

The Case for Pop-Up Urbanism as a Tool to Vitalize Local Economies

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Case Study: Christchurch, New Zealand

In February 2011, New Zealand's second largest city, Christchurch, was hit by a major earthquake. 185 people were killed, many buildings were destroyed, and the damage is estimated now to have cost NZ\$40 billion. Economists predict that it will take between 50 and 100 years for New Zealand to completely recover.

The central commercial district was particularly hard hit by the February 22nd catastrophe. City Mall, the main pedestrian mall in Christchurch, was virtually destroyed and cordoned off, with 80% of the district having been demolished.

On October 29th, a mere eight months after disaster struck, City Mall re-opened, albeit with a very different look and identity. The new iteration of City Mall was built from shipping containers. The shipping containers were retrofitted to accommodate an initial roster of 27 shops. This was not meant to be a long-term solution. Rather, the strategy was to bootstrap the mall's recovery through this temporary measure, giving birth to "Re:START," a pop-up mall whose aim was to accelerate the revitalization of commerce in central Christchurch.

Re:START was the brainchild of Christchurch's Property and Building Owners group, who recognized that the revival of downtown commerce was vital not only for its economic well-being, but also for its psychological well-being. Re-building the city with permanent, earthquake-resistant structures would take years, and leaders felt that the people needed something to happen more quickly.

Re:START was an immediate hit, and the container mall continues to receive worldwide acclaim for its accomplishment. It now houses over 50 businesses along with market booths and street entertainers. Besides spearheading the economic revival of the city, Re:START has been the central force behind the resuscitation of Christchurch's tourist industry as well, becoming a "must-see" for world travelers.

With such widespread devastation, both financially and emotionally, how much did it cost to construct the Re:START container mall and begin to put Christchurch's business scene back on sound economic footing?

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Case Study: Camden, U.K.

The London Borough of Camden is located in northern London, abutting Central London to its south. Its local governing authority is the Camden London Borough Council, overseeing a number of directorates. But its local businesses also undertake a robust approach toward developing and promoting initiatives that would help local commerce.

In 2009, faced with myriad local economic challenges, including an unsustainably high number of storefront vacancies, Camden Town Unlimited (CTU) was appointed by the business community to implement programs to upgrade the local commercial performance. Among them was a Pop-Up Shop program whose aim was to transform empty stores into vibrant platforms for start-ups and boutiques.

In its first year, the CTU acquired three empty retail venues and filled them with a rotation of pop-up shops. During that first year, all three storefronts were able to attract long-term tenants, the community began to re-connect with the local business retail establishment, and jobs were created. Since then, dozens more vacancies have been filled with pop-ups, offering a wide variety of galleries, stores, incubator space, art, and handmade artisanal merchandise.

Pop-ups have now become a line item in the Camden town budget, providing low-cost tools through which permanent tenants are cultivated, businesses are grown, and community benefits are reaped.

Case Study: Oakland, California (U.S.A.)

Popuphood is a community-based organization that was founded to curate and activate previously vacant spaces in Oakland — block by block. It is a movement to energize local economic development through the use of pop-ups in order to create jobs, pathways to permanent leases, and enhance the attractiveness of urban living.

Popuphood was started in September 2011 as a grassroots attempt to bring life to an urban area that had continually been marked by high unemployment and storefront vacancies. With the help of a small grant, Popuphood was able to offer five new retail shops — ranging from a bicycle shop to a metalsmith to a jewelry-maker — six months of free rent at previously empty storefronts, all located on one block. The spaces had been empty for over a year.

Since that time, dozens of new shops point to Popuphood as having been the catalyst to a brick-by-brick, block-by-block revival that has helped launched local businesses, create permanent retail tenants, and turn previously-avoided streets and neighborhoods into popular destinations and for both local and out-of-the-area visitors.

These three case studies are examples of how those charged with revitalizing local and even hyperlocal communities are utilizing pop-ups to effect positive change.

When trying to understand what is propelling pop-ups forward as an emerging retail trend, one usually starts off by pointing to the “shop local,” “DIY,” “handmade” preferences shoppers are embracing. Or they may put the focus on the desire for exclusivity and the desire for a shopping *experience*. Or fingers might point to general currents in the economy, where entrepreneurialism on one hand, but the desire to mitigate risk and large commitments on the other, have led to the growth of pop-ups as a natural solution.

But the pop-up trend must also give credit to the community of economic development professionals. There are thousands of economic development officers, on the state, regional, municipal and even community level, whose task it is to somehow foster economic growth in their geographic areas. And they are being asked to do this while hamstrung with tighter and tighter budgets. There is literally competition for every dollar they have to spend.

The economic development professional also has several constituents who look to them for assistance: local merchants, local consumers, commercial property owners, and people looking to start businesses. Sometimes their interests coincide, sometimes they conflict. Officials have to find the right balance among them all, not an easy job.

And then along came the pop-up movement. Suddenly, there was an inexpensive — sometime no-cost at all! — way to connect several interests all at once. Often, pop-

ups are able to provide a one-size-fits-all solution to all of these distinct groups, the ultimate win-win scenario.

Some examples:

- Venues — When one thinks of pop-up venues, the first thought that comes to mind are vacant storefronts. Pop-up shops that move into empty spaces, even for a short period of time, help the landlord in a variety of ways. They provide incremental income — perhaps not a huge windfall, but usually enough to cover such expenses as utilities, insurance, and other fixed costs. They provide staging — it is far better for a landlord to be able to show his/her space active and alive, as being able to support local business, than empty and perhaps even a “loser.” And perhaps best of all, they provide a conduit to permanent lessees, for it is not uncommon for the pop-up to become permanent, and for the pop-up merchant to become a permanent lessee!
- Merchants — Pop-ups help merchants in several ways. The most obvious one is that they are relatively inexpensive ways for vendors, designers, collectors, and makers to test out the market for their goods and services without having to quit their jobs, mortgage their homes, and go blindly into a new enterprise. Pop-ups are great testing grounds for new businesses and start-ups. And they are exclusive outlets for artisans to actually showcase and commercialize their talents.

Pop-ups also help already-established businesses from a couple of perspectives. First, an exciting pop-up, one that is drawing new foot traffic from consumers who visit with an intention to spend money, often spill over into nearby establishments as well. A buzz is created, and pop-up shoppers often stop at nearby eateries for a snack or lunch, or expand their shopping expeditions to include other stores near the pop-up shop.

And in a newly-discovered benefit, many stores and boutiques are using pop-ups as their own marketing resource, making space within the confines of their stores for third-party pop-ups (and charging them rent!) and themselves gaining from the pedestrian traffic that is drawn to check out the new pop-up in the area.

- Consumers — Consumers have shown that they love pop-ups, in all of their forms. Whether seasonal farmers and flea markets; food trucks and food truck festivals; pop-up parklets and flash mobs; yard sales; one-off entertainment and classes; or “conventional” pop-up dinners and pop-up stores, pop-ups lend an air of excitement to otherwise static shopping, dining and entertainment options. And this benefits everyone, including the communities that host the pop-up events.

As baby boomers retire from their full-time occupations, and as millenials enter an ever-tightening job market, economic development professionals are put under greater pressure to find local business opportunities for their constituent populations. At the

same time, these same officials are asked to do their jobs under tighter budgetary constraints. Pop-up initiatives have become a low-cost resource that cities, large and small, are turning to with greater frequency as a means to promote local merchants, customers, and neighborhoods.