Future(s) Perfect

Uchronian mapping as a research and visualisation tool in the fringes of the Olympic Park

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Introduction

Imagined or real bastions of life at the urban margin, Hackney Wick and Fish Island in East London have taken central stage in the Olympic story as early as the bidding process in 2003. Over a decade later, they have become a pivotal component of the so-called convergence strategy of the London Legacy Development Corporation's redevelopment of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and adjacent areas, and are set to be transformed beyond recognition. Such a linear narrative of urban change, with consequent gentrification and sanitisation of a former industrial and low-income area, however, doesn't do justice to the many attempts to generate and enact alternative futures for the area. A linear history, moreover, doesn't account for the many setbacks and divergent trajectories taken by public and private property owners and developers in their own activities to reshape the local urban landscape.

That the future is unwritten is a lesson that is easy to forget when private and public real estate development dogmas take over all horizons of imagination and action. As researchers and practitioners thinking and working with alternative uses of vacant spaces, we tried to find a way of representing possible uses (of temporarily vacant land) that could disrupt or at least challenge linear understandings of urban development. The choice of case studies in Hackney Wick and Fish Island derived from the authors' personal and professional involvement in the area, and particularly on a year-long research collaboration, titled 'Revaluing Temporary Urban Uses' on temporary uses in the neighbourhood.[1]

Our research on temporary use in cities has been grounded in the practical attempt to use temporary uses to open up (physically, symbolically) urban possibilities. A critical element of this basis is a keen awareness of the tension between temporariness as associated with process-based, experimental and open projects, on the one hand, and temporariness as place marketing and precarious, symptomatic of the ever-increasing foreclosure of alternative spaces in the city. A critical history of any temporary use project, we argue, inevitably requires addressing the tensions between the symbolic and material dynamics of transformation in a given urban context and the desires and hopes that inhabit specific practices. In attempting to map the thick, networked histories of temporary uses, we asked ourselves: how to represent the multiple and contradictory visions and hopes that are mobilized by the act of occupying a vacant space, albeit temporarily? How to represent urban dynamics without replicating the narrative of powerful actors? How can mapping help to question the finality of currently proposed urban futures? How to show that urban space and time are potentially open and constantly struggled upon? How to map the potentials and desires of such uses to intervene and potentially transform 'inevitable' capitalist urban dynamics? How to research and represent the tensions between temporariness as experimentation and openness, and temporariness as precarious foreclosure?[2]

From timelines to uchronias

[The] idea of time is so wrapped up with the metaphor of the line that taking them apart seems virtually impossible

D. Rosenberg and A. Grafton[3]

Our mapping process began with a more linear form of data visualization of one of our case studies, as we reconstructed the organically developed transformation of a vacant building

turned into an entrepreneurial/ creative site in Fish Island. This part of the research concerned about two years in the life of a building (Swan Wharf) and had been put together through participant observation, several in-depth interviews as well as analysis of various online materials.

The timeline combines a linear temporal development, left to right, with a schematic architectural drawing of the actual building, and the different and cumulative temporary uses of different components. This starts in October 2013 with an office, to which was added a 'hire space', which generated revenue to begin fitting the studios, built alongside the wood and metal workshop, where the furniture for the Cygnet bistro was created, before the Fish Island Lab opened its doors in July 2014. A third layer in the top attempted to map out the organisational networks mobilised by each of these temporary uses and spaces, as a growing spiderweb of partnerships, alliances, in-kind support and collaborations.
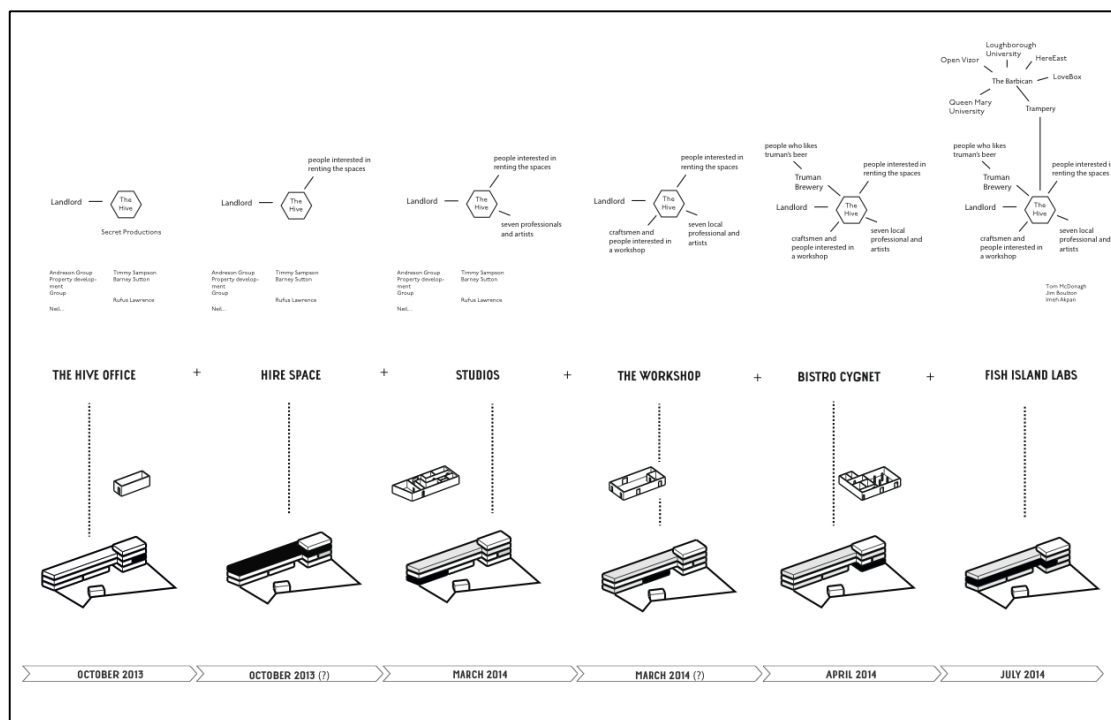

Fig.1. Timeline of Swan Wharf. public works (2014).

What was missing from this representation was all the rumours, the expectations, the boastings, the promises kept and the promises broken as the actions of developers, public sector organisations, individual practitioners, companies and community groups – each projecting possible futures onto the building - interweaved with the evolution of the site. In

other words, we had graphically represented 'what actually happened', but in so doing we had to cast aside other dimensions of this recent past, which we began to identify as 'what should have happened', according to planning applications, marketing materials and public announcements; and 'what could have happened', the alternative proposals, the promises that weren't kept but that might have retained a more open approach to the transformation of the site. In other words, what our timeline did not show was both how the logic of profit-driven urban development had been subjected to delays and detours, and how other proposals, more political or less profit-oriented, could have equally, plausibly, taken place within the temporary occupation.

As we began looking for alternative cartographies of time, we were captivated by a diagram by 19th Century French liberal philosopher Charles Renouvier from his philosophical novel *Uchonie* [Fig.2].[4]
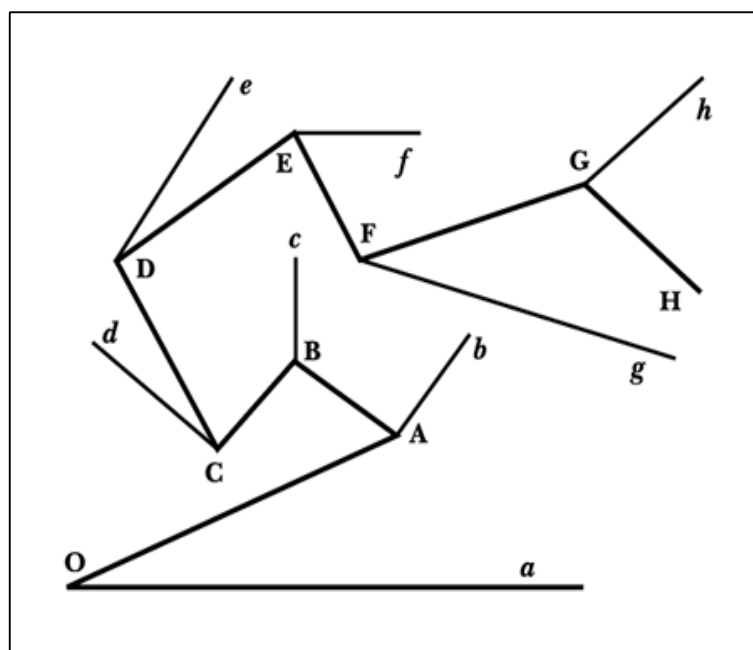

Fig. 2. Graphical representation of a uchronian narrative from Renouvier *Uchronie (l'utopie dans l'histoire).*[5] (*Uppercase*: events that did not happen; *Lowercase*: events that happened).

Renouvier had used the neologism *uchronia* in a series of articles published in the *Revue Philosophique et Religieuse* in 1857, later collected in his 1876 philosophical novel titled *Uchronie (l'utopie dans l'histoire): Esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne tel qu'il n'a pas été, tel qu'il aurait pu être.* It is an apocryphal sketch

of the development of European civilization not as it was but as it might have been. Very broadly, Renouvier proposed a liberal utopian re-imagining of how European civilisation could have developed differently along liberal democratic values. The volume includes several appendices and prefaces, and the diagram accompanied a pretended publisher's note (Postface de l'èditeur) that discusses the method for writing uchronias and the difficulties and paradoxes facing a *uchroniste*, which interestingly resonated with some of our own reflections, as will be discussed below.

Uchronias and utopias

Uchronia as utopia in history is a neologism that plays on the words chronos (*Χρόνος* = time in Ancient Greek) and utopia, a term that is usually associated with Sir Thomas More's political satire.[6] 'Utopia' is a pun using three different Ancient Greek words $εὖ$ = good, and $οὐ$ = not and *topos* = space. Utopia, paradoxically, is 'the good place that is no place'.[7] Similarly polysemic, the term uchronia plays on the double root of 'u' as indicating a non-time but also a 'utopian', good, progressive time. Utopias are usually conceived as a spatial phenomenon that is 'elsewhere', for example the other side of the planet (More's Utopia); in the past ('Golden Age' and 'Arcadia'); or in the future (as in Millennialism and many within the Sci-Fi genre). Uchronias also occur elsewhere - in a parallel apocryphal past that bears degrees of verisimilitude to historical accounts. Uchronian writing is often considered akin to Sci-Fi, alternative histories, alternate histories, virtual histories, a literary subgenre that developed particularly in English language fiction writing in the 20th century, often veering towards dystopian apocryphal historie.[8] Critics, however, contend that while the 19th centuries uchronias clearly referred to the political theoretical tradition of utopian writings, the original term did not designate a simple translation from the spatial to a generally conceived temporal, but to a careful rewriting of history, rather than to a deferred future.[9]

Contemporary utopian theory tends to view utopia as something that can be materialized in the present, and which has a critical and prefigurative function, simultaneously showing what is wrong with the status quo, whilst experimenting with alternative desires. Utopia thus need not be limited to literature or social theory, but can be used as an analytic tool for understanding the critical and expressive functions of a wide range of social practices, including art, architecture, fairy tales, dreams and medicine.[10] According to this approach, utopia should be understood as a critical function of a practice that mobilises embodied affects at the subjective level, such as hope and desire.[11] Utopia has a pedagogical function of

teaching us to think and desire beyond the given status quo. Uchronian writing in the 19th Century also had a directly didactic dimension; in Renouvier's novel, the apocryphal narrative is a ruse to discuss, philosophically, how history could have been otherwise, with a strong ethical purpose of inspiring the present and future through a 'pedagogy of liberty'.[12]

Thus, contrary to the popular and colloquial uses of the term as blueprints for a future society, the function of utopias is that of mobilizing hope and desire. In this formulation, utopia is not necessarily deferred, but prefigurative, experimental, experiential, embodied, affective. When understood thus, utopia has an interesting relationship to time and temporality. Firth and Robinson argue that 'rather than seeing utopia as dislocated in time, one might conceive that it fundamentally alters the relationship between past, present and future'.[13] It is this dimension of uchronias as a literary subgenre, that according to literary theorist Elisabeth Wesseling can be interpreted as an instance of utopian thought because it

> induces a keen awareness of the contingency of history. By juxtaposing actual history to alternative sequences of events, it disrupts the illusion that an actual course of events was inevitable.[14]

In presenting potential other pasts, uchronian fiction plays an active role in expanding imaginaries as it "disputes the monopoly of the realised possibilities in "the land of reality" by developing alternatives".

Whilst utopias have an important role to play in mobilizing hope and desire for social transformation, it is also important to note that they are not necessarily progressive or liberatory. Levitas asserts that 'we have to recognise that utopias are not the monopoly of the Left'.[15] This leads her to declare the existence of seemingly counter-intuitive neo-liberal and conservative utopias.[16] Capitalism too has an image of a desired society and is utopian in its imaginary: that is what makes it so pervasive: it produces images and promotes ideas that are seductive and mobilise personal hopes and desires. Furthermore, there is a specific structuration of affective experience of time, involving a linear progression that implies self-sacrifice and deferral. Moments of time are homogenized through devices such as calendars and clocks, which allow for the commodification and colonization of instants of consciousness.[17]

If one conceives capitalist time as utopian, one might also imagine the existence of alternative, counter-utopias of temporality. Examples might be drawn from critical theory and

philosophical thought,[18] activist theories,[19]indigenous epistemologies,[20] and cultural aesthetic practices such as retrofuturism and steampunk.[21] Thinking about non-linear time as utopian arises from a desire to map "non-linear connection of past, present and future temporalities" through which time can be "restored to a subjective, expressive meaning, against the measuring and homogenising functions of capitalist time".[22] Whilst these alternative counter-utopias of time and temporality differ drastically, there are similarities in their critiques of capitalist time. They are frequently opposed to alienation, and objectivism, favouring creative, expressive and plural alternatives. They also tend not to view linearity and sequentialism as essential, that is, time does not necessarily move in a straight line from past to future.[23]

Renouvier's diagram inspired us partly for its pseudo-scientific appearance – reminiscent of architect Helen Stratford's drawings in *Mechanical operations in Cambourne* (2009) – and partly because it represents, in a graphically elegant and simple way, a timeline that curls upon itself through the bifurcations between the past as we know it, and the past that could have been, thus revealing a past and a present open to multiple possibilities. As temporary use is at times seen as a suspension and re-arrangement of the linear dynamics of urban decay and its counterpart development, a version of uchronian mapping appeared suitable for visualizing the possibilities and constraints of temporary uses. At the same time, we were not interested in writing or visualizing a utopia by choosing a point of divergence and developing a parallel history of how a specific building and land could have become otherwise, in a utopian or dystopian way. More modestly, we let the uchronian diagramming take us to places where our research had not yet been: sites of possibilities, of alternative outcomes and of an area as it could have been.

Uchronian researching and drawing

In the process of investigating and representing alternative histories of Swan Wharf, from a vacant site to a place of temporary uses, we decided first of all to look back into the past to challenge the usually vague origin of temporary use projects – 'in a dilapidated/empty/abandoned building in East London' – that only serve to reproduce a naturalised narrative of vacancy and urban development. To do so, we conducted a rough biography of the site through planning applications and local newspaper and trade articles over a period of thirteen years, placing our starting point (X) in 2002. The process enabled us to reconstruct not just the history of that specific building, and various planning applications

(proposed, amended, rejected, approved) but also of adjacent sites. In examining extant proposals, we could read community members' objections as well as the various design iterations and recommendations. With the transfer of planning power for the area from Tower Hamlets to the London Legacy Development Corporation in 2012, further documentation of briefing sessions and recommendations were available. These, and information gathered about landowners and recent transactions, formed the backbone of 'what actually happened' as well as of the 'what should have happened' points on our bifurcating timeline.

We then decided to investigate some of the rumours and imaginaries that circulated at a given time, floating into the public opinion: here we drew on interviews, research into past flyers and website representations, local blogs, word of mouth. This, and at times some more imaginative but equally plausible stories, formed the basis for the 'What could have happened' component of the diagram. Graphically similar, but actually substantially differing from Renouvier's diagram, each possible future was marked by a letter. A lower case letter – a – represented 'What should have happened'; a lower case with a superscript – a^1 – signalled 'What could have happened'; a upper case capital letter – A – marked the turns actually taken by history. In trying to give the reader of the map some indication of major macro events that could have influenced the more localised decisions and detours about the uses of the building, we also included horizontal 'event lines', such as London winning bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games (July 2005) or the establishment of the local Conservation Area (October 2008).
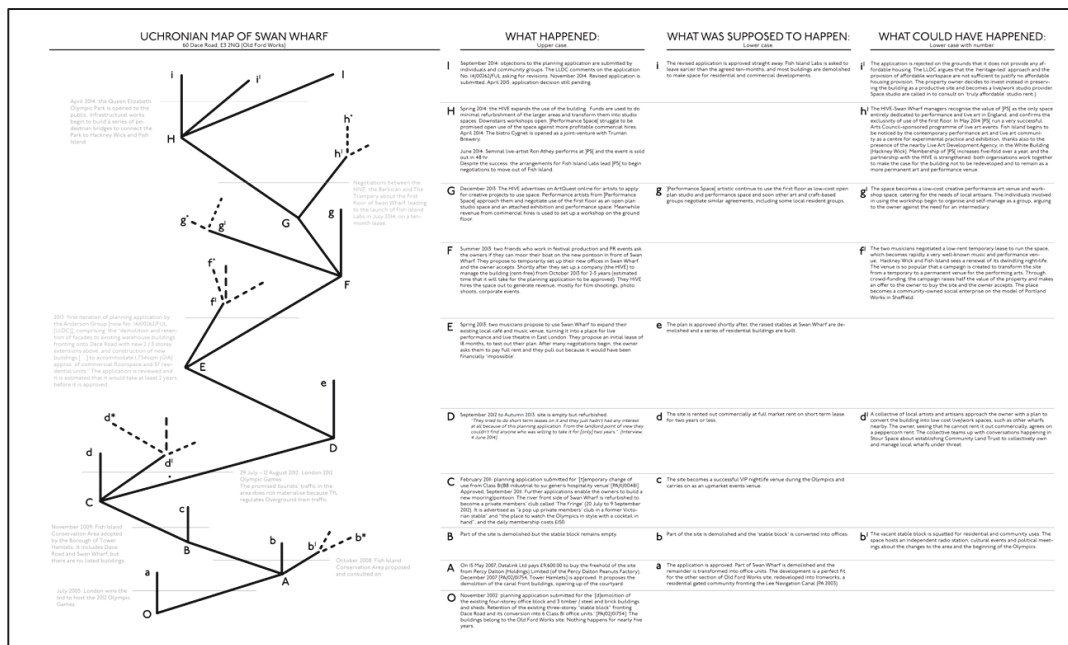

Fig. 3. Uchronian Map #1: overview.

The final map was structured in four vertical columns: a vertical uchronian diagram on the left hand side, while on the right we placed three text columns with brief descriptions of 'what happened' (e.g. A), 'what should have happened' (e.g. a) and 'what could have happened' (e.g. a^1), graphically aligned to the actual points on the map. The diagram starts from a point of Origin (X) at the bottom of the page, set by the author as a critical moment where the mapping should begin. 'What should have happened' (A) moves in a straight line vertically upwards in time from the point of Origin. 'What actually happened' (a) is a deviation from A and is slightly offset to indicate a diversion from the initial intention. This is an intuitive process and has no underlying metric to measure the degree of departure. A third line is added to mark a plausible alternative scenario that again could have changed the trajectory of development.

Time travels from the bottom upwards, rather than from left to right of traditional timelines, allowing the more intuitive horizontal reading to cut across the three scenario columns, which are given equal weight, and to propose a less linear understanding of the development. As the most current point is at the top of the page, the reader is invited to explore and trace the story backwards, towards the point of Origin, or upwards, following the vertical timeline. In this way the map can be read sideways as well as from top to bottom or bottom to top.
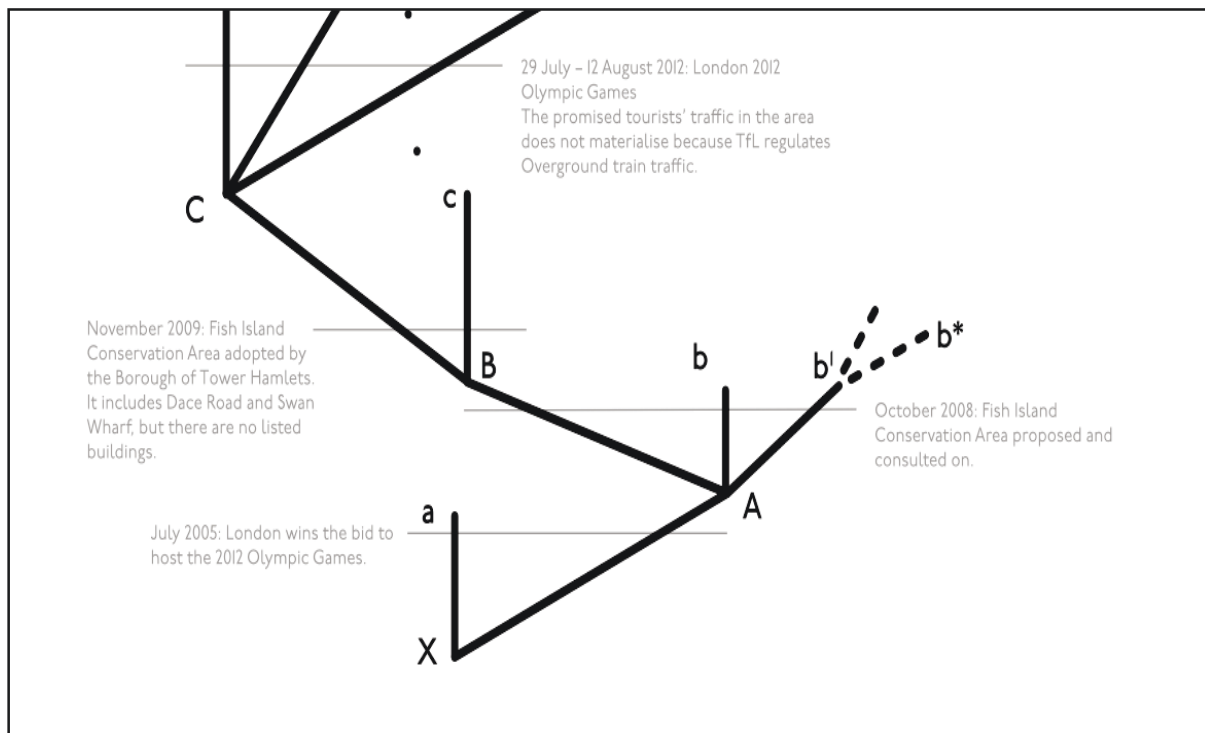

Fig. 4. Detail of Swan Wharf uchronian map #1.

Probing uchronian mapping: a participatory workshop

Once our first uchronian map was produced, we decided to try and test the ad-hoc method that we had developed and to host an event to present it and discuss its possibilities, in the form of a participatory workshop as part of the *Livingmaps* programme. The workshop took place over three hours on a Saturday afternoon in late April 2015. Hosted at Stour Space in Fish Island, an artists' studio, café and exhibition space that has come to symbolise an alternative future for some of the many self-build studio spaces of the area. The workshop started with a presentation and discussion of the uchronian map as an idea and research tool and was followed by a presentation about Stour Space and a walk to two sites, Hub67 and Swan Wharf. All sites are temporarily occupied by community/social/creative purposes, yet presented substantial differences, both in terms of the actual activities and uses and in terms of expectations and desires for future permanence and presence on the site and in the area. Upon return, the workshop concluded with a group mapping exercise. Participants were invited to organise in smaller groups, to choose one of three sites and were given a printed dossier with selected materials including planning applications, newspaper clippings, blog entries, websites' 'about us' sections, minutes of planning committee meetings and of local forums. They were also given a blank A3/A2 uchronian template and a printed protocol (below) in order to produce their own version of a 'uchronian' map for their chosen site.
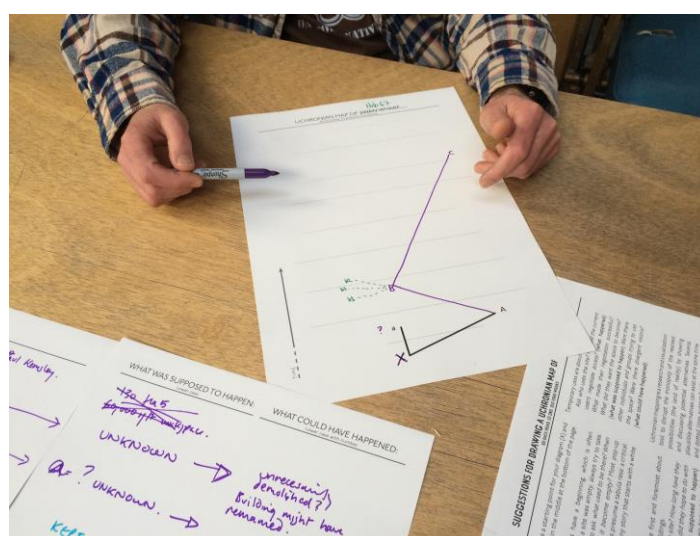

Fig. 5. Photo from the Future(s) Perfect workshop, 25 April 2015.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DRAWING A UCHRONIAN MAP OF TEMPORARY USE

1. Choose a starting point for your diagram (X) and place it in the middle at the bottom of the page.

    •   All stories have a beginning, which is often arbitrary. If a site was empty, always try to take a step back to ask: what used to be there? When and why did it become empty? Most pop-up space narratives presume a tabula rasa: a critical map questions any story that starts with a white sheet.

2. Temporary uses are first and foremost about access to land or buildings.

    •   Ask who owns the site? How long have they owned it for? What did they hope to do with the site? (what was supposed to happen) What happened to their hopes/plans? (what actually happened)

3. Draw the first two lines of the diagram. What was supposed to happen is marked by a lower case letter at the end of vertical line perpendicular to a given point of origin (X). What happened is marked by an upper case letter and appears at the end of a sideway line, generating a new point of origin.

4. Time is represented vertically and is marked by event lines. Event lines point at events that appear significant and capable to influence either the actual or potential unravelling of uses. From the specific site you can expand your questioning to the neighbourhood, area and even city at large.

    •   Ask: is the site affected by zoning regulations, e.g. a conservation area? What else was happening to the area and city (e.g. the Olympic bid being won)? (event lines)

5. Changes to land and buildings are regulated by planning authorities.

    •   Ask what is the planning authority relevant to the site? Are there submitted, pending or approved planning applications? (what was supposed to happen) Has there been opposition to proposed plans? Have alternatives been proposed? (What could have happened). What could have happened is marked by a lower case letter with a number at the end of (a) sideway line(s). The points suggest plausible alternatives, fictions that could have become a reality.

6. Temporary uses are about use.

    •   Ask who uses the site? How did the current users negotiate access? (what happened) What made their negotiation successful? What did they want the space to become? (what was supposed to happen) Were there other individuals and groups trying to use the space? Were there divergent visions? (What could have happened). Uchronian mapping is a research and visualization tool to disrupt the monopoly of the realised possibilities (the land of reality) by showing and discussing potential alternatives. Several plausible alternatives can exist at the same time and dotted lines suggest further developments of these alternative stories, marked by a lower case letter followed by an asterisk.

Uchronian urban mapping as a tool for research and visualisation

The process of designing a uchronian map generated overwhelmingly more questions than answers about the histories of specific sites as well as about the process and visualisation itself. Choosing a starting point and the first 'points of divergence' was particularly difficult and workshop participants found themselves embroiled in a process of disentangling hearsay from actual facts, and having to make arbitrary decisions about when to draw the line for the end of their excavations of the past. Prior expertise of architectural and planning language and maps enabled some important discoveries: in one case, a vacant plot of plant that LLDC officials believed had become vacant because of a certain local masterplan, was actually not marked on over five years of local planning documents and application, raising question marks about potential land acquisitions and swaps, leading to further investigation.

Researching a site with a uchronian output in mind means simultaneously to write a local history and to identify significant 'points of divergence', where decisions could have changed dramatically the uses and transformation of a place. This presents the double problem of ascertained causal relationships but also of imagining how they could have been unhinged, at specific points. Renouvier, in his post-face, describes this issue as an impossibility present in the very core of the work of the uchroniste. In other words, if the aim of the uchronian map is to challenge the illusion of a deterministic reading of history as inevitable, this cannot be achieved by presenting a counter-history whose counter-facts themselves present an inevitable alternative trajectory.[24] The 'points of divergence' and the alternative trajectories thus hover between an attempt at verisimilitude and a more clearly arbitrary and fictional possibility.

This issue was closely connected to questions raised about the ambiguity of our protocol, which did not specify whether the alternative trajectories, the utopian points and lines of 'what should have happened' and what 'could have happened', were to be more progressive and community-led or simply alternative to what had actually happened, as conservative or neo-liberal utopias.[25] The pseudo-scientific diagram gives equal weight, graphically, to all lines, including the alternatives. In the discussion during the workshop, some participants thought that this non-prescriptive evenness was positive as the politics of choosing specific points of divergence were hidden behind a 'factual' form of representation, that made them appear as equally plausible, thus succeeding in disrupting the mobilising power of the 'what

should have happened' planning and policy imaginaries. On a more negative note, this evenness bears the risk of transforming the diagram into an a-political 'neutral' map, where power remains somewhat hidden. It was debated whether in future iterations there should be clear graphical differences (in typography, size, format) between the alternatives of community groups and those of property owners and local governments, to show different desires, but also different forms and possibility of agency.

As a tool for visualisation, questions were raised about the fact that time is still somewhat linear, even if with kinks and detours. It is argued that the visual complexity of the letters and the referencing to the text columns made the final result less successful as a form of data visualisation, yet some participants found its not immediate legibility attractive, as a rebus or puzzle to be solved, which further worked to question linear understandings of time. From a more political angle, it was discussed whether using uchronian mapping in urban research only produced very intricate archaeologies of sites, or whether it could be used to identify salient dynamics and sites/times of intervention. Questions were finally raised about the potential use of uchronian mapping as a tool not just for excavating the past, but also to map out the long temporalities and future strategies of urban development that are so often invisible or difficult to grasp by community groups examining and organising for greater transparency and participation in decision-making about local issues.

To conclude, what we call *uchronian* mapping in our project is fundamentally an attempt to experiment with a format of critical mapping as both a tool for research and for visualization. Uchronian ideas have inspired us in the attempt to address and analyse temporary uses in vacant spaces as co-constituted by possibilities for alternatives (by degree) to the seeming inevitability of a mono-cultural urban development and by processes of capture and foreclosure of those very possibilities. While falling short of producing counter-utopias to the capitalist utopias of Fish Island redevelopment, we have experimented with a tool to raise questions and to challenge the idea of natural vacancy and development, and of temporary uses as intrinsically alternative.

As an entry point into the complex and contradictory histories behind vacant spaces and their temporary uses, our mapping attempts have offered a possible way of asking critical questions about how spaces became vacant, how their vacancy became a 'space of opportunity' for entrepreneurial urban action, how certain uses became sanctioned and

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promoted while others, equally plausible, were relegated to the realm of 'what could have happened'. Our modest uchronian experiment did not construct grand events as 'points of divergence', but tried instead to unravel decision-making and possibilities to identify minor moments that might have just about scratched the surface of linear development and perhaps altered ever so slightly its course. In doing so, it also challenged understandings of the relationship between temporary uses and urban development as one of recuperation. Uchronian mapping thus can be used to attend to the nuances in the shifting positions and development of practices of temporary uses themselves, and to analyse the changing relationship to the overlapping shorter and longer-term plans for specific vacant sites. In this sense, our uchronia is less a utopian mapping exercise than a thick forensic of marginal histories within sets of uses and projects that are themselves marginal, both spatially and temporally.

A draft of our uchronian map is available at

http://www.wickcuriosityshop.net/collection/uchronia

Endnotes

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