RETHINKING VACANCY:
EXPLORING A TEMPORARY USE MODEL FOR VACANT LAND IN CHICAGO

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ABSTRACT

Urban vacant land is a pervasive feature in many U.S. cities. Following the 2008 foreclosure crisis, local governments sought to reduce the high concentration of municipal-owned vacant land through initiatives that transferred lots to private ownership. This approach provided short-lived financial benefits but left large amounts of vacant land without plans for reutilization. This research explores how municipal strategies can adopt a temporary use model that allows for incremental, short-term interventions on vacant land. Focusing on Chicago, this paper compares the city’s former Large Lots Program with three case studies in the Washington Park neighborhood to illustrate different approaches to vacant land reutilization. Using a descriptive evaluative framework, this paper argues that embracing a temporary use model promotes socio-ecological benefits that can mitigate the adverse impacts resulting from high concentrations of vacant land and support community-led transformation.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrew Epps is a researcher and planner. He works as a City Planner for the Baltimore City Department of Public Works supporting stormwater mitigation strategies and community partnerships. He completed his Master of Regional Planning degree from Cornell University in 2023, where he studied climate adaptation planning and community-led land governance. While at Cornell, he was a research assistant for the Mui Ho Center for Cities and A Northeast Safe and Thriving for All (NEST), a NOAA-funded project identifying barriers to climate migration in the Upper Northeast region. After graduating, he worked for Chicago-based Sweet Water Foundation as an Urban Ecology Fellow-In-Residence, where he researched vacant land reutilization, supported educational programming, and grew food on a two-acre community farm. Andrew was born and raised in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin.
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ANLAP – Adjacent Neighbors Land Acquisition Program

DPD – City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development

GHN – “Green Healthy Neighborhoods” (2014)

KDG – King Drive Community Healing and Resilience Garden

LL – Large Lots Program

MOL – municipal-owned land

NS – NeighborSpace

RND – Regenerative Neighborhood Development

RR – Redefining Redlining

SWF – Sweet Water Foundation
PREFACE

“Study how a society uses its land, and you can come to pretty reliable conclusions as to what its future will be.” – E. F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful (1973)

“We write to you from the middle of something. It may not really be the middle, but it is not the end, and it is not the beginning.” – Eve Tuck, Guess, and Sultan (2014)

In the fall of 2022, after a year of graduate studies under my belt, I took a workshop that radically changed my perspective on planning. The course took a dozen graduate students to Detroit to work with community groups on land strategies that could benefit local residents. It was co-led by Chicago-based Sweet Water Foundation, who led a “disorientation” at their 12-acre demonstration site called The Commonwealth. The feeling of disorientation stayed with me long after the four days on site, and I decided to dig deeper and find a way to make this the focus of my graduate research.

I could not shake the feeling of encountering the expanse of vacant land in Chicago and Detroit. After a semester of planning history, I knew the degenerative practices of redlining and urban renewal that had led to such widespread vacant land, but I had never experienced it in person. As I began to research the issue, I became frustrated that more people were not as bewildered as I was at the scale of vacant land in Rust Belt cities. It seemed like such a wasted resource, especially in places experiencing housing crises, stalled economies, and under-resourced local governments. The deeper I searched, the wider I cast the net, and I quickly realized that vacant land was challenging because it touches on so many other important and critical issues in planning and urban studies, most of which center around the
relationship between people, land, and property.

After graduating in May 2023, I spent the next seven months at Sweet Water Foundation in Chicago. Each morning, I rode my bike along 57th Street through Washington Park, passing acres and acres of vacant land. There were also vacant lots around The Commonwealth, but these had become reclaimed spaces that were cared for by the team. They were activated by a weekly market, garden beds opened to the community, and temporary architectural installations, all of which spoke to the generative potential of vacant land. Experiencing the transformation of these so-called vacant places first-hand, I began to recognize the power that community control of land can have in a neighborhood and the land struggles that prevent such models from coming into existence.

While this research focuses on Chicago, it is rooted in a more expansive vision of community-led land use. It feels exceedingly urgent, because I am writing this in the middle of something that is still coming into form. There are at present multiple looming and unfolding crises that are already radically changing political, social, and ecological landscapes on local and global scales. The unending pursuit of growth at the expense of greater labor and resource extraction continues to be the foundation for national and global economic agendas. And undergirding all of these issues are questions of land.

Land—our most important natural resource—is increasingly being squandered by liberal property regimes that reduce land to an abiotic commodity. The evidence of this is everywhere. At the center of the ongoing conflicts in Palestine, Ukraine, and elsewhere, are deep divisions and historic struggles over ownership and control of land and its resources. In the same vein, record-breaking heat waves, floods, droughts, and wildfires have become business-as-usual, thwarting urgent and necessary climate action. The chaos of living in the
middle of “something” has seemingly eroded our grasp on what is real and sacred.

In his 1973 book *Small is Beautiful*, economist E. F. Schumacher warned of the challenges that would follow rapid globalization and a growth-first economic model. He argued that treating natural resources as expendable externalities in pursuit of perpetual profit resulted in a ‘despoiling’ of the land. For Schumacher, the alternative lay not in economics, but rather in societal priorities. He espoused the importance of being “in touch with living nature of which [humanity] is and remains a highly vulnerable part” (1973, p. 113). Fifty years later, the caution of Schumacher seems more prescient than ever. Land-as-property is concentrated in the hands of few, making the social and responsible use of this scarce resource increasingly rare. But not all is lost. Small-scale solutions from the bottom-up are evidence of what is possible through collective action and graduated incrementalism that supports ecologically conscious land stewardship. Small is beautiful.

As a student of history, I believe that those who understand the past are best equipped to shape the future. While I was at Sweet Water Foundation, I encountered the term *Sankofa*, a proverb from the Akan people of West Africa meaning “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.” In other words, there is wisdom in learning from the past. This project is rooted in identifying and weaving together historical threads to better understand the emergence of vacant land. It is through this process of uncovering history that I have come to a better understanding about the future of land and what must be done to move forward in ways that are just, prosocial, and in balance with living ecologies.

*February 2024*
INTRODUCTION

In Washington Park on the south side of Chicago, the paradox of vacancy is visible in the neighborhood’s patchwork of vacant parcels. Along Prairie Avenue, between 56th and 57th Streets, two lone six-flat buildings are the only structures that remain. The rest of the block is made up of ten vacant lots, six of which are owned by the City of Chicago and the other four by absentee owners. One of these parcels was purchased through the Large Lots program, the city’s former vacancy management initiative that attempted to jumpstart the local housing market. Since the lot was purchased, it has remained undeveloped and with only minimum care and maintenance.

Nearly a decade ago, the corner of Calumet Avenue and 57th Street looked the same. Since then, however, this space has been transformed into a community garden with over twenty raised garden beds, trellises for growing cucumbers and tomatoes, and a large mural adorning an adjacent building. This transformation exemplifies how effective community reinvestment and land reutilization can turn vacancy into vibrancy. Surprisingly, it also shares a common origin with the vacant lot on Prairie Avenue: both were acquired through the Large Lots Program. These two vastly different outcomes—located only a block from each other—raise questions about the efficacy of the Large Lots Program and if an alternative land use model could have produced different results.

When the Large Lots Program (“Large Lots”) launched in 2014, then Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel promoted it as a novel approach to “help return empty land to productive use” (City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor, 2014). The initiative sold vacant, municipal-owned land (MOL) to same-block property owners for a symbolic $1. It championed local control of vacant land to build wealth and increase safety (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and
Development, 2014c). Research evaluating the program identified that it reduced crime (Stern & Lester, 2021), empowered property owners (Rigonon et al., 2021), and improved the condition and care of purchased lots by same-block residents (Gobster et al., 2020). However, some local residents expressed that it was opaque and exclusionary (Tepper, 2018). Although the program was suspended in 2018, the recent consolidation of Chicago’s land purchase programs and the continued influence of Large Lots on its vacancy management approach has renewed interest in how the city supports the reutilization of vacant MOL.

Large Lots emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 foreclosure crisis and increased visibility of urban vacant land. Cash-strapped local governments responded by employing reutilization initiatives that premised vacant land as a problem to fix, not as an opportunity for local transformation. The resulting vacancy management programs overemphasized the “permanent” solution of selling vacant MOL. Despite the short-lived financial benefits, this approach has the potential to exacerbate preexisting urban disparities in neighborhoods with high concentrations of vacant land.

This paper seeks to offer an alternative model. I argue that a temporary use model for urban vacant land offers more expansive potential for community transformation than traditional market-based approaches, especially in neighborhoods with significant vacant MOL. Rather than reserving vacant land for future unplanned use or holding it for real estate speculation, temporary uses of MOL offer greater benefit to local communities and achieve socio-ecological benefits. Using case studies from small-scale interventions in Washington Park, I chart the potential for vacant land to disrupt traditional notions of economic value. I conclude by putting forth potential pathways to incorporate temporary uses for vacant land into municipal reutilization strategies.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban vacant land is a pervasive feature in many U.S. cities. Due to its perceived lack of economic value, cities have been slow to adopt progressive action and implement effective reutilization programs (Weaver, 2017). The challenges of urban vacant land are not new (Berkman, 1956), but the increased visibility of urban vacant land since the 2008 financial crisis has renewed interest in the topic (O’Callaghan, 2023). While the causes of urban vacant land are often related, the lack of sufficient data has been a significant barrier for local governments (Bowman & Pagano, 2000) and potential reutilization strategies are influenced by a number of hyperlocal contexts—e.g. location, demographic makeup, political climate, etc.—that make it difficult to study and compare across geographies (Németh & Langhorst, 2014).

Literature in planning has focused largely on the negative externalities of urban vacant land. It decreases property values (Newman et al., 2019; vom Hofe et al., 2018), drains municipal resources (Mallach, 2018), contributes to higher crime (Immergluck & Smith, 2006; Kondo et al., 2016), and adversely affects the health and wellbeing of local residents (Bowman & Pagano, 2004; Garvin et al., 2013). Additionally, with greater attention from above by planners and policymakers and from below by local communities, vacant land has emerged as a site of conflict and contestation upon which differing visions of urban futures are enacted (McClintock, 2018; Noterman, 2021; O’Callaghan, 2023).

Despite its outsized impact on communities, urban vacant land remains understudied “as a process in its own right” (Dimitrakou, 2022, p. 998). In response, a growing set of literature has uplifted the generative impacts of vacant land’s social value (Anderson & Minor, 2017), ecological benefit (Kim, 2016; Kim et al., 2018), and potential for supporting
community-led transformation (Safransky, 2023). I situate this emerging scholarship within the competing demands of municipal reutilization strategies for vacant MOL.

The following literature review is divided into eight sections. The first section explains how urban vacant land challenges traditional economic values. The second section offers alternative “meta-economic” values of vacant land by exploring its social, ecological, and symbolic dimensions. The third section introduces the concept of hypervacancy, where more than 20 percent of a neighborhood’s properties are vacant, and how it is connected to vacant land. Delving into historical and ongoing forms of class and racial discrimination, I argue that hypervacancy is a systemic problem with many complexities that require flexible and innovative strategies to mitigate.

The fourth section turns to research on the municipal pressures that undergird municipal reutilization programs, including fiscal, developmental, and social imperatives. It examines how municipal decision-making is influenced by bounded rationality and path dependency, leading to an over-prioritization of fiscal concerns over social and developmental goals. The fifth section centers on the limitations of “transfer of ownership” programs to address hypervacancy. It critiques the overreliance on market-driven outcomes that can lead to real estate speculation and curb community control of land.

The sixth section introduces the temporary use model of vacant land. It discusses the potential benefits and drawbacks of temporary uses and how they reflect political, economic, social, and ecological outcomes. The seventh section highlights “clean and green” programs, which are municipal reutilization programs that allow for temporary uses and serve as a template for advocating for greater inclusion of a temporary use model. The final section introduces the evaluative criteria from three frameworks included in the literature review.
These criteria will be used in the paper’s analysis to create a matrix that will evaluate reutilization initiatives on urban vacant land.

**Urban vacant land challenges market-based values**

Land is a commodity in a contemporary market economy (Harvey, 1973). In economics, a commodity is an object sold for production or consumption with properties that meet a human need or desire. It has both an exchange and use value. In the case of land, an exchange value is realized when land is rented or sold and is generated by its ability to return on an investment (Pivo, 1984). The use value of land is determined by *who* and *how* it is used or consumed and may be defined differently by its specific users and/or uses (Harvey, 1973).

This binary construction of value premises land as a source of profit. It reduces it to an object that has financial value based on a predetermined set of qualities. Therefore, access and allocation of land is determined only by market forces leading to social conflicts, inefficiencies, and inequities (Pivo, 1984). The failures of this model are exemplified by the thousands of vacant lots that compose many postindustrial urban landscapes.

In cities with high urban vacancy, e.g. Cleveland and Detroit where respectively over 13 and 23 percent of addresses are vacant (Newman et al., 2016), the oversupply and lack of demand diminishes *both* exchange and use values causing land markets to functionally cease to exist. Whereas traditional economic values prioritize maximizing productivity and profitability, urban vacant land challenges this approach by remaining unused or underutilized, highlighting the limitations of market-based solutions to solve the challenges of vacancy. Even in cities where land markets have rebounded or adjusted to capture urban vacant land, the high supply weakens traditional exchange and use values (Ganning & Tighe,
These issues are amplified in the case of vacant MOL. Municipal ownership of urban vacant land is subject to policy objectives, regulatory frameworks, and strategic planning initiatives that may diverge from traditional market dynamics. Local governments have the authority to use legal and regulatory frameworks to influence land uses that encourage or restrict uses or development in certain areas. For example, land banking is a property reutilization method that allows public or semi-public agencies to disrupt traditional markets by influencing supply and demand as well as formulating pricing mechanisms (Alexander, 2015). When municipal interventions are used in tandem with community support, vacant MOL can represent unique opportunities for rethinking traditional exchange and use values.

“Meta-economic” values support alternative land use

Urban vacant land offers a significant opportunity to engage with new forms of value beyond immediate economic gain. Robert Rotenberg (1993) wrote that “whether vacant, reserved, open, or razed, empty spaces…play crucial roles in the fabric of the city” (p. 15). Geographer Cian O’Callaghan (2023) argues that vacant land is an active feature of the urbanization process. In his review of scholarship on vacancy, he identified how vacant land has the power to reconfigure use and exchange values, shape political imaginaries, and influence governance priorities. These counternarratives are rooted in the elasticity of urban vacant land’s use values, or what economist E.F. Schumacher called “meta-economic values.” Schumacher argued that meta-economic values reflect broader considerations of well-being, social cohesion, sustainability, and spiritual fulfillment that are not and cannot be reflected in traditional economic systems (Schumacher, 1973). Inspired by meta-economic, I argue that
alternative uses of urban vacant land have the potential to reflect more holistic social, ecological, and symbolic values.

**Social**

Urban vacant land has exponential social value. High concentrations of vacant land can have negative impacts on land access and public amenities, which diminishes social cohesion and informal sites of encounter. Vacant lots can be reutilized as gathering spaces, pocket parks, or sites of community memory and identity. In neighborhoods with long-term population loss, vacant lots can also be the catalyst for community action that supports mutual aid, care and security networks, and informal local economies. A study in Boston found that urban vacant land was a unifying force in forging collective networks based on social relationships and shared experiences (Foo et al., 2013). These social bonds contributed to increased community fabric, social order, and a shared sense of belonging.

**Ecological**

While overgrown lots are considered a negative externality, they signal the ecological value of urban vacant land. Whether cared for intentionally or not, land is inherently ecologically productive. It is a critical part of an integrated ecosystem and supports many forms of life seen and unseen, above and below ground. Urban vacant land offers the potential for agriculture and food production; stormwater retention; urban forestation; and the natural regulation of air, soil, and water (Kremer et al., 2013). Benefits vary based on land conditions, current and historic uses, and management practices, but it has the potential to better local environmental amenities while supporting additional cultural and social values (Burkholder, 2012).
Symbolic

The visual import of vacant land represents its *symbolic value*. It exemplifies the shifting landscapes of use and reflects back broader economic and political changes. Vacant parcels disrupt linear narratives of progress and decline, becoming sites of contestation that symbolize narratives that extend beyond the physical land and into expressions of identity, power, and spatial relations (Massey, 1994). As “economically nonproductive” spaces, they may serve as powerful visual tools against planned development, displacement, and gentrification, leveraging their aesthetic value—positive or negative—as a form of “placekeeping.” The term placekeeping is the use of existing resources to identify, protect, and strengthen the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural assets that reflect local community character and cultivate cultural memory (Bedoya, 2014). This can take many forms, including the use of “land-as-medium” artistic practices that draw attention to past histories of use or erasure. Urban vacant land as a symbolic expression can “convey availability, opportunity, and informality” to support alternative futures (Bowman & Pagano, 2000, p. 561).

These three meta-economic values—social, ecological, and symbolic—are significant because they challenge traditional use values. Market-based land use is frequently determined by the ambiguous assessment of “highest and best use,” which is by definition a form of value speculation (Dotzour et al., 1990). In contrast, meta-economic values are not easily quantified, measured, or capitalized. This reality makes it difficult for local governments to recognize and support these alternative use values as they are frequently determined to be threats to traditional land markets. However, as noted above, market-based values are largely ineffective in developing progressive reutilization strategies of urban vacant land, particularly of vacant
MOL. Embracing meta-economic values has the potential for greater land and community transformation, especially in urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of vacant land.

**Hypervacancy is racialized and systemic**

Across U.S. cities, urban vacant land is unevenly distributed. Neighborhoods where more than 20 percent of properties are abandoned or unoccupied are considered to be hypervacant (Mallach, 2018). Hypervacancy is unique because it represents the *scale* of the problem. More than just the presence of abandonment, it describes an endemic issue that alters and defines a neighborhood’s character. As direct consequences, residents leave or are forced out, local businesses close, municipal services slow or are suspended, and the local housing and land markets collapse (Hackworth, 2015; Mallach, 2018). These compounded effects beget larger issues, including derelict buildings and overgrown vacant lots that may attract crime or illegal dumping, lead to inadequate infrastructure maintenance, and result in reduced municipal investment (Bowman & Pagano, 2004).

Hypervacancy emphasizes abandoned and vacant homes, yet there is a clear connection between residential vacancies and urban vacant land. After the 2008 foreclosure crisis, many postindustrial cities adopted demolition-only policies that *literally* created more vacant land while reducing an area’s residential capacity (Hackworth, 2016). In this way, hypervacancy represents the preconditions for urban vacant land. It captures the process of degenerative urban cycles that produce vacancy as an externality and highlights the limited state support and lack of political imaginaries for land reutilization in hypervacant neighborhoods. As such, I use the term hypervacancy to include and emphasize urban vacant land while drawing attention to its embedded and systemic connection to residential vacancies.
Hypervacancy is often understood as the result of “disinvestment,” but this is a misleading characterization. Disinvestment supposes that decline results from an absence of capital. However, as Rea Zaimi (2022) argues, hypervacancy is largely the outcome of sustained predatory and extractive investment. Discriminatory practices like redlining spatially segregated neighborhoods and excluded Black and low-income families from traditional housing markets and access to capital, severely limiting pathways to homeownership. As a result, a natural market of subprime lending emerged based on racially-motivated exploitation (Rugh & Massey, 2010). These practices went unabated for decades, enabling the conditions that create and sustain hypervacancy while setting the stage for the 2008 foreclosure crisis.

Historic and ongoing systemic racism and class prejudice are at the core of the production of hypervacancy and vacant land. Black and Latinx populations are overrepresented in hypervacant neighborhoods exacerbating preexisting racialized disparities (Harrison & Immergluck, 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Jason Hackworth (2018) argues that race is a stronger predictor of land abandonment in Midwestern cities, even more than the three common economic factors used to explain hypervacancy, including aging housing stocks, municipal fiscal stress, and deindustrialization. Hackworth connects this correlation to past and present institutional discrimination that constructs Black people as a “threat to property, safety, and political power” (p. 55) resulting in practices, like redlining, that arbitrarily reduce housing demand and capital flows to select neighborhoods.

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1 Redlining is the practice of arbitrarily denying home loans in select neighborhoods based on race and economic status. It was a common practice from the 1940s to the 1960s, when it was outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1966. While the practice is no longer active, the residual impacts of redlining have enduring consequences for many neighborhoods that continue to this day (Hunt, 2005).
Policy language has continually reinforced the discursive nature of vacant land and its relationship to notions of race. Describing urban space as “empty,” “abandoned,” “unimproved,” “unproductive,” or even “vacant” hinges on a process of erasing land uses that are perceived as counter to its “best and highest” use (McClintock, 2021). Associated language about land and property are frequently coded with implications that strengthen the “othering” of race and class, creating hierarchies of access and use (Bhandar, 2018). For example, mid-century urban renewal projects were largely motivated by eradicating and clearing so-called “blight.” The term blight—taken from botany to identify a plant disease—was used to categorize certain neighborhoods as undesirable. These so-called blighted areas corresponded to redlined neighborhoods with majority Black or low-income residents. Over time, blight became a rhetorical tool that upheld a racialized regime of property that legitimimized municipal practices of displacement and “disinvestment.”

Taken together, hypervacancy is a constructed ecology of absence.² It is the product of decades of planning history driven by racial discrimination, municipal neglect, and overt practices of profit-by-exploitation. Yet, it is also a localized dilemma that represents lived experiences and poignant narratives of decline and opportunities for rebirth. This duality of hypervacancy reflects the complexities of urbanization processes that must balance multiple demands. The impact of a market-based economy, however, means that non-financial objectives, like justice, are seldom emphasized, because “efficiency is an easier goal than equity” (Abbott, 2005). Progressive solutions to effectively mitigate hypervacancy must engage with an overemphasis on economic productivity and recenter on strategies that center

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² This term is borrowed from Sweet Water Foundation and the “Constructed Ecology of Absence” board included in their 2019 exhibition, “well·ness at The Commonwealth” (2019).
and aim for more even and just goals for land reutilization.

**Municipal imperatives reflect constraints of bounded rationality and path dependency**

Planners and local governments are faced with many challenges when managing hypervacancy. The issue becomes more complicated in cities with large inventories of vacant MOL. Planning scholars Ann Bowman and Michael Pagano (2004) delineated municipal approaches to urban vacant land into three separate imperatives: *fiscal*, *developmental*, and *social*. The three imperatives are entangled within municipal decision-making and drive political processes related to urban vacant land.

**Fiscal**

Municipal governments have significant financial considerations and implications regarding urban vacant land. On average, property taxes make up 30 percent of municipal revenue (Urban Institute, 2023). Urban vacant land that is tax delinquent or held by the city is not generating any revenue for a local government. Moreover, cities have financial obligations to regularly care and maintain for urban vacant land, including clearing and mowing as well as associated administrative and labor costs. In a political climate where cities must do more with fewer resources (Peck, 2012), expenses for urban vacant land maintenance are seldom prioritized resulting in a lack of public funding to address hypervacancy. As a result, the fiscal imperative is motivated by reducing a municipal government’s cost burden by any means necessary, which may result in effort to return vacant parcels to the tax rolls and transfer maintenance and financial obligations to private property owners.

**Developmental**

While the fiscal imperative is largely motivated by reducing costs to municipal governments, the developmental imperative narrows in on increasing private capital. This
approach seeks to leverage urban vacant land in order to maximize its “best and highest use” to stimulate economic activity and attract more investment to a neighborhood. The developmental imperative has two approaches, which often work in tandem. The primary approach directly targets private developers by the low cost of land, potential tax breaks or public funding, and/or fast-tracking project approval. The secondary approach focuses on increasing the investment potential of a neighborhood to support the primary approach. The secondary approach frequently uses greening initiatives that aim to augment the appearance of hypervacant areas through beautification (McClintock, 2021). This approach can have positive outcomes for community empowerment and connectivity, but it may also contribute to “green gentrification”, which threatens to further displace existing residents and exacerbate urban disparities (Rigolon & Collins, 2023).

**Social**

The social imperative is motivated by improving a neighborhood’s quality of life. This approach acknowledges the related challenges of hypervacancy and views urban vacant land as a part of the solution. Rather than focus on the economic drivers of the previous two imperatives, a social approach uplifts the “meta-economic” values of urban vacant land discussed in the previous section. Efforts may focus on the reutilization of vacant lots as community spaces, greening sites, or for urban agriculture that all have the potential to support greater social benefit. Municipal approaches organized around the social imperative emphasize community engagement to involve local residents in decision-making and build out reutilization efforts that lead to greater community control of urban vacant land.

While these imperatives are not mutually exclusive, municipal reutilization programs tend to prioritize the goals of the fiscal imperative over the other two. This outcome has two
explanations. First, municipal decision-making is made within a framework of bounded rationality (Simon, 1957). According to Herbert Simon’s model of bounded rationality, decision-making is limited by constraints of imperfect and incomplete information. This leads individuals and organizations to make decisions in one’s own self-interest that are “good enough” rather than optimizing processes to achieve the best possible outcome. In the case of vacant land management, reutilization programs were largely created as a response to the 2008 foreclosure crisis, a period marked by fiscal stress on local governments. As a result, programs overemphasize the fiscal imperative and adopt policies that maximize municipal revenue at the expense of more innovative approaches (Nelson, 2012).

A second explanation is municipal path dependency. In the last three decades, cities have embraced neoliberal governance that seeks to increased efficiency and market competition by focusing on economic development and directing resources to sites of capital production (Olesen, 2014). This has manifested in municipal fiscal restraint, social policy rationalization, and a general trend towards downsizing and privatizing state support (Peck, 2012). On a practical level, this also retrains residents’ “imagination of a radically different future” by casting alternative strategies as “impossible” (Olesen, 2014, p. 295). Without active involvement of community members and local advocates, municipal decision-makers are free to pursue risk-adverse, path-dependent policies that address the fiscal imperative and bottom line of local governments.

“Transfer of ownership” programs are less effective in addressing hypervacancy

The consequences of municipal path dependency are evident in the transfer of ownership approach adopted by many vacant land management and reutilization programs.
This approach focuses primarily on the disposal of vacant parcels to private owners in order to increase tax revenue and decrease municipal maintenance costs (Rigolon et al., 2021). A transfer of ownership program sells vacant MOL for nominal fees to same-block or nearby property owners as individual lots or side yards. It is driven by the idea that urban vacant land’s “best and highest use” is realized through its exchange value and can be controlled by top-down municipal intervention into vacant land markets (Németh & Langhorst, 2014).

The transfer of ownership approach hinges on a paradox. On one hand, it is rooted in the belief that vacancy is the result of "poverty, economic decline, and market failure" (Mallach, 2018, p. 5). Yet, it also relies upon those same economic and market forces to function and is buttressed by municipal control of pricing and regulatory frameworks. Growing cities with high interest in development, varied patterns of vacancy, and explicit economic goals are likely to see more success with this approach (Németh & Langhorst, 2014), but it has limits in “shrinking” cities with long-term population loss. A study of St. Louis’s side yard program concluded that supply-side barriers, namely restrictive policies and pricing structures, were the largest constraint on the program’s success (Ganning & Tighe, 2015). Loosening the program’s residency requirements found eligible—but not necessarily interested—buyers for up to 10.8 percent of vacant lots. Even with this hypothetical outcome, it would still leave over 13,000 vacant residential lots unaccounted for by the program’s approach.

The limits of transfer of ownership are especially apparent as a strategy to curb hypervacancy. Formal reutilization programs only authorize sales to existing property owners, despite rentership being more prevalent in hypervacant neighborhoods (Pfeiffer et al., 2021), largely an outcome of historic barriers to homeownership and the aftermath of the 2008
foreclosure crisis. While this restriction intends to prevent cycles of tax foreclosure by selling land to those unable to afford taxes and maintenance costs (Mallach, 2018), it is inherently exclusionary to local residents who are non-property owners, e.g. renters and the unhoused, and limits potential local buyers and stewards of vacant land. Rather than adopt alternative forms of access or ownership, programs entice buyers by selling vacant MOL for symbolically low prices, e.g. $1, with limited restrictions against speculation. This can open up the most vulnerable neighborhoods to an influx of outside private capital drawn in by low-cost land markets and the potential for future profits. This approach may succeed in reducing a local government’s cost burden but leads to additional challenges of real estate speculation while subverting vacant land’s meta-economic values. In order to overcome the bounded rationality of municipal decision-making, vacant land reutilization programs must embrace more flexible, innovative approaches.

A temporary use model of vacant land supports urban transformation

In planning literature, there is a growing interest in using temporary projects as a means to tackle urgent urban issues. In The Temporary City, Bishop and Williams (2012) argue that conventional large-scale, long-term plans fall short in capturing the evolving complexities of urbanization. Instead, they propose temporary interventions as flexible and adaptable solutions to respond to local needs, promote innovation, and empower communities.

Németh and Langhorst (2014) extended this concept to urban vacant land through their embrace of temporary use model. A temporary use model refers to a formal or informal framework for utilizing space or resources on a short-term or interim basis. This approach is used to activate vacant or underutilized spaces for different purposes until more permanent
uses are established. A successful temporary use model is a testbed for innovative and experimental concepts and can inform the transition to more permanent uses or advocate for development based on lessons learned and community feedback.

*Table 1. Benefits and drawbacks of a temporary use model for vacant land from Németh and Langhorst (2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Drawback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political</strong></td>
<td>• flexible • incremental • responsive to local needs • faster results • reveals (in)efficiencies of traditional regulatory and planning systems • exposes uneven and unjust development from contrasting value systems • requires significant changes to regulatory systems which is time-consuming and expensive • challenges prevailing paradigm • inadequate land records • success may risk future development plans • difficult to measure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic</strong></td>
<td>• no land acquisition • inexpensive • greater individual impact from revenue and access to capital • little investment security • liability of uses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td>• alter perception of vacant land • increase local involvement • empower marginalized communities • potential victimization if abandoned for more profitable use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ecological</strong></td>
<td>• increased vegetation • improve microclimate • create habitat • stormwater retention • requires multi-scalor approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their research, Németh and Langhorst found that a temporary use model proves most effective in shrinking cities that are losing population and generally have amounts of vacant land. In particular, a temporary use model is well-suited to transform vacant MOL with high “use value” in neighborhoods affected by hypervacancy. However, they observed that
many reutilization programs in shrinking cities prioritize “permanent” solutions through traditional real estate development, such as transfer of ownership programs. They found that a handful of programs allow for temporary uses, but such a model is not the explicit strategy of any program.

Moving towards a temporary use model for municipal vacant land reutilization can uplift the goals of the social imperative mentioned above to address quality of life issues while also supporting long-term developmental goals. Because temporary uses can take many forms, there are a variety of innovative ways to address socially progressive goals while uplifting vacant land’s meta-economic values. Temporary uses also reveal the shortcomings of prevailing paradigms and illuminate the barriers to implementation, which may open up vacant land to additional conflicts and contestations.

A primary challenge to a temporary use model is its temporal subjectivity. A variety of timelines are reflected in the word “temporary,” which can create confusion and challenges to this approach. Indeed, from a long-term perspective all land uses are temporary. Even property ownership may be considered a temporary action. A temporary use model is intentionally adaptive and flexible to temporal considerations. It can be used as a use framework for a few days or multiple decades. The selected approach is variable to the site’s condition, context, and location. The key difference between a temporary use model and transfers of property is that nothing materially changes between shifts in ownership. This action is only concerns with land’s exchange value. A temporary use model is shaped around the use value of land, which is relative and altered by who and how it is used, not owned.

The temporary use of vacant land can provide many benefits and potential drawbacks. They may be political, economic, social, or ecological in nature (Németh & Langhorst, 2014).
The social and ecological benefits are robust and can be realized relatively quickly with few drawbacks. Political and economic benefits require a longer timeframe and greater investment to be successful. The benefits are also more challenging to demonstrate and are likely to experience pushback due to the significant drawbacks. Assessing temporary uses based on vacant land conditions and criteria can support reutilization strategies that maximize benefits and minimize drawbacks.

“Clean and green” programs support temporary uses

A temporary use model for vacancy management programs may seem unachievable, but existing municipal programs already support such a model. “Clean and green” programs exist in a number of postindustrial, shrinking cities, including Baltimore and Cleveland (Rigolon et al., 2021). They are temporary, low-cost strategies that care for vacant MOL in order to allow for more permanent future use. Rather than transferring MOL into private ownership, these programs focus on vacant land stewardship through regular maintenance done either by local government agencies or through paid or volunteer residents. Clean and green programs focus on revitalization by using physical interventions to beautify and increase the appeal and functionality of urban vacant land.

Clean and green programs seize on the “greening hypothesis” (Krusky et al., 2015) that care and maintenance of vacant land—whether aesthetic or productive—can spread across a neighborhood (Gobster et al., 2020). This can support community empowerment and improve local quality of life, while also allowing for experimentation and innovation that can lead to more expansive and generative uses over time. Vacant MOL is public, which enables these programs to focus on uplifting the use value of land; and because use value is relative,
these programs have the potential to reflect a wider range of value.

As with a temporary use model, there are drawbacks to clean and green programs. They can be expensive to maintain and require regular funding sources. Because they lead to outcomes that are not as easy to measure or demonstrate, they face political pressures from governments that must justify their impact. These economic pressures can also manifest in public or private actors taking advantage of clean and green programs by using symbolic “sustainability capital” to advocate for more profitable endeavors (McClintock, 2018), leading to the potential victimization of local communities and residents. However, programs can use a temporary use model to incrementally build community control and power while exhibiting potential outcomes that challenge uneven and unjust development practices.

**Evaluative criteria of a temporary use model**

As the above sections demonstrate, vacant land has the potential to achieve outcomes that are reflective of values beyond traditional market-based solutions. However, many reutilization programs—especially “transfer of ownership” programs—prioritize economic metrics that estimate tax revenue, land’s market value, and/or wealth generation from ownership, all of which undermine or underrepresent potential benefits from alternative uses and values (Kim et al., 2018; Németh & Langhorst, 2014; Rigolon et al., 2021; Stern, 2019). There is no method for evaluating to what extent urban vacant land strategies can promote outcomes aligned with these uses and values. This section presents evaluative criteria that are representative of progressive goals for vacant land reutilization. Together, these criteria serve as a matrix to assess programs on their feasibility to support alternative land uses, such as a temporary use model for vacant land.
The criteria are drawn from the three frameworks presented above. The first framework is based on Schumacher’s (1973) meta-economic values as they apply to research on vacant land. The second framework captures the municipal perspective by drawing upon Bowman and Pagano’s (2004) identification of municipal imperatives that shape reutilization strategies. The final framework adapts the criteria from Németh and Langhorst (2014), which establishes a theoretical basis for the benefits and drawbacks of a temporary use model, for a practical application of vacant land reutilization through temporary use. Only the latter two frameworks were designed to specifically address vacant land, yet taken together, each reflects a different but complementary aspect of vacant land reutilization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Ecological</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Symbolic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meta-economic values</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal imperatives</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary use model</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Integrating these three frameworks produces five evaluative criteria: economic, ecological, political, social, and symbolic. As Table 2 shows, there are patterns across the frameworks. A measure of social value is found in each framework suggesting its importance within vacant land reutilization. Symbolic value is difficult to measure and capture within a reuse strategy, which is likely why it only appears in one. Municipal imperatives do not consider ecological value while meta-economic values are not reflective of economic or political goals; by integrating all three frameworks into one matrix, these different priorities are balanced providing this paper with a foundation for evaluation that is rooted in objective analysis.
METHODOLOGY

This research aims to understand how implementing a temporary use model in municipal strategies for vacant land reutilization can mitigate hypervacancy while encouraging collective action to achieve local benefits. I use a three-part analytical approach. First, I present a spatial survey and demographic context of vacant land in Chicago using open-source data from the City of Chicago and the University of Richmond’s Mapping Inequality project. Next, I engage in a qualitative policy analysis of the Large Lots Program and three alternative case studies—Sweet Water Foundation, NeighborSpace and the King Drive Community Garden, and Redefining Redlining—to chart the origins, motivations, and outcomes of each initiative. Finally, I engage in a descriptive analysis using the evaluative criteria presented above in the literature review. The evaluation is composed of twenty questions—four for each criterion. Every question is rated using a Likert scale with three options: "yes," "somewhat," and "not at all." This evaluation model is used to identify patterns and trends across different reutilization approaches.

This analysis focuses on Chicago, specifically the city’s Washington Park neighborhood. As the largest city in the Rust Belt, Chicago is a prototypical postindustrial city. As such, it is an ideal case study due to the prevalence of hypervacancy and high inventory of vacant MOL. Further, there are more available and accessible data sources, media, and resource material on vacant land, municipal records, and political outcomes in Chicago than in many other cities in the Rust Belt.

I narrow in on Washington Park for three reasons. First, Washington Park was one of the most impacted neighborhoods by the fallout of the 2008 foreclosure crisis and has continued to be adversely affected by hypervacancy. Yet, research has tended to focus on
Englewood, the adjoining neighborhood to the west; there has been little research on and no
direct municipal strategy for vacant land in Washington Park. Second, the lack of municipal
action has led local individuals and organizations to activate vacant land within the
neighborhood through alternative methods, many of which became the basis for this paper.
Finally, I lived near Washington Park and commuted through the neighborhood on bike for
five months in 2023. My daily experience in the neighborhood inspired me to think more
critically about hypervacancy and potential strategies for the reutilization of MOL.

That said, this research is influenced by my participant-observer status in vacant land
reutilization. For one year, I worked remotely and on-site with the nonprofit organization
Sweet Water Foundation. My involvement included daily tasks related to urban agriculture,
carpentry, and land maintenance on formerly vacant lots. It also included policy and site
analysis work that documented and considered the organization’s work against other
initiatives in Chicago and in other cities. This on-the-ground experience has informed this
paper’s focus, scope, and assessment of temporary uses of urban vacant land.

There are limitations to this research. Data on vacant land is quite limited, and its
accuracy and quality are inconsistent. This is a prevailing problem for local governments
wanting to make informed decisions and for researchers who must make sense of the gaps in
data availability. For this research, it limited my analysis to qualitative methods, which are
more likely to be influenced by my bias. Due to time constraints and limited access, no
interviews were conducted for this research, but future research would benefit from
integrating perspectives from municipal officials, organizations, and residents involved in
temporary uses of vacant land.
POLICY ANALYSIS

In Chicago, there are over 30,000 vacant lots (Vance, 2020). As of writing, nearly 13,000 are owned by the City of Chicago (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2024). These parcels have been acquired through a variety of means, including the foreclosure of demolition liens, property condemnation, sale of tax delinquent properties, and direct purchase. Many have been under municipal ownership since the 1990s, but a few have been in Chicago’s land inventory since the 1950s. While the management of MOL has been a focus over many decades, it is only recently that a clear count of the city’s total land holdings has emerged with a publicly available map created with the consolidation of multiple land purchase programs (Vance, 2022).

The majority of MOL is concentrated on the south and west sides of Chicago. This pattern of vacancy, shown in Figure 1, corresponds to two other trends. First, the largest shares of MOL are located in Black-majority community areas3 (shown in grey). Second, the areas with the highest concentration of vacant land are areas that were historically redlined (shown in hatched pattern). This suggests that patterns of hypervacancy in Chicago are the product of spatial segregation and systemic racial discrimination.

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3 Community areas are the administrative boundaries used to divide the City of Chicago for statistical and planning purposes. The city has 77 total community areas. Census data and other statistics correspond to these boundaries, which are distinct from but related to the numerous neighborhoods of Chicago. In this paper, I use “community area,” “community,” and “neighborhood” interchangeably.
Figure 1. Map of Chicago displaying city-owned vacant land, redlined areas, and Black-majority community areas. The map highlights the boundary of the Washington Park neighborhood. Data sources: Chicago DPD, CMAP, Mapping Inequality

![Map of Chicago](image)

Figure 2. Map of Washington Park with city-owned lots and redlined areas. Data sources: Chicago DPD, Mapping Inequality

![Map of Washington Park](image)
This pattern of hypervacancy is very apparent in places like Washington Park. Historically, the neighborhood, which is nearly 94 percent Black, was entirely redlined, representing decades of housing discrimination. In a 1940 assessment of the neighborhood by the Home Owners Loan Corporation, the neighborhood was determined to be “hazardous” for lending. According to the description, this was because the neighborhood “has been almost completely monopolized by the colored race.” It continued:

_Washington Park is already doomed. Throughout the entire area many vacant lots for which there is no market, due in part to the class of inhabitant and age of improvements. Rehabilitation also is a negligible factor. Instead of demolishing or rehabilitating some of these properties, it might be better to dispose of them than increase vacant property which has little value today._ (Mapping Inequality, 2023)

The effects of redlining continued for many decades, creating the conditions for severe hypervacancy. During the 2008 foreclosure crisis, over 10 percent of mortgageable properties in Washington Park were foreclosed, the highest rate in Chicago (Woodstock Institute, 2008). This marked a continued loss of more than 9,000 units of housing in the neighborhood since the 1970s, a total reduction of over 150 percent of residential capacity (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2023; LISC & Washington Park Consortium, 2009). As of 2021, 17.8 percent of the neighborhood’s housing units were vacant. The low rate of homeownership and limited private development has resulted in over 85 percent of the nearly 5,000 occupied housing units being renter-occupied (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2023). The majority of renters are also financially vulnerable as 58 percent are rent-burdened, paying more than 30 percent of their income towards housing costs (Washington Park Residents’ Advisory Council, 2020).
The rise of housing vacancies in Washington Park produced a high concentration of vacant land. An estimated 41 percent of the neighborhood’s parcels are considered vacant, half of which are owned by the City of Chicago. In total, these parcels comprise 170 acres of vacant land, nearly a fifth of the neighborhood’s total land area (Washington Park Residents’ Advisory Council, 2020). This is significant because Washington Park is only 1.48 square miles (947 acres), nearly 40 percent of which is covered by park space (Washington Park Residents’ Advisory Council, 2020), meaning the available land cover is much lower.

In part, Washington Park’s vacancy is a product of Chicago’s history of supporting a demolition-forward approach to residential vacancy. According to the Chicago Tribune, the city government demolished more than 1,600 buildings each year from 1972 to 1979; this included a record high of 2,675 demolitions in 1975 (Briscoe et al., 2020). Demolitions continue to take place across the city (Vance, 2024), but this trend has slowed with the introduction of municipal vacant land reutilization strategies, including county-level land banking and the Large Lots Program.

**Large Lots Program**

Billed as a “neighborhood stabilization initiative,” the Large Lots Program sold vacant lots in select Chicago neighborhoods for $1 a parcel. It was administered by the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) from 2014 to 2018, running for nearly five years. The program operated on a “transfer of ownership” model, selling lots that were vacant, city-owned, and zoned for residential use. Up to two lots could be purchased by applicants, who had to own property on the same block, be current on property taxes, and have no financial obligations to the city.
There was no residency requirement for purchase, which allowed absentee landowners to purchase lots on blocks where they owned land. To deter land speculation, the city issued a property covenant for parcels purchased through Large Lots. They required the buyer to keep the lot for five years before it could be sold, preventing landowners from quickly “flipping” vacant land for profit. It also required regular maintenance; fencing, if not adjacent to the owner’s property; and paying annual property taxes, an average of $672 per lot in 2018 (Rigolon et al., 2021).

When Large Lots first launched, the DPD published four primary goals of the program. They were listed as: “1) give local residents greater control over vacant land in their neighborhood; 2) dispose city-owned land in these neighborhoods efficiently, which returns the land to the tax rolls; 3) create wealth in the community by allowing owners to sell land after five years; 4) increase safety, build community, and raise home values by creating more neighborhood-level investment” (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2014c).

These goals reveal two important origins of Large Lots. First, the program was a result of community pressure for greater control over vacant land. It was a recommendation from Green Healthy Neighborhoods (GHN), a “10- to 20-year” neighborhood stabilization plan that focused on “productive uses involving land and other local assets” in Englewood and surrounding community areas, including portions of Washington Park (Chicago DPD, 2014b, pp. 5–6). During the community engagement process, residents in Englewood campaigned for a vacant land acquisition process that was less opaque and restrictive. An organizer for the initiative noted, “there were people who had been interested in acquiring these properties from the City, [but] the policy on the books, rather than facilitating that process, was actually
preventing people from getting these lots” (Assessing Chicago’s Large Lot Program, 2017).

These petitions were successful, and the GHN final report published in 2014 identified the creation of Large Lots as a primary goal. The report noted that the high concentration of vacancy presented “a significant challenge in the overall appearance” in these neighborhoods and that Large Lots would “foster the private ownership of existing City-owned land” to help stabilize the local housing market (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2014b, p. 12). The program was also a recommendation in Chicago’s Five-Year Housing Plan, a $1.3 billion investment from 2014, that framed it as a complementary community development tool to “create stronger neighborhoods and more tax revenue” (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2014a, p. 23).

As a product of GHN, Large Lots had an outsized focus on Englewood. This is not only because the program was created based on demands from Englewood residents, but also because the community area had the largest concentration of vacant land in Chicago (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2024). Large Lots first launched as a pilot program in Englewood, before expanding to other communities. The first city-wide cycle was in 2016, which offered over 4,000 lots for purchase. The program was designed to target and be responsive to hypervacancy issues in Englewood, where it saw early success (Stern, 2019). However, subsequent neighborhood-specific and city-wide cycles were influenced by different conditions of vacancy and perceived investment potential, which impacted who participated in the program.

The second origin of Large Lots is its influence from the city’s first vacant land management initiative, Adjacent Neighbors Land Acquisition Program (ANLAP). Approved by Chicago’s City Council in 1981, ANLAP was a side yard program that sold vacant parcels
to adjacent property owners. The original ordinance was based on the claim that city-owned vacant parcels “are of minimal value, yet are costly to clean up and maintain…and it is in the best interest of the City to convey certain of these parcels to…be maintained, beautified, and otherwise improved…[in order to]…return the parcels to the tax rolls and enhance the quality of life in the City’s neighborhoods” (City of Chicago, City Council, 1981, p. 5584). The primary goals of Large Lots, included above, reflect this same rationale.

Table 3. Comparison between ANLAP and Large Lots [adapted from Matthew Stern’s master’s thesis (2019)]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANLAP</th>
<th>Large Lots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eligible lots</td>
<td>vacant, city-owned, and zoned for residential use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>1981 – present</td>
<td>2014 – 2018, pending sales through 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase costs</td>
<td>$1,000 - 17,000, plus annual property taxes</td>
<td>$1, plus annual property taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible buyers</td>
<td>adjacent property owners in primary residence (owner-occupied) current on property taxes and/or city debts</td>
<td>same-block property owners current on property taxes and/or city debts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant restrictions</td>
<td>no construction of permanent structures except for garage or addition to primary house; prohibited sale for five years</td>
<td>allowed construction of any structures permitted by zoning; required fencing is not adjacent to owner’s property; prohibited sale for five years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application process</td>
<td>rolling applications</td>
<td>application cycles (7 total)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, Large Lots copied the eligibility criteria and procedure of ANLAP. Lots sold through ANLAP included a property covenant restricting its sale for a decade after purchase (amended to five years in 1994) and limited the uses and structures permitted on the
parcel. Further, the ordinance language for Large Lots bears a striking resemblance to ANLAP. Both ordinances have seven total sections, four of which are nearly identical. For example, in the opening section which includes the program’s rationale, 55 percent—58 of 105 words—of the language is identical in use and phrase. While it is not uncommon for legislation to use or copy language from previous ordinances, the near identical language in these ordinances indicates that the motive and justification for Chicago’s vacant land strategies have remained unchanged for over 30 years.

**Figure 3.** Map of Washington Park with city-owned vacant lots (blue) and lots purchased through the Large Lots Program (yellow). Data source: Chicago DPD

Despite its inclusion in the “10- to 20-year” GHN plan, the last application cycle for Large Lots took place in 2018, after which it was quietly discontinued. Large Lots sold 1,192 City-owned lots in the nearly five years the program operated. Due to pending sales after the program ended, an additional 318 lots were transferred through 2023, bringing the total lots
sold to 1,510 (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2024). In Washington Park, there are over 470 city-owned vacant lots. Some of these lots are reserved for planning projects or pending environmental review and were not included in Large Lots. However, only 17 lots were sold in Washington Park, accounting for just 1 percent of Large Lots’ total sales.

In the study areas used in his assessment of Large Lots, Matthew Stern (2019) found that nearly a third of all buyers purchased lots in neighborhoods where they did not live. Further, 13 percent bought more than two lots, a violation of the program’s rules. For purchased lots with same-block owners, the land’s condition and care did improve; however, the condition and care decreased as the lot’s distance from the owner’s residence increased, suggesting that proximity is key in upholding the “greening hypothesis” (Gobster et al., 2020) and that speculation from external buyers had a negative impact on the care of vacant land. While these insights are valuable for understanding the impact of Large Lots, the research has focused exclusively on the lots sold. The reality is that many hundreds of vacant lots remain under municipal ownership without plans for reutilization or redevelopment. The condition of these lots under an alternative temporary use model is the focus of this paper’s research.
CASE STUDIES

The following case studies represent three examples of temporary uses of vacant land in Chicago’s Washington Park. In contrast to Large Lots, these examples are small in scale and operate on different timelines and towards different ends, showcasing the wide range of potential for urban vacant land reutilization. The first case study is Sweet Water Foundation, which has transformed six city blocks into a demonstration site of the potential for vacant land to support a hyperlocal circular economy, the preservation of community identity, and ecology-driven food production. The second is the King Drive Community Healing and Resilience Garden, which is supported by NeighborSpace, an urban land trust that maximizes the potential of vacant land as community gardens in Chicago. The third and final case study is the installation Redefining Redlining created by artist Amanda Williams that interprets the symbolic value of vacant land by showcasing how land-as-medium artistic practices can engage with community memory.

Figure 4. Map of Washington Park showing the location of the three case studies. Data source: Chicago DPD
Sweet Water Foundation

Context

Sweet Water Foundation (SWF) works across six city blocks on the western edge of Washington Park. When SWF began stewarding the land in 2014, 81 percent of the area’s parcels were vacant, representing a constructed ecology of absence (Sweet Water Foundation, 2023). The site exists within the shadow of many large-scale planning initiatives that were detrimental and degenerative to the neighborhood. A block north of SWF is the former site of the Robert Taylor Homes, the largest public housing project in the country that, when completed in 1963, stretched on for two miles. At its peak, it had 4,400 units and housed over 9,000 residents (Dumke, 2022; Hirsch, 1983). The last of its 28 buildings was demolished in 2007. Two blocks west is the Dan Ryan Expressway, an interstate that was created in the 1960s with federal funding by razing existing Black and low-income neighborhoods (Hirsch, 2005). As discussed above, the area was also redlined and subjected to housing discrimination and predatory lending.

Backgrounded by these large-scale events, the six blocks where SWF operates tell their own story. Once a thriving multiethnic neighborhood, the area began to change in the 1940s. An entire block was razed for reconversion housing for Black veterans returning from WWII. Two decades later, the same block housed a school for “social adjustment,” considered by many to be a pipeline to prison. Along with a series of housing demolitions in the ’70s, this contributed to a negative perception of the neighborhood and spurred a slow exodus. When the school closed in the 1980s, the building was briefly repurposed as a homeless shelter before sitting vacant and eventually being demolished in 2009 (Sweet Water Foundation, 2023).
Under SWF’s stewardship, these neglected spaces have been reclaimed and transformed into The Commonwealth. Occupying nearly 12 acres, The Commonwealth is a demonstration site for vacant land reutilization. Co-founded by architect Emmanuel Pratt, the nonprofit organization takes a triple-bottom line approach—people, planet, and profit—to neighborhood development that centers on fostering connections between local residents and the surrounding natural environment. Their work is guided by the practice of Regenerative Neighborhood Development (RND), an interdisciplinary approach that combines urban agriculture, ecology, civic arts, design, and education to reclaim and reactivate vacant land. The practice of RND is incremental by design, which means that transformation happens over time. Rather than adhere to a long-range plan, this approach is inherently experimental, nimble, and responsive to feedback.

For a decade, SWF has put their RND in action to transform The Commonwealth. Some notable successes include turning the formerly vacant location of the school into a two-acre community farm. With over 140 rows, the farm grows over 40 varieties of produce, feeds hundreds of local residents annually, and has three hoop houses allowing the farm to grow food year-round. Diagonally from the farm is the RND Park, a site of lots under mixed ownership that is used for a weekly market. Down the street is the Civic Arts Church, a historic church saved from demolition that has been preserved as a site of community memory and center for arts and education. Each space has been transformed over time through daily presence and maintenance and with community consensus and participation.

Temporary use model

Much of the work of SWF is exemplary of a temporary use model of vacant land. Focusing in on the RND Park is perhaps the most illustrative example. Located a block from
a high-traffic corridor, the park is an open green space spread across five vacant parcels. A perimeter of trees extends across the back of each lot serving as a natural buffer and demarcation of space. The anchor of the park is a timber-framed structure with polycarbonate sides called the *Meeting House*. The architectural installation is designed in the conventional shape of a house, which pays homage to the homes that were once located on these lots. For residents, it has become an icon that identifies the park and signals an ethic of care. More than just form, the structure is also a functioning greenhouse designed with adjustable panels to account for seasonal differences, allowing it to be used as a meeting or teaching space in temperate weather. Although permanently located at the RND Park, the *Meeting House* is technically a temporary installation that could be removed without damage to the land if future uses or demands require it. Its temporary nature represents the past, present, and future potential of what these vacant lots could become.

*Figure 5. Marketplace at SWF’s RND Park with the Meeting House to the left, August 2023.*

*Author’s photo*
Its strong place identity enables RND Park to be regularly activated. On Friday afternoons from late spring to early fall, the entire park becomes a marketplace. The SWF team organizes tents, tables, and chairs around the Meeting House to signal when the market is operating. Neighbors of all ages arrive for a pay-what-you-can produce market, all of which is freshly picked from the community farm. Many market attendees stay to socialize, trade stories and recipes, or engage in creative play at an art station. In a neighborhood that experiences many adverse consequences of hypervacancy—including affordable, reliable access to healthy and culturally-relevant food—the marketplace’s temporary condition provides not only an essential service for feeding local residents, but is a critical node of social cohesion, an hyperlocalized example of a relational and reciprocal economy, and a shared site of community memory and prosocial creation.

Figure 6. Civic art station at weekly marketplace, August 2023. Author’s photo
Additional considerations

There are a number of additional factors to consider of how the work of SWF is reflected in a temporary use model. One is the daily presence of the SWF team on the site. The RND Park’s proximity to other SWF installations and activities promotes a spatial continuance across The Commonwealth. The park is maintained by SWF, including regular mowing, raking leaves, and clearing debris. The care and condition of the lots signal an ethic of care, which can also be used as a tool against speculation by presenting these lots as “claimed.” These actions become a form of placekeeping that preserves the condition and/or character of the neighborhood through commemorating cultural memory and promoting localized spatial justice (Bedoya, 2014).

Another consideration is the mixed ownership of the RND Park. SWF takes care of the five residential parcels but does not own the lots. Three are city-owned and two are owned by absentee owners. Because it is taking place across ambiguous property lines, the work challenges the prevailing property regime. The Meeting House is located on MOL, so it does not infringe upon private property rights, but nevertheless highlights the potential activation and reutilization of vacant land that is squandered by speculation and curbed by private ownership models. It also brings into question Chicago’s vacant land-holding strategy by showcasing how small-scale interventions on vacant land can lead to positive community transformation, most of which is not represented, allowed, or even desired by current city policies.

Lastly, it is important to consider that SWF is a product of its location and capacity. The Commonwealth has been built from the ground up and benefits from being uniquely situated in a pocket of Washington Park without many residential neighbors and a high
concentration of MOL. Their approach might look different in areas with more diverse land uses. Many community groups and nonprofit organizations also have limited access to capital, labor constraints, and a lack of leadership. SWF is led by a well-regarded, trained architect with access to a diverse funding network. This still requires significant work, but it does allow the organization to maintain a full-time paid staff, acquire necessary materials and tools, and gain support and recognition from designers, educational institutions, and funding agencies. However, through their work with easily accessible tools and reclaimed materials, SWF demonstrates that revitalizing vacant land can be take place anywhere with fairly limited resources if it is done incrementally and with community support.

**King Drive Community Garden and NeighborSpace**

**Context**

Located on the southern edge of Washington Park is the King Drive Community Healing and Resilience Garden. King Drive is a main thoroughfare that stretches through Washington Park along its namesake park. A high-traffic area, it also moves through portions of the neighborhood that have a negative reputation due to instances of crime and hypervacancy. The community garden’s location grants it high visibility for local residents, signaling it as a threshold space for gathering, growing food, and—as the name denotes—healing and building resilience.

The King Drive Community Garden is managed by the Urban Growers Collective, a Black- and women-led nonprofit organization. Across Chicago, they operate eight farms and community gardens that aim to use growing food as a tool for building more just and equitable food systems. Since 2017, they have provided hands-on training programs for local residents
to generate economic opportunity for individuals and the community and as a tool for increasing health and well-being (Urban Growers Collective, n.d.). The King Drive Community Garden is one of their more innovative projects, because it is designed to be more collaborative and is led by local residents. Rather than focus solely on the productive capacity of vacant land, this initiative centers the healing and health benefits of urban agriculture by bringing together residents to grow food on formerly vacant lots.

Further, the King Drive Community Garden is different than many other gardens because it is part of a land trust known as NeighborSpace. As of writing, NeighborSpace is the only urban land trust in Chicago, representing over 100 community gardens across the city. The role of NeighborSpace is to support community organization partners with the creation and maintenance of neighborhood-level open space. As a nonprofit land trust, they acquire land and hold it in trust for community organizations. They can also gain property tax exemptions for garden sites, provide insurance, and offer resource support to organizations or local residents who are responsible for day-to-day operations. This model allows for local stewardship and community control of vacant land without added financial burdens, which promotes long-term social, ecological, and economic benefits.

NeighborSpace was the result of the 1998 open space plan, CitySpace (City of Chicago et al., 1998). The intergovernmental report identified the lack of protected open space in Chicago and put forward a strategy to reserve land for local benefit through a network of urban community gardens. Its recommendation was the creation of a land trust—NeighborSpace—that would be funded jointly by three agencies. The trust would hold land in perpetuity, providing stable ownership and support to the community garden network. For nearly 30 years, NeighborSpace has grown to manage over 23 acres of formerly vacant land that has
been converted into community-managed gardens and open space (International Center for Community Land Trusts, n.d.).

Temporary use model

The idea of an urban land trust holding land in perpetuity may seem antithetical to a temporary use model. However, a land trust holding land for community organizations is precisely what allows the benefits of temporary uses to unfold. NeighborSpace is expressly committed to holding land for community-controlled open space and gardens. When the organization acquires vacant land, they remove it from market-based fiscal and developmental pressures, which are primarily concerned with profit and increasing investment potential. In the right conditions, NeighborSpace’s work can fulfill the “greening hypothesis” that gardens and “green space” can lead to more greening activities that may ultimately drive development and investment in the neighborhood. Holding land for community benefit in a land trust slows down the impacts of green gentrification by providing stable and secure land tenure to ensure these areas remain under community control as active sites of economic and social production.

Time is another important element of NeighborSpace and an urban land trust. By nature, a temporary use model is flexible and adaptive to different timescales. The stability of land tenure supports small-scale land transformation that can take place over time. Community buy-in and involvement are critical to the long-term success of vacant land reutilization efforts. A temporary use model provides the advantage of building up community investment, capacity, and trust. Further, it allows organizations to adopt ecological approaches that are incremental and responsive to the land and surrounding environment.
The King Drive Community Garden is an example of these benefits in action. Designed by the Urban Growers Collective to be a collaborative co-production of a community space, the garden has become a symbol of land transformation along King Drive. Figures 8 and 9 show how in the span of just a few years, the site has been entirely revitalized from vacant, unmaintained lots into dedicated community space. The raised garden beds provide spaces to grow produce and the open space allows for social gatherings that center
around healing and building greater cohesion and belonging. The reclamation of this site, in particular, is significant because it is located directly opposite three nearly entirely vacant blocks consisting of MOL. The transformation of these two lots into a thriving community space, especially in a highly visible location, provides a re-storying of the area and an example of the potential for other vacant land in the neighborhood to serve community needs through reinvestment and reutilization efforts.

**Additional considerations**

NeighborSpace is focused on the transformation of vacant land into community open space. Its land trust model, however, does have its limitations. It requires NeighborSpace to be selective about the land it acquires and the community organizations with whom it partners. It is an aversion to its mission and against the organization’s interests to acquire too much land, renege on purchases and return land back to the city’s inventory, and/or to enter into agreements with organizations that do not have sufficient local capacity or community support. This means that NeighborSpace is subject to intense socio-political pressures from above by municipal agencies who partially fund the work and from below by community organizations and residents. Its goal is to increase community control over vacant land, but it is still beholden to specific conditions of ownership and use. This can result in a decision-making process that resembles the bounded rationality of a municipal government.

Further, NeighborSpace is a unique example of an urban land trust because it was created as a municipally approved initiative. It is a rare example of intergovernmental cost-sharing to reserve land for community benefit. Today, NeighborSpace still receives some municipal financial support, but its growth has required additional fundraising and a greater reliance on external funding sources (International Center for Community Land Trusts, n.d.).
This has introduced some precarity into the land trust model. Still, the success of King Drive Community Garden and other sites across the city speak to its efficacy and significance. The operations of NeighborSpace to manage finances and governmental relations protect the interests of local community organizations and free them from undue financial obligations. Although the model has shortcomings, it also allows it to operate more nimbly than a municipal government and provide direct support to scores of community organizations and the gardens they manage, most of which would not exist without the security and stability of the land trust model. Without NeighborSpace, the King Drive Community Garden would still be two unmaintained vacant lots.

“Redefining Redlining”

Context

Historically, the entire neighborhood of Washington Park was redlined. The lingering effects of this legacy are the central theme of the public art project Redefining Redlining. The installation transformed 21 vacant lots into blooming fields of 100,000 red tulips. Spread across four residential blocks, the installation’s location, like most of the neighborhood, is a patchwork of vacant land. The fields of red tulips bring striking contrast to the seemingly random pattern of demolitions that produced the enduring conditions of hypervacancy.

Redefining Redlining subverts this status quo by using vacant land as both the subject and medium of the installation. It is the creation of artist Amanda Williams who, together with 450 volunteers, planted the thousands of tulip bulbs in the fall of 2022. Each spring, these lots will continue to be transformed into fields of red tulips. More than just bringing attention to the visual dissonance of red tulips and vacant land, the installation confronts the history of
redlining and how its systemic discrimination enabled cycles of disinvestment that justified property demolitions, thus producing vacant land.

**Figure 9.** Photo of Redefining Redlining from April 2023. Source: CBS News (2023)

The project is a poignant artistic representation of the value of vacant land. The red color of the tulip symbolizes the history of redlining. This refers to the red shade that demarcated “hazardous” neighborhoods in the insurance maps of the federal Home Owners Loan Corporation. The tulips are planted on each parcel to resemble the footprint of a house that once occupied the site. This serves as a visual memory and preservation of the neighborhood’s past and the families that once occupied these lots. The tulips themselves present questions of value. They serve as a form of aesthetic value that is juxtaposed against the patchwork of vacant land, reflecting both the potential for vacant land transformation and the uneven ethics of care across the neighborhood. The tulips also embody a form of speculative value that references the 17th-century “tulipmania ” in the Netherlands, during
which boom-and-bust flower markets extracted value in ways that resemble the practice of redlining (Brennan, 2023).

Drawing visual attention and appreciation to vacant land frees an observer from the bounded ideas of what is possible in a hypervacant neighborhood. This is a theme throughout Williams’ work. Her Color(ed) Theory project involves a series of houses slated for demolition that she—clandestinely and without consequence—painted in vibrant hues to mark the end of their existence. Each house was painted in a color associated with a product or establishment targeted to or used by Black consumers (Chong, 2022). As with Redefining Redlining, the project drew attention to the history and experiences of Black communities within the context of urban development and hypervacancy, especially the many forms of disinvestment, exclusion, and municipal neglect that create and sustain these patterns. Her work challenges perceptions of value and visibility by making explicit connections to identity, power, and spatial relations.

**Temporary use model**

Out of the three alternative case studies, Redefining Redlining is the “most temporary.” Blooming for only a few weeks each year, it is a very short-term project; yet, it speaks to how—regardless of the timeline—vacant land can be leveraged as a tool in its own reutilization and revitalization.

Artistic practices on vacant lots using land-as-medium represent an optimal use within a temporary use model. Depending on the project, they generally require limited land area, little to no municipal resources, and can be relatively low-cost. A temporary installation on vacant land can provide transformative potential to a neighborhood by activating otherwise underutilized or overlooked spaces. This can bring life to community revitalization by serving
as an experimental model that generates collaborations, place attachment, and even economic activity. With the proper support and vision, artistic interventions can help to transform vacant lots into community assets that are generative and prosocial.

Redefining Redlining is one example of how this work can be done using a temporary model. The most intensive part of the installation was the initial site planning that began in fall 2022 to ensure the tulips bloomed the following spring. Each of the selected lots was leveled and spread with a thin layer of topsoil. Then, the 450-plus volunteers planted the 100,000 tulip bulbs, a critical act of bringing people together to work collectively on vacant land transformation. Although a one-time event, this convergence speaks to the organizing potential of vacant land to bring people together to give new forms and new futures to narratives of hypervacancy. Further, it is a form of interim land stewardship, providing attention, care, and maintenance to vacant lots that were otherwise un- and undermaintained.

In this way, artistic uses on vacant land are inextricably in conversation with the past. Hypervacancy is a persistent reminder of histories of erasure and discrimination. This generational cycle poses a threat to a community’s identity and residents’ health and well-being. Installations on vacant land (e.g. Redefining Redlining or SWF’s Meeting House) can provide a source of catharsis and healing that explores themes of place, identity, and memory. Similarly, artistic endeavors can challenge existing perceptions of vacant land by providing residents with a platform to explore and contemplate alternative futures and fostering opportunities for community transformation.

Additional considerations

As a public art project, Redefining Redlining has been celebrated for its poignant message and visual import. One aspect of this success is the high profile of the artist, Amanda
Williams. Similar to the position of SWF, the project benefits from its affiliation with a well-regarded creator, which gives it an enhanced sense of legitimacy and access to resources. This is not to say that a project with fewer resources, no name recognition, or without even claiming the intervention as an artistic installation could not be successful. If anything, it shows that with the proper financial and/or institutional support, such interventions could be further represented by a temporary use model for vacant land.

Further, there are many prosocial benefits of artistic uses on vacant land, but they may not all align with municipal interests. *Redefining Redlining* is directly calling out municipal cycles of disinvestment and neglect that supported demolitions and produced residential vacancies. From a municipal perspective, this installation may be perceived as a transgressive act and contested use of MOL. However, this installation is not only showing an alternative use of vacant land, but also providing educational materials about the practice of redlining while amplifying residents’ concerns. If local governments want to support direct democracy and socially progressive goals, this installation is signaling the potential for community transformation that can take place in the area around the installation and other parts of Washington Park. The support of similar temporary installations that involve local stakeholders can directly benefit residents and prove more effective than in other areas of the city. *Redefining Redlining* is evidence that experimental uses of vacant land produce important feedback and opportunities for municipal governments to adopt alternative approaches.
ANALYSIS

This section presents a descriptive analysis of the qualitative characteristics of the vacant land reutilization initiatives discussed above. The analysis assesses how each case study exemplifies the values of the five evaluative criteria outlined in the literature review of this paper: economic, ecological, political, social, and symbolic. It aims to identify patterns and trends in vacant land reutilization to determine to what extent a temporary use model can achieve socially progressive outcomes that support community transformation and address the impacts of hypervacancy.

In the following tables, each case study is identified by its initials to enhance clarity: LL is Large Lots, SWF is Sweet Water Foundation, KDG/NS is King Drive Community Garden and NeighborSpace, and RR is Redefining Redlining. Further, each rating corresponds to a point value, with "yes" receiving two points, "somewhat" receiving one point, and "not at all" receiving zero points. The point totals (Table 9) are not intended to be a comprehensive ranking, but rather are used to illustrate patterns and differences between initiatives.

Economic

Table 4. Evaluation of economic criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Is / Does) the reutilization initiative...</th>
<th>Yes (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat (1)</th>
<th>Not at all (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...a market-based approach?</td>
<td>LL</td>
<td></td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...generate revenue from land sale / taxes?</td>
<td>LL</td>
<td></td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...generate revenue from goods/services?</td>
<td>SWF</td>
<td>KDG/NS</td>
<td>LL, RR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...promote economic development goals?</td>
<td>LL</td>
<td></td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not surprising that Large Lots is rated the highest on the economic evaluation. Of
the four reutilization initiatives, it is the only one that employs a purely market-based approach. Operating as “transfer of ownership” program, it is influenced by a municipal fiscal imperative to sell vacant MOL and increase tax revenue. Consequently, it is only concerned with the exchange value of vacant land. Large Lots supports municipal economic development goals through “neighborhood-level investment” to jump start housing and land markets, “create wealth,” and “raise home values” (City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 2014c).

The three alternative case studies are all rated low on the economic evaluation. Comparatively, their use of MOL is not directly aligned with revenue-generating activity or profitability. The example of SWF’s pay-what-you can market does generate revenue, yet it is also an embodiment of an alternative economic model; rather than focus purely on profit, their practice emphasizes relational and reciprocal economic exchanges that reflect a triple-bottom line approach. Similarly, the King Drive Community Garden does not generate revenue, but is aided by its affiliation with Urban Growers Collective, which operates for-profit urban farms, and NeighborSpace, which is funded for their service work supporting and building capacity for community organizations to managed gardens and open space. *Redefining Redlining* registered zero points for this criterion, because it is not grounded in generating economic value and operates as a critique of traditional market-based approaches that it argues contributed to Washington Park’s hypervacancy. While these three alternative initiatives provide direct and ancillary economic benefits, these are not reflected in a traditional understanding of the economic value of vacant land.
Ecological

Table 5. Evaluation of ecological criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Is / Does) the reutilization initiative...</th>
<th>Yes (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat (1)</th>
<th>Not at all (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...promote active care and maintenance?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
<td>LL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...positively contribute to biodiversity?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td>RR</td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...use land for food production?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td>LL, RR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...prevent pollution / illegal dumping?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td>LL, RR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The highest ratings for the ecological evaluation are Sweet Water Foundation and the King Drive Community Garden and NeighborSpace. These case studies are demonstrated practices that are directly involved in reusing vacant land as growing spaces, for environmental restoration, and to increase the natural condition and productivity of the land. Both are also invested in the transformation of the land they steward into significant spaces for local residents to engage with their local ecology.

Redefining Redlining is as a form of interim land stewardship that positively contributes to the ecological condition of vacant land in Washington Park. The temporary use of land is rated slightly lower than the former cases because it does not support food production and is active for a comparatively smaller window of time. This limits the long-term impacts the installation has as a deterrent to illegal dumping and on promoting the active care and maintenance of vacant land.

The lowest rated initiative is Large Lots. Despite lots sold through the program having afterlives as community gardens and designated green spaces, the program’s goals, covenant restrictions, or ordinance language do not identify or support the ecological benefits of vacant land. However, the transfer of land into private ownership does promote both minimal land maintenance and serve as a barrier to illegal dumping.
**Political**

**Table 6. Evaluation of political criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Is / Does) the reutilization initiative...</th>
<th>Yes (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat (1)</th>
<th>Not at all (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...aligned with municipal policies?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, LL</td>
<td>RR, SWF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...responsive to local demands / needs?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td>RR</td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...include substantial community engagement / consensus building?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td>LL, RR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...expose uneven or unjust development?</td>
<td>RR, SWF</td>
<td></td>
<td>KDG/NS, LL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questions posed in the political evaluation reflect how different forms of political power are expressed in reutilization approaches. The results are highly variable. On one end, NeighborSpace and Large Lots are representative of policy path dependency. Both are municipal initiatives crafted to enable government agencies in Chicago to minimize its MOL inventory. Despite their different approaches, they both represent the importance of political power in supporting large-scale, publicly funded programs. However, the programs are rated low on the more transgressive end of political power; neither initiative exposes uneven or unjust development. This is not surprising for initiatives crafted by local governments yet serves as evidence of the limits of certain forms of political power and the impact of bounded rationality on municipal decision-making.

On the spectrum of political power, *Redefining Redlining* and Sweet Water Foundation are rated directly opposite the former case studies. Both initiatives are notable for their use of vacant MOL without formalized ownership agreements or support from local government. Their non-compliance to traditional form of land use is a political act. *Redefining Redlining* brings attention to the cycles of municipal disinvestment and neglect that undergird hypervacancy and challenges the existing power imbalances that produce property
demolitions. Similarly, Sweet Water Foundation’s use of vacant MOL questions prevailing property regimes and municipal priorities. It also reflects the inherent political power of community organizing and grassroots development that offering alternative forms of governance and land management. However, from a policy perspective, both initiatives are rate low for their lack of public support or endorsement.

The low rating of Large Lots on its responsiveness to community demands is particularly of note. The program originated from residents’ demands that were a part of the community engagement process in the GHN plan. However, there is no evidence of ongoing community engagement after the program was launched. Further, eligibility for participation in the program was restrictive and did not include opportunities for non-property owners to benefit. For co-opting community concerns without reflecting their demands, Large Lots receives the lowest rating.

Overall, NeighborSpace is rated the highest on the political evaluation. The primary political advantage of NeighborSpace is its facilitation of community-managed open space without procedural political barriers. Although it has limited authority and restrictions on the resources and services it can offer to community organizations, NeighborSpace—and the land trust model more broadly—shows how municipal agencies can support the alternative reutilization of vacant land while still engaging in more traditional vacant land management approaches, e.g. Large Lots. This range of opportunities allows local governments to be more responsive to community demands and needs.
Social

Table 7. Evaluation of social criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Is / Does) the reutilization initiative...</th>
<th>Yes (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat (1)</th>
<th>Not at all (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...promote community participation?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
<td></td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...use MOL as informal gathering space?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
<td></td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...focus on building social capital?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td></td>
<td>LL, RR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...provide related educational resources?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
<td></td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three alternative case studies are all highly rated on the evaluation of social criteria. Each case study represents a different reutilization approach, which demonstrates that the use value of vacant land can be leveraged towards different ends and still produce significant social benefits. For example, Sweet Water Foundation’s weekly marketplace at the RND Park (shown in Figures 5 and 6) is a temporary use of vacant MOL that is transformed into a community node of social interaction and network building. Providing for the care and condition of the site allows for its social benefits to be realized, the effects of which extend well beyond the six blocks that Sweet Water Foundation stewards. Explicitly designed for community gathering, the King Drive Community Garden offers similar social benefits. Through small-scale interventions, the site’s transformation has created a designated space for growing food while also focusing on healing and building resilience for local residents.

The social gathering that convened to install *Redefining Redlining* represents the impact that temporary, one-time events can have on creating new connections while also improving the condition of vacant land. When the installation blooms, it also becomes a temporary space for people to gather and reflect on the legacy of hypervacancy and embrace the potential of vacant lots to support community transformation.

The lowest rating on the social evaluation is for Large Lots. As previously mentioned,
the program’s design is concerned with the exchange value of vacant land by moving MOL into private ownership. However, because the social benefits of vacant land are expressed through its use value, the reutilization approach of Large Lots undermines the social potential of vacant land. The program’s absence of educational content, technical support, or resources to encourage building social capital furthers reflects its low emphasis on social value. Even in the cases when parcels sold through the program became socially productive after being transferred, Large Lots was not concerned with the afterlives of vacant land as long as it provided relevant economic and tax revenues for the city.

Symbolic

Table 8. Evaluation of symbolic criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Is / Does) the reutilization initiative...</th>
<th>Yes (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat (1)</th>
<th>Not at all (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...celebrate/preserve cultural memory?</td>
<td>RR, SWF</td>
<td>KDG/NS</td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...reflect local identity/sense of pride?</td>
<td>SWF</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR</td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...have aesthetic appeal?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR, SWF</td>
<td>KDG/NS, RR</td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...promote “placekeeping”?</td>
<td>KDG/NS, SWF</td>
<td>RR</td>
<td>LL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The evaluation of symbolic criteria measures the extent to which each reutilization approach reflects both tangible and intangible cultural values. Sweet Water Foundation is the highest rated on symbolic criteria. The core of their practice is connecting residents in Washington Park with local ecology. Through the daily care and maintenance of their 12-acre site, they transformed formerly vacant parcels into attractive and inviting spaces. Further, Sweet Water Foundation uses the visual appeal of architectural installations, e.g. the Meeting House (Figure 5), to re-story the area and preserve the cultural memory of the neighborhood and its past, present, and future residents. Their work is laden with symbolic import and is a
direct form of placekeeping that reflects local identity and contributes to a sense of pride and belonging. Their work is a model for how to capture symbolic value through vacant land reutilization and reflects the potential of other MOL initiatives to address urgent quality-of-life issues that are responsive and adaptive to community needs while also engaging in the more intangible—but no less important—work of preserving community memory to build the collective narrative of a place.

The work of the King Drive Community Garden, NeighborSpace, and *Redefining Redlining* are equally rated. As a garden and growing space transformed from vacant MOL, the King Drive Community Garden is a highly symbolic space that rates high on its aesthetic appeal. The garden is one example of how NeighborSpace uses a land trust model to promote the act of placekeeping—a material and symbolic gesture—by providing secure, stable land ownership that removes it from pressures of unwanted development and gentrification. The essential quality of *Redefining Redlining* is its symbolic value. The project purposefully has a heightened aesthetic appeal that is critically questioning the value of vacant land. Using a temporary use model, it is elevating the inherent use value of land by connecting it to histories of erasure and degeneration that produced hypervacancy. This work symbolically connects its reutilization to forms of community memory and creates space for alternative futures.

Similar to above, Large Lots does not reflect symbolic value in this evaluation, but the goals of the program are still symbolic. The program’s goals outlined by DPD premise it as a strategy to build community, increase wealth, and lower crime, all of which hinge on a particular cachet of vacant land to be a vehicle to achieve desired outcomes. However, the program does not overtly support any symbolic criteria. Its reutilization strategy is not concerned with cultural memory, local history, or promoting community identity.
Synopsis

Overall, the synthesis of these evaluations reveals the nuanced landscape of vacant land reutilization in Washington Park. The ratings indicate varying degrees of alignment with each evaluative criterion and reveal the strengths and limitations of each approach. The evaluation point totals are located in Table 9. Using these point totals, the patterns of this evaluation model are most visible in the radar chart (Figure 10), which spatially maps the relationships between each criterion and reutilization approach.
Table 9. Point totals from evaluations of each initiative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LL</th>
<th>SWF</th>
<th>KDG/NS</th>
<th>RR</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Radar chart of point totals from evaluations of each initiative
DISCUSSION

Large Lots reflects narrow economic and political goals

The analysis indicates that Large Lots is most aligned with economic and political criteria. This suggests that while the program's traditional, market-driven strategy for vacant land reutilization may serve short-term municipal interests, its emphasis on land's exchnage value limits its effectiveness in addressing broader "meta-economic" values and enabling alternative uses of vacant land. This reinforces that Large Lots was subjected to the bounded rationality of municipal decision-making and the path dependency of policymaking at the expense of supporting more expansive ideas of vacant land reutilization.

Evidence for this claim is found in the program’s initial launch that premised Large Lots as a solution to systemic issues. The program’s goals, published by the DPD, display municipal assumptions that the transfer of property will contribute to significant changes in local housing markets, public safety, and community cohesion. While research shows that some lots sold through the program had positive localized impacts, there are also examples of lots sold that have remained undeveloped and held for speculation thereby preventing local action. Further, there are thousands of vacant lots that were either not sold or not offered through the program and have remained in the city’s land inventory without any plans for reuse or redevelopment. For example, the enduring hypervacancy in Washington Park—where only 17 parcels were sold of the neighborhood’s hundreds of vacant lots—is evidence that the narrow focus of the program had uneven property transfers that had little impact on localized hypervacancy and curbing the effects of systemic disparities.

Looking to the splintered origins of Large Lots shows that it overemphasized its commitment to community concerns but did not deliver results. The program originated as a
response to local residents in Englewood who wanted to achieve greater community control over vacant land. However, the program’s eligibility criteria and ordinance language were copied nearly completely from the 1981 ANLAP initiative and did not reflect or acknowledge community demands. This marks a political co-option of community demands without offering an avenue for non-property owners to benefit from the program.

From a municipal perspective, Large Lots was successful in achieving the goals of the fiscal imperative, namely reducing the city’s inventory of MOL and generating revenue. However, as one of the only vacancy management programs in Chicago, this defined the entire municipal approach to vacant land reutilization. Diversifying approaches to reutilization, such as adopting a temporary use model for vacant land, could allow the city to focus more directly on the specific character and conditions of vacant land in hypervacant neighborhoods and design site-specific approaches that support and allow for community-led transformation.

**Alternative uses of vacant land reflect diverse set of values, temporary use model**

The analysis strongly indicates that alternative uses of vacant land are aligned with a broader range of values. This is particularly apparent for ecological, social, and symbolic values, which are highly represented in the three case studies: Sweet Water Foundation, the King Drive Community Garden and NeighborSpace, and *Redefining Redlining*. “Meta-economic” values are rooted in the elasticity of vacant land’s use value, suggesting that alternative approaches to vacant land reutilization are the most effective at uplifting land’s use value. Further, the alternative case studies also reflect a range of economic and political values, which indicates that reutilization approaches aligned with vacant land’s use value reflect a more holistic and diverse set of values and outcomes.
The alternative case studies all embrace a temporary use model. These initiatives hinge on flexible approaches to use, ownership, and time, which allow them to be responsive to local social and environmental conditions. Embracing the symbolic value of vacant land can be a driving factor in preserving cultural memory and exemplifying community-based reutilization in practice. The work of each initiative is evidence that temporary interventions can contribute to socio-ecological care and repair while mitigating hypervacancy and supporting greater community cohesion.

The integration of approaches that uplift vacant land’s use value through a temporary use model can have positive impacts not only in local communities, but also for local government. While some forms of alternative uses may be viewed as transgressive, they represent the potential for community-led design that may be working against models perceived as inadequate or restrictive or in the absence of municipal support. For municipal governments seeking to generate socially progressive outcomes, supporting reutilization programs that use a temporary use model can allow for small-scale initiatives to achieve greater socio-ecological benefits and promote communal approaches to care and maintenance.

**Increased social infrastructure can support MOL reutilization**

The reutilization of vacant land displays the tensions inherent within municipal approaches to hypervacancy. Local governments, without federal support or substantial reform, are beholden to the fiscal imperative to functionally operate by generating tax revenue and responsibly managing finances. This reality is clear in the embedded priorities of Large Lots that pursued economic goals at the expense of centering socio-ecological outcomes. However, Large Lots also had limited effects on mitigating the effects of hypervacancy and
was unsuccessful in disposing of thousands of city-owned lots that have remained in the city’s inventory without additional plans for redevelopment or reutilization.

The alternative case studies represent the possibilities of MOL reutilization without the transfer of ownership that achieves different forms of vacant land stewardship. These examples in Washington Park reflect the inherent power within vacant land to regenerate communities affected by hypervacancy. As an alternative to Large Lots, each initiative showcases that stewardship of MOL does not need to be tied to traditional ownership or support explicit economic or development goals. These community-powered interventions completed with limited funding sources represent the possibilities of MOL to become informal community marketplaces and green spaces, sites for good production, sources of community healing, and installations for artistic expression and reflection. Strategies that are small in scale, experimental, generative, and even subversive can all support the revitalization of communities by providing pathways for social connection, ecological care, and building networks toward realizing collective futures.

The most critical, important investment for successful vacant land reutilization is in social infrastructure. This includes building social capital and capacity through active, good faith engagement between municipal governments, community partners, private sector, and local residents. Actively supporting individuals and community organizations engaged in incremental uses of MOL can have mutually beneficial results. Strengthening local networks of residents can build critical partnerships and open up new forms of economic, social, and political capital. Temporary alternative uses on vacant land can demonstrate pathways and/or barriers for municipal vacant land reutilization strategies that are responsive to local needs and demands. This process requires overcoming political and economic barriers that maintain
municipal bounded rationality and path dependency.

**Alternative land use mechanisms support community control of vacant land**

Municipal governments can realize the co-benefits of fostering greater community control of vacant land through a temporary use model. The alternative case studies presented in this paper offer practical pathways that can be used to transform Chicago’s more than 13,000 city-owned vacant lots into community assets by supporting specific alternative land use mechanisms.

One significant approach to achieving vacant land transformation is through alternative ownership models. This is exemplified by NeighborSpace's work in supporting the creation of the King Drive Community Garden. Municipal support for a land trust model, like the one utilized by NeighborSpace, proves effective because it provides secure and stable land tenure for community organizations. This inclusive approach allows for incremental and sustained land stewardship that engages local residents in the use and development of the land. This approach departs from Large Lots, which was time-bound and focused on transferring vacant land into private ownership.

While the land trust model is inherently designed to support a temporary use model, its success at the municipal level requires additional actions. First, it requires a long-term financial commitment from public agencies or private entities. Land trusts, while not directly generating financial benefits for local governments, can significantly reduce financial burdens associated with land care and maintenance. Secondly, successful implementation of a land trust model relies on identifying (or creating) community organizations with the capacity and interest to support desired activities like community gardening and land maintenance. In areas
characterized by hypervacancy and low rates of homeownership, such as Washington Park, a land trust model could be particularly effective in achieving greater community control over vacant land compared to traditional ownership transfer programs like Large Lots.

Another alternative strategy is the establishment of "clean and green" programs for vacant land, which have demonstrated success in cities affected by hypervacancy like Baltimore and Cleveland. These programs allow local governments to retain ownership of vacant land while enabling care and maintenance by local residents through volunteer or paid agreements. Built around a temporary use model, these programs foster socio-ecological benefits by promoting active community engagement and care networks. By avoiding the permanent transfer of property, they serve as interim solutions that enable localized strategies to evolve over time.

While "clean and green" approaches have faced criticism for shifting municipal maintenance responsibilities onto community members, residents and local governments can implement measures to mitigate potential issues. For instance, the use of usufructuary agreements on MOL can formalize residents' right to use and benefit from vacant land for a certain period of time. An alternative to the city holding MOL without plans for redevelopment, these short-term land leases can provide local economic and social benefits while relieving municipal maintenance pressures through resident-led stewardship. This approach could also facilitate more expansive uses of vacant land, such as hosting temporary artistic installations. With adequate support, localized interventions can serve as valuable experimental trials that inform risk-averse decision-making processes within local governments.
CONCLUSION

This research has argued for a temporary use model for municipal reutilization strategies of city-owned vacant land. Comparing the Large Lots Program to the case studies of Sweet Water Foundation; NeighborSpace and the King Drive Community Garden; and Amanda Williams’ *Redefining Redlining*, my analysis revealed that temporary uses of vacant land offer pathways to achieve socio-ecological benefits that support community-led transformation and mitigate hypervacancy. These case studies model how temporary uses of vacant land can fill the gap left by ownership-centric municipal reutilization strategies, like Large Lots, by providing localized, flexible, responsive, and scalable solutions to meet community needs and protect local assets.

These findings underscore the limitations of municipal market-based approaches to vacant land. As local governments succumb to greater pressures from neoliberal development and urban vacant land becomes increasingly commodified and subject to speculation, increased community control can combat adverse outcomes while contributing to broader goals of community cohesion and resilience. A temporary use model allows for collective visions to unfold incrementally and in ways that are responsive to local needs and external pressures. This approach can challenge mainstream ideas of land access and ownership by presenting use models that are more equitable, just, and reparative.

While the alternative approaches to vacant land in this paper are promising, there are limitations to this research. I have taken a qualitative, “big picture” analytical approach that provides relatively light analysis and recommendations. Including interviews and data collected directly from residents, city officials, policymakers, and researchers would enhance future analysis. Additional research might take a quantitative approach to policy reform that
more closely and critically explores alternative approaches to vacant land reutilization in Chicago and across other postindustrial cities.

While I advocate for a temporary use model, this research shows that innovative approaches to vacant land reutilization are already taking place out of desire and/or necessity in many places. These actions represent the precarious power (im)balances that are threaded through land access, political processes, and local ecologies; municipal governments are in the position to tip the scale in one direction or the other. I believe that by supporting community-led initiatives and embracing temporary use models, cities can unlock the transformative potential of vacant land as catalysts for positive and progressive change.

In closing, this paper advocates for a paradigm shift in municipal approaches to urban vacant land management. By embracing a temporary use model, planners, policymakers, and residents alike can reimagine vacant MOL as an opportunity to mitigate the systemic effects of hypervacancy and support sustainable community transformation.


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