

BEYOND DICHOTOMIES IN TEMPORARY USE OF SPACE: USING COMPLEXITY TO BROADEN UNDERSTANDINGS

Kobe Tilley¹, Tim Devos², Angelos Varvarousis³

Abstract

The utilisation of unoccupied space is becoming increasingly prevalent. This 'practice', known as Temporary Use of Space, is evolving and being used in more varied ways. Despite these developments, existent literature is lagging and often frames temporary use in terms of overly narrow dichotomies. While such distinctions may sharpen the debate, they can also obscure the complexity of contemporary dynamics. To address this, we draw on complexity theory to transcend dichotomous phrasings. After examining three common dichotomies, as well as a complexity-informed approach to temporary use, we analyse three emblematic cases from Flanders. Based on this perspective, we argue that dichotomies are insufficient for capturing the changing nature of temporary use. Thereafter, we propose understanding temporary use as an integral component of adaptive planning processes.

Keywords:

Temporary Use, Complexity Theory, Dichotomies, Adaptive Planning.

1 Centre for Mobility and Spatial Planning (AMRP), Department of Civil Engineering, Ghent University.
E-mail: ktalley.Tilley@UGent.be. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7866-9037>.

2 Centre for Mobility and Spatial Planning (AMRP), Department of Civil Engineering, Ghent University.
E-mail: Tim.Devos@UGent.be. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9632-7611>.

3 Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA-UAB), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
E-mail: angelos.varvarousis@uab.cat. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4300-6456>

1. Introduction

Temporary Use of Space (TU) is defined by its impermanent nature and refers to the interim use of space, between the end of one defined use of a space and the beginning of another. When implemented, TU often attempts to answer questions of urban governance and development (De Smet, 2013). Originally associated with grassroots and squatting movements, TU has increasingly become adopted by municipal governments, real estate developers, and professional associations (Galdini, 2020; Matoga, 2019). TU has often been mobilised to combat vacancy (O'Callaghan, 2023) and to foster redevelopment after periods of industrial decay and urban shrinkage (Dubeaux and Sabot, 2018). Arguably, TU has thus evolved from a niche practice into a process-oriented form of planning that is linked to adaptive tendencies in area development. While TU has mostly inspired a growing focus on temporal aspects in planning, it should also be understood as a practice that transcends its 'temporal' character (Oswalt et al., 2006).

Despite its wider adoption, existent literature upon the same has largely remained framed by niche interpretations and dichotomous debates. Dichotomies help frame the often-contradictory dynamics which practitioners have to work with and serve an analytical function (Tonkiss, 2013). However, overly simplistic dichotomies can hinder understanding of contemporary TU cases and their hybrid nature in terms of application and actor involvement (Devos and Boelens, 2024). We discerned three common dichotomies within existent literature on TU. The first, the '*temporary or permanent*' dichotomy, relates to the impact of the temporal-programmatical interplay of TU. The second, the '*grassroots or institutionalised*' dichotomy, questions the adoption and use of TU by a multitude of actors. The third and final dichotomy, '*inclusive or neoliberal*', concerns the beneficiaries of TU.

This paper explores avenues for expanding prevailing understandings of TU, beyond dichotomous framings, and we use Complexity Theories of Cities (CTC) to find a way of understanding the changes that TU faces. Because "complexity theory emerged as an interpretation and a tool to deal with contemporary urban territories" (Silva, 2016, p.2), we regard CTC as a gateway to studying TU. We seek to show how CTC enables deeper insight into the dynamics underlying these dichotomies while framing TU as an emblematic form of adaptive planning (Wohl, 2018; Silva, 2016). For this purpose, we apply the core CTC concepts of *uncertainty*, *non-linearity*, *self-organisation*, and *co-evolution* as lenses through which to view TU.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section (2), we introduce three dominant dichotomies within existent TU literature. Section 3 introduces CTC as a theoretical approach to adaptive planning in changing societal contexts. Furthermore, we discuss how CTC resonates with TU as a hybridising practice. In section 4, three Flemish TU cases are introduced as empirical testing grounds to reveal how these dichotomies fail to capture contemporary TU dynamics. Thereafter, section 5 synthesises the three cases and discusses how dichotomous framings lead to reductive portrayals of urban dynamics. Finally, the paper's overall conclusions are presented.

2. Dichotomies in Temporary Use

The practice of TU has changed significantly over recent decades, as new actors have become involved and reasons to implement TUs are diversifying (Deas et al., 2021; Carlton and Vallance, 2017). Nevertheless, we can discern a tendency toward dichotomous thinking in debates on TU (Turku et al., 2023; Chang, 2021). Framings such as top-down versus bottom-up, citizen-initiated versus government-led, and development-oriented versus experimental, risk reducing TU to a black-and-white phenomenon. In practice, however, TU typically occupies intermediate positions and operates within spatial and institutional grey zones. Rather than offering an exhaustive overview of all tensions in TU practice and literature, this paper focuses on three recurring dichotomies as an entry point for analysis.

Should TUs function only in the meantime, or would they benefit from striving for a more permanent form of impact? The first discerned dichotomy is summarised as '*temporary or permanent?*' (Turku et al., 2023). It is commonly agreed that TUs are ways of 'in between' experimenting with program, space or governance. However, temporality can come with different expectations. This is especially true when TU initiatives are

embedded in larger development schemes because site owners may approach temporary interventions simply as the meanwhile use of sites. In contrast, for other actors such as organisers or users, these temporary activities can uncover opportunities and raise hopes for sustainability. Rather than focusing on the temporality or permanence, partial continuation on-site (Ferreri, 2015) or elsewhere (Lehtovuori and Ruoppila, 2017) can also be a valuable outcome. At the same time, impact can and should also be considered beyond immediate physical outcomes.

The second dichotomy, '*grassroots or institutionalised?*', is inherently linked to the changing nature of TU as a spatial practice. Despite having roots that, amongst other aspects, trace back to grassroots and squatting movements (Honeck, 2017), TU is nowadays applied by a multitude of actors. Governments have become active adopters of the practice for different reasons. At the same time, a wave of professionalisation can be discerned (Orbaşlı and Karmowska, 2020). Spatial entrepreneurs and agencies now develop businesses focused on temporarily reusing vacant land or act as professional mediators (Matoga, 2019; Hernberg, 2022). Has the growing popularity of TU led to a shift away from its original 'grassroots' characteristics to the extent where it is now considered an institutionalised practice occupying a "place within a strictly limited time frame, while waiting for a major permanent project" (Dubeaux and Sabot, 2018, p.9)?

The final dichotomous debate, '*inclusive or neoliberal?*', concerns the beneficiaries of meanwhile uses. Often, TU initiatives are reported to tackle unmet needs and to exercise an oppositional force against traditional planning (Moore-Cherry and McCarthy, 2016; Tonkiss, 2013; Calzati et al., 2022). In other words, they offer an opportunity for social and spatial experiments in which people can "assert their right to the city" (Németh and Langhorst, 2014, p.149). However, the success of TU as an experimental practice has led, for example, to its incorporation into government-led city marketing (Colomb, 2012). Additionally, critiques are formulated towards real estate developers who want to raise the value of their land by promoting TU before, during and after development (Bragaglia and Caruso, 2022). Given its growing popularity, can TUs still be seen as progressive and inclusive practices, or have they evolved into an instrument of neoliberal redevelopment and land valorisation?

3. A Complexity Approach to Temporary Use

Like all planning practices, TU is not applied in a vacuum but it operates within an increasingly complex planning arena (de Roo, 2020). Complexity Theories of Cities (CTC) have been developed to help comprehend societal change and to ground planning in conditions of uncertainty, non-linearity, and unpredictability (Boelens and De Roo, 2016). Chettiparamb (2019) argues that CTC enhances our understanding of the dynamics of complex systems and interacting networks of agents that shape spatial order. Similarly, Chettiparamb illustrates how this perspective can shape the design of processes, instruments, and institutional arrangements that balance top-down interventions with bottom-up dynamics. This highlights how planners can work within complex networks of actors and self-organising entities.

Through its experimental and ephemeral nature, TU exhibits several key traits emphasised in complexity thinking. However, only a limited number of publications have explicitly examined the connections which exist between TU and complexity-oriented approaches. Boonstra and Boelens (2011) were among the first to use TU in an illustrative manner. More recently, Rauws (2017) and Hoefkens and Machiels (2025) use TU to illustrate processes of (bottom-up) adaptation in urban regeneration schemes. Contrastingly, Silva (2016) and Wohl (2018) developed more extensive theoretical accounts of tactical urbanism through CTC. Silva (2016) conceptualised tactical urbanism as an adaptive practice operating in hard-to-predict but continuously evolving cities, whereas Wohl (2018, p.27) frames TU as a way of harnessing relational processes, "capable of 'fine tuning' the placement of long-term interventions by leveraging self-organisation and emergent capacities of complex adaptive systems." Finally, Chang (2022) synthesises CTC-inspired characterisations of TU by building on the aforementioned authors. Chang (2022, p.36) situates TU within non-linear processes marked by multiple uncertainties and influenced by "temporal systems". In line with the aforementioned authors, this paper draws on four core CTC concepts that resonate strongly with TU practices: *uncertainty, non-linearity, self-organisation, and co-evolution*. Although these concepts are often closely intertwined, they are initially treated separately for analytical clarity.

The disruptive and unavoidable nature of *uncertainty* is a cornerstone of complexity thinking (Moroni and Chiffi, 2021). It reminds us that our knowledge of how systems work is always incomplete, as are our predictions of the impacts that planning decisions or tools may have (Hillier, 2016). Even though uncertainty is inherent to planning, the discipline has historically been uncertainty-averse (Christensen, 1985), and thus repeatedly attempted to reduce or suppress it (Machiels et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, spatial planning has treated the everyday environment as fixed and static for decades. This has resulted in a profession that has been modelled around ideas of predictability and linear development (de Roo and Rauws, 2011). CTC challenges this logic by treating uncertainty as a fundamental premise of planning processes and by accepting the unpredictability of both process and outcome (Innes and Booher, 2018; De Roo, 2016). For TU, this approach entails recognising the uncertain contexts and conditions from which initiatives emerge, while also embracing the unpredictability of the processes that follow. This uncertainty is reflected, for example, in the unknown time frames and future trajectories of initiatives (Nedučín and Krklješ, 2022); in challenges related to long-term sustainability (Kamvasinou, 2016; Jaspers and Steen, 2020); and in heightened feelings of intangibility which shape the conditions under which TU actors plan and operate (Ferreri, 2021).

Non-linearity is best understood as a natural condition of society rather than a clearly identifiable indicator. De Roo (2016, p.153) states that “non-linearity is seen as the characteristic representation of the path that progress takes. (...) A system that functions well will never reach a steady state of equilibrium.” Elaborating further, De Roo (2016) emphasises the absence of clear, direct and causal relations between elements within a process. Acknowledging non-linearity in relation to TU entails embracing ongoing and unpredictable processes. Under these often-precarious conditions, TUs are forced to adopt strategies of adaptation, whether formally or informally defined, throughout their operation. This ties in with the understanding by Boonstra and Boelens (2011, p.109) who describe non-linearity as processes that are constantly in motion and prone to (unforeseen) shifts. This aligns with the consideration that implementing a temporary project or experiment opens the possibility of unexpected outcomes. For Chang (2022), this aspect is key to understanding TU as an example of non-linear planning practices. TUs may leave legacies, but are rarely integrated into planning processes with this objective (Chang, 2022). However, it is also the case that TUs are often expected to produce clear and traceable results, contradicting their experimental nature. Most TUs eventually end, but they may leave legacies that extend beyond their immediate sites. Such legacies – which might include, for example, the relocation of activities between sites or the formation of networks between actors – are nonetheless hard to foresee and always subject to various unpredictable factors.

Self-organisation refers to the evolutionary process of spontaneous bottom-up order (Luhmann, 1984) and has gained prominence in the planning field, particularly as understandings of participatory planning move beyond purely governmental frameworks about citizen involvement (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). Self-organisation captures both the diversity of planning and the plurality of actors involved. Understanding self-organisation is pivotal for analysing spatial transformation through civic action (Boonstra, 2015). Similarly, self-organisation draws attention to the innovative coalitions which exist between civic initiatives and governmental actors (Devos, 2021), with neither top-down nor bottom-up approaches alone being sufficient (Portugali, 2011; Chang, 2022). Self-organising initiatives can therefore both challenge and coexist with formal planning traditions, and may also enable mutual inspiration (Portugali et al., 2012, p.230). Cozzolino and Moroni (2024) distinguish between self-building, self-governance, and self-coordination when analysing self-organisation. TU especially aligns with aspects of self-coordination, as many TUs emerge bottom-up, organise accordingly and rely on the neighbourhoods they are situated in (Kamvasinou, 2016; Orbaşlı and Karmowska, 2020). As locally embedded practices, TUs allow people to exercise oppositional power as well as to actively engage in urban decision-making processes. Therefore, TU, as an example of self-coordination, could pose “a major challenge to urban planners and their established repertoire of tools” (Cozzolino and Moroni, 2024, p.33). Self-coordination “is a challenge because its (spontaneous) form of coordination does not coincide with forms of top-down coordination established by public authorities” (Cozzolino and Moroni, 2024, p.31-32).

Finally, *co-evolution* captures how different systems or subsystems mutually influence each other (Van Assche et al., 2017). Relating processes to their historical or social roots is fundamental to understanding change (Pumain, 2021; Allen, 2011). In the context of planning, the concept of co-evolution entails the recognition of interactions with other governance domains, the adaptation of actor-networks to evolving contexts, and the interplay between policy discourses and designated instruments (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Porter and De Roo, 2012). TU ‘as a practice’ has evolved alongside society and planning, shifting from an isolated practice to

a means of involving citizens in redevelopment processes, with new actors taking part in TU initiatives. The observed change in TU as a spatial practice can be regarded as having occurred as a result of the co-evolution with planning and society (de Roo, 2020). Thus, the “de-marginalisation of TU contributes to the transformation of planning itself” (Honeck, 2017, p.268; Patti and Polyak, 2015). Derivative calls to adapt planners’ roles when applying or mediating TUs align with this evolution (Vallance et al., 2017; Jaspers and Steen, 2020).

4. Illustrative cases

The discerned dichotomies can be argued to be rather artificial when it comes to trying to understand TU in our contemporary society. CTC provides the necessary nuance to embrace the changes facing TU and to explore how TU can accommodate adaptive planning processes. To illustrate this, we introduce three cases of TU in Flanders, Belgium. The cases were selected because each represents aspects of TUs in Flanders that are difficult to capture within the three discerned dichotomies. The description of the cases is based on desk-top research and semi-structured interviews conducted with coordinating actors of the individual cases. The first case (De Meubelfabriek, Ghent) is emblematic of an experimental municipal approach to TU. The second case (Asiat Park, Vilvoorde) is emblematic of a TU’s role in a large-scale yet undefined redevelopment context. In addition, case 2 illustrates the growing professionalisation of TU practice. The third and final case (Archipel, Antwerp) is the only case in which the owner of the TU-site is a private actor. It follows that the final case is emblematic of collaborations between non-profit TU organisations and private actors.

Whilst Flanders is known for its scattered development pattern (Vermeiren et al., 2019), TU in Flanders remains mostly an urban phenomenon. In contrast to, for example, the Netherlands, where TU is often centrally implemented and operated as cultural incubator spaces (van der Leden, 2024; Wijn, 2002), there is no central or shared policy regarding TU in Flanders. This contrasts with the top-down tradition which still dominates spatial planning in Flanders (Lacoere, 2023). TU remains absent from much legislation and policy documents, and the decision to implement a TU is often only made by the involved actors and only seldom part of top-down redevelopment processes. However, as the cases will illustrate, this situation is changing, with other parties becoming increasingly involved.

4.1. De Meubelfabriek (Ghent): Municipal Participatory Experiment

The site of De Meubelfabriek, a former furniture factory, houses 23 diverse organisations, including small workshop spaces, individual craftspeople, as well as sports and socio-cultural organisations. It is located in Brugse Poort, a dense and socio-economically vulnerable neighbourhood in Ghent. Squatting activities took place between 2011 and 2012 (Staes, 2012), and a smaller-scale TU was initiated by local inhabitants and continued until 2014, while the site was still privately owned (Respondent_06, 2025). After two consecutive failed attempts to obtain building permits for residential development (Gent, 2019a; Gent, 2017), the city acquired the site through a property exchange in 2018. In the same year, the municipality launched a then-novel open call for potential TU users (Gent, 2019c; Gent, 2019b). Following the selection procedure, the municipality supported the users in founding a non-profit organisation which would be, and is, responsible for site management (Respondent_03 and Respondent_04, 2024; Respondent_04, 2025). Several consecutive temporary occupancy and subsidy agreements were concluded between De Meubelfabriek vzw and the city for the period 2019-2026 (Gent, 2023; Gent, 2020; Gent, 2019b); the latter currently marks the TU’s formal end date. While the site has long been regarded as strategic within a wider neighbourhood renewal programme (Gent, n.d.), the nature of its long-term redevelopment remains uncertain. Despite consultation with temporary users as part of a 2024 preparatory study, it remains unclear as to what extent programmatic insights from the TU will be incorporated into future plans (sogent, n.d.).

A first distinctive feature of this case is the deployment of a city-employed community worker on site, who was tasked with coordinating and acting as a liaison between the users, neighbouring inhabitants, and the city administration. This approach was motivated by the vulnerable context of the neighbourhood and the fact that many of the selected organisations play important community roles but lack resources or familiarity with either legal or funding procedures. Nevertheless, the organisations were deliberately granted managerial agency, occupying a middle ground between autonomous self-organisation and a closely mediated process. Secondly, successive experiments with different governance arrangements have been

a cornerstone of the process. Initially, a horizontal governance model was implemented, which allowed all residents to participate in collective decision making. However, after certain weaknesses became apparent, management responsibilities were reassigned to the overarching non-profit and the municipal employee (Respondent_03 and Respondent_04, 2024; Respondent_04, 2025). These experiments were regarded as an inherent component of the process. During this period, the city's institutional support structures, including the presence of an on-site official, the exchange of administrative knowledge, and the acceptance of trial and error, were continuously tested, negotiated, and adjusted. It follows that emergence in this context did not imply the absence of institutional arrangements, and that self-organisation also did not equate to full autonomy. Thereby, the observations challenge idealised notions of bottom-up governance. In other words, self-organisation was actively negotiated rather than linearly realised. Thirdly, this experiment in collective governance unfolded amongst a heterogeneous group of organisations, of which not all were explicitly neighbourhood-oriented or locally embedded. Degrees of engagement with Brugse Poort therefore varied considerably, complicating assumptions of TU as an inherently community-driven practice.



Figure 1. The main building of De Meubelfabriek, a former furniture factory (Authors' picture, 2024).

Viewed through this lens, De Meubelfabriek exemplifies the non-linear redevelopment trajectory characteristic of complex inner-city areas. Failed development attempts, shifting ownership, local oppositions, and persistent uncertainties produced an unpredictable course. This context enabled TU activities to emerge and take on a significant role within the non-linear trajectory, and in active partnership with the municipality. Boundaries between the TU and the formal development process became blurred due to, for example, iterative feedback effects between development proposals, interdependencies between successive TU phases and shifting governance arrangements. The first TU uncovered opportunities which indirectly led to the second phase that was discussed above. Afterwards, budgetary difficulties led to multiple prolongations of the TU; again exposing the residing organisations to uncertain and precarious conditions. Precariousness thus worked as a constitutive feature of the project's operation, and was also continuously redistributed between initiators, users and the municipality itself. Uncertainty shaped both organisational strategies and future expectations. For the municipal government, De Meubelfabriek functioned as an experiment at multiple levels. For one of the first times, they interacted closely within a TU through the on-site deployment of a community worker. By doing so, the municipality positioned itself in between a top-down and bottom-up approach. Thus, the municipality did not merely oversee the TU, but adapted its own practices through prolonged engagement, co-evolving

with the user collective and the site itself. De Meubelfabriek is difficult to situate within a restrictive 'grassroots or institutionalised' dichotomy. The TU can be labelled top-down, but an important role was initially assigned to the residents. However, the fluctuating trajectory of governance experiments proved unpredictable and was subject to unforeseen change. Through these experiments, the project nevertheless aimed to stimulate the neighbourhood's self-organising capacity. This approach built on the earlier participatory dynamics created during the first, bottom-up phase of TU and its related neighbourhood dynamics (Respondent_06, 2025). By granting space and agency to vulnerable neighbourhood-oriented organisations, the municipality also strengthened their reach. The impact of the TU is therefore difficult to pinpoint, but it extended beyond immediate on-site outcomes. During the temporary phase, impact materialised primarily at personal and organisational levels. The effects of the TU thus emerged less as fixed spatial outcomes and more as relational and organisational transformations that unfolded over time. Beyond on-site outcomes, the TU has made a significant contribution to the TU culture in Ghent, empowering organisations and informing the city's distinctive neighbourhood-based approach. These effects are often overlooked by evaluations focused on permanence. It also remains the case, however, that many organisations still face an uncertain future due to the site's ending.

4.2. Asiat Park (Vilvoorde): Temporary Use Driving Slow Urban Renewal

Asiat Park is a TU project located on a large former military facility, sited at the northern edge of the urban centre of Vilvoorde. The site is bordered by industrial areas, a river-canal waterway, and a major arterial road. After the site became vacant in 2008, a local school and the municipality's technical services occupied the site for two years before it fell vacant again and becoming increasingly vulnerable to theft and squatting. During the European asylum crisis of c. 2016, it was used as a temporary asylum facility. For the municipality, the site's potential became particularly evident after an illegal New Year's Eve rave in 2017. Subsequently, the municipality of Vilvoorde acquired the site in late 2018 (Berlanger, 2018). A study to investigate the potential of TU was commissioned, and a TU was pioneered by allowing the Horst Arts & Music Festival to take place on the site. From 2019 onwards, the municipality sought to structurally activate the site prior to redevelopment. In 2022, following an innovative tender procedure, coordination and management were assigned to an alliance of two companies operating in public-private partnership with the city for two consecutive five-year periods. One of the companies is focused on alternative real-estate, while the other is the creative agency behind Horst Festival (Vlaamse Overheid, n.d.; Respondent_01, 2024). Alongside the initiation of the TU, the development of a new zoning plan for the site and its surroundings commenced (Vlaamse Overheid, n.d.; Vilvoorde, n.d.). As a result, TU, zoning development, and visioning progressed simultaneously with spatial interventions gradually tested and adapted in view of possible long-term development. Presently, Asiat hosts a broad mix of community organisations, cultural initiatives, small businesses, sports facilities, and public events, while also functioning as a semi-public park.

Three essential insights can be derived from the developments at Asiat Park. Firstly, the case clearly shows how local policymakers actively value and deploy TU. Even more explicitly than in the case of Meubelfabriek, this echoes a deliberate municipal strategy to use TU as an active planning instrument rather than a mere ad interim condition. This is particularly significant given the complexity and scale of the area's renewal; it would have been difficult to advance through conventional, municipality-led approaches, but became feasible through this hybrid public-private collaboration. Secondly, the TU coordinators are commercial companies with a clear societal mission rather than non-profit organisations. The alliance was specifically established for this project and operates within a public-private partnership with the municipal government. This challenges the dominant assumption that socio-cultural TUs are primarily rooted in activist organisational forms. The arrangement constitutes a hybrid governance configuration which aligns with public objectives while also tying in with local needs. Lastly, the current TU primarily functions as a testing ground for future site use. While remaining open to change, it is expected for the future site to involve similar types of activities and actors such as small businesses, socio-cultural organisations and leisure. To this end, the coordinators have sought to foster a slow-urbanism planning dynamic with a long-term perspective. This approach emphasises gradual co-evolution between actors, practices, and spatial configurations, rather than a linear pilot phase aimed at rapid consolidation or static planning. Their objective is to move beyond a loose collection of independently operating actors by fostering community building. In addition, the coordinators' role extends beyond mediation, as they organise the music festival themselves and shape spatial-artistic interventions. Community formation is thus approached as an emergent process rather than one of a predefined outcome.

Through this dual role, they seek to establish an unavoidable position within the site's development trajectory (Respondent_01, 2024; Respondent_05, 2024; Respondent_05, 2025). This strategy reflects an attempt to embed the coordinating alliance within the site's evolving governance and value structures, rather than merely facilitating meanwhile use.



Figure 2. A view on the central square at Asiat Park with the neighbouring cooling towers in the background (Authors' picture, 2026).

While formally the period of vacancy ended with the municipal acquisition, an open-ended redevelopment and a state of uncertainty here operates not as a planning failure, but as a condition actively mobilised within the TU strategy. The coordinators clearly mobilise this idea to market the site's temporary development as experimental 'slow urbanism'. To align their ambition to be embedded on-site for the long run with retaining the power of current dynamics, the coordinators have complemented their on-site gatekeeper role with a mandate to develop long-term visions (Respondent_05, 2025). This illustrates how it can often be difficult for TUs to envision pathways towards having impact on site. By emphasising both short- and long-term goals of their activities, the coordinators have strategically deployed temporality to pursue durability and challenge the conventional distinctions which exist between temporary and permanent development. Another aspect which shows the hybridity of contemporary TU cases is the role of the government. The latter initiated the TU, but did not top-down manage and design the site, thereby allowing self-organising and non-linear dynamics to develop. Much like the Meubelfabriek case, it is often hard to distinguish between top-down and grassroots dynamics within successful TU cases, in particular on an area-development scale. Moreover, the involvement of a commercial alliance does not necessarily imply that the TU is being instrumentalised in a mainstream redevelopment. Instead, the case illustrates how atypical commercial actors engage with or even develop in response to or even alongside constrained planning frameworks that limit conventional real estate trajectories. As the newly developed zoning plan excludes a major real estate development, it is even experienced as difficult by the coordinators to find an achievable long-term development strategy. Through the involvement of the government as both owner and formal planning entity, Asiat Park is likely to develop along another path compared to several other sites that have hosted TUs. Taken together, the Asiat Park case reinforces how contemporary temporary-use projects operate through hybrid governance arrangements, non-linear development trajectories, and strategic engagement with uncertainty.

4.3. Archipel (Antwerp): Cooperation Beyond Co-option

Archipel, founded and managed by the artist collective Rooftoptiger, is an artist-run workspace offering affordable studio space (Archipel, n.d.-a). The TU is located at the redevelopment site of the former slaughterhouse district in northern Antwerp (Antwerpen, n.d.). It has involved a redevelopment process that has been marked by a complicated public-private partnership, with the city owning only a relatively small part of the land, heavy contestation, multiple standstills, changes of ownership and strong hybrid forms of local involvement (Meeus et al., 2016). The collective has been active on-site since 2017, and has survived multiple waves of such developments. Initially, Archipel occupied one of the central derelict slaughterhouse halls but later moved to a new building at the northern fringe of the site, as the halls were transformed into a university college. Unlike the previous two cases, the building which Archipel occupies is owned by a private real estate developer. Their relationship is characterised by precarious dependence, formalised through a temporary agreement. The agreement was initially set for a three-year period. However, multiple extensions have been verbally confirmed but await formal agreements (Respondent_02, 2024).

The private ownership of the redevelopment site where Archipel is located contrasts most with the previous two cases. While the owner of the site offers space, not much further help has been received. Securing help from the municipal government has also proved difficult and has prompted Archipel to seek alternative and less conventional partners. Archipel has actively formed partnerships with other actors to secure financial stability and to diversify its network. Given the site's proximity to major ring road infrastructure works in Antwerp, Archipel could secure a collaboration to increase the liveability of the neighbourhoods affected by the works. The semi-public developer responsible for these works emerged as an unconventional but relevant partner (Archipel, n.d.-b; Respondent_02, 2024). Archipel is also taking on a multifaceted role through its activities. Apart from offering studio spaces to artists, the collective is organising socio-artistic interventions with and within the neighbourhood. By doing this, they are striving to create a coherent network within the neighbourhood that is affected by the redevelopment. However, influencing or altering the redevelopment process itself is not Archipel's primary objective. Nonetheless, by maintaining a strong presence in the neighbourhood, Archipel aims to become indispensable as a socio-cultural organisation and local hub (Respondent_02, 2024). Archipel's sustained on-site presence has further enabled the formation of alliances with both neighbourhood actors and private partners, including direct collaboration with residents and organisations. Notably, this mirrors earlier moments in which neighbourhood collectives, often disillusioned with government-led participatory processes, engaged directly with real-estate developers, resulting in tangible outcomes such as the retention of a community garden on site.



Figure 3. Archipel occupies the building on the left side, with across the street the redevelopment site of the former slaughterhouse (Authors' picture, 2026).

Archipel's search for partnerships and alternative networks indicates that coalitions of actors within TU projects are changing. Archipel has sought to secure their self-organising capacity by not relying on one partner or by focussing on only public means, as other TUs have. In addition, the enabling developer has not immediately instrumentalised the artist collective. As such, Archipel's cooperation with both private and semi-public partners appears nuanced and extends beyond straightforward critiques of co-option. Like the previous two cases, the embedding of Archipel in the larger development process is characterised by precarious conditions and uncertainty. As the development proceeded, they were allowed to remain but had to move throughout the site, occupying several places within the same development site over the past years. Each relocation required significant effort yet did not result in longer-term stability. This has hindered the long-term impact Archipel hopes to pursue. Although not aimed at altering the development, Archipel does aspire to remain in the vicinity of the new neighbourhood. By maintaining a strong presence in the neighbourhood, Archipel seeks to become indispensable as a socio-cultural organisation and local hub. Thus, impact is sought both in the temporary phase, for example by offering studio spaces while these are scarce in Antwerp, and in the longer term. Although the latter is unpredictable, Archipel has been actively trying to bridge the *'temporary or permanent'* dichotomy by not focussing on solely one or the other.

5. Nuancing Dichotomies Through Complexity Theory

In this penultimate section, we discuss why the earlier discerned dichotomies need nuancing. We do this by synthesising the three cases we elaborated on.

The *'temporary or permanent'* dichotomy addresses TU's impact as shaped by its temporal-programmatic interplays. This dichotomy largely emerges from practitioners' challenges when it comes to anticipating desired or foreseen outcomes. It often risks reducing a reading of a TU's impact to immediate spatial results, and may therefore overlook processual, relational, and displaced impacts beyond the site and the timeframe of the (given) intervention. Non-linearity invites us to shed light on relational forms of impact that emerge where outcomes are uncertain or unplanned. In the case of De Meubelfabriek, important impacts materialised at a personal and organisational level, as access to an experimental space has allowed organisations operating under precarious conditions to innovate. Moreover, previous trajectories – including failed development attempts as well as TU initiatives – have played a catalytic role in shaping later initiatives. In the case of Asiat Park and Archipel, co-evolution challenges us to rethink a narrow *'temporary or permanent'* dichotomy: evolving collaborations and the networks created embody meaningful forms of impact, even while the projects are still ongoing. In both cases, temporality is deliberately embraced as a method for long-term embedding. Nevertheless, establishing clear causal links between short-term activities and long-term legacies remains challenging within complex development processes.

The *'grassroots or institutionalised'* dichotomy addresses the growing adoption of TU by a multitude of actors and the accompanying effects. Shifting actor-constellations illustrate how TU practices co-evolve with society, exemplified by the municipally deployed TUs in the Asiat Park and Meubelfabriek. In both cases, governments deliberately assign an important role to TU for the in-between phases of development processes and pursue hybrid collaborations allowing for adaptive and self-organising processes. Professionalised, and often at least partially commercial, TUs further indicate that, like governments, the professional field of planning practice and spatial consultancy is evolving alongside TU practice. An overemphasis on either grassroots origins or the institutionalisation therefore obscures such hybrid governance arrangements and the continuously renegotiated agency among involved actors. While Archipel was initiated bottom-up, the unconventional alliances it pursues similarly reflect a changing field rather than a return to fixed categories. A self-organisation perspective thus reminds us that neither top-down nor bottom-up framings sufficiently capture the complex dynamics of TU.

Finally, the *'inclusive or neoliberal'* dichotomy addresses who benefits from TU practices, and frames it as either emancipatory or instrumentalised. While we need to stay vigilant for e.g. gentrification, the cases show that the beneficiaries of TUs are manifold. In Asiat Park and De Meubelfabriek, the engagement of municipal actors demonstrates how opportunities were explicitly given to vulnerable organisations, while recognising the precariousness associated with temporality. At De Meubelfabriek, we see inclusion materialised at a personal and organisational scale. At Asiat Park, the municipal-imposed quotas for social inclusivity or constraints

excluding future real estate development coexist with valorisation pressures, illustrating co-evolution rather than straightforward co-option. It follows that governments have the capacity to intervene to limit future gentrification, and indeed, to compel commercial entities such as the coordinating alliance to develop alternative strategies for maintaining their presence in the area. Archipel, again, puts forward a slightly different story as they are directly confronted with a real estate developer as the enabler of the temporary initiative. Nonetheless, through self-organised embedding and negotiated uncommon collaborations, it fosters inclusion through non-linear and negotiated pathways, while avoiding co-option by the TU's enabler. This case shows that it can be a viable strategy to bridge dichotomies and forge alliances with development partners. Self-organisation can thus function as a counterforce to co-option, whether adopted tactically by grassroots actors or actively promoted by governments.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined how a complexity-informed approach can broaden prevailing understandings of the practice in response to the persistent use of dichotomous phrasings in the literature on TU. The aim of this paper was to demonstrate the analytical value of CTC for understanding these dynamics; it did not seek to provide an exhaustive review of complexity theory or all tensions inherent to TU. We discerned three dichotomies, mobilised key CTC concepts and analysed three TU cases embedded in ongoing redevelopment processes.

Together, the cases show how dichotomies stabilise debates yet fail to capture TU as a complex, evolving, and relational practice. The impacts created in and by TUs seem to be non-linear, the governance structures are often hybrid and emergent, and inclusion is constantly negotiated. In relation to TU, it is clear that CTC offers a valuable lens for understanding the ever-evolving practice of TU and for rethinking planners' roles accordingly. The offered vocabulary provides new perspectives to the actors involved to deploy TU without necessarily falling into the 'instrumentalisation' trap. From a CTC perspective, the cases show that different dynamics incorporated in theoretical CTC accounts are inherently embedded in TU practice. In conclusion, the analysis foregrounded how CTC supports a shift from binary classifications towards trajectory-, process-, and relation-oriented perspectives of TU.

Rather than only using TU illustratively, we argue that it should be understood as part of broader adaptive planning transformations. Following this, careful dialogues can be initiated to promote TU in more diverse contexts, while remaining beneficial for the many actors who can be involved. Likewise, this interaction between TU and CTC can become a stepping stone to explore how TU's deeper intergration into planning processes influences current planning practice and instruments on a broader scale.

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