Slow Cities, Urban Politics and the Temporalities of Planning: Lessons from London

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In press, *Environment and Planning C*

Abstract

In the wake of the global financial crash of 2007-8 many governments have sought to streamline their post-war planning systems and encourage faster project delivery. Expedited decision-making is equated with efficiency and the meeting of broader growth objectives, whereas slower and more complex forms of engagement are presented as an impediment and a governmental problem to be solved through reform. For critical authors such as Weber, such approaches are fraught with danger. The core objective of planning systems should, conversely, be focused on the production of 'slow cities', in which decision-making times allow time for proper democratic and judicial-technical oversight of development processes. Slow planning, it is claimed, can limit the negative impacts of rapid development on urban built environments and communities. In this paper we draw on research in London to examine the relationships between the temporalities of planning, project outcomes, and the politics of time. We argue that within critical urban studies there needs to be a stronger focus on the temporal dimensions of governance and the temporal resources possessed by different actors. We highlight the conditions in and through which the temporalities of planning are deployed strategically by different interests and assess the ways in which powerful, reflexive, and time-resourced developers and investors use planning timeframes to capture markets and boost returns over the longer-term. We conclude by setting out agendas for future research and for more variegated and contextualised explorations of fast and slow planning processes.

Introduction

Since the financial crisis of 2008 governments across Europe have sought to liberalise their planning systems in order to boost competitiveness. The focus has been on the introduction of output-led, delivery-focused arrangements that 'speed up' development processes and practices. Expedited delivery is equated with efficiency and the meeting of broader policy objectives, whereas slower and more complex forms of political engagement, such as those embedded in bureaucratic post-war systems, are presented by sections of the development industry and many policy-makers as an impediment to effective forms of intervention (see Ferm and Tomaney, 2018). Deliberation and regulation are considered to be a 'luxury', associated with earlier periods of accumulation in which territorial competition was less significant and welfare demands more manageable. UK governments, since 2010, have been at the forefront of these broader trends and see the presence of a restrictive and slow planning system as circumscribing the ability of place economies to 'keep up with' growing demands (HM Treasury, 2015). Planning controls add financial costs and prevent experts from 'getting on with the job' of delivering urban programmes and meeting social and economic needs (see Moore *et al.*, 2017). They 'harm and restrict' market flexibility and 'adaptability' in the wake of economic and social change. Planning demands also place limits on the ability of market actors to respond to market opportunities, thus corroding the competitiveness of cities in the longer term. Similar agendas and logics underpin reforms in many countries and cities.

At the same time, a variety of contributions to planning theory explicitly or implicitly highlight the ways in which a slowing down of planning and governance arrangements allows for enhanced deliberation and more balanced and sustainable forms of urban development. Drawing on Lynch's (1973) pioneering work on slow cities, Rachel Weber (2015) calls for new forms of 'slow building' in which urban environments grow in a deliberative manner that values quality of life, the preservation of difference, and place attachment. Slowness provides time for greater reflection and limits the opportunities for investors to establish investment bubbles that can bring ruin not only to themselves but to urban planning priorities and the livelihoods of citizens and businesses. Recent writings on urban development booms and the 'financialisation' of built environments have highlighted the damaging effects of 'rapid' and unsustainable development (see Aalbers and Christophers, 2014; Halbert and Attuyer, 2016). At the same time a global network of urban leaders and community organisations call for the pursuit of 'slow cities' that 'stand up against the fast-lane, homogenised world so often seen in other cities throughout the world' (SlowMovement, 2017: p.1).

It is in this context that this paper draws on research undertaken on a major urban development project in London, known as Centre Point, to examine the relationships between the temporalities of planning, project outcomes, and the politics of time. It argues that far from encouraging the preservation of difference and place attachment, the relatively slow pace of the English planning system opens up opportunities for adaptable and well-resourced development interests to engage in *market capture*. The institutionalisation of a development-led, viability-based planning system since 2012 and the entrenchment of planning gain negotiations and principles into governance processes has added new regulatory complexity to planning and slowed decision-making time-frames. But this, in turn, has enabled more powerful interests to negotiate outcomes that are more favourable over the longer-term. The paper does not argue that slower planning time-frames, in themselves, always generate such outcomes. Instead, it highlights the conditions in and through which the *temporalities of planning* are deployed strategically and become politicised. Uncertainty over time-frames gives additional flexibility to private sector actors to reduce, or sometimes even withdraw from, commitments to provide social and community obligations. As planning processes have become more complex, symbolic representations of time as a resource are represented by powerful interests as a justification for higher market returns, or a form of 'compensation' for the uncertainties generated by relatively slow pace of planning processes. Some developers and investors use their power to slow development processes down, much to their advantage and are able to use 'strategic' waiting to outmanoeuvre competitors, planning agencies, and citizens/communities.

Moreover, not all investors and development interests share the same time-frames and outlooks. Whilst we agree with many of the arguments surrounding the impacts and implications of the speeding up of planning systems to favour capital, we also highlight that there exist multiple types of capital, some of whom can align their activities very effectively to the functioning of a slower planning process. Temporalities, we show, are inherently messy and politicized and subject to disruptions and antagonisms. Whilst there exists a rich vein of writing on 'critical temporalities' in the fields of anthropology and literature studies (*cf.* Bastian, 2013; 2014), that explore the distinctions between time as a dimension of experience and relational temporalities as socially and politically situated experiences of time (embedded within power relations), much less is written in the fields of governance and planning. What is therefore required are new conceptual and methodological approaches that explicitly examine how and in what ways temporalities become systematised and embedded into planning systems and structures and with what effects. Bastian (2014) notes that even within the broader humanities literature 'there is a striking gap that seems to have remained unidentified…on time and political communities' (p.154). And despite recent contributions, such as Moore-Cherry and Bonnin's (2018) study of urban development in Dublin, much of the urban studies literature on time concentrates on debates over heritage planning, rather than exploring relational temporalities. The first part of the paper discusses the relationships between planning and temporalities before turning to our case study work and broader reflections for future research agendas.

Characterising the Temporalities of Planning

The temporalities of planning and development are fundamentally politicised. Planning as a mode of governance represents a 'form of governmental technology through which social discipline, ritual, and rhythm are made present in social life, and in which time is materialised, mediated, or brought into conflict' (Abram, 2014: p.129). It establishes a 'manifestation of what people think is possible and desirable, and what the future promises for the better' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2011: p.3). Promises are more than descriptions as 'they express intention…and entail an obligation on the part of the promisor to fulfil his [*sic.*] promise to the promisee' (p.9). These relations of obligation are systematically temporalised as control over the timing and phasing of planning constitute 'an instrument of power with very real effects…[in which] temporal uncertainty can act as a form of social control' (Harms, 2013: p.346). Under bureaucratic planning systems, time is presented in linear terms, with specific times allocated to specific tasks. The focus is on achieving deliverable outcomes over a designated time period, with each element of the process compartmentalised and given its own timing and place.

Again in Abram's (2014) terms, bureaucratic planning systems seek to reduce the focus on the near and medium past, with a 'relentless focus on worlds yet to be and work yet to be done quickly leaving behind this meaningful past' (p.133), so that plans 'perform a particular kind of work, which frequently seems to be less about a specific content than the kind of conceptual orders that they lay out' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2011: p.14). When represented as forms of 'strategic' planning they become 'layered and hierarchized, with near, middle, and distant futures scaled from concrete to abstract concerns' (*ibid.*). This neatness in temporality reflects planning's close connections to Modernist rationalities, with the top-down ordering of time elided with efficiency and strong forms of managerialism and control. It is a way of thinking premised on the concept of perpetual renewal and the rapid obsolescence of existing urban forms (see Berman, 1986) and a distinction between what Lefebvre (1991) described as the 'near' (individuals, groups, and communities) and the 'far' (state bodies, institutions, and legal codes). The role of planning institutions becomes one of mediating and ordering 'divergent representations, techniques, and rhythms of human and non-human time' (Bear, 2014: p.6).

However, these attempts to orchestrate linear times are open to contestation and challenge when embedded in political processes and specific contexts. As Bear (2014) argues 'time thickens with ethical problems, impossible dilemmas, and difficult orchestrations' (p.6), undermining or challenging dominant temporal orderings and opening up alternative ways of timing and shaping the evolution of built environments and landscapes. For Guyer (2007) bureaucratic times are frequently 'punctuated rather than enduring', full of discontinuities rather than linearity and clarity' and 'pivot[s] around compliance and delay, synchrony, and avoidance, and the multiple possibilities for forward looking and backdating' (p.416). They can be unsettled through engagements with 'unruly groups' of citizens and other political and economic interests who may challenge a planning system's attempts to fix times of engagement and action in a clear and linear manner. There are repeated 'fractures in temporal landscapes' (Hudson, 2015: p.461) as diverse interests engage in a politics of temporal framings, and different interests possess diverse capacities and skills to exploit temporal fractures and ineffective (bureaucratic) attempts to control time.

But what is often unclear are the ways in which temporal agendas take on specific forms and characteristics, how these are mobilised in specific contexts, and with what effects. Critiques of bureaucratised and systematised planning temporalities come from multiple directions. On the one hand, they are criticised for their perceived inability to incorporate the differential and relational temporalities of communities and citizens in the city and how time is experienced and understood by a range of diverse groups. Bastian's (2013) work on 'critical temporalities' has been particularly influential in examining the connections and disconnections between the temporalities of economic and political systems and 'community times' consisting of complex place-embedded rhythms that place them outside other structuring temporalities (see also Livingstone and Matthews, 2018). On the other hand, some of the most influential criticisms of the temporalities of planning have emerged within neo-liberal critiques that emphasise the 'slowness' and 'obsolescence' of planning arrangements that prevent developers and investors from 'getting on' with the task of delivering new investments in the built environment (see Ball, 2010). Some of these critiques emerged during the 1960s and 1970s with the formal Planning System seen as one of the key policy fields in which state actors and bureaucracies had taken on too much power to shape the lives of individuals, often by reference to abstract claims of standing up for a 'public interest' (see Le Galès, 2016; Pennington, 2006). Since the mid-1980s successive governments have presented planning deliberations as an 'impediment' to speedy development and implemented reforms that attempt to streamline approval processes. The result is that planning as a technology of governance is becoming increasingly discredited with the UK government, for example, arguing explicitly that planning requirements, 'can create the sort of slow, expensive and uncertain process that reduces the appetite to build' (HM Treasury, 2015: p.45).

The global financial crisis of 2008 and the slow pace of recovery have given a new urgency to the search for 'rapid' forms of development. Recent writings on policy mobilities have highlighted the growing impact of what Peck (2016) terms 'fast' policy transfers between places as a manifestation of neoliberal time-space compression (McCann, 2016). It is argued that under contemporary forms of capitalism new policy agendas and development models are taken up with growing speed, with consistent efforts to put in place successful policy 'solutions' that will promote and facilitate development. There is little time for the slow, deliberative processes that characterised post-war planning and even less time to experiment. What is required is de-regulated, purposive, and output-oriented planning regimes. Organisations such as the World Bank and EU equate the speed with which planning processes operate with the efficiency and quality of national regulatory frameworks. Good governance occurs where 'pre-commencement planning conditions are only imposed by local planning authorities where they are absolutely necessary' (Smith, 2016: p.11).

The expansion of financial flows into the urban built environments of contemporary cities seems to have created a new impetus towards rapid urban development as 'global capital continually ruptures our cities, effecting change and challenging how spatial form is manifested and meditated', with the effect that 'space is becoming increasingly transient' (Livingstone and Matthews, 2017: p.1). For Jessop (2015) the implications of the pursuit of 'fast-track implementation' only 'increases pressures to make decisions on the basis of unreliable information, insufficient consultation, lack of participation'. This in turn 'privileges those who can operate within compressed time scales, narrows the range of participants in the policy process, and limits the scope for deliberation, consultation, and negotiation' (p.102). It is increasingly argued, therefore, that 'slow, smart cities' are 'preferable to rapid and unstable urbanisation' (Weber, 2015: p.188) as slower planning allows time for proper democratic oversight and citizen deliberation and stronger planning structures that 'could extend the time horizons of real estate investors [so that] capital would not continually flit from old to new assets. Instead it would stay in place and mature as owners were forced to live with their decisions and consider the asset's future prospects' (p.204). For this group of critical writers, extended temporalities are equated with a qualitative improvement in the development and planning processes that shape cities.

However, such characterisations have their limits. It is not only planning temporalities that are fluid but also the very notions that justify the actions of investors and developers in the market. Too often debates over development times simplify this fluidity and present development sector as a unified interest with a clear subjectivity that want 'fast' returns from investment decisions. There is a lack of recognition of the diverse *social relations* of property development and the diversity of time resources and constraints that exist within an increasingly pluralist economic sector. As Adams and Tiesdell (2010) argue there is 'no single land and property market, but many markets, each reflecting the different ways within which development cultures play out in different localities' (p.194). Temporal variabilities exist in the outlooks of different actors and interests. The speed of financial transactions and the desire to meet the demands of shareholders are often presented as determining factors in understanding developer outlooks, but as Guy *et al.*, (2002) argue there are very different developer cultures that exist and no one model of a developer interest that can be used to shape understandings and policy imaginations. The pluralisation of investment sources for urban projects in major cities opens up opportunities for the formation of different temporalities. For example, sovereign wealth funds or those belonging to private, family-centred interests or foundations, or charities may possess very different time-scales or outlooks.

The reality of how and *when* land assets are used in the development process is therefore highly politicised and variable. In some instances investors and developers are in a stronger position to 'value-engineer' their approaches, by deploying techniques and approaches that maximise their control over longer-term uncertainties and risks. Writings on value-engineering have been hugely influential in post-war management literatures, with enhanced firm competitiveness elided with the implementation of systems that set in place 'recognise the pattern of the future and be prepared for it' (Thew, 1969: p.261). As authors such as Harms (2013) have demonstrated, the process of waiting, or slow planning, 'can produce great wealth…as real estate is a form of delayed gratification and wealth accrues to those who have the strategic vision and the ability to wait productively' (p.353). This notion of what he terms 'productive waiting' represents a specific tactic for investors given that 'wealth accumulates over time and investment strategies depend on a temporal separation between the injection of capital and recuperation of profit' (p.354). In other contexts investors may require short-term returns and look for 'quicker' gains. In others the temporal separation may be extended and engineered in ways that reflect (and help reproduce) urban property market conditions (see Barrass, 2009).

Time is thus a resource like any other. Private actors possess different amounts and have a range of strategies and tactics for its deployment. Calls for the 'speeding up' of planning deliberations may benefit some types of investors but not others, who may value-engineer slower planning timeframes in the pursuit of greater longer-term profits (Grover and Grover, 2014). There are existing examples of how value-engineering impacts on development processes in the temporal politics of land banking and definitions of 'vacancy'. For instance, the charity Shelter estimates that there are nearly 500,000 sites in the UK that have not been built on, even though formal planning permission has been given (see Jefferys, 2016). By restricting and manipulating the existing supply of 'available land' and building up, but not releasing, land assets values are increased along with returns for asset owners and investors. As Jefferys notes, 'the earlier in the process of development you control a piece of land, the more you can potentially make from its development' (p.1). Moreover, the perceived abandonment of land also becomes a political tool for development interests and it provides symbolic visual evidence that the planning system and policy-makers are somehow failing their electorates and not expediting development. The most extreme examples are found in US cities such as Detroit where representations of a physically abandoned city have legitimated the introduction of pro-market measures that reduce obligations on potential investors (see Hackworth, 2015).

The remainder of the paper now explores one high-profile case study in London and the politics of temporality that has shaped its evolution over time. The findings draw on a research project that has interviewed investors, promoters, and developers across London to explore broader questions over what makes the city an attractive investment space, the changing investment landscapes within (and beyond) the city, and the temporal outlooks and resources that they possess. The Centre Point development was chosen as a specific case study that exemplified broader trends within London and elsewhere and additional interviews were conducted with key actors involved in its development, allied to a content analysis of key plans, strategies, minutes, and records. In the next section we assess the ways in which the introduction of viability-driven planning in countries such as England and elsewhere, has introduced new temporalities to the politics of development. begin by outlining the background to the development before exploring its temporal politics from a variety of perspectives. Collectively, we demonstrate that the 'slow' nature of the planning process in sites such as Centre Point opens up opportunities for particular types of investor and opens up opportunities for market capture and strategic value-engineering.

The Changing Temporalities of the English Planning System and the Redevelopment of Centre Point

The relationships between temporalities and In the English context, 2011 have introduced new political temporalities to urban development processes. The focus is increasingly on 'deliverability', speed, and financial 'viability', with a new presumption that projects will be given the go-ahead, unless local actors can mount successful legal or regulatory challenges. 'Planning gain', in the form of contributions towards the physical and social infrastructure to support new development and crucially social housing has long been a central feature of the planning system; albeit one that is seen by both developers and planners as a mis-conceived idea, with relatively little clarity over its core parameters and priorities (Colenutt *et al.*, 2015). However, the relentless inflation of property market values in England, have made planning gain and the capturing of development benefits a major priority for local authorities. Local planners are now required to contribute to what central government term a 'national crusade' to build thousands of new homes (see Forrest and Hirayama, 2015), whilst reducing the political and socio-economic complexities that exist in local contexts and circumstances. These are encapsulated in Paragraph 173 of the NPPF, a statement that represents one of the most radical reformulations of planning practice since the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947:

'*to ensure viability, the costs of any requirements likely to be applied to development, such as requirements for affordable housing, standards, infrastructure contributions or other requirements should, when taking account of the normal cost of development and mitigation, provide competitive returns to a willing land owner and willing developer to enable the development to be deliverable*'.

The ethos of the planning system is thus inverted. Its traditional role of ensuring that any new development is only granted permission once it conforms to local, publically-defined needs is replaced by a legal requirement, wherever possible, to prioritise growth and the expansion of new homes and development projects. The role of planning practice is to take the messiness and complexity of places and convert them into spaces ripe for investment and make local authorities increasingly *dependent* on property market uplift, whatever the wider impacts on marginalised local residents, businesses, and places (Penny, 2017).

It is this wider context of reform that the comprehensive redevelopment of Centre Point is taking place. The building is one of central London's tallest and most distinctive landmarks. In the words of the quango Historic England (2017: p.1) '*the slender tower, with its delicately modelled surfaces, carried on the very visible pilotis, is one of the most distinctive high-rise compositions of the 1960s and a major London…[and] Planning interest: the relationship of tower, link and east block is a notable instance of Le Corbusier-inspired planning in London*'[1]. Centre Point was originally designed by the architects Richard Seifert & Partners between 1960 and 1966. The main tower is of 35 storeys high and has slightly convex sides and it was one of the first buildings of its kind to employ the use of concrete. As Platt (1999) argues, from the outset it was subject to political controversy, with the Greater London Council allowing for its development, despite it being breach of existing rules over maximum height. Permission was only given following the developer's agreement to provide new road layouts and infrastructure, making it one of the most significant examples of a planning gain project in post-war London. It was financed by a property tycoon, named Harry Hyams, who wanted to lease the building to a single occupier at a relatively high cost. However, no such tenant existed and as Marriott (1967) showed, the developer used the asset as collateral to generate debts the result was that it remained unoccupied until the 1970s. Its visible vacancy turned it into an iconic symbol for squatter movements and legal battles over its use. It eventually became a commercial centre but was plagued throughout its history by under-occupation and a lack of maintenance.

The political controversies surrounding the building's use and exchange values came to prominence in the 2000s as the high-end London residential property market became a focus for new forms of financialised global investment. Sites such as Centre Point gradually took on a new status as prime opportunity sites through which such investment could be channelled. It was relatively straightforward to generate a narrative of obsolescence about the building that would resonate with planners and other interests who had long viewed it as 'under-used' and 'lacking in utility function'. The poor quality and maintenance of modernist public spaces around the main building were a particular source of concern, particularly in the wake of long-term, large-scale infrastructure investments taking place around it. The Underground Station at Tottenham Court Road has been upgraded for London's new Crossrail Line, giving Centre Point a strategically significant location directly connected to Heathrow Airport and the City of London. Moreover, the entire neighbourhood is a part of a designated Growth Area under the *London Plan*, known as St Giles', within which the objective is to '*provide a balanced mix of uses, an excellent public realm, and development of the highest quality and to remedy the lack of open space*' and create a '*central London gateway and the creation of new world class public spaces*'[2]. Camden Council's (2010) Local Development Framework presents the site as strategically significant and states that '*development should contribute to the creation of mixed and balanced inclusive communities by containing a mix of large and small homes overall*' (p.37).

The public policy context within which the redevelopment programme has taken place has also been transformed since the financial crash of 2007-2008 and the subsequent austerity cuts to local government budgets (Bailey *et al.*, 2015). Camden's declined by approximately 50% between 2010-17, or over £20million/year. Its *Borough Regeneration and Planning Directorate*, that oversees planning negotiations, has been particularly hard hit, dropping from a budget of £2.54million in 2013/14 with 157 employees, to just £297,000 in 2017/2018 (London Borough of Camden, 2014; 2017). Its capacity to control or influence the

[1] Because of its architectural, planning, and historical interest the building was formally recognised under planning legislation as having official Grade II Listed Status in 1995 (see Historic England, 2017).
[2] London Borough of Camden, Application Number 2012/2897/L, Paragraph 1.4.

direction of major development projects, funded by investors with large levels of technocratic knowledge and time resources. At the same time, as noted above, investment flows into London's high-end residential market have reached unprecedented levels, the financing of which comes from a mix of institutional actors including pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, the so-called 'super-rich', and national governments (Hunter, 2016). Under these conditions there is growing pressure on local authorities to seek to extract as much planning 'gain' as possible and to deliver projects that maximise returns to investors. Residential developments provide the highest market returns and are particularly attractive to local authorities looking to increase planning gain. Since 2012 developers have also been given the power to swap Permitted Development Rights, or shift a building's use from commercial to residential, if there is an identified 'need' for additional housing in an area and provided that there are no strong economic reasons why such development would be 'inappropriate' (Planning Magazine, 2016). At a stroke commercial sites such as Centre Point have thus been opened up to viability-driven residential investment. In the next sections we draw on our data to examine the temporalities and practices of its planning and development that the discussion now turns.

The Redevelopment of Centre Point – Slow Planning in Action

The first proposals for the redevelopment of Centre Point were drawn up by the developer Almacantar after acquiring the site in 2010. Almacantar typifies the new generation of investors who have moved into the London property market since 2008. They are a private equity fund whose investors include wealthy individuals and families looking to deposit their money in a relatively safe investment climate. It describes itself to potential investors as possessing a specific form of temporality: '*We specialise in large-scale, complex investments in Central London, with the potential to create long-term value through development repositioning or active asset management*' (Almacantar, 2016: p.1). It has made a series of strategic decisions to invest in high-end London property and large-scale assets that are "*high risk but high return*". Capital alignment is principally concerned with the allocation of capital and its return over a mutually agreed set of time-frames. In the words of one interviewee "*the more successful businesses are the ones that have aligned the type of capital to the type of activities they do*" and Almacantar looks to develop "*long term, patient capital*" that is aligned to major investment projects, with long-term returns. As one financial manager noted in interview: "*if financiers are willing to invest then I can make them a lot of money but I need them to be there for the long term…I need someone to sit there for ten years*". Such investment cycles are typical of private equity funds.

Almacantar also drew on London-based sources of long-term finance and expertise. The negative impacts of the financial crisis of 2008 encouraged investors, in the words of one interviewee, to change "*from being allocators of capital to being providers of return…because they were unable to control anything [they] have said actually we want to allocate the capital*". Through an investment agreement, 25% of the funding for Centre Point comes from the property investment body Frogmore Estates, a company that was looking to spread its portfolio of investments in the wake of the financial crash of 2007/08. As a family-backed Estate group, Frogmore possesses a relatively high degree of time resource and typifies the type of 'patient capital' that exists in the central London market. The presence of the London Estates helps to provide additional confidence. They not only possess land assets but are also skilled and experienced negotiators and have the expertise and resources required to bring projects to fruition. The characterisation of property investors as short-termist and focused on rapid returns that underpins much of the literature on slow cities, does not apply to such companies in the same way, as they possess long-term temporal assets and outlooks.

The long-term nature of Almacantar's funding streams has allowed them to develop a flexible set of institutional arrangements, structures, and financial systems. The parent company, Almancantar Ltd., oversees a number of subsidiaries, each of which then works under a binding contract to deliver services to the parent firm. As the firm's trading statement makes clear, '*the principal activity of the group is the provision of advisory and administrative services to other companies. Income will arise in due course as other group companies make* *property investments*' (2015: p.3). It is domiciled in Luxembourg, which has become a key location for off-shoring in the EU. Its accounts also indicate that the parent company is able to '*extend loans to other group companies on an arm's length basis*' (p.3), thus enabling it to allocate and re-allocate funds across the group, whilst managing risk and reducing borrowing charges. The parent company possesses assets (2016 prices) of over £77million.

The Centre Point proposals involved a complete re-making of the building, under the auspices of its listed heritage status. The original planning application was submitted in June 2012 and sought to change the use from office space to residential use and provide 82 new units[3] (see Figure 1). The developer submitted an economic assessment that concluded that '*the building is reaching the end of its useful life as offices and that a change of use is warranted on economic grounds*'. This view was supported by a local authority-funded study by consultants BPS that:

'*agree[d] with the applicant's conclusion that the building is reaching the end of its useful life; requires substantial investment in its fabric to ensure that the future of this listed building can be secured; and that the income generated from continued office use is insufficient to provide an adequate return on the investment. The overall conclusion is that the proposed change of use is warranted on economic grounds*[4]'

This 'obsolescence' narrative (*cf.* Weber, 2015) was central to the political objective of 'selling of the project' to councillors and local residents and businesses. In early planning submissions it featured as the primary justification for development. As the building was '*in need*' of refurbishment, its acquisition by a long-term investor created '*circumstances [that] now provide an opportunity to redevelop*' the site, and how the tower was '*not suitable for 21st Century office space and is not viable*'[5]. The advantage of residential units for the developers is that they also generate returns more quickly through forward sales and this allows them to 'add value'. For many property developers, a pre-sales target of 30-35% for units in a new development is required to generate enough confidence in a development to attract finance[6]. For Almacantar, the focus on pre-sales has been concentrated on the most expensive units, in order to generate income *early* in the development process, with the contractual undertaking that this will then be redistributed through planning gain at a later date.

A number of regulatory requirements and policies were used to further justify obsolescence. The building's lack of 'insulation' and poor energy use was presented as evidence of its poor sustainability. In pushing for change, the proposals claimed that *only* a '*change of use to residential*' will generate sufficient returns to make development happen. As Almacantar's Development Director was quoted as saying in 2012, '*office use is simply not sustainable for the 'beautiful building'*', citing '*the difficulties initial developer Harry Hyams had finding tenants for the tower throughout the 1970s as a kind of harbinger for its ultimate unsuitability for this use*' (Norman, 2012: pp.1-2). Moreover, an economic viability argument was presented that stated explicitly that '*the present use does not and cannot pay for the required refurbishment works*[7]' and that the '*depth of the building would provide for good habitable space*'. This, in turn, would mean that whilst '*they have considered providing onsite affordable housing…there are technical difficulties including having the extra lifts required the lack of required outdoor space and the need for mechanical venting*'. It was claimed that planning gain obligations could only be met if such housing were to be provided elsewhere, so the initial proposal was to establish high-end retail uses on the bottom floors and residential apartments, including a Penthouse Suite, on other floors.

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[3] See Developers' Briefing 11 June 2012, 'change of use, alterations and extensions at Centre Point 103 New Oxford Street, London, WC1A.

[4] Centre Point Committee Report, 31 May 2012: Paragraph 6.25.

[5] See Developers' Briefing 11 June 2012, 'change of use, alterations and extensions at Centre Point 103 New Oxford Street, London, WC1A.

[6] *Pers comm.* Sonia Freire-Trigo, Bartlett School of Planning, UCL, 18 September 2017.

[7] See Development Management Forum: Centre Point, 24 July 2012.

As with other major developments in English cities, the main area of political contention has been over the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of planning gain that result from the development and amount of affordable and social housing that will be delivered. In early discussions, there were over 2200 objections to the plan, mainly around the issues of disruption and the loss of local heritage assets. There was particular criticism of the types of development being proposed and their 'soulless' character, with a fear that global retail and restaurant chains would be attracted to the area. A series of *Developers' Briefings Meetings* were undertaken at which community representatives, planners, and developers (and their architects) discussed the details of the scheme before it went through to the planning permission process. For instance, it was argued by local residents and heritage groups that the top floor of any proposed refurbishment should be kept open as a public space. However, from the beginning the developer noted that a commissioned '*viability study…suggested that the scheme would be unviable if this was implemented*' and there was '*no relevant policy or precedent for public access at the top of tall residential buildings*'[8]. In the first submission Almacantar therefore proposed to provide an 'off-site' set of affordable housing units away from the Centre Point development and, failing this, to provide the local authority with a one-off payment for social housing[9]. It also offered to pay for large-scale public space improvement works and a series of other measures to divert traffic and transport links in the area. The development even required an archaeological evaluation report to be paid for by the developer again adding both cost and additional time to the planning and development process[10].

The original proposal was refused permission. Whilst it was recognised that the plans met the objective of acting as a '*high quality development appropriate to this central London gateway and the creation of new world class public spaces*' (paragraph 1.5)[11], they were rejected as they failed to meet the requirements to create mixed and balanced communities as set out in the Local Development Framework. The main issue of contention was over the absence of affordable housing provision in the application and the lack of a '*sufficient justification for the shortfall of on-site affordable housing and why it is not currently possible to deliver affordable housing off-site in accordance with the Council's affordable housing target*' (Camden Borough Council, 2012: p.2)[12]. For the local authority, there was '*too little certainty*' in the application with '*insufficient information to demonstrate what is the maximum reasonable amount of affordable housing that could be provided on site*'.

The initial rejection led to a new round of negotiations over what planning gains should consist of and *when* they should be delivered. Between April-July 2013 a series of agreements were put in place in which the investment would be used to pay for 'affordable' housing units on a site adjacent to the main tower and a one-off payment would be made to Camden Council of over £900,000 to 'mitigate the loss of employment opportunities to Camden residents', owing to the loss of commercial space. The size and scale of the pre-development payment reflected both the financial capacity available to the investors and developers and the market advantages to be accrued by those able to accept short-term costs for enhanced longer-term returns. The whole process took more than 3 years, during which additional costs were accumulated, that in turn would have to be recouped through higher residential sales.

It is this accumulation of up-front costs that led to a series of outcomes favourable to the developer. Once the final settlement was agreed only 13 of the 133 (9.8%) units to be constructed were defined as affordable, including just 3 of the 76 2-bedroomed apartments and 2 of the 29 3-4 bedroom units (see Figure 2). The degree to which affordable apartments at 80% of market value would be genuinely in the price range of local residents has to be questioned, particularly in a context in which residential units will be marketed as

[8] See Development Management Forum: Centre Point, 11 February 2013.

[9] Centre Point Planning Application Briefing Note (2011/2895/P). 13 August 2012.

[10] The specialist consultancy Museum of London Archaeology produced a report declaring that 'results from the evaluation indicate the development is unlikely to impact on archaeological remains' (2015: p.1).

[11] Officers' Report for 3.

[12] Meeting of Planning Committee, Thursday 20 September 2012, Application no.: 2012/2897/L

being in an 'iconic' central London location. According to RightMove (2106) 'most property sales in Camden involved flats which sold for on average £806,894. Terraced properties sold for an average price of £2,024,879, while semi-detached properties fetched £3,394,314'. The refurbishment is now in the final stages with apartments due to open from 2017 with the exclusive property agents Knight Frank and CBRE overseeing marketing and sales to national and international investors. One apartment alone is being marketed as 'one of the most luxurious Penthouses in the world' (Mansion Global, 2018: p.1) with a retail price of £55million, indicating the enormous scale of returns for the 'patient capital' invested in the redevelopment.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Temporal Politics and the Development of Cities

The Centre Point case indicates how the complexity, expense, and relatively slow pace of urban development processes can generate outcomes favourable to those with larger degrees of time resources and extended temporal outlooks. In this final section we highlight three key dimensions of this process and their relevance for understanding and interrogating the politics and governance of contemporary cities.

First, the slow pace of planning approval and its up-stream, resource-intensive character enabled a degree of *market capture* for investors and developers. Only those with the resources and backing to support a long-term project would, *de facto*, be in the market to undertake the project. More resources also allow firms to manage the complexity and times of the development planning system and turn slow decision-making to their advantage. As one interviewee noted in relation to planning across London:

"[where] *we have got held up with more layers of planning that we need to go through…quite often involving the Mayor [of London], or a judicial review…the whole uncertainty of that front end has caused issues, but that's generally very good for people who are good at it and get planning [permission] and have got funding to get on to sites*".

The capacity to be 'good' at "*navigat[ing] difficult circumstances*" in a time-frame that meets longer-term investor demands, therefore gives specific types of firm a competitive advantage and limits the development of smaller market competitors. Interviewees were also candid about the perceived 'dangers' of faster and more 'efficient' planning arrangements. For instance, it was noted that where planning approvals are expedited development assets can go into a form of over-supply and start to 'under-perform' in terms of expected yields. As one interviewee noted often "*the big players pile into the market and generate oversupply very quickly…because of the ease with which they can access capital, the ease with which they can access debt…and the ease with which they can get planning consent*". Conversely, a slower and complex planning environment produces very different outcomes: "*when it's easy the market goes into oversupply, when it's difficult, [as it is] in virtually every other market, it tends to stay structurally undersupplied, and we make higher returns*". The slowness of the planning approval process thus "*cost us a ridiculous amount of money, [and was] deeply inefficient*". However, it was also acknowledged that this temporality worked well:

"*the upside is enormous if you can do it. We have to put £120million into the purchase and then probably £20million to get through planning…if we hadn't got planning [permission] we would have been sitting on an asset worth about £90million. If you get it right it's worth five time that*"

The scale and complexity of the resource inputs gave longer-term investors and those best able to understand how the planning system operated, a strong market position:

"*if it was any easier someone would have paid £150million for that asset on day one and we would have been blown out of the water…we're the ones with the track record and you've got no competition…in a way imperfection in the property market is what drives returns*".

Second, such insights illustrate the antagonisms inherent within markets and planning systems and some of the contradictions between the perceived benefits of slower processes of deliberation and project outcomes. Viability-based planning legislation is designed to off-set investment losses in the event of a market slowdown but less able to generate additional investments in social housing and/or public infrastructure when markets inflate to a higher degree than expected (McAllister *et al.*, 2016). The local authority were aware of this danger from an early stage. As the original approval document conceded:

'*given the uncertainties…with regard to sales values a deferred contribution would be expected at this site. As with any other development scheme in the current market in Central London and given the sensitivities with the financial viability of the scheme it is likely that a small change in sales values in the tower will result in a large change to the viability of providing affordable housing*'.

However, under planning legislation negotiations, the returns for local government, and citizens can only be acquired over time and in-line with changing market conditions. This legal certainty underpins the longer-term temporal outlooks that firms can take as under English Common Law changes are relatively foreseeable to the extent that one interviewee noted that "*there is nowhere else in the world they* [private equity firms such as Almacantar] *can invest in on the same basis. And therefore it is unique*". Similar attitudes were presented in relation to planning regulations, including environmental standards and social obligations that have "*increased cost and reduced efficiency but it has provided greater protection*" for future revenues and returns. Moreover, the possession of significant temporal resources enables companies to attract more favourable forms of finance and debt, further boosting their profitability. These advantages are reproduced by a context in which there is a continual under-supply of property assets, aided by the complexities and 'slow' times of the planning system that limits the rate of supply.

Third, the processes outlined in this case show that the degree of regulation and oversight provided by planning authorities is being reduced in the wake of austerity cuts. The work of scrutinising the progress that a major, complex development is making over a number of years, requires a resource-intensive degree of bureaucratic oversight. The scale of reductions faced by the local authority, threatens to undermine its longer term capacities to undertake these monitoring tasks. Whilst authors such as Adams *et al.* (2016) argue that strong planning arrangements create certainty for developers, the evidence from Centre Point indicates that there is a reflexive awareness of both the severe pressures local authorities are under and the potential advantages that this gives to investors in negotiations, particularly over benefits that are supposed to accrue over longer time-frames. As one interviewee noted, "*planning is generally under-resourced and policies are not clear enough for them to be capable of not being challenged, but I don't mind*". Similar trends also characterised community engagement and protest. The ability to sustain local political activity is limited, particularly as individuals are not being threatened with life-changing relocations as they are in other parts of London. Once planning approval was given, the capability of activists to maintain engagement over the longer term was circumscribed by a lack of time and other resources, allowing investors to wait for protests and challenges to subside. There is nothing new in the finding that communities possess limited resources. What is new, under contemporary planning arrangements, is that protest and opposition to developments need to be articulated over the long-term and underpinned by a high degree of technical brokerage and vigilance that is costly and subject to short-term change and variability.

Conclusions

The paper has used the example of a major urban development project in Central London to explore the temporal politics of urban planning, practices, and projects. Much of the existing literature in urban studies emphasises the compression of space-time under conditions of contemporary capitalism and financialisation. Public policy narratives in the UK and elsewhere are pushing for quick and expedited delivery. In many European and North America cities neo-liberal temporalities have taken on greater resonance, along with the argument that in order to build 'market competitiveness' in a global environment, policy-makers have little but to increase the speed of their planning systems and prioritise output-led and delivery-focused modes of intervention. For critical authors such as Weber (2015), the way to challenge such approaches are to support the introduction of new forms of regulation that generate 'slow urbanism', allowing time for proper democratic and judicial-technical oversight of development processes.

And yet, as the paper argues, much research on development processes leave 'the temporal undertheorised', particularly in relation to urban elites (Lauermann, 2016). Future research on the politics and governance of the built environment needs to be more engaged with the relationships between power, resources, and temporality. Whilst there has been a growing concern with questions around policy mobilities and transfers, the politicised nature of temporalities have been less thoroughly discussed and when addressed have been dominated by simple binaries between the speed of planning and decision-making processes and project outcomes. The paper has argued that the 'speed' of decision-making processes and planning approvals is only one factor amongst many in shaping the built environments of cities. It has shown that time is a *resource* within the development process and that like other resources it represents a source of both power and control. The existence of relatively slow and complex planning arrangements, particularly in regard to major projects can, in practice, create new opportunities for investors and developers who possess long-term outlooks and sources of finance. Such actors are not only considering their own temporal strategies, but a myriad of other influences such as planning systems, macroeconomic influences, global capital flows and real estate cycles. Following on from this, there needs to be greater sensitivity within characterisations of development processes, to the presence of a plurality of institutional players, who possess very different time resources and needs. This opens up opportunities for 'market capture', given that relatively few companies or groups of investors are able to bear the inflated short-term costs involved in putting together complex and expensive applications for longer terms gains. The greater the initial costs in obtaining planning permissions and obligations, the more powerful investor and developer interests may become in shaping viability negotiations.

Such examples demonstrate that without a stronger set of *temporal imaginaries and outlooks*, policy-makers and citizens will remain in a relatively weak position vis-à-vis resource intensive, reflexive, and patient investors and developers. The temporalities of planning lie at the heart of broader debates over contemporary forms of urban governance, democratic engagement, and policy outcomes. The research has shown that temporalities are not just about time but about the socially and politically situated experiences of time embedded in specific power relations and conjunctions. In methodological terms, we have shown that the only way to assess the politics of temporality is to carefully examine cases in a holistic manner and to explore the conditions in and through which specific deployments of temporality generate different outcomes. The paper has also argued that in order to do this more attention needs to be given to the social relations of the property development and investment sector and the recognition that multiple systems, structures, and cultures are present, each with their own temporal politics. Within London, and elsewhere, there is a growing policy focus on how to generate more diversity in the types of developers and investors who exist in the market so that more developments take place more quickly (see Mayor of London, 2017). There is a push to 'diversify' investment and construction markets and encourage smaller players to take a more prominent role in project delivery. But as the case study has shown, smaller players, with fewer time resources, are unable to compete with those who possess sufficient time to enable developments to take place and to engineer value as profit. A focus on temporalities indicates that the competitive advantages of more powerful actors are being further consolidated by recent changes to planning arrangements and their shift to viability concerns and longer-term temporal horizons. A focus on planning temporalities also helps to explain why and how urban development projects in major cities have become increasingly global in scale and disconnected from broader social needs and objectives.

And finally, we have also argued that the impacts of austerity cuts to planning budgets have temporal aspects that remain relatively under-developed in the burgeoning literature on 'austerity urbanism'. Our case has shown that if the 'benefits' of slow city planning, that authors such as Weber are arguing for, are to be achieved, then they require planning authorities to possess the capacities to control and oversee the rolling-out of development processes. Austerity cuts are undermining such capacities, allowing for 'temporal fracturing' that opens up opportunities for powerful interests to take a stronger role. The expectation that cuts will impact on the longer-term capacity of state bodies to regulate and oversee development processes is reflexively understood by development actors and opens up new opportunities for them to shape project outcomes. Local authorities are faced with direct temporal trade-offs between delivering on planning gain objectives and meeting multiple local socio-economic needs, all of which may relate to different time-frames and temporal outlooks.

These processes also raise significant governmental and regulatory challenges. Proposals to 'speed-up' development may be doomed to failure in a context where projects take on higher levels of complexity and slowness, from which greater profits can be accrued. Similarly efforts to 'slow down' developments with the introduction of more regulations and more complexity may, as we have seen, benefit larger developers and enable them to inflate the scope and scale of developments to meet any resulting cost increases. Every time a regulation is introduced, costs expand requiring the diminution of social contributions in order to maintain a site's economic viability. It may be that planning interventions need to adopt more radical, and less market-driven modes of intervention by, for instance, bringing in new temporalities to planning law or allow state bodies to undertake their own development and establish their own deliberative time-scales, irrespective of market concerns. Such interventions would establish very different temporalities, relatively divorced from market pressures and under the control of public authorities and citizens. Future research needs to explore who governs planning times and how is time deployed selectively to influence the politics of urban development.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Eugene McCann, three anonymous referees, and Sonia Freire-Trigo at UCL for their thoughtful and insightful comments on an earlier draft of the paper. Responsibility for the final draft is of course the authors' alone.

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