Green Shoots in Vacant Plots?
Urban Agriculture and Austerity in Post-Crash Ireland

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Abstract

In recent years in the global North Urban agriculture (UA) has grown in prominence in response to shrinking cities, "degrowth" agendas and the failure of neoliberal development models. These concerns are amplified in the context of the recent global economic downturn. Within the context of numerous unfinished developments, vacancy has become an at once more visible and politicised feature of post-crisis cities. In this paper, we draw on a qualitative study of urban gardeners in Dublin to offer an analysis of the growth in, and motivations behind, UA and its relationship to vacant space following the crisis. Our core argument is two-fold. Firstly, practices of UA, while deployed as a stop-gap between development booms, have potential to challenge the normalcy of neoliberal urban development models. Secondly, while the motivations behind those participating in UA are reflective of the immediate material conditions of crisis (e.g. unemployment), they are also indicative of more deep-seated desires to re-calibrate values and lifestyles in the post-crash period. Taken together, we conclude that UA has a role to play in contributing to a wider, more broad-based political platform seeking the re-animation of vacant space in the city.

Keywords

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in urban agriculture (UA) in recent years (Tornaghi, 2014). Previously focussed on the global South (Mougeot, 2005, 2006), UA has been increasingly deployed in the global North, for instance, in the revival of allotment and community gardening,[1] the rise of community supported agriculture, the growing focus on food sovereignty and security, and imaginative plans for eco-villages and towns. Moreover, many grassroots as well as institution-led UA projects are reshaping urban landscapes, experimenting with alternatives to the capitalist organisation of urban life, and establishing embryonic forms of 'commoning' (Tornaghi, 2014).

Urban agriculture has also been utilised as part of a 'degrowth' agenda that aims to respond to the problem of "shrinking cities", or to more generally challenge the presumption for growth in mainstream urban development strategies (McClintock, 2014; Safransky, 2014). These concerns are amplified in the context of the recent global economic downturn, which has seen a rise in the scale and prevalence of unfinished developments and vacant land (Bishop and Williams, 2012). In line with these trends, Ireland's property crash and economic crisis have resulted in a vast landscape of stalled development sites and empty housing and commercial units (Kitchin et al., 2014). As such, 'vacant space' played a key role in media and narrative accounts of Ireland's crisis, and became a vehicle to challenge the assumptions of the development model (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). Partly as an outcome of these processes, the period following the crash has also seen an increased interest in re-using vacant spaces and development sites for alternative, often temporary, purposes (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Kettle, 2014; O'Callaghan and Lawton, 2016). In the context of the complete stagnation of development, property owners found themselves overseeing vacant buildings and land with little prospect of sale or redevelopment in the short-term. Responding to a bottom-up demand, and encouraged by new policy measures, many property owners have made vacant spaces and land available on an interim basis to a variety of users.

UA has grown in popularity as one response to conditions of crisis and austerity (Corcoran and Kettle, 2015; Lohrberg et al., 2015). In recent years, allotments and community gardens have emerged in abundance in the city of Dublin and on its perimeter. While no statistics are currently available on the percentage of public land devoted to UA in Ireland, the four local authorities operating in the Dublin region currently provide 1,680 plots in the metropolitan area. However, current waiting lists for public allotments stand at 924 (see Figure

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[1] Whereas allotment gardens are divided into individual designated plots cultivated by individuals (and their families/friends), community gardens contain a single plot of land that is cultivated collectively. Allotment gardens have a long history in the United Kingdom and Ireland and have legislative recognition while community gardens do not. The latter are similar to collective gardens in North America.

1). Although we have no precise figures, fieldwork indicates that plots provided by private landowners in the city and its hinterland outnumber those supplied by the city and county councils.
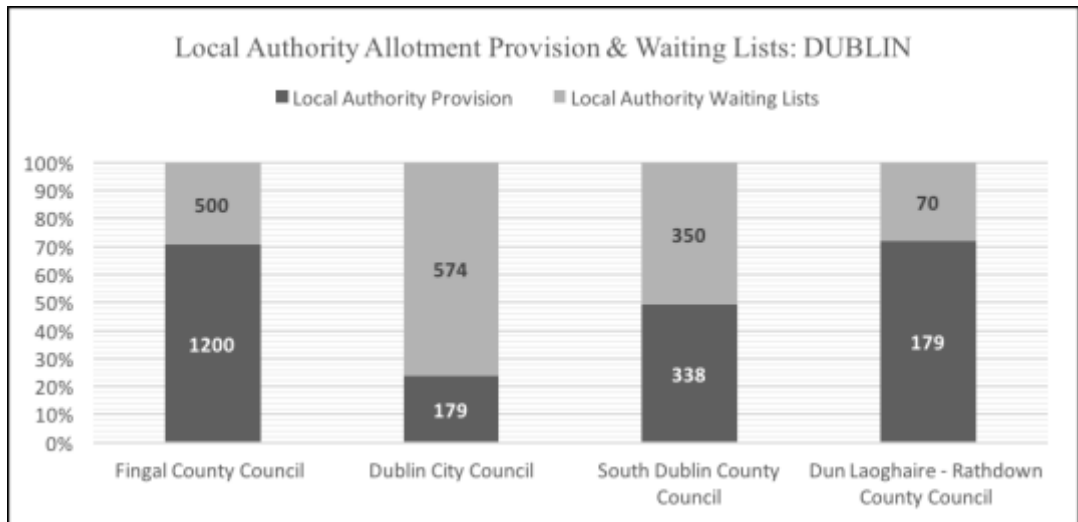
Local Authority Allotment Provision & Waiting Lists: DUBLIN

■ Local Authority Provision   ■ Local Authority Waiting Lists

Fingal County Council	Dublin City Council	South Dublin County Council	Dun Laoghaire - Rathdown County Council
500	574	350	70
1200	179	338	179

Fig. 1: Provision of allotments and waiting lists for public allotments, Dublin Region

Over the last ten-year period, more than thirty community gardens have been established in the Dublin region. Concomitantly, there has been a flourishing of civil society advocacy groups mobilising around alternative production systems, organic farming, food waste, health and well-being, as well as many projects whose focus is on awareness-raising through targeted educational programmes.

Allotment gardens[2] are contingent or temporary spaces with the prospect of repossession or re-appropriation, especially in prime downtown areas, a constant threat. Thus, focusing on the relationship between reusing vacant spaces and UA initiatives can offer a way to tease out shifting perceptions of 'socionature' (Swyngedouw, 2004), urban sustainability, and wider questions of identity and values.

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[2] While we acknowledge the growth of community gardens on the city's landscape particularly since 2006, the research drawn upon here relates solely to publicly provided allotment sites. This decision was taken for a number of reasons: (1) Allotment gardening in Ireland dates back to the early twentieth century and, while its history was chequered, a clear revival steered from below was identifiable, coinciding with the economic crisis; (2) the allotment sites included in the study were spatially diverse including inner-city and suburban locations. In contrast, the community gardens tend to be sited on relatively small tracts of land in inner-city neighbourhoods only; (3) as public utilities allotment sites have the potential to serve the wider public in the city, not a local, self-selecting population as is more often the case with community gardens.

In this paper, we offer an analysis of the growth in, and motivations behind, UA in Dublin and its relationship to the availability of vacant space. We gathered data through multi-sited, ethnographic methods (semi-structured interviews, participant observation and visual analysis). Fieldwork was conducted mainly between 2011 and 2013 in Dublin (across eight diverse locales in the city and on the perimeter), see Figure 2. Site selection reflected the rise in demand for UA, and the socio-economic profile of practitioners residing in each locale. In total, we conducted forty-eight interviews with plot-holders, fifteen interviews with advocates and five with providers (both public and private). Respondents who participated in the study differed in terms of a range of variables including: gender, ethnicity, social class, professional and occupational status, and length of time investing in UA. This paper draws on a sub-set of interviewees, namely, those plot holders and advocates who directly or indirectly referenced austerity and the economic crash in the course of their interviews.

Fig. 2: Allotment sites in Dublin City Centre (left) and the greater Dublin Region (right)

Our core argument is two-fold: Firstly, the availability of vacant space arising from the property crash creates opportunities for UA. The practice of UA in such spaces has the potential to challenge the normalcy of the neoliberal urban development model. In our analysis, UA is a practice through which neoliberal subjectivities may be countered by the formation of new subjectivities that challenge the "guilt" and "responsibilisation" of indebtedness as contributing to the crisis (see Di Feliciantonio, 2016; O'Callaghan et al., 2014). Secondly, while the motivations behind those participating in UA are reflective of the immediate material conditions of crisis (e.g. unemployment), they are also indicative of more deep-seated desires to re-calibrate values and lifestyles in the post-crash period. Taken together, we conclude that UA has a role to play in contributing to a wider, more broad-based political platform seeking the re-animation of vacant space in the city. This has particular resonance, we argue, in post-crisis cities that have experienced property crashes symbolised by large amounts of vacant space.

Given the central role that vacant space has played in the material and discursive articulation of Ireland's crisis, contestations over the use of land have become more central to Dublin's urban politics. The property crash offered opportunities for experimental uses of vacant spaces, in the process inculcating alternative forms of sociality. While the progressive potentials of these experiments have been selectively incorporating into urban policy goals, the more recent recovery of the city's property market has led to the closure of many of these alternative uses. Furthermore, escalating rents have led to a new crisis of housing affordability and associated homelessness. Together, the political visibility of vacancy following the crisis combined with the demonstrated failure of the property-led model to create a sustainable and inclusive city have served to politicise further the issue of private land and property. This politicisation occurs, in part, through antagonisms over the use of vacant space. In UA, then, there is an embryonic potential to advance a "more militant politics of place" (Stehlin and Tarr, 2016, 16). In the context of Dublin, such antagonisms have to date been spearheaded by housing activists. However, there are possibilities for incorporating other actors. For instance, cultural actors such as visual artists had previously been engaged in temporary use through formalised collaborations with policy actors. The recent closure of a number of arts venues and pop up galleries has further politicised the issue of accessing cultural space. Given recent trends, some sections of UA activists have also found common cause with food justice initiatives such as Grow It Yourself, FoodCloud, Urban Farm and Our Table[3] *alongside* other activist movements challenging the uses of vacant space.

We are not arguing that UA in and of itself is necessarily transformative. Our interview data indicate that there is an impetus among plot-holders and UA advocates towards reusing vacant spaces, along with a UA praxis that has stimulated a re-calibration of values and lifestyles based, in part, on "putting life in common" (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015). We contend that UA's visible presence in the interstitial spaces of the neoliberal city alongside other actors reusing vacant spaces calls into question practices of commodification as well as affords Dubliners another avenue for pushing back against economic and social crises (Cangelosi, 2015).

The paper proceeds in five sections. In the first section, we outline the context of Ireland's boom and bust, focusing in particular on the relationship between the property bubble and vacant space. We then briefly review the current allotment provision model in Dublin in light of recent debates on temporary urbanism (Bishop and Williams, 2012). In the third section we present our case study findings of UA practitioners in Dublin. We then critically reflect on some of the transformative potentials and limitations of UA in the context of the

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[3] Our Table is a pop-up restaurant in Dublin's city centre where asylum seekers living in Direct Provision Centres devise and cook the menu. The intention is to highlight how those in Direct Provision are not allowed to cook for themselves and how that affects family and cultural identity.

continuation of the city's broadly neoliberal development model, before closing with some brief conclusions.

Ireland boom and bust: austerity and vacant space

Ireland's Celtic Tiger

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007-2008 hit Ireland exceptionally hard. The crash was all the more spectacular given that Ireland had experienced a period of extraordinary economic growth during the preceding so-called 'Celtic Tiger' years (roughly the period 1993-2007), which saw the country transformed from one of the poorest in Europe to the fastest growing economy in the Eurozone. Adopting a low corporate tax rate of 12.5% and presenting itself as a small, open and liberalised economy, Ireland became a leading destination for footloose transnational capital. The result was a rapid shift to high-skilled manufacturing, a remarkable growth in the service sector, expansion of the population through natural increase and immigration, and the development of a consumer society (see Bartley and Kitchin, 2007; O'Riain, 2004).

The period of export-led growth during the 1990s was followed in the 2000s by growth largely predicated on a debt-fuelled property bubble (Kitchin et al., 2012; MacLaren and Kelly, 2014). Facilitated by the expansion of the global financial sector and enabled by the deregulation of the Irish banking sector and planning system, a massive construction boom swept across the country transforming urban and hitherto rural space on an industrial scale. Between 1991 and 2006, 762,541 housing units were built in Ireland (Kitchin et al., 2012). During the same period, house prices on average rose by between 300 and 400%.

By 2007, the property bubble was driving Ireland's economy in a number of ways. Firstly, by 2006, construction and allied activities accounted for 13% of total employment (and 21% of all male workers) while the personal services economy (i.e. sales and retail) accounted for 26% of the share of total jobs (O'Riain, 2014). Secondly, the financial institutions were profiting considerably from the continuation of the property bubble, as investment in property received the vast bulk of credit during the period 2000–2007 (O'Riain, 2014). The total value of mortgage debt increased from €47.2 billion in 2002 to over €139.8 billion at the end of 2007 (Kitchin et al., 2012). Thirdly, the national government shifted tax policy away from income tax and towards stamp duty, capital gains tax, and value added tax (VAT). By 2006, the property market accounted for 17% of total tax revenue, up from 5% in 1998 (Kitchin et al., 2012). This was all reinforced at the level of individual households, for whom property was increasingly their primary asset (either the family home or investment property). Thus, a variety of actors had a vested interest in sustaining the property bubble.

The crash

As the credit crunch hit Ireland, construction activity suddenly and cumulatively stopped, leading to a dramatic drop in property prices. By 2010, three years after the peak of the boom, many land assets had depreciated by more than 90%. By 2012, house prices had halved with apartment prices down almost 60%. The numbers at work in the construction sector declined by 125,000 or 58% between 2006 and 2011 (CSO, 2012). The impacts of the property crash were visible on the landscape in the form of vast tracks of vacant and derelict property. The National Survey of Housing Developments in 2010 documented 2,846 unfinished estates in Ireland, present in every local authority (Housing Agency, 2010).

What followed was a wide-ranging crisis, precipitated by government debt rising to 117% of GDP by 2013. This debt was mainly the result of the country's six principal banking institutions being at least partially nationalised. The broader impacts on the economy of the financial and property crisis left a trail of mass unemployment, which peaked at 14.6%. The economic impacts of the recession were further exacerbated by high levels of debt. For example, as late as March 2016, the Central Bank (2016) estimated that 11% of principal dwelling mortgages were in arrears, with 9,356 households in arrears over 720 days.

Despite the catastrophic impact of free-market policies during the property bubble, the Irish government response to the crisis was neoliberal in nature. In September 2008, the State issued a blanket guarantee on all assets and liabilities of Irish-owned banks (totalling €485 billion), and the following year established the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA). The expectation was that NAMA, by taking on the bad debts of the other Irish banks, would recover monies from the assets associated with impaired bank loans (Byrne, 2016). In addition, successive governments implemented a range of harsh austerity measures over the following years. Inevitably, these policies impacted poverty and deprivation rates. While those at risk of poverty remained relatively stable across time (14.4% in 2008; 15.2% in 2013) the consistent poverty rate doubled from 4.2% in 2008, to 8.2% in 2013. Most tellingly, the deprivation rate rose dramatically from 13.7% in 2008, to 30.5% in 2013 (CSO, 2016).

The juncture of the crisis has also signaled social and symbolic disruptions of a different nature. The widespread collapse of the economy symbolized the collapse of particular visions of the future, expressed in psychological and existential anxieties, experienced both collectively and individually. The crisis created a vacuum in which Irish people began to renegotiate the developmental vision underpinning the boom and their own personalised narratives as part of it (Linehan and Crowley, 2013; O'Callaghan et al., 2014). In line with neoliberal narratives of personalised responsibility or the "indebted subject" (Di Feliciantonio, 2016), public discourse was saturated with a sense of guilt, shame, and sober reflection on the preceding economic boom (Free and Scully, 2016;

O'Callaghan et al., 2014). This perspective served to obfuscate the systemic and structural nature of the crisis (Fraser et al., 2013; O'Riain, 2014).

The dominant narrative that emerged to account for the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger essentially straddled a dual discourse. On the one hand, the crisis was seen as the responsibility of "reckless" bankers, developers, and politicians who drove and sustained the property bubble. On the other hand, individuals and households – by virtue of having taken out mortgages and other forms of credit – were encouraged to view themselves as personally culpable (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). These discussions were, in part, played out through discourses about – and material practices taking place in – vacant spaces and unfinished developments. Vacant space, in particular "ghost estates", became a metaphor for the failure of the development model and of the capitalist system more broadly. Moreover, 'ghost estates' constituted material sites within which the everyday impacts of the crisis were being experienced and negotiated by people. In a more optimistic vein, a new set of proposals for how vacant spaces could be reused presented an alternative development trajectory. In this sense, vacancy became an at once more politicised, visible, and emotive feature of the post-crash landscape (O'Callaghan et al., forthcoming).

Vacant space, urban agriculture, and the temporary city

In some countries, unfinished and vacant developments have played a key role in narratives of the crisis. In many others, a host of new initiatives targeting vacant space have appeared (Bishop and Williams, 2012). Indeed, the deployment of "temporary use" (Bishop and Williams, 2012) as an explicit urban policy approach has become both more widespread and more formalised in the face of the crash. There are a variety of impulses underpinning these trends, ranging from bottom-up attempts to carve out space for cultural use or food cultivation to more formalised policies targeting "creative city" or regeneration agendas (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Colomb, 2012; McClintock et al., 2016; Mould, 2014; Till and McArdle, 2016). In recent years, UA has intersected with such initiatives.

Urban agriculture's revival in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been linked to contemporary concerns about food provenance, food sovereignty, food justice, and sustainability. On the one hand, the promotion of UA initiatives has fed into an agenda to re-localise food production in response to the concerns posed by climate change, peak oil, and financial turmoil linked to the dominance of the corporate agri-food sector (Sage, 2014). Urban agriculture may also be viewed as part of a strategy to repurpose under-utilized land in cities suffering economic and population decline (Colasanti et al., 2012). Allotments and other forms of community gardens have become a means for residents to re-localise food production so as to proactively address issues of poverty and social fragmentation (Draus et al., 2014). On the other hand, community growing is coming under threat from revanchist policies promoting "green gentrification" and the influx of corporate interests (Safransky, 2014). This indicates the essentially

contingent and temporary nature of urban gardening (within the current urban economic regime) and its failure to become embedded as a core, sustainable and sustaining element of urban and regional planning.

In the case of Dublin, there is neither a city food policy nor a policy on UA. Different local authorities have taken different, largely *ad hoc*, approaches in response to demand for land for cultivation. Economic retrenchment at national and local state level has meant that Dublin's municipalities adapted a reactive rather than proactive approach in developing vacant spaces. This means that the agenda for more UA in the city has largely been advanced by activists and advocacy groups from below pressuring municipalities into action.

One response by municipalities in Dublin has been to create allotment spaces *within* existing public parks. This strategy ostensibly makes public land available for cultivation, but does so through re-appropriation. Furthermore, because such allotment sites are in publically maintained parkland they take on a "show case" patina, or that of "performative spaces" (Stehlin and Tarr, 2016, 4). Thus, they represent a minimalist and even cynical response to the demands for land to cultivate.

Most of the public allotments across the city of Dublin are organised as co-operative partnerships, where the municipality and urban dwellers act together in identifying, constructing and developing sites. The management and governance of sites is devolved to practitioners, with municipalities thereafter playing an advisory rather than a hands-on management role. The municipalities thus have found a way to promote active participation in "greening the city" a sustainable development objective outlined in the City's Development Plan (2011-17), while minimizing resource input. As one local authority official explains:

> We would devolve everything to the people… The trick is to devolve them to the people. Psychologically you see, people in Ireland, well in the city, think that if the council have let it, they should provide everything and should maintain the sites. But the real problem is there's no resources, and the best way to solve the current problem is to devolve them to the people and get committees to maintain them, and take responsibility.

This type of divestment strategy is not particular to the Dublin case. Rosol (2012, 239) notes how the recent municipal promotion and support of community gardening in Berlin constitutes "a form of outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services and urban infrastructure." The community gardens are heavily dependent on the commitment and voluntary work of the gardeners activated by the local state. In a similar vein, Perkins (2012) argues that the pursuit of an austerity agenda in the city of Milwaukee has resulted in a diminished investment in the parks system. To compensate for the reduction in the number of parks employees, the Park Director has encouraged citizen-based stewardship through volunteering, thus, displacing responsibility from the

municipality onto the citizens. Ironically, Perkins (2012, 322) concludes that "actions to compensate for disinvestment end up inadvertently bolstering the Park Director's market initiatives that many volunteers do not support otherwise."

Other administrative areas across the Dublin Region employ a more centralised governance approach because of the absence of policy or strategies explicitly directed at UA. Moreover, interdepartmental and structural deficiencies within and between local authorities have greatly impacted the quality, development and management of allotments in the municipal region. Whilst efforts are made to meet the rise in demand for land for cultivation, the lack of municipal funding is hampering provision, and long waiting lists remain. Another local authority official observes:

> There wasn't really a plan … the allotments emerged purely *because* of demand, and the council responded. But what's happening is that every Council operates slightly differently, structures everywhere are different … There isn't really committees on sites. We manage them. But the demand is phenomenal. We *are* making efforts to deal with it … but there is no money left. So even if we wanted to supply them, they cost a lot to set up … that's the problem. People are complaining and the waiting list is quite high.

The important point is that the municipalities – whether pursuing devolved or centralised approaches – have had to respond to claims-making on the part of activists seeking land for cultivation. Such activism has the potential to interrupt if not subvert the tacitly accepted neoliberal urban development model, although this is by no means a given.

Indeed, a central claim of much of the policy rhetoric about temporary use, more generally, and UA in particular, has been that these practices "could represent a powerful mechanism to retune our cities for what lies ahead" (Bishop and Williams 2012, 35). However, there are a number of core tensions that trouble these propositions. Firstly, as McClintock (2014) observes, there are a wide variety of political motivations behind UA. While the impetus underpinning some projects might be a radical environmental or social agenda, others are more reformist or even neoliberal in nature. Moreover, the formalised policy mechanisms and land-use models framing these projects are often conservative or streamlined with dominant entrepreneurial city models. For instance, Walker (2016, 168) notes that in both the case of Detroit and Vancouver, two cities with radically different profiles, UA functions as a specific fix: "in different ways in each city, urban agriculture development and policy is employed both as a tool of the entrepreneurial city and as a grassroots response to urban environmental injustice."

Secondly, others have critiqued the current appeal of forms of temporary use (such as UA) as one outcome of what Peck (2012) describes as "austerity urbanism". In essence, the neoliberal project is "an anti-municipal project" (Crewe 2016): as local authorities are starved of finances and public policies are inexorably

marketized, the DIY ethos of temporary use fills a stopgap between more intense phases of private investment and redevelopment. This makes cities more vibrant while also paving the way for more 'viable' (i.e. commercial) long-term uses.

Thirdly, there has been growing concern that such uses in large part do not challenge the existing dynamics of urban property markets. While all sorts of 'alternative' uses are allowed to flourish in periods of economic and urban stagnation, the wealth of evidence suggests that landowners will seek to displace these 'temporary' uses once opportunities for more profitable sale or redevelopment present themselves (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Colomb, 2012; Safransky, 2014). The idea of green infrastructure provision thus remains secondary to the provision of grey infrastructure, or indeed to the demands of commercial property markets. These tensions present problems for an agenda that seeks to promote socially progressive and environmentally sustainable cities.

Wright (2014) argues for the re-purposing of space to ameliorate the more pernicious effects of capitalism. He argues that key resources such as land ought to be taken out of the market so that they can be restored to the commons. His argument resonates with the work of other social scientists who have promoted the benefits of the commons, or commoning practices (Ostrum, 1991; McKibben, 2007; Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). Increasingly a response to crisis, new forms of 'urban commoning' (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015) have emerged that seek to intervene in the areas of social reproduction that austerity diminishes. Research has focused on how people are coming together to collectively respond to the dearth of provision of their basic needs for housing, food, healthcare, and de-commodified forms of culture (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Di Fieliciantonio, 2016; Vaiou and Kalandides, 2016). It places emphasis on how "commons" are both produced within the capitalist city while also encompassing forms of experimentation of working together with strangers in ways that are politically, socially, and spatially generative (see Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Huron, 2015; Noterman, 2016). Conceptualising "commoning" as a verb, Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) suggest how the practice of creating communal spaces can be transformative for those involved. Focusing specifically on a food justice agenda in the contemporary city, Tornaghi (2016) argues for a politics of engagement, capability, and empowerment that extends citizens' control over social reproduction. Specifically, she envisages an alternative urbanism based on a critique of neoliberalism, the embedding of agroecological principles in the urban realm and urban food commoning.

We suggest that the practice of UA is not merely a neutral stop-gap between phases of more intense development. Although conceived of as temporary, the production of allotment gardens over time by UA practitioners means that urban space is imbued with new meanings and values, which challenge the assumptions of neoliberal development policies. Moreover, viewed in terms of practices of urban commoning or urban food commoning, UA has the potential to be socially transformative for those involved, offering a socio-spatial context in which priorities, values, and even politics can be re-imagined. Moreover, such concerns

are particularly pertinent to post-crisis cities that have experienced property crashes and where the use of vacant space has become visible and politicised.

Cultivating in a time of crisis

During the crisis period, Dublin municipalities and private landowners provided for UA on greenbelts adjacent to built-up areas, and on vacant sites previously zoned for development in the city and on its perimeter. There is no standard size of allotments provided by local authorities or private bodies, but plots generally vary in size from 21 to 200 m^2. Rents for publicly provided plots tend to be less expensive than for allotments on private land, but pricing structures vary considerably. Between 2011 and 2013, average annual rents for allotments on public sites ranged from €50 to €200, and up to €300 on private sites. The standard of facilities on sites varies, though all limit security of tenure through an eleven-month licence system with notice to quit within seven days. There is no onus on local authorities to provide alternative sites when the use of sites has ended.

In this section of the paper we draw on a subset of interviews with plot holders (abstracted from the full dataset) where direct reference was made on the part of the interviewees to wider socio-economic forces of "boom to bust" and the impact of austerity. Through a process of constant comparison, we identified a number of themes that speak to the contribution of UA in developing a critique of neoliberal power relations from the ground up.

Re-empowerment after dis-empowerment

Many respondents had taken up allotment gardening because they had suffered either job loss or had had their working hours reduced. Others while retired or still employed themselves were aware of the newly unemployed among their cohort. Taking up an allotment requires regular and significant input of time and labour, offering a way of occupying oneself and coping with the stigma of being out of work. A low threshold of entry (in terms of costs and raw materials) makes allotment gardening accessible. Gardeners generally are willing to share not just seeds and plants but also knowledge, so prior experience, while helpful, is not essential. In one allotment gardening site located in a working-class area of the city, a local champion who had been instrumental in the site development was clear that the wider economic environment had a significant impact on uptake:

> Well, I think around here it's, first and foremost, the economic downturn because people have no jobs and they're looking for an outlet … and I think the social thing, social needs are part and parcel of that as well … as one fella said to me, I feel I have something to get up for since I got my plot. (Bernard, 2012)

Even in more middle-class settings on the perimeter of the city, people acknowledged that the sites offered an outlet for those affected by the crash:

> I suppose it's a kind of therapy for people who are unemployed or recently unemployed. I myself am between jobs at the moment. It's very difficult when you suddenly find yourself out of work. This gets you up and out and concentrating on something else rather than your [employment] situation … It saves you going to the doctor too and stops you feeling depressed. (Eoin, 2013)

Some respondents were quite forthcoming about how the crash had affected them personally, costing them their jobs and leaving them without an income and a focus in their day-to-day lives. Taking up allotment gardening conferred a sense of self-efficacy:

> I couldn't stand sitting around all day out of work, and there's only so many DIY jobs you can do at home ... The two of us are out of work now and you go down to the Social Welfare and you feel like you're going begging. I'd much rather be working for my wage … so the allotments have, yeah, they have helped me … It has given me somewhere to go, somewhere I don't feel degraded. (Michael, 2012)

> My dad would come here to work the plot with me. He recently became unemployed and for him it's just been *amazing*. It's very difficult for a man who's worked all his life to find himself out of work … it can destroy a man you know? So this has been *massive* for him in that way … It's amazing what it's done for him. He just *loves* being able to come down here. He meets people. It gets him out, and it has *really* helped him … It's been his saving grace. (Aidan, 2012)

As Purcell and Tyman (2015) observe, cultivating urban land emphasizes and develops social and ecological values, and re-orients people away from the market. Allotments present a field of activity where people are not passive consumers but active participants. It counteracts the effects of urban alienation:

> I'm definitely conscious that I live in an apartment … a squared off box in the air that I spend almost every day of my life in a landscape in the sky. Before getting this, I'd say I felt stuck … and deep down I felt I have to go back to it, to be and feel connected to it, the earth. You lose yourself in it … Plus it gives you a bit of space … a little space in the middle of the city. Growing things and getting to know people. And interacting with people you'd never meet in your everyday life living in your little box. (Aidan, 2012)

As alluded to earlier, the widespread collapse of the economy was accompanied by the collapse of a particular visions of the future, experienced both collectively and individually. Allotment gardening offers the opportunity for productive engagement both with the land and with other gardeners and thus helps to mitigate isolation, loneliness, stigma and fears. In effect, urban land cultivation *socializes the problem of joblessness* and enables plot holders to develop a greater

capacity for critical analysis, self-reflexivity and resilience. As a local activist observed:

> I think this [allotment gardening] is one way of bringing people together. It's an alternative way of life, a good one, educational and offers them somewhere to go that they can feed their families while *taking charge of the course of their lives*, too. (Michael, 2012, emphasis added)

Crucially, the focus here is on the individual coming to terms with the new state of affairs and developing techniques to manage the new reality. In this sense, the allotments may be seen, not as political spaces for mounting a critique of capitalism, but rather as refuges that offer a temporary respite from the fall-out of the crash and the attendant austerity policies. Such responses to a considerable extent are depoliticised, and indicate an internalisation of the logic of neoliberalism: that every individual ultimately fends for him or herself. There is, therefore, an inherent tension in allotment gardening. On the one hand, cultivation may be seen as a protection against social isolation caused by structural changes in the wider urban economy. On the other hand, "losing oneself in nature" may siphon off some of the anger and frustration associated with unemployment, loss of identity, or overburdened work lives. The dismantling of neoliberal subjectivities relating to the fallout of the crisis – the perceived "loss" of communal values that came with economic prosperity – is countered by the assertion of a new "do-it-yourself ethos" that fetishizes thrift as a bulwark against austerity (Jensen and Tyler, 2012) and underplays collective politicised responses. Nevertheless, in quotidian ways the practice of allotment gardening has allowed respondents to at least partially dismantle their previous identities as neoliberal subjects. The reclaiming of subject positions and affiliations outside of market relations has allowed them to assert their dignity in new ways.

The kind of interstitial spaces that UA tends to occupy are temporary and contingent, which militates against users fomenting a long-term land-use strategy more oriented toward the commons than the market. Nevertheless, UA opportunities have evolved and expanded as a direct result of agitation from below. Moreover, as Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) note, the praxis involved in producing such communal spaces can also transform individuals' perceptions. As they develop critical mass, they offer a pathway toward re-appropriating the means of production and provide an alternative vision of urban property rights on which the capitalist economy rests (Purcell and Tyman 2015). In this way, UA can make common cause with other urban social movements similarly engaged in "a right to the city" agenda.

Challenging the neoliberal model of social reproduction

Allotment holders are not just engaging in innovative practices of food production. Their experiences on the allotment sites are also encouraging greater reflection on the wider processes and practices of consumption. Recent research on

Irish consumer behaviour has identified a trend toward re-evaluating the meaning of consumption during the austerity years. This involved reconnecting with values that appeared to have been lost during the Celtic Tiger era, and making changes to lifestyle and consumption habits that have become normalised (Claudy, Keating and Prothero, 2017). Our research with allotment gardeners bears this out. Several respondents offered a critique of the crisis couched primarily in terms of criticism of banks and developers. But equally they expressed a sense of individual and household culpability for the kind of values and practices that had taken hold in the Celtic Tiger (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). Michael, for example, makes a direct link between his private troubles (loss of income and capacity to be a good provider) and public issues (the over-extension of financial institutions):

> Like Christmas is coming and I'm dreading having to ring the Vincent de Paul [charitable organisation]. We're in a situation that we didn't create, the bankers are getting off scot free and we're paying the price. I mean, I was never on the dole … I always worked … And it's your pride too. Not being able to provide for your family, you know? (Michael, 2012)

Another respondent drew a link between the property bubble and individual indebtedness, noting the impact of poor planning during this era when many developments were given the go ahead without due regard to the provision of appropriate facilities:

> The Celtic Tiger did a lot of damage. It really did. It's left devastation behind now. There's young people up to their necks in debt. They bought into the property ladder, bought apartments but they had no facilities like this [allotment site], places where people could mix and integrate. (Pat, 2012)

In the face of these changes and the way in which they are playing out, respondents had developed a more self-reflexive attitude toward their own values and practices:

> The recession has taken people aback. A lot of them don't understand it, they've never been in that situation before … it has certainly made people more conscious of how they spend their money … and if they can save a little bit by doing this – growing their own – then that's a bonus, too. (Bobby, 2013)

Amongst our respondents, UA is frequently juxtaposed to the global agri-food industry, which has brought with it industrialization, intensification, and commodification of food production. Various authors have argued that UA has the potential to re-embed food systems in overlapping ecosystems, human settlements and cultures (Friedmann, 2010), and overcome the metabolic rift – ecological (environmental degradation), social (commodification) and individual (alienation) – that is at the core of capitalism (McClintock, 2010).

Our respondents testify to the potentialities of allotment gardening for re–shaping their own relationships to consumerism and to nature. A strong theme emerges in the narratives that relationships to land and nature had attenuated while at the same time people had been socialised into a pattern of wasteful over-consumption during the boom: "If you asked people fifteen years ago like, or in the height of the Celtic Tiger, if they'd grow or [tell them] that you were growing, they would have laughed at you" (Bill, 2012). Several other respondents were also keen to explain:

> Look at all these jars and stuff. It's mass produced … even the veg in the supermarket, the same veg I grow is there in half the time … It's all mass produced. They're [global food industry] using methods now to mass produce stuff and it can't be good for you. With all the food scares in the past few years, I don't trust it. It's removed people from it too [the land]. They don't know how to grow anymore. (Margaret, 2013)

The desire to reconfigure lifestyles is expressed in their commitment to food commoning. They do this through such practices as substituting cultivated foods for processed foods, sharing the fruits of their labour with others on the site, and with family and friends. They are keen to acquire knowledge and to develop horticultural literacy, as well as to share that knowledge with others. For many who are just one generation removed from rural Ireland, the allotments offer the opportunity to rekindle an agrarian disposition. They see the potential for building productive ecosystems in the urban realm (Tornaghi, 2016). This requires a reorientation of values away from consumerism:

> Years ago we knew where our fruit and veg and stuff came from and how things were made or grew … you were conscious of what you did with things. You didn't waste things … Money has destroyed people and old values, that's what I think … people got too caught up in their own little worlds, in material things … people waste too much today, so … I am conscious that I am resourceful. (Margaret, 2013)

> [During the Celtic Tiger] it was a culture of haves: I must have x to be x, I must spend y to be y … young people, they were obsessed with buying things. They were buying a lifestyle so to speak. (Pat, 2013)

Pat suggests that the allotments offer a kind of redemption, a place where they can learn new skills, connect with others (particularly knowledgeable older people) and re-imagine their lifestyles: "People are trying to change … I admire them because they are very enthusiastic to learn, to take control back, to create a new alternative world for themselves away from all that [Celtic Tiger excess]" (Pat 2013). Here we see self-conscious attempts to challenge some of the core principles of the consumer society and to outline the basis of an alternative way of life. In

particular, the kinds of work practices engaged in through UA involve people in knowledge acquisition, in mastering the process of food production and in seeing the outcome of their labour:

> We need to reflect and look at what's around us, to look and use nature to heal ourselves. We need to come back to nature a bit more. I think that's what people are getting out of it. (Bobby, 2013)

For many this is a process to which they had no previous access, and of which they were not previously cognisant. There is a realisation of disconnection from the ecological food cycle and an opportunity for reconnection. This may be read as a critique of the neoliberal project, which, if not overtly political, is grounded in a new cognisance of broader socio-ecological processes and their impact in contemporary society.

Urban agriculture as an urban commoning phenomenon

Respondents demonstrate a real commitment to creating a shared community of practice on the allotment sites. The problem of how strangers express themselves to each other is resolved through a focus on applying knowledge, skill and physical labour. The terrain sets the boundaries to interaction. Plot holders, intimately connected to the material practices of cultivation, privilege that version of themselves above all other as a means of creating a common ground with unknown others. It is all about *the doing,* the getting on with the practical task of cultivation, which we argue aligns with what Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) have characterised as commoning. Such practices necessarily draw gardeners into circuits of sociality as well as shared knowledge. Allotments facilitate the striking up of easy interactions between plot-holders. They are places where "working together with strangers" (Huron, 2015) seems less strange since there is a shared commitment to cultivation:

> When I'm coming for four hours I'll always bring my flask and if someone was around I would say, "Do you want a cup of tea?" They might take it and they mightn't take it. (anonymous South County Dublin gardener, 2012)

There is a sense of fellowship connected to the joint project even if each plot holder is engaged in an individual enterprise. Participants place a premium on the willingness and capacity to share with others, directly challenging the notion of the segregated city, which Lefebvre believed produced passive consumers rather than active citizens (Purcell and Tyman, 2015). Time and again respondents referred to the "social levelling" that occurs on allotments:

> Your class doesn't matter here … It doesn't matter what your background is because here, everyone is doing the same thing … they've a common interest. We've all sorts of people here on the site. People from all walks of life are growing food together … and, especially the social element … it gives you an excuse to meet

people … allotments are great that way, for people mixing and meeting each other … to mix with people you wouldn't otherwise meet … it gets you involved in your own community and doing things right. (Deirdre, 2013)

Eizenberg (2012) points to community gardens in New York City as an example of an alternative modality of social reproduction that takes after the model of the commons. She argues that community gardens, which date to the economic crisis of the 1970s, are an instance of counter-hegemonic space that can arrest the decline of the commons implicit in the neoliberal political project (Eizenberg, 2012). Similarly, we suggest that allotments offer an alternative modality of social reproduction that takes after the model of the commons. Land is held in common under a public tenure system that is the opposite of speculative financialisation. The focus is largely on cultivation for the purpose of non-market production and consumption, and much of the produce is swapped with others on site, or shared for free. The mode of production is non-hierarchical and participatory and not directed at generating profit.

We are cognisant that "urban agriculture remains a residual, marginal and interstitial practice, fraught with contradictions and troubled by constraints" (Tornaghi, 2016, 1). Yet recent scholarship suggests that UA can be a useful means for claiming the right to the city (Passidomo, 2016; Shillington, 2013). In particular, UA initiatives driven by civil society are expressions of "a persistent desire among inhabitants to produce, cultivate and manage urban space for themselves, together, and on their own terms" (Purcell and Tyman, 2015, 12). Viewed through a food justice lens, UA can serve as a template for a politics of engagement, capability, and empowerment (Tornaghi, 2016). Civil society groups in Dublin have already pressured municipalities into ceding urban territory for food production. They have renewed vacant spaces and produced new, productive spaces in the city. The idea of "growing your own" is no longer an alien one. Tornaghi (2016) counsels that a reimagined food system will not come from the market, but must start from the daily experience of urban space. A range of civil society groups, already working with schools and community groups, are extending and embedding versions of the UA project through processes of capacity-building, direct engagement and re-skilling. At the same time, they continue to be a thorn in the side of municipalities, demanding the right to land for cultivation.

Urban agriculture: sustainability fix or stopgap?

As we have outlined in the previous section, UA has provided a means by which practitioners have reassessed their relationship with nature, society, and the economy. Participants' narratives clearly point to the ways in which UA has the potential to be transformative. However, this still leaves us with the question of how sustainable such practices can be within the context of the continuation of a neoliberal urban development model.

In the period of the crisis a new policy interest in proactively addressing vacant space emerged (O'Callaghan and Lawton, 2016). On the one hand, there has been an increase in groups seeking to employ vacant spaces for temporary use, while a number of activist groups, focusing in particular on housing, have highlighted vacancy as a way of making a claim for the right to the city. On the other hand, policy actors have sought to reframe vacant spaces as part of an entrepreneurial urban agenda, emphasising how centrally-located vacant spaces provide an opportunity for new investment and development. Driven in particular by Dublin City Council, this angle has included a suite of policies and initiatives to promote the reuse of vacant spaces over either a temporary or more permanent basis. Chief among these has been the formal introduction of a vacant land levy, which was passed into law in 2015 and is due to come into effect in 2018. Prior to its introduction, landowners paid no tax on vacant land or on property that could not be put to immediate use (see O'Callaghan and Lawton, 2016, 82). The levy is intended to combat land hoarding and speculation and to encourage the reuse or redevelopment of space in a period of stagnation. Thus, debates about the "problem" of vacancy and everyday engagements by various groups in such spaces became a prominent modality for discussing the fallout of the crisis. These discussions emphasised how the "problem" of vacancy was symptomatic of a failed development model, while new forms of temporary use signalled alternative and progressive ways of rethinking the city.

The new focus on vacancy has shifted the policy landscape while thus far doing little to fundamentally alter the neoliberal development model. In the Dublin City Council Development Plan for 2016–2022, vacancy is viewed as "a great challenge and opportunity for the city" in that extensive vacant lands also provide an attractive prospect for developers (Dublin City Council, 45). The plan proposes to take an "active land management" approach to vacant sites and properties, including strategies to promote temporary uses and encourage more extensive redevelopment (ibid, 46). As such, while there is evidence of a greater emphasis on tackling vacancy, these efforts are essentially folded into a "business-as-usual" neoliberal development strategy. Moreover, while the downturn offers opportunities for all sorts of alternative, non-commercial uses of space, there is little evidence of policy responses that seek to secure spaces for these uses over the long-term. This is particularly acute in the context of the city's resurgent property market. Over the last few years rising property prices have led to the evictions and displacement of many forms of temporary use.

Within this context, practices of UA that developed during the downturn are also under threat. In Dublin, as in other cities impacted by austerity, UA moved up the policy agenda as land dropped in value. Vacant sites became available and civil society groups successfully agitated for the right to cultivate in the city. However, this does not necessarily auger well for the longer-term embedding of UA in the urban landscape. Firstly, the pressure for allotment land has primarily come from the bottom up. The downturn created parcels of vacant which communities and

civil society groups pushed to use for cultivation. Secondly, while the local authorities have become more willing to cede control of vacant sites to such groups due to budgetary restrictions they are generally not in a position themselves to take such sites in charge. In effect, the responsibility for governance and management of the sites falls on the plot holders. The gardeners who are there on a voluntary basis bear the responsibility of ensuring the day-to-day running of the sites. While on the one hand this can be viewed as an instance of Lefebvre's right to *autogestion*, as it implies self-management on the part of the plot holders (Purcell and Tyman, 2015), a more sinister reading would see it as an attempt on the part of the local state to create responsibilized neoliberal subjects (Walker, 2016; Pudup, 2008).

In contrast to publicly provided allotments, private allotment provision is imbued with a market ethos and therefore directly challenges the principle of commoning. On privately provided allotments, sites are costlier to rent. Many services (such as rotivation of land, pest control, soil preparation) are commodified by the owner and are made available to the gardener for an additional fee. There is no prohibition on the sale of produce as there is on public allotments, reinforcing the notion of cultivation as a business rather than a practice. This represents a further challenge to civil society groups who are intent on promoting food commoning activities in the urban realm.

Thirdly, it is clear that the local authorities are taking a longer-term view of potential land values. A tension remains between the affordance of temporary tenure, and the more lucrative developmental potential of city land. The local authorities have permitted alternative uses of temporary spaces, but it is unlikely that they are prepared to challenge the way the property market works. What happens to the allotment spaces when the commercial imperative takes hold? It is likely that the allotment space available in the prime inner-city areas will shrink, while those sites on the perimeter (where land will remain relatively cheaper) may be sustainable in the longer-run. On the other hand, municipalities have the power to plan and set aside land for common cultivation in all future developments. Experience to date shows that they will only do so in response to sustained campaigns on the part of the urban citizenry.

However, as we have argued above, the green shoots of 'urban commoning' that are evidenced on Dublin's allotment gardening sites have demonstrated the potential to challenge everyday norms about urban development and political activism around the appropriate reuse of vacant space. We can already see the residual outcomes of debates about vacancy in Dublin taking the form of political activism and social movements. In the context of the closure of several arts spaces, for example, there have been campaigns to lobby Dublin City Council to take land out of the market to ensure the continuation of these activities. Housing activist groups and Left political parties have highlighted vacancy as a way of making a claim for the right to the city in the context of growing levels of evictions, homelessness, and poverty. Most prominently, groups have engaged in a number of direct actions occupying vacant buildings, including the Home Sweet Home

group's occupation of the NAMA-controlled Apollo House in December 2016. The occupation received widespread support as the office block was temporarily transformed into a functioning homeless service. Initiatives like these have served to further politicise the issue of vacancy and its entanglement with both the crash and the policy response to the crisis. While, thus far, antagonisms around UA have not been as prominent, it is an open question as to what kinds of resistance and mobilisation future closures of allotments and other green spaces might provoke. By focusing the politics of place and the right to the city on the trope of "vacant space", UA might form part of a broad-based coalition of urban social movements that can mobilise together to challenge the dominant urban development model.

Conclusion

This paper argues that allotment gardening has a role to play in healing the kinds of rifts engendered by neoliberalism and policies of austerity, nurturing a more grounded relationship with nature, enhanced social interaction, and a new kind of politics of place. Our respondents testify to the potential for UA to accommodate the urban citizenry with 'shared-in-common' spaces that promote social and 'civic' integration (Vertovec, 2007) and fulfil an important role associated with public urban life (Sennett, 2011).

It is arguable that the rise in demand for access to allotment gardening in Dublin represents a form of resistance to the *dis-embedding* processes associated with late and post-modernity. Urban gardening can be viewed as an attempt by urban dwellers to develop a sense of self-efficacy, to (re)connect with traditional forms of knowledge and land use practices and to generate new ways of food commoning in the city. Tornaghi argues that "rather than becoming new forms of enclosures of the commons, urban green spaces could for example becoming experimental grounds for the de-commodification of food" (2016, 13). In this sense too, those involved in urban gardening have, at least partially, overcome neoliberal subjectivities relating to the "guilt" and responsibility of personal indebtedness as contributing to the crisis, and reproduced new subjectivities emphasizing non-commodified forms of production and exchange.

But these potentialities must be set against national and urban regimes that are wedded to a growth model that is underpinned by marketization. Any challenge to this model in favour of, for instance, greater commoning in the city must take on the constitutionally ironclad commitment to the rights of private property holders. In the wake of the economic crash however, a discourse of dissent has emerged challenging the vision of the city that privileges private property rights. This has been particular visible in the focus of a number of campaigns and initiatives on vacant spaces in Dublin, and attempts to animate them, even on a temporary basis. In this paper we have argued that UA has a role to play in contributing to a wider, more broad-based political platform seeking the re-animation of vacant space in the city.

The convergence of a number of conditions suggests the nascent possibilities of such embryonic contestations: as outlined above, the political visibility of vacant land and property as symbolic of political failure has called into question the use of land and the legitimacy of development-led approaches in Dublin. This has happened in tandem with a range of prominent narratives (including from policy-makers) promoting the positive re-use of vacant space, which have also served to open up new horizons of possibility. The tension between these two processes is brought into sharp relief by the harsh return of property-led growth and the associated exclusions this has produced in terms of diminishing cultural and ecological space, rapidly increasing rents, and an unprecedented homelessness crisis. In this context, UA may form common cause with movements that reclaim the "right to the city" from neoliberal interests. Such a platform would enable UA activists to advance a more radical urban commoning movement in Irish cities alongside a "more militant politics of place" (Stehlin and Tarr, 2016, 16).

Acknowledgements

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