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Young Advisory Committee (YAC)
Culture through Place Project

Temporary Space, Lasting Impact: Meanwhile Use as Infrastructure for Placemaking



Working towards the city we want to inherit

About the project

The Young Advisory Committee (YAC) brings together under-35s from Cambridge Ahead member organisations to be part of the decisions which will determine the future of Cambridge.

We do this by producing research and collecting evidence on the issues that matter most to early-career professionals – working towards *the city we want to inherit*.

In 2024, the YAC formed a project to explore the culture of the city, with a particular focus on placemaking. Working in partnership with Cambridge City Council, the group held a roundtable in July 2025 to explore the barriers and enablers to meanwhile use. This report distils the insights and recommendations from that session, drawing on local case

studies and international best practice to inform future opportunities. Thanks to all of the organisations that gave their time to participate in this work.

This report was prepared by members of the Cambridge Ahead Young Advisory Committee: Erin Charles – St John's College, Robin Creighton – Mission Street, Molly Eyles – Savills, Maisie Mannion – Stantec, and Emmie Singleton – Allia.



The opportunities and benefits

The case for meanwhile use

Meanwhile use is broadly defined as the temporary occupation of a vacant or under-utilised space in the short or medium term, often while long-term development plans are being implemented.

This can also occur while alternative uses are explored, or planning permission is being obtained. Meanwhile use offers an opportunity to add significant economic, social and environmental value, as well as

to transform often dormant assets into productive resources while supporting community development and urban regeneration.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS



- Mitigate void costs
- Creates immediate value from vacant properties
- Reduces barriers for entrepreneurs and small businesses
- Enables affordable testing of business ideas – such as through pop-up shops, exhibitions, and shared workspaces¹
- Generates footfall and local spending that benefits surrounding businesses

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS



- Creates community resources like meeting spaces, cultural venues and educational facilities²
- Provides opportunities for residents to connect and collaborate
- Deters antisocial behaviour through increased activity³
- Makes areas feel safer and more vibrant

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS



- Maximises use of existing buildings, reducing need for new construction
- Prevents underutilised and empty properties from deterioration
- Preserves the energy and materials that are already invested in buildings
- Often promotes sustainability through initiatives like community gardens and environmental projects³

STRATEGIC VALUE



- Allows testing of ideas and community needs before major investments¹
- Reduces the development risk while keeping communities engaged during planning processes
- Creates immediate benefits while supporting longer-term regeneration goals and placemaking

These benefits of meanwhile use align directly with Cambridge City Council's Wealth Building Strategy⁴, which seeks to tackle poverty and inequality by using the Council's assets and resources to build community wealth.

To understand how meanwhile use can support the Council's strategy, it is important to recognise the inequalities present in the city. Despite Cambridge's overall prosperity, it has the second highest income inequality of any city in England and Wales, with stark educational, health, and employment disparities between neighbourhoods. These inequalities have created geographical concentrations of

poverty while wealth remains concentrated elsewhere.

Meanwhile use supports the Council's wealth building strategy in practical ways. It turns vacant buildings into affordable spaces which can be used by local businesses and community groups, gives entrepreneurs a more affordable way to test their ideas, and provides venues where residents can come together for community activity such as to tackle local issues or strengthen social cohesion. This makes meanwhile use both a practical solution for addressing inequality in the city and a tool for building the Council's longer-term vision of a Fair For All Cambridge⁵.

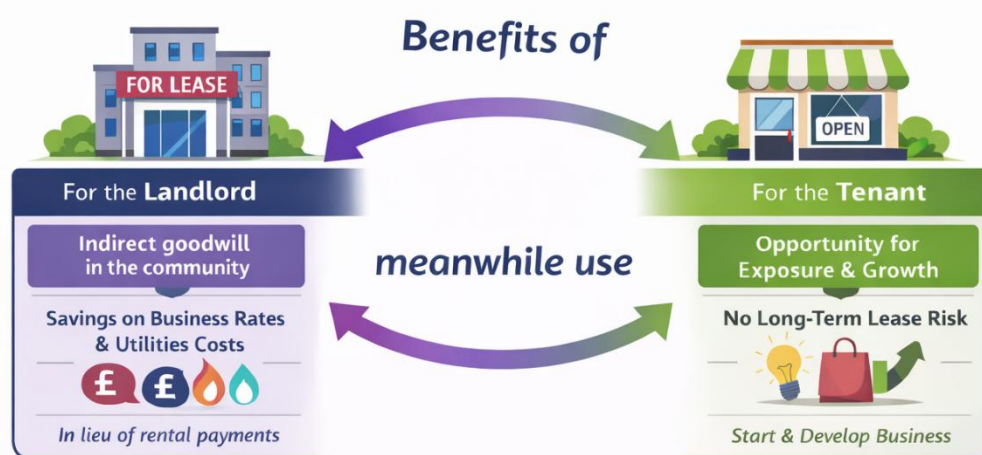


Image developed using ChatGPT

Learning from good practice

Examples and case studies

WATERBEACH, CAMBRIDGE

Waterbeach is a major new settlement masterplanned by Urban&Civic, which is set to deliver approximately 6,500 homes. This is alongside extensive supporting infrastructure. Establishing a strong sense of place and community from the outset was critical in light of the development's scale and phased delivery, as many permanent community facilities were scheduled for later phases.



Meanwhile Use Strategy

As a way to address this, Urban&Civic implemented a proactive meanwhile use strategy, this involved repurposing existing military buildings into temporary leisure facilities and office space. As well as this, additional interventions included a pop-up café and a lakeside activity hub offering paddleboarding and other outdoor activities. These uses activate the site early, avoided vacancy, and created opportunities for local enterprise.

The benefits are as follows:

- **Placemaking:** Fostered early identity and belonging among new residents.
- **Amenity provision:** Offered accessible and useful facilities before permanent infrastructure.
- **Asset utilisation:** Avoided underuse of existing buildings and land.
- **Economic support:** Enabled small businesses to operate and engage with the emerging community.
- **Social cohesion:** Attracted existing and new residents, as well as visitors from neighbouring areas, helping integrate

Waterbeach into the wider local context and support cohesion among new and existing residents.



Why it worked?

Meanwhile use proved highly effective as a transitional strategy. It is bridging the gap between early occupation and long-term infrastructure delivery, all the while ensuring residents have had access to meaningful amenities from day one. This not only supports quality of life, but it also reinforces the development's identity as a vibrant, inclusive, and well-considered place to live.



Practical takeaways

Meanwhile use opportunities featured early in discussions around placemaking, with meanwhile use opportunities being seen as an infrastructure cost at the outset and as fundamental to the development of the place. This is important to avoid 'tokenistic' or 'bolt on' meanwhile use projects.

While there are challenges in bringing about meanwhile use, understanding of the place, its existing assets and community, and working collaboratively with this to deliver meaningful temporary uses is critical to the success of the meanwhile use project.

THE CAMBRIDGE ROOM, CAMBRIDGE

The Cambridge Room at the Grafton Centre is a compelling example of meanwhile use with a civic and cultural twist. It functions as an urban room – a concept popularised by Sir Terry Farrell and designed to foster inclusive public dialogue about the future of Cambridge and its surrounding region.



Meanwhile Use Strategy

The Cambridge Room is an innovative initiative that transforms a vacant unit within the Grafton Shopping Centre into a dynamic space for public events and civic engagement. Designed to accommodate a diverse programme, from exhibitions and workshops to community consultations, the space requires a highly flexible layout to adapt to changing needs.

Operated by a charitable organisation, The Cambridge Room, the space relies on fundraising and donations to support its activities. While the space is essential for operational delivery, financial constraints mean that it would be unfeasible to secure a permanent commercial lease. Therefore, the meanwhile use arrangement offers a vital opportunity to activate underused retail space while at the same time also enabling inclusive, community-led programming at the heart of the city.

The benefits are as follows:

- **Revitalises vacant space:** Transforms underused retail units into vibrant, purposeful environments, reducing the visual and economic impact of vacancy.
- **Improves footfall:** Draws visitors to the Grafton Centre, supporting surrounding businesses and enhancing the centre's role as a civic anchor.

- **Low-cost occupation:** This enables charitable organisations to operate in central urban locations without the financial burden of commercial rent.



Why it worked?

Meanwhile use has provided a valuable opportunity to pilot The Cambridge Room concept in a real-world setting, enabling its model and programming to be refined and proven ahead of any commitment to a permanent commercial arrangement.



Practical takeaways

Utilising vacant retail units through meanwhile use in this context enables community organisations and early-stage start-ups to pilot ideas in high-footfall, accessible locations, helping to maintain day-to-day vibrancy in shopping centres while laying the groundwork for future longer-term occupation. By offering short-term access to vacant units, meanwhile use supports grassroots initiatives and start-ups in proving their concepts, while ensuring retail destinations remain active and relevant to local communities.

THE WAREHOUSE INDOOR SKATE PARK, CAMBRIDGE

The Warehouse at the Beehive Centre is a strong example of meanwhile use shaped directly by community input. What began as a simple consultation with local skaters and Railpen about future skateable features in the Beehive redevelopment quickly evolved into a much more immediate opportunity: the creation of an innovative temporary indoor skatepark operated by Cam Skate. The project shows how meanwhile use can emerge organically when landowners and community groups work together.



Meanwhile Use Strategy

The Warehouse is a meanwhile indoor skatepark built using modular, movable ramps and equipment. The space is run by Cam Skate, on a not-for-profit basis, supported by volunteers and community fundraising. The meanwhile arrangement allows the group to operate in a central location without the cost of a commercial lease, while Railpen benefits from an active, well-managed use of a unit that would otherwise sit empty.

The benefits are as follows:

- **Revitalises vacant space:** Transforms underused retail and spaces into a positive environment which benefits the local community.
- **Supporting young people:** Provides a safe, weatherproof space for skating and socialising.
- **Community led:** Built and run by local volunteers ensuring the space reflects real community needs.



Why it worked?

Railpen was willing to explore temporary solutions, and Cam Skate had strong community support to help deliver them. The meanwhile use arrangement enabled both parties to test the concept quickly, without long-term commitment, while evidencing the value of youth-focused activity on the site. With pro-bono legal advice supporting Cam Skate's lease, the organisation was able to take occupation of The Warehouse with confidence.



Practical takeaways

Meanwhile use can emerge organically when landlords engage early with local community groups. Offering short-term access to vacant units allows organisations like Cam Skate to pilot ideas, build community support and keep sites active while redevelopment plans progress.



LES GRANDS VOISINS, PARIS, FRANCE

Vincent-de-Paul hospital in Paris' 14th district that operated for 5 years until the mid-2020s.

It was slated for redevelopment, but instead of leaving the 3.4 hectare site empty, the developer, Paris Batignolles Aménagement opened it rent-free. It even got extended beyond the original timeline as construction began on other portions of the site.



Meanwhile Use Strategy

Les Grands Voisins is innovative as it turned former treatment rooms, an A&E building and wards into a hostel with 600 beds for the homeless, pop-up shops and startups.

The benefits are as follows:

- **Activation of underused space:** It turned a vacant plot into a community benefit for 5 years and generated footfall for the local economy.
- **Flexibility of uses:** The space provided flexibility for pop-up uses and low-cost studios and workshops. It also provided opportunities for social housing and emergency accommodation in the city.
- **Community and social value:** Inclusion by integrating vulnerable groups and also created public engagement through a variety of uses.

- **Economic sustainability:** Generation of affordable space for small businesses.



Why it worked?

It turned a waiting period into an opportunity, while activating idle land, supporting the most vulnerable in society and fostering innovation to be impactful socially and economically.

Meanwhile use as a tool for inclusive growth

Considerations for good meanwhile use

Meanwhile use is more than a stopgap – it is a tool for inclusive growth. When done well, it can add significant value, tackle inequality and give new life to underused spaces.

Partnership between organisations, asset owners, developers and the Council is key to success. Drawing on the insights from the roundtable on meanwhile use, we have identified four key principles to guide effective meanwhile use in Cambridge, with recommendations to turn these into reality:



Make it easy

Smaller organisations may not have the resources to navigate complex leases, insurance and planning obligations. Clear, accessible information and early conversations between asset owners and tenants help streamline the process and build trust.

- A collaboratively developed code of best practice could reduce barriers and make it easier for social enterprises and community groups to engage with meanwhile use.
- The Council may consider establishing a strategic partnership with a leading meanwhile use specialist to provide expert guidance.
- Early, open dialogue and the use of template agreements can reduce legal costs and complexity for all parties.



Make it viable

Meanwhile use only succeeds where it is practically and financially workable. Short-term leases create uncertainty and limit investment, while fit-out, rates and utilities can pose significant costs. Demountable designs and flexible agreements offer practical ways to reduce risk and support sustainable use.

- Longer temporary leases or clear minimum durations may enable tenants to secure investment.
- Asset owners may consider absorbing fit-out costs, rates and utilities as wider placemaking or infrastructure costs.

3

Make it last

Successful meanwhile uses often evolve into permanent fixtures, becoming anchors for community activity and local enterprise. Planning for what comes next is key – whether transitioning to the next stage of a development plan or identifying future locations. These spaces can be stepping stones for organisations to grow, build networks, and attract investment. Collaborations between asset owners, community organisations and the City Council can future-proof meanwhile use, ensuring it's not just a temporary fix, but part of a longer-term strategy.

- A Council-led register of vacant or underused spaces could facilitate partnerships, and may be particularly helpful when planning for the end of meanwhile uses.

4

Make it happen

Delivering successful meanwhile use requires co-ordination and clarity. Meanwhile use can play a key role in the city's growth, and the City Council plays a pivotal enabling role. Opportunities exist to strengthen this through co-ordinated internal approaches.

- Embedding meanwhile use into local planning policy and practice would encourage asset owners to plan for it from the outset as part of their placemaking strategy.
- A cross-Council approach which aligns planning, rates, community development and asset management, could improve consistency.
- Council-facilitated workshops, in partnership with asset owners and tenants, can highlight best practice and support future projects.

References

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Further resources

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