, as much as possible, a new use so as to enable experiment and renewal. This feature is also intended to promote equal opportunities for other activators and prevent continual use of the Flexible Space by interrelated activators, or those who simply seek to continue a prior activator's work.

F) Designing for unscheduled uses. Flexible Spaces should provide space for unscheduled, impromptu, and fleeting uses, enabling users to simply show up and briefly be an activator. These can be self-regulated areas or areas with an informal sign-up. They should be subject to minimal regulation, have limited tenancies and should not disrupt previously established activators' uses.

G) Free or minimal cost tenancies. To encourage a range of spatial experimentation, and to reduce the barriers to less privileged activators, the cost of activating should be kept to a minimum, preferably free. This is intended to allow for uses that are neither capital intensive, nor profit-focused. While new businesses creation is not incompatible with Flexible Space, for-profit tenancies should be limited, or profits shared with other activators to support alternative uses.

H) Potential off-site expansion. As experimental spaces, Flexible Spaces should enable their activators' experiments to develop a life beyond the original tenancy. For uses that are potentially commercialized or supportable through grants, crowdsourcing, membership, or other forms of funding, Flexible Spaces may serve as launching points for more permanent projects elsewhere. For uses that could scale out to become more conventional forms of public space, the temporary space may offer a proving or test ground.

4. The case for Flexible Space

The foregoing guide for creating Flexible Spaces is intended to help address many, if not all of the structural failures of conventional planning described above:

1) The tendency of planners to pre-determine outcomes. Once created, Flexible Space eliminates the need for planners' interventions, replacing them with a succession of activators from a variety of backgrounds. The requirements of limited tenancies and new uses can prevent a given activator's preferences or biases from locking in the character or use of that space. And by allowing individual biases and preferences (whether those of an activator or the users of the space) to fully flower over the duration of a limited tenancy, the benefits, shortcomings, contradictions, and possibilities inherent to such approaches may be fully explored and built upon. This is not to say that conventional planning approaches cannot lead to, or cannot be essential for the creation of flexible spaces in some cases. We would expect that flexible space can be used as a planning tool in both expert driven and participatory planning exercises. Nor is it to say that framing a planning project around flexible space approaches would necessarily insulate it from the influences of expert based and/or participatory planning practices. Rather, Flexible space planning creates a direction forward that is not inherently tied to either of these traditional approaches, and is structured around minimizing the influence of experts and the tendency to channel community input through expertise.

2) The failure of planning to integrate truly democratic input in decision making. By replacing a democracy of procedure with a democracy of process, and by replacing planning by planners with planning by activators and users, Flexible Spaces potentially help address endemic concerns about the failure of procedural-participatory planning (let alone expert-rational planning) to ensure that stakeholder input is genuinely democratic and inclusive. Activators' tenancies must be distributed in a fair, open, transparent, and democratic way. The barriers to doing so are much lower than in conventional planning, as Flexible Space eliminates the punishing

aspects of conventional planning, by which intensive involvement is often rewarded by adverse permanent decisions, notwithstanding an individual or group's best efforts. Instead, Flexible spaces both lower the stakes for planning with finite tenancies and reward involvement by enabling groups and individuals to directly put their visions into action. Also, non-activator users can "vote with their feet", in deciding whether, how, and when, to use a given Flexible Space at a given time, rewarding successful uses with greater user engagement. Any given use will allow planners and policy makers to see how much the users of a given tenancy actually represent the broader public without having that use "locked in". In short, Flexible Space allows people to envision, try, and evaluate proposed uses in real time.

3) The tendency of elites to exclusively drive planning outcomes. Flexible space planning is perhaps most promising in its ability to bring new, previously excluded populations into the project of city making. While a number of the projects we draw upon below were initiated, envisioned and/or administered by those who might be considered "creative class" due to their cultural, political, and/or economic leverage, what we find most intriguing about these projects is their ability to either create or suggest new openings for marginalized stakeholders to meaningfully engage in planning. Indeed, an embrace of flexible space planning points the way towards a new role for architects, planners, and urbanists. Rather than serving either as experts to whom the public should defer, or interpreters through which public input must be filtered and implemented, we propose to instead position these creative professionals as creators and enablers of flexible spaces in which the public may subsequently plan by doing.

Similarly, several of the characteristics outlined above are intended to ensure as broad a range of activators and users in flexible space as possible. Limited tenancies should help immunize Flexible Spaces against privileged activators seeking to use that space to either reinforce patterns of structural advantage, or to pursue long-term maximization of capital investment. While nothing would prevent elites – whether economic, political and/or cultural – from serving as activators, the democratic distribution of tenancies and minimal tenancy costs would create spaces for otherwise marginalized populations to participate as activators as well. Likewise, because the sheer amount of process involved in conventional participatory planning often precludes a huge swath of the population from being meaningfully involved in planning, the elimination of much, of this process promises to open up flexible space activation to a broader range of actors. And while successful creation and administration of flexible space – like any improvement to the built environment – could open the door to neighborhood gentrification, this link is not inevitable. Rather, if regulators and/or activators are truly representative of the community, Flexible Space could provide a bulwark against gentrification by directly tying planning to community needs. For example, the use of a flexible space to provide needed resources for homeless members of a community in a neighborhood with a large at-risk population could help render those community members "in place" while discouraging gentrification at their expense.

4) The inability of stakeholders to envision planning outcomes. One of the greatest potential strengths of Flexible Spaces as a planning method is that they shift participatory planning from an exercise of anticipation to an exercise of exploration. Instead of having to predict whether or not a given use of space will be beneficial, useful, orderly, or interesting, Flexible Spaces enable users and other stakeholders to try new uses without having to commit to them. This approach circumvents the often fear-based input that many stakeholders bring to conventional planning.

5) The persistence of NIMBYism. On one hand, we anticipate that Flexible Spaces may provoke a greater level of NIMBYism than conventional land uses. Their unpredictability might inspire resistance to such experimental sites, and will mean that they need to be located carefully. On the other hand, the potential to test new uses may help assuage NIMBY resistance to those uses if they ultimately move off-site to other locations. By providing lived experience and feedback from neighbouring stakeholders, Flexible Spaces may help reduce baseless or knee-jerk opposition to otherwise suitable uses in other locations.

6) The failure of government to translate planning into policy. By minimizing the government's role in planning, Flexible Spaces reduces the gap between planning and policy. Instead, activators and users become temporary policymakers. And while governmental entities sponsoring Flexible Spaces might try to influence which activators and users have access to those spaces, hopefully this tendency will be outweighed by the political and social capital that can accrue to governmental policy makers by allowing minimally regulated, maximally democratic Flexible Spaces to serve as true breeder-reactors for artistic, entrepreneurial, recreational, and other land use innovations.

7) The limits of planning to alter existing private property and capital investment. Here again, existing patterns of land ownership and capital investment can create substantial barriers to the creation of true Flexible Spaces. That said, the limited duration of tenancy inherent to a Flexible Space means that privately held, undeveloped or underdeveloped, land can become a temporary Flexible Space. The case studies discussed below provide a variety of examples of privately held property hosting transitory uses to reinvigorate the urban core. It is easy to envision contexts in which property developers, private firms, or NGO's at least temporarily dedicate property as Flexible Space in order to engage in public relations, community outreach, and/or capacity building with community stakeholders. Equally importantly, Flexible Space empowers people to begin to experience community outside the contexts of privately or governmentally controlled property.

Flexible Spaces also offer additional advantages over dominant contemporary practices:

1) Creating space for experimentation and utopia. Instead of having planners or stakeholders envision what uses are best for a given space; Flexible Space allows activators to try out different uses that may seem utopic, idealistic, and/or otherwise impractical. By minimizing regulation, the entire community is able to draw on the imagination of each of its members. Thus, Flexible Spaces enable true experimentation in land use, in contrast to contemporary planning which often limits experimentation to large-scale entrepreneurship in the name of maximizing capital return.

2) Eliminating the mundane abuses of procedural-participatory planning. Procedural-participatory planning is often numbingly time intensive (Carr, 2012). Flexible space reduces the need for committee, council, planning, and other meetings that community members and other stakeholders must devote hours to, hoping to have their voices heard. Instead, communities and stakeholders have an opportunity for direct feedback – becoming and/or working directly with activators and users, deciding which uses they want and whether to support a given Flexible Space use.
3) Introducing flexibility to planning. Many of planning's problems stem from the permanence inherent to its charge. Planning must usually be presumed to be, "forever". By introducing transience to planning, political and policy flexibility are likewise incorporated. A given activator's approach to a Flexible Space can evolve in light of

feedback from other users, community, and stakeholders.

4) Planning as a continual process. Flexible spaces have the promise to render planning a healthy, creative process in which there is a constant cycle of activator planning, experimentation, evaluation, renewal, planning, and experimentation.

5) Planning as a source of value to policy makers and stakeholders. Flexible Spaces offer a relatively safe, low cost space for experimentation in innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, placemaking and marketing. Flexible Spaces can enable grassroots economic, social, and environmental development without the traditional limits of large-scale, long-duration capital investment.

6) Flexible Space can be an effective way to promote placemaking and community development. Flexible and short-term uses have a positive impact in connecting communities, and in linking people with places. The shared activation of a Flexible Space can empower local networks because it allows users and activators to develop new bonds of communication and trust.

7) Scaling out practices of innovation. While the case studies upon which our analysis is based are largely focused on urban, post disruption contexts we would argue that their lessons can potentially scale out to a variety of urban public and community spaces, including those that are not dealing with the aftermath of economic or natural disaster. The benefits of flexible space, including the potential to empower a broader range of stakeholders while reducing the costs of experimentation and involvement with planning can potentially apply to suburban, peri-urban and rural open spaces. And while flexible space approaches may not make sense for planning infrastructure, public housing and the like, they can provide productive tools for planning parts of housing projects, residential neighborhoods or commercial districts, giving users the opportunity to engage in ongoing processes of planning and experimentation within their environments.

These may be strong claims to make for the potential benefits of an approach to planning that has yet to be fully attempted. Nonetheless, the longstanding shortcomings of traditional planning and the success of existing flexible space projects – as discussed below – strongly recommend further efforts to try this “third way”.

5. Empirical pathways for Flexible Space

The foregoing theoretical framework springs from an increasing number of case studies that support the practicalities and benefits of Flexible Space. This section focuses on empirical examples of Flexible Space in both: 1) post-disaster recovery and rebuilding contexts in Christchurch (New Zealand) and North-eastern Japan; and 2) in contexts of socio-economic transition, exploring the cases of Newcastle (NSW, Australia) and Detroit (Michigan, USA). The transitional activities that emerged in post-earthquake Christchurch, and the creation of short-term spaces in North-eastern Japan after the 2011 tsunami, demonstrate the power of Flexible Space to support communities after a disaster, whereas projects in Newcastle and Detroit speak to the benefits of flexibly repurposing vacant urban spaces under sudden social and economic changes. By examining projects which exhibit many of the features of Flexible Space, this section explores what such spaces might look like while making a case for approaches to planning that embrace flexibility. These projects have fueled culturally vibrant development while allowing a broad range of individuals to “plan by doing” free from the constraints of traditional planning – including creative-class professionals and artists who often serve as a vanguard for experimentation, small entrepreneurs, members of cultural and racial minority groups, and people left behind or disempowered by natural and economic disruptions.

5.1. Flexible Spaces in post-disaster recovery and rebuilding

Flexible urban spaces have been essential for post disruption community recovery and rebuilding as evidenced by the examples of Christchurch, New Zealand and North-eastern Japan. Well-located, thoughtfully designed, safe and accessible space has been an essential resource for response, mobilization, and empowerment in post-earthquake Christchurch (Dionisio & Pawson, 2016; Wesener, 2015). In North-eastern Japan, short-term structures accommodated social amenities in temporary housing areas after the 2011 tsunami, encouraging people to create new social bonds amidst displaced communities. We focus on spatial experiments the wake of disasters because these large-scale disruptions tend to create unique openings and needs within cities, real estate markets, and planning practices for Flexible Spaces (Solnit, 2009).

5.1.1. The transitional city: Christchurch, New Zealand

Notwithstanding the unprecedented damage the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes inflicted upon Christchurch, its Central Business District (CBD), and its residents, initial planning responses to rebuilding were highly traditional. Reflecting conventional expert-led approaches, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) was created by the central government, removing jurisdiction over the CBD and most affected areas from the Christchurch City Council (CCC). CERA's focus was on creating a permanent plan for rebuilding. In contrast, while the CCC has been largely excluded from planning the CBD's future, it has adopted a procedural-participatory approach to planning for the transitional, temporary, and transient uses of spaces vacated after the earthquakes. This approach informed the award winning ‘Share an Idea’ project, in May 2011, which successfully gathered 106,000 responses to the CCC's call for ideas and aspirations for the future of Christchurch.

The conflict between these two approaches in Christchurch's post-quake real-politics has demonstrated the limits of both. Expert-led approaches have dominated, with CERA's Central City Recovery Plan (CCRP) ignoring the outputs of “Share an Idea”, and limiting community consultation or engagement. Instead, the CCRP was expedited in a 100 day expert led process during which community vision was only present, if at all, through the interpretations of planning experts (Bennett, 2014; Dionisio & Pawson, 2016; Kingham, Dionisio, & Newman, 2016). Even so, delays by private landholders, disputes between the state Earthquake Commission and private insurers, and the ponderousness of government have, to date, largely prevented the CCRP from translating planning into actual reconstruction. And because governmental decision makers have hindered the implementation of the public input from “Share an Idea”, the procedural-participatory approach has likewise failed to gain traction in Christchurch.

In contrast, flexible, grass-roots planning has started to fill the vacuum created by the failure of both conventional planning approaches, providing many of the city's post-quake successes. Community groups have temporarily reactivated spaces vacated by extensive demolitions across the city to address community needs, demonstrating the environmental and social value of flexible planning. Although not always explicitly framed as addressing social issues, these Flexible Spaces have benefitted Christchurch's communities by promoting social connectedness and opportunities for food resilience, while inspiring similar initiatives throughout the city.

For example, Gap Filler – the creators of the Dance-O-Mat – is a leading creative-led regeneration enterprise advocating short-term transformation of urban spaces focused on social amenities to reconnect the people with the city (Gap Filler, 2016; Wesener, 2015). Their other significant projects include the Pallet Pavilion – a short-term venue for cultural and social activities, built of wooden pallets – and the Commons, a space for collaborative work on different temporary projects

and public events, managed and organized by community and social justice groups. The Commons regularly hosts food trucks, a bicycle maintenance shop, and other small local businesses and NGO's. Smaller Gap Filler initiatives include the Think Differently Book Exchange, an old refrigerator transformed into a shared community lending library; and the Painted Piano project, which makes old pianos publicly available in vacant spaces across the city (Gap Filler, 2016). These short-term projects are widely acclaimed, highly used, and help reconnect communities and the city, while empowering local networks by reducing investment risks to participating in small local businesses.

Similarly, Greening the Rubble has been creating short-term gardens and pocket parks in empty spaces throughout the city for over five years. Working with local authorities, organisations, builders, sponsors, and landowners Greening the Rubble has created amenities as play parks, urban farms, and green patches (Wesener, 2015). While ephemeral, these projects have demonstrated that flexibly creating urban space with the support and collaboration of local stakeholders can provide tangible environmental and social value to communities, and give those long denied a meaningful voice in planning an opportunity to "plan by doing".

For example, The Kākano Café and Cookery School (Fig. 1) brings Māori food and cultural traditions into the community, while supporting people to grow, harvest, and cook food in healthier ways. This Flexible space is led by a local Māori mother of five, Jade Temepara, with the support of her family and close friends. It focuses on family wellbeing, community empowerment, and better social connectedness.

The success of these projects, however, has not happened in a vacuum. The systematic creation of flexible spaces in Christchurch has depended on support provided by Life in Vacant Spaces (LiVS). Fitting our definition of "administrators", LiVS develops connections, and assists with the negotiations between landowners of vacant land and activators (Dionisio & Pawson, 2016; Wesener, 2015). LiVS also helps different types of activators to implement ideas for the temporary use of vacant open spaces (Life In Vacant Spaces, 2016). The LiVS website provides resources for the development of flexible spaces, such as use license agreements, building consents, and information on small business funding and regulation (Life In Vacant Spaces, 2016). Since 2012, LiVS has mediated the development of a significant number of projects, including The Kākano Café and the 'Nature Play Park', an interactive natural space in which LiVS, negotiated between CERA as landowner, and 'Greening the Rubble' as activator. Similarly, LiVS has supported and facilitated the 'Inconvenience Store'— a conceptual shop and art space where customers can get items and local produce in exchange for their time – and Dorothy's Tea Room, a mobile British style tearoom. In so doing, LiVS' work as an administrator is essential to enabling short-term, transient, and mobile uses of spaces.

5.1.2. Flexibility of spaces use for social connectedness: North-eastern Japan

The post-tsunami recovery in North-eastern Japan has been characterized by tensions between top-down and community driven paradigms for reconstruction. The Japanese government has a long tradition of relying on technological, industrial and engineering-based approaches to risk management and post-disaster reconstruction, which often fail to account for social considerations (Puppim de Oliveira & Fra.Paleo, 2016). For example, soon after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, the government began constructing sea walls in the most affected prefectures in North-eastern Japan, while many affected communities opposed this approach. Sea walls negatively impact local ecology, and hinder the relation between built environment and sea (Dionisio & Pawson, 2016). Rejecting resolute, heavy, high-tech, engineered government solutions, local communities have instead focused on community needs, emphasizing soft measures and tactical interventions, featuring shared, collaborative, and flexible schemes of construction and management.

Ishinomaki 2.0 was created by local residents from a broad range of backgrounds to support community and businesses in coping with temporary displacement and in restoring livelihoods in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, after the 2011 tsunami. The project focuses on Ishinomaki Chuo shopping street, by linking businesses that lost their venues in the tsunami with owners of vacant spaces (Ishinomaki 2.0 Archives, 2012). As an "administrator", Ishinomaki 2.0 has also facilitated the conversion of unoccupied spaces into community spaces, and the creation of shared business management schemes that enable people to create and run new enterprises. In the initial stages of the project, the negotiation process focused in talking with landowners, and advocating the importance of opening up vacant spaces, garages, and unutilized areas for reactivation by the very kinds of residents often left without a voice in traditional, top-down government disaster relief efforts. Further, Ishinomaki 2.0 worked to develop sharing schemes to benefit different parties, based on collaboration, cooperation and partnership between local NGOs, landowners and residents. These

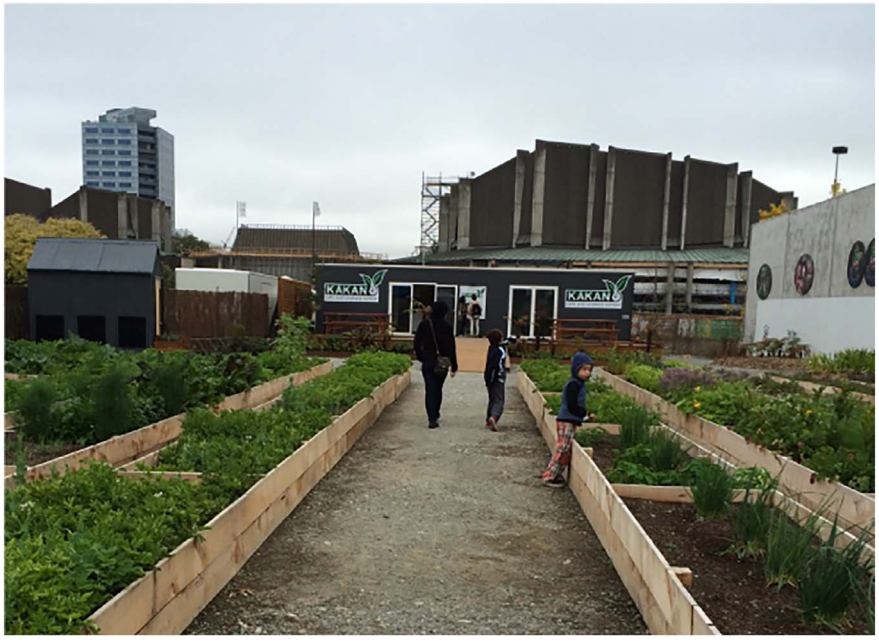

Fig. 1. Kākano Café and Cookery School, Christchurch, New Zealand, April 2016.
Photography: first author.

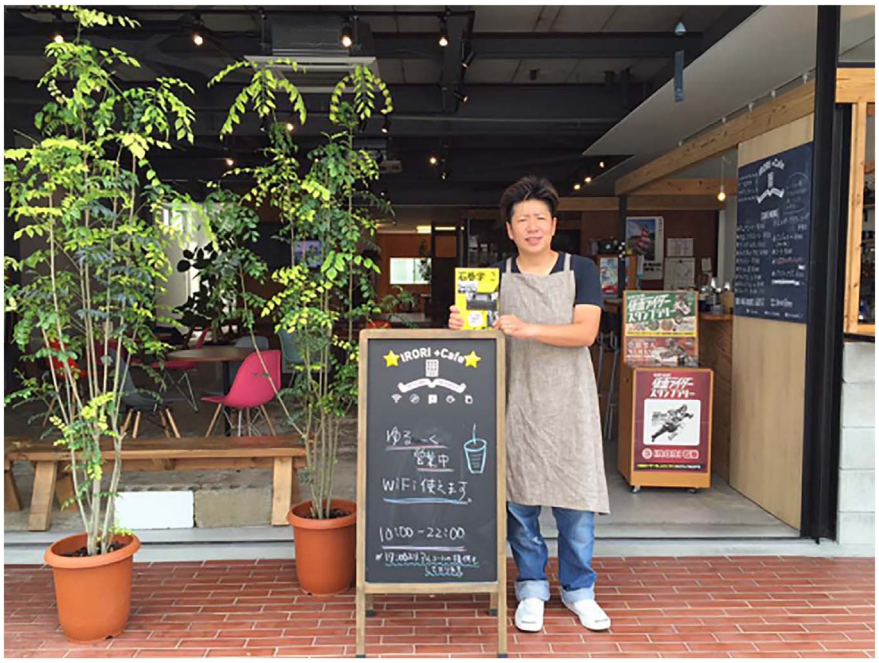

Fig. 2. Irori Café, Ishinomaki, Japan, September 2016. Photography: courtesy of Irori Café.

projects have been so successful and valued that the local community has committed to continuing this model for solving future community problems rather than returning to "business as usual" (Ishinomaki 2.0 Archives, 2012).

Ishinomaki 2.0's most successful space conversion projects include the Irori Cafe (Fig. 2) and the Fukkou Minpaku accommodation. The Irori Cafe is a coffee shop started in an empty garage to support the owner of a cafe destroyed in the tsunami. Offering inexpensive coffee and tea, free Wi-Fi access, electricity, books and magazines, the Café has become an important rendezvous space for the community (Ishinomaki 2.0 Archives, 2012). Similarly, an empty building in the city center was converted into a new accommodation space, Fukkou Minpaku, to host visitors and volunteers coming to Ishinomaki (Ishinomaki 2.0 Archives, 2012). It has simultaneously contributed to the local economy while addressing the lack of short-term accommodation in North-eastern Japan.

The Ishinomaki 2.0 project has also enabled shared schemes of business management and temporary tenancy. The Reconstruction Bar was built soon after the tsunami, providing space to experiment with temporary management. Each weekday has a different management team and anyone in the community can be a temporary manager – in the manner of a Flexible Space "activator" (Ishinomaki 2.0 Archives, 2012). This experiment has established social and entrepreneurial relationships between residents and neighbors within the affected communities, promoting new local business ventures. Ishinomaki 2.0 also facilitated a space sharing between two small businesses, a traditional kimono shop, Kameshichi, which survived the tsunami, and a business owner who lost his café in the disaster. To this day, the Café and Kimono Shop share the same establishment, a symbiosis, attracting young people to the café and elder customers to the kimono shop. This allowed the café owner to rapidly recover his business, and allowed the kimono shop to sub-let part of its establishment to attract new customers.

Similarly, Home-for-All (Minna no Ie), creates social amenities for communities living in temporary housing areas in North-Eastern Japan. All projects center around small buildings, up to 60 m^2, that can be quickly built with few resources and are exempted from building consents (Dionisio & Pawson, 2016; Domus web, 2012). Most Home-for-All buildings offer spaces for communities to meet and reconnect, such as shelters, child care spaces or recreation centers. The construction of the small facilities often integrates strong engagement and collaboration from the community, while the management is based on shared cooperation schemes with local stakeholders.

5.2. Flexible Spaces in socio-economic shifts

Like disasters, chronic stressors such as environmental, socio-cultural, and economic changes often pose unprecedented challenges that call for the reutilization, re-appropriation, and reinterpretation of vacant urban space. Under conditions of "creative destruction", (Harvey, 2006) many city spaces become underutilized, obsolete, or abandoned, offering new opportunities for experimental, innovative, and creative uses. Unlike disasters, however, conditions of economic distress are often characterized by the lack of and/or ineffectiveness of existing systems of planning, which are typically contingent upon capital investment and tax based resources. Lacking an effective conventional planning regime, the decline of the mining sector in Newcastle (NSW, Australia), and the deindustrialization of Detroit (Michigan, USA) have forced local communities to explore the potential of re-purposing vacant space to revive their neighborhoods, prioritizing the needs of communities while enhancing social empowerment and resilience (Dionisio & Pawson, 2016).

5.2.1. Reinventing urbanity through flexible appropriations: Newcastle (NSW, Australia)

The economy of Newcastle was heavily dependent on steel production and coal mining until the late 1980s, when both industries rapidly declined. Jobs disappeared and residents left for other Australian cities, leaving Newcastle with a surplus of empty shops and offices. Ironically, the economic downturn, combined with Sydney's proximity and greater attractiveness for investment, effectively preserved Newcastle's unique architectural and natural features by precluding redevelopment, leaving the deserted city center an unintentional monument to the history of Australian city making (Westbury, 2015). Throughout the 2000s, the city center's stagnation continued due to lack of investment, property speculation and other constraints, notwithstanding the demands of communities and property owners facing devalued assets (Westbury, 2015).

Against this backdrop, administrator Renew Newcastle was founded in 2008 to facilitate the creation of short and medium term uses for empty properties in Newcastle's city center, 'to generate activity in

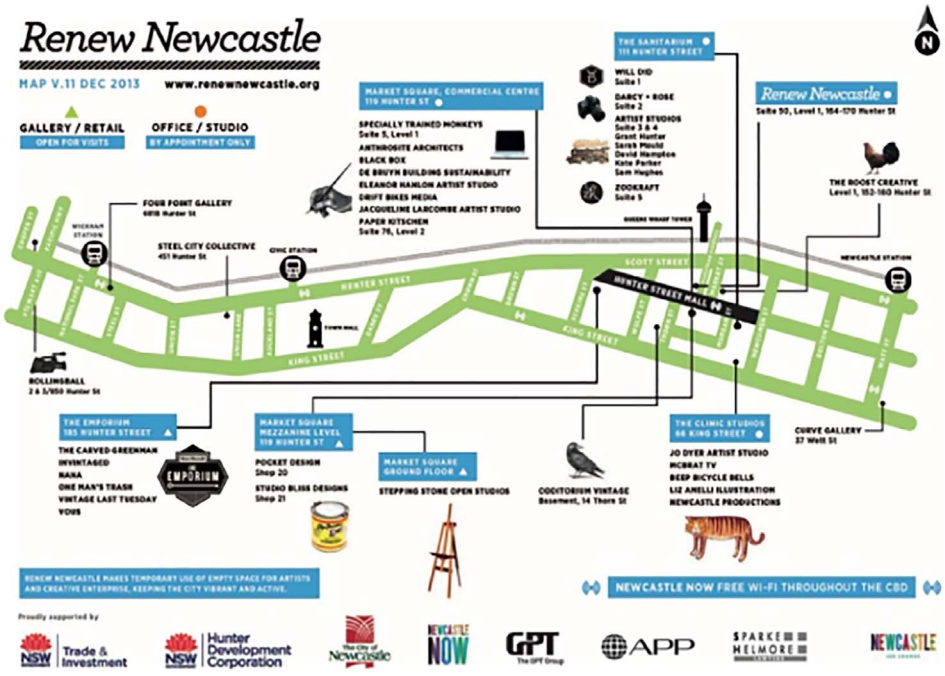

Fig. 3. Renew Newcastle Map, Newcastle, Australia, December 2013.
Image: courtesy of Renew Newcastle.

buildings until that future long term activity happens' (Renew Newcastle, 2016). The organization was initiated by a local resident with experience in public events, and focused on attracting small local entrepreneurial and creative groups and individuals because of their continuous need for space and their willingness to undertake the risks of short term occupation. After several years spent identifying legal and planning barriers, Renew Newcastle developed a negotiation framework to match property owners with activators, providing licences for use (rolling 30 days term), that minimize opportunity costs to owners in case conventional commercial tenants appear. Renew Newcastle has provided new, temporary occupants with the opportunity to experiment, trial, and establish activities that possibly would never occur in space subject to market rates, facilitating the implementation of 55 temporary uses by community groups and cultural enterprises, among others (Fig. 3) – including a flexible space theatre, which is widely available for productions lasting between one day and 8 weeks. And while much of Renew Newcastle's focus has been on arts and small business development, it has succeeded in engaging a wide range of new activators who would not have otherwise become involved with planning or development in Newcastle. Reflecting the success of this approach, some temporary licences have been converted to long term commercial leases, attracting new businesses into the area. Renew Newcastle has helped make the city center a vibrant place with small businesses, events, and street activities, while attracting designers, photographers, and artists (Westbury, 2015). As Westbury notes, 'our cities aren't simply grand projects and mega visions; they are the constellation of small acts and activities' (Westbury, 2015, p. 13). At a time when many smaller cities are struggling, projects like Renew Newcastle suggest that Flexible Spaces can provide suitable solutions by enabling such "small acts and activities" – short and medium term uses that can help offset economic decline while empowering local creative, community and cultural groups.

5.2.2. Reconnecting communities by repurposing the city: Detroit (Michigan, USA)

Because of the dominance of the 'Big Three' automakers – General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler – over the economy of the Detroit area and Michigan as a whole, the deindustrialization of the 90's drastically remade an area that had not needed to diversify since the 1930s (Padnani, 2013). Approximately 3 million jobs were lost in the North American automotive industry – mostly in the greater Detroit region – after nearly two decades of financial struggle and the 2009 bankruptcies of GM and Chrysler (Vlasic, 2011). As a result, about 240,000 people left Detroit, and approximately 100,000 homes and lots are currently deserted (Suburban Stats, 2015). This socio-economic shift has disadvantaged those who were forced to leave as well as those who have stayed in a city facing physical and social destruction, broken community bonds, and crushing financial struggles (Seelye, 2011). Vacant urban lots now represent 20% of all urban properties in Detroit. In response, the city council has been acquiring some of these vacant properties and has slated approximately 10,000 empty buildings for demolition (Seelye, 2011).

As in Christchurch, Newcastle, and North-eastern Japan, an abundance of available urban space and a need to empower existing urban residents have created openings and demands for inventive repurposing of vacant land. Urban farming, art spaces, and social amenities are the most common re-appropriations, claimed and managed by residents, community groups and activists. In East Detroit, the Planning and Development Department is offering to sell residents adjacent vacant lots, often for a few hundred dollars. Residents of nearby vacant lots often already use such spaces for gardening, play, or beautifying their neighborhoods (AlHajal, 2012). While enabling new uses, these Flexible spaces tend to share a focus on social justice, connectedness, and livability among economically marginalized communities. In particular, urban farming has become one of the best known types of re-appropriation of vacant land in Detroit, enabling over 1000 small community gardens and uplifting local economy, through projects like Farmway, Earthworks, and D-Town Farm (Gallagher, 2015; Tostes, 2012).

In Brightmoor, Northwest Detroit, a group of residents called 'Neighbors Building Brightmoor' (NBB) have focused on re-appropriation as the key to improved urban livability, crime reduction, and creation of neighborhood-wide opportunities to work together. The group works to enhance the community capacity of local families – many of whom are economically at-risk – based on a grass roots, democratic decision making model. Among the projects the community has prioritized is the creation and maintenance of small pocket parks and urban gardens, while providing opportunities to involve local children and teenagers (Neighbors Building Brightmoor, 2016). By engaging with landowners, residents, and the local government, the NBB has enabled a variety of flexible appropriations including an

abandoned house transformed into playhouse, urban gardens managed by residents, and market gardens to assist residents in generating income through farming produce (Rock, 2012). Linked by a natural corridor along the Rouge River, these spaces have engendered grass-roots growth of the local economy and community connectedness within Brightmoor, helping offset the structural disadvantage of its residents.

Similarly, Earthworks Urban Farm was developed by Capuchins, a local religious organization, which repurposed 1 ha of vacant urban land to grow organic produce (Earthworks Urban Farm, 2016). Another urban agriculture project, D-Town Farm was developed by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, an organization focused on food justice and community development within the city's African-American communities (D-Town Farm, 2016). Utilizing 3 ha of previously vacant urban space for community agriculture, The D-Town Farm is also one of the biggest urban farms in Detroit. Both these projects are exemplars of consensus building among communities to enable re-appropriations that have flexible management, to support and empower particularly disfranchised groups through the production and sale of farming produce. Moreover, they both promote intergenerational activities, bringing children, teenagers, adults, and elderly people to meet and work together.

Reflecting the power of flexible, community driven, experimental spaces to re-establish a sense of community and place, connectedness, and social cohesion, these projects have enabled informal self-governance among the largely impoverished Eastern neighborhoods of Detroit. And while driven by communities' need to manage ongoing social and economic crises, these flexible uses have also empowered people to experiment and intervene in their neighborhoods, prompting appropriation as a deeper practice of belonging.

6. Conclusion: towards a world of Flexible Space

While communities will undoubtedly continue to create flexible spaces when confronted with disasters, economic disruptions, or other events rending the urban fabric, we believe it would be a mistake to only treat flexible space as a "worst case scenario" solution. Rather, the lessons from successful community driven flexible space projects in places like Detroit, Christchurch, Newcastle, and North-eastern Japan can be applied in a variety of different and non-disrupted contexts. In short, we should begin to treat Flexible Space as a true "third way" to plan – or supplement existing approaches to planning – given its capacity to encourage innovation, development, and/or the empowerment of those often excluded from meaningful decision making under conventional planning approaches.

Indeed, a growing number of communities and governments are beginning to embrace flexible space planning in non-disrupted contexts. For example, several cities in Europe are starting to capitalize on the opportunities provided by incremental and temporary, community and individual-led, projects for city making. 'Restaurant Day' was initiated in 2011 in Helsinki (Finland) promoting pop-up restaurants, in which anyone can have their own food business for one day, in public or community spaces, or even in people's homes and offices (#Restaurant Day, 2011). In only five years, the initiative has been adopted in 75 countries, with over 1 million participants organising restaurants. Similarly, Park(ing) Day in San Francisco repurposes metered car parking spaces, filling them with such amenities as patches of grass, outdoor furniture, and small playgrounds with participants paying the parking meter (Tostes, 2012).

Implementing Flexible Space as a third way of planning, however, raises a number of essential questions. More research is needed to understand the contexts and locations in which flexible spaces might provide the most benefits, how best to structure, incentivize, regulate, and enable flexible spaces, and what kinds of elements go into making truly effective planning interventions through flexible space creation. Indeed, the very nature of our case studies – namely successful projects in post-disruption contexts – suggests the need for additional work that interrogates the possibilities for flexible space projects beyond disrupted and/or dense urban environments.

Of course, one of the greatest barriers to conducting such research is the need for actual flexible space experiments to use as the basis for further examination. And if these experiments are to truly take hold and produce benefits for communities outside areas of disruption, planners, planning educators, activists, policy makers, and city managers among others will need to embrace the very powerful opportunities and benefits that flexible spaces can offer.

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