

## **“VACANT LAND IN LONDON: NARRATIVES ABOUT PEOPLE AND LAND TRANSFORMATION”**

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Vacant land is a widespread urban phenomenon that has been studied in different contexts, both in the Global North and the Global South. The literature shows a wide range of issues revolving around the common topic of the transformation of vacant land, such as land grabbing in South Africa (Hall 2011); containment of urban sprawl in England and Germany (Schulze Baing 2010); opportunities for urban growth and social inclusion in South America and United States (Clichevsky, 2007; Pagano and Bowman, 2004); and recovery of contaminated sites in Japan (Dixon, Otsuka, Abe, 2011). Underpinning all these studies is the belief that (urban) land is a unique and finite resource and its 'best use' is of paramount importance to the environment, social and economic (Benett and Dickinson 2015). The re-use of vacant land comes as a reasonable and necessary political choice in this light. The way forward is less clear.

In spite of the numerous studies about the nature and extent of vacant land, little agreement has been made about the key factors behind its obduracy or the most effective policies and mechanisms to bring this land forward to its best use. This research has found that, in England alone, the concept of vacant land has evolved and produced 8 different definitions since the 70s. More importantly, the changes in the definitions have been accompanied by changes in the regeneration policies addressing the transformation of vacant land. Since 2010, the Coalition Government has been pushing forward yet another way of tackling the re-use of vacant land - currently known in England as Previously Developed Land (PDL) or Brownfield land. The focus of this new regeneration policy is on land with the right conditions to boost (economic) growth (DCLG 2012), leaving aside those challenging sites that are less attractive for the market. The designation of brownfield land as Opportunity Areas or Strategic Sites is a consequence of this policy (GLA 2011:59-60). A legitimate question arises about the sustainability of this approach, which seems to condemn the rest of brownfield land to idleness and dereliction and moves away from the more comprehensive regeneration policies of the previous Labour government (UTF 1999; Allmendinger 2003; Whitehead 2012)

The literature review shows that the conceptualization of vacant land, framed in economic-development terms, might be behind the continuous shifts in regeneration and land policies set out to tackle the problem (see Cameron *et al.* 1988, Adams 2010). However, very little research has been done about the reasons for and implications of the epistemological and ontological challenges underpinning this issue. This paper is part of an on-going research that sets out with the objective of looking into these challenges and providing a new analytical framework for the study of vacant land. This analytical framework will place its focus on the human dimension of the transformation process of vacant land and it will provide a dynamic analytical framework that will overcome the space-time limitations of the previous (economic-development) conceptual models.

The research will use a case study approach to test the soundness of this conceptual model. It will carry out an in-depth analysis of two Opportunity Areas, located to the East and West of London, which have been 'vacant' for the past 30 years. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the key actors involved in the on-going transformation process of these sites. Secondary data – i.e. planning applications, historical archives, legal documents, etc. – will also be used to unveil the *narratives* that these different actors tell about the transformation of these 'vacant' sites. The research will finally argue that the way the regulatory framework filters the different *narratives* around that land, has a clear impact on its existence and obduracy. In order to strengthen the validity and reliability of this statement, the research will also incorporate a comparison with past proposals for the sites that never happened despite getting planning permission.

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