



Meanwhile Space
15 Years in Practice



Meanwhile Space
First published in the UK in 2024 by Meanwhile Space
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Thanks to Freya Bishop, Rebecca Ryan, Ellie Sillett, Mitra Mohammdi Tolson and Jack Bailey for their help with the contents.
Excerpts transcribed from an interview with founders Emily Berwyn and Eddie Bridgeman at The Hithe on 8 August 2024.

Images by Meanwhile Space, Jan Kattein Architects Ltd, IF_DO, Mike Massaro, Mark Chilvers, Public Works, LJAG and The Platform Cafe.

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Printed in Great Britain

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This publication follows on from the comprehensive Meanwhile Space: 10 Years in Practice report (2019). It aims to give a summary of the manifestations, achievements and outputs of Meanwhile Space through qualitative and quantitative data, an interview with the founders and site case studies.

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What is meanwhile use?

Meanwhile use is the productive use of buildings or land while they are waiting for something else to happen.

Meanwhile Space interprets this as rethinking underused space for community benefit, for as long as it is available, in a way that positively impacts a place and the people who live and work there. Equity and access to commercial space is a primary driver of good meanwhile use projects, and working in partnership with local people to inform, test, develop and grow ideas that create distinctive and unique places is really where the most impactful opportunity of meanwhile sits.

This is not flash in the pan animation; it is carefully considered activation of a place to achieve maximum social value and equality of access to property.



“Intelligent use of unproductive empty buildings and underused land.”

- Local Government's (DCLG) Meanwhile Project 2009

What we do

Meanwhile Space is a pioneering social enterprise that has been bringing temporarily redundant space into productive use since 2009.

We are experienced strategy, design, and operations specialists, uniquely equipped to guide projects at every stage, always with a focus on bringing social and economic value to local people.

Research and strategy

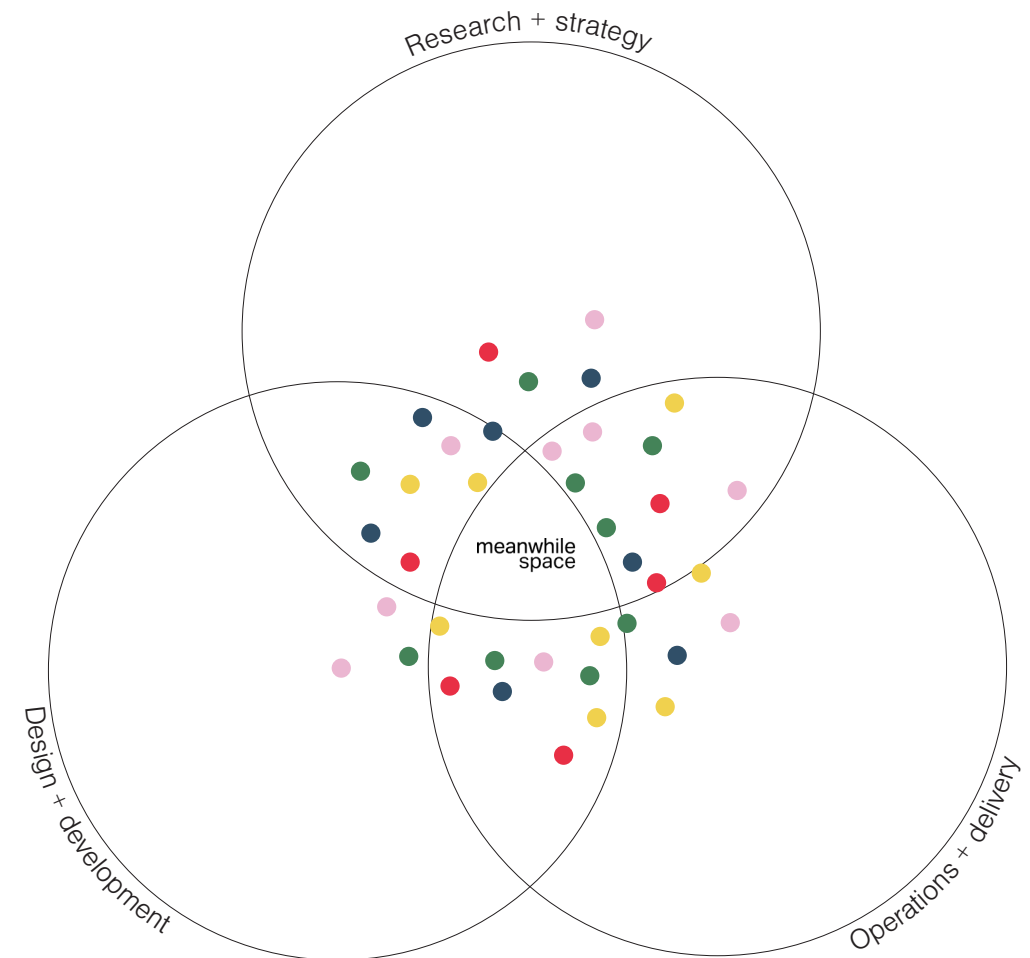
Using a client's brief we identify and work with key stakeholders to develop strategies on a range of scales, from single building initiatives to borough- or city-wide regeneration masterplans.

Design and development

We harness in-house expertise and collaborate with award-winning partners to deliver place-specific projects, putting positive social impact at the forefront of design.

Operations and delivery

We combine our resources with strategic partnerships to offer tailored site management across all scales, from initial launch through to long-term building management.





Meet the founders

Emily Berwyn

An urban designer and dynamic director of projects that deliver social and creative entrepreneurialism, Emily has established multiple organisations, JVs and charities to support a wide range of social initiatives that drive positive change.

Emily has been a visiting lecturer on MA Urban Design at University of Sheffield's School of Architecture, and is a fellow of the RSA. Her achievements include a feature in the RBS Women in Social Enterprise 100 as a BPF Future Leaders winner for Innovation, and an MA in Urban Design from the University of Westminster.

Eddie Bridgeman

Eddie is an innovator who enjoys exploring and delivering new products and services that foster meanwhile use. These often require skilled partnership working and relationship management as much as creative thinking. In addition to taking pride in Meanwhile Space's impact at 'street-level' in urban communities, he also has a particular interest in how these relate to seaside towns and the complex set of issues these communities face.

A social entrepreneur, Eddie maintains the jigsaw of operating the companies that comprise Meanwhile Space and is most satisfied by generating a sound business that has positive financial and social outcomes.



How it all began...

Eddie

My first proper job was in business publishing. I had to research a different subject and then put on a conference every month. When I got given one to do on property, I thought: "I really like this – I like being involved in something you can touch, feel and that affects people's lives."

Emily

I was working in nightclubs until Eddie gave me my first proper job as an Events Assistant at British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA). We did lots of conferences together – our role was about bringing the public, private and community sectors together to network, relationship build, to understand each other and ultimately deliver best practice regeneration. In 2005 it was just accepted that you'd leave sites empty – sometimes for decades – until you were ready to use them. So meanwhile use was one of the things we were talking about.

Eddie

Although it wasn't phrased like that at the time. I remember going to Margate for a site visit and waiting for someone at the station. I was looking over the car park to the Dreamland site (derelict at the time) and someone said: "What a waste – I wonder what its meanwhile use is?" I remember thinking: "I've never heard that before. I really like that phrase."

Emily

From BURA I went on to do an urban design masters. Part of the qualification was master planning – you had to come up with 20-year solutions to huge sites which seemed like madness. It was clear to me that we needed to think about things on a shorter-term basis.

Then in 2009 I ended up on the dole and there weren't any jobs for arts graduates. I was 27 years old and not qualified for much.

Eddie

But through BURA we knew the mechanics of how regeneration worked; we knew how to create networks and bring people together, so we had the pieces we needed. But really, we set Meanwhile Space up as an experiment.

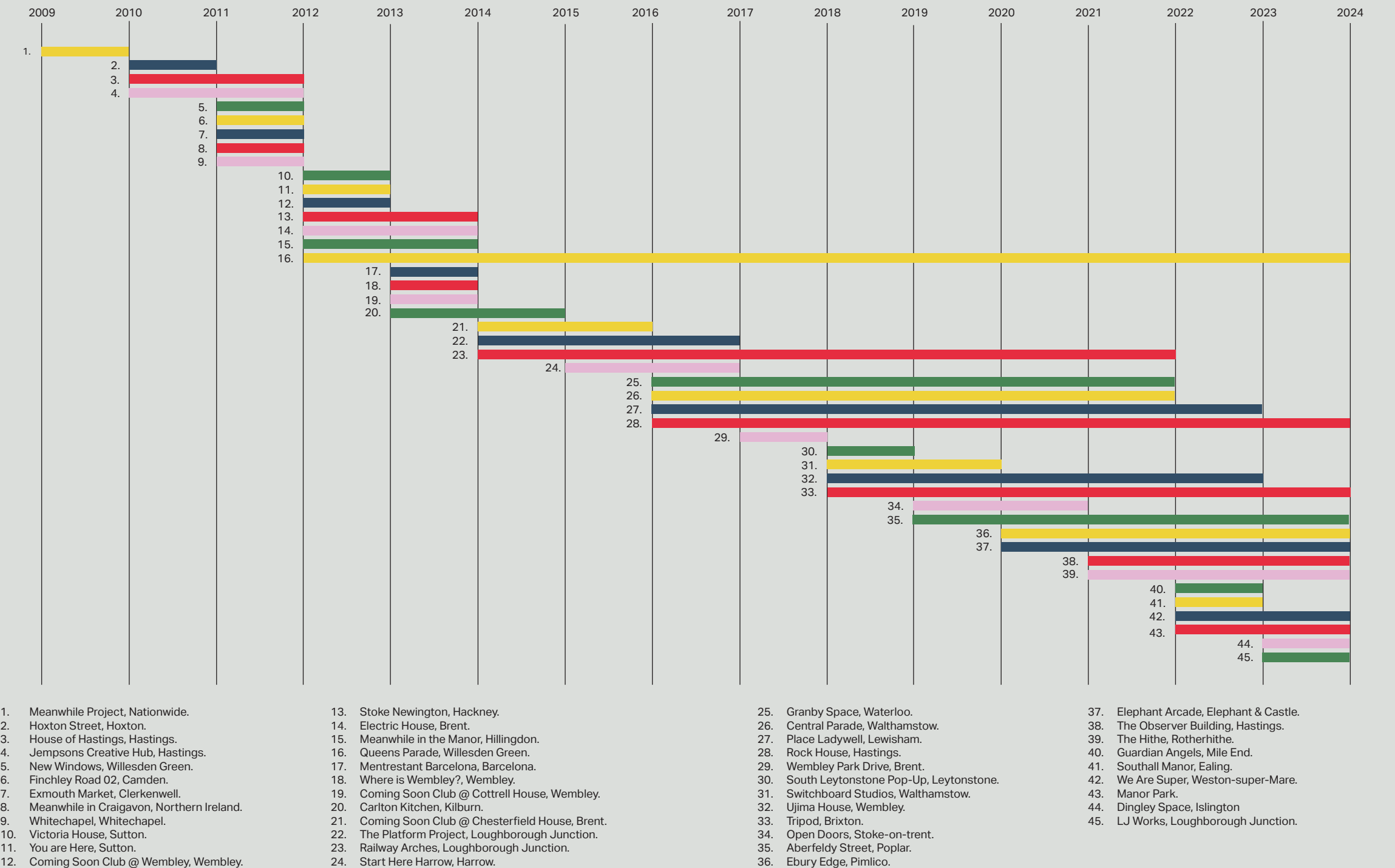
Emily

Just as we were starting our ex-BURA colleague, Jess Steele, was seconded to central government and asked to come up with ways to support the high street during the recession. She pushed us forward and went: "This is the solution."



253 Hoxton Street 2009

Operational projects 2009-2024



Current projects



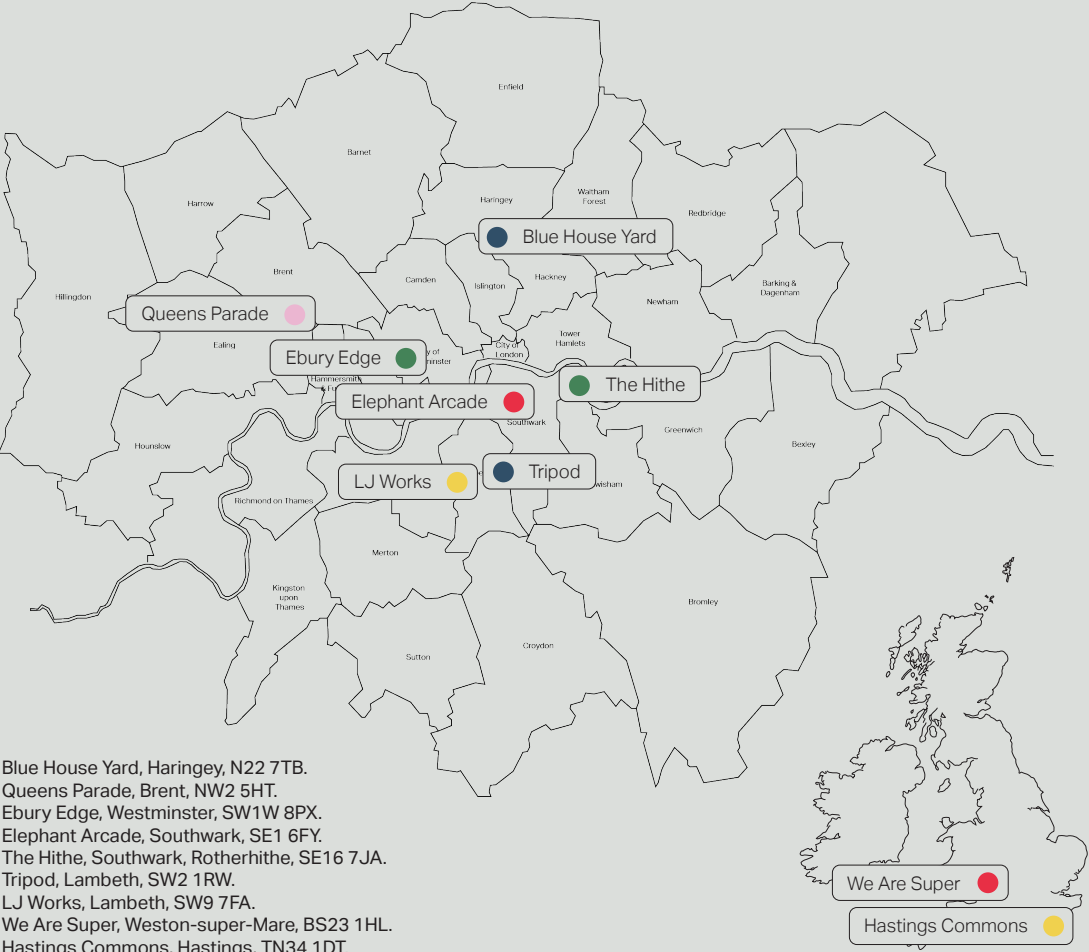
Office, studios and workshops



Retail and food & beverage units




Desks and co-working spaces

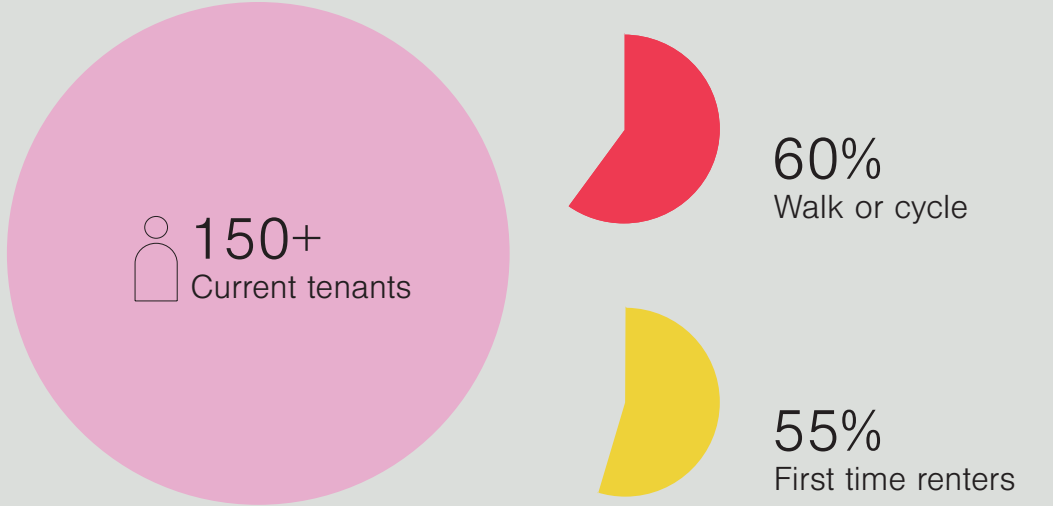




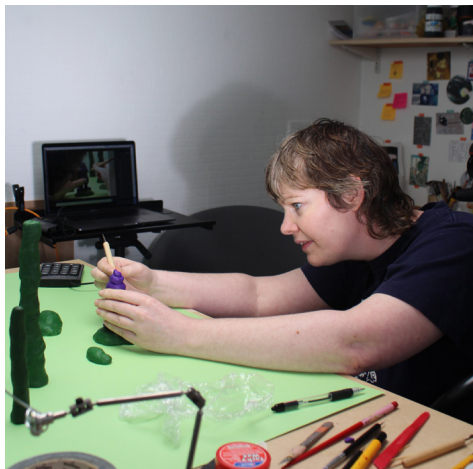
940+
SMEs supported



100+
Project partnerships



Tenant spotlight



Amanda Stockley, Animator
Blue House Yard



Energy Garden, Green community projects
Ebury Edge *Image: Energy Garden*



Talía Girton, The Cycling Music Teachers
The Hithe



Lily King, Heliotique: gifts and lifestyle
Queens Parade



Dr Juice, Fresh juice bar
Elephant Arcade



Aaron Kennedy, Creative director of Originate
We Are Super



Old Spike, Coffee roastery and social enterprise
LJ Works *Image: Old Spike*



Soham De, Urban designer
Tripod

On the evolution of Meanwhile Space

Emily

Originally Meanwhile Space was just a project. We didn't have jobs, someone asked us to do it and it was interesting. After a year of that we could choose whether it was something we went with or not. We obviously did, and so we spent the next six years trying to get the concept of meanwhile use to be more accepted within the wider property industry – basically by building trust and proving the concept.

Then we had to consider how to make it a sustainable business: How do we charge an affordable rent to the people who use our spaces, such that it covers our costs and allows us to develop new projects?

Since Covid we've been transitioning towards being financially valued for our knowledge, skills and experience as strategic thinkers. 15 years on, we have all these business models that we've tried and tested, and lots of different types of buildings that we've brought back into use. We're at a stage where meanwhile use is beginning to be recognised alongside architecture and urban design a valuable, stand-alone service.

Eddie

Over the 15 years we have had detractors – people who think it's just about flash-in-the-pan pop-ups. But cities are transitional places and meanwhile use covers the transitional periods. If you don't have anything that does that, there are gaps, which is a waste.

The end product of meanwhile use is constantly evolving into different things. There are more operators working in the space now, which is a good thing, but our ambition is to continue to do new, different things – to remain at the pioneering front of things.

Emily

At the moment our real interest is in bringing different uses and activity to small sites: places that are left over from bigger development projects, or that people don't know what to do with, because of their constraints. There's a focus throughout London on using small sites to reach housing targets, but some of those sites aren't suitable for housing, or housing can be just one component of what is suitable.

This calls on us to reassess the definition of meanwhile – to understand it as a tool for community benefit that can cover longer periods too. It is taking us in the direction of a longer-term asset-based model.

I don't know what meanwhile use will look like in another 15 years' time. It could be anything: whatever is not being used to its full capacity. I'd like to think it's longer term, and it's the ethos of accessibility that lasts – the anti-masterplan approach, using different spaces at different scales in a more flexible way.



Meanwhile Space team 2024



1. Vacant site
Image: LJAG



2. Sandbag planters
Image: LJAG



3. The Platform Project
Image: Meanwhile Space



4. LJ Arches
Image: Mike Massaro



5. Steering group
Image: Tom Dobson



6. Co-design for LJ Works
Image: Tom Dobson



7. Community site visit
Image: Tom Dobson



8. LJ Works launches
Image: Shannen Lythgoe



9. The Platform Cafe today
Image - The Platform Cafe



Local community groups, Venice Biennale Architecture 2019
Image: Public Works and Peter Guenzel

Loughborough Farm

Between the suburban railway line and Loughborough Estate lies a triangle of land. Owned by Lambeth Council, the 2,000m² site had been left vacant since the 1960s.¹ Vaguely destined for redevelopment, in 2013 it was unofficially occupied by local volunteers who began a community food growing project. They planted everything in sandbags acquired from building sites so that they would be able to relocate Loughborough Farm if they were evicted.²

The Platform Project

Funded by JP Morgan Chase Foundation, Meanwhile Space brought a derelict public toilet block located across the road back into use for community benefit.³ The Platform Project launched in 2014, offering Loughborough Junction residents free space to pilot their business ideas on a rotating short-term basis. This then evolved into a number of uses time sharing the space, and then for the last nine years the space has been occupied by Platform Cafe, who serve produce grown by Loughborough Farm across the road.⁹

LJ Arches

Successful participants in the Platform Project were offered affordable follow-on space in railway arches, renovated in partnership with Network Rail.⁴ The programme produced

ten viable businesses, three of which are still based in the Arches, now managed by The Arch Company.

LJ Works

The growing success of Loughborough Farm drew the site to Lambeth Council's attention, and so its redevelopment came back into question. A steering group was formed in 2015 to create a collaborative long-term vision for the site.⁵ Local residents came together with representatives from the project partners: Loughborough Farm, Meanwhile Space, Lambeth Council, Loughborough Estate Management Board, Marcus Lipton Youth Centre, Loughborough Junction Action Group, Tree Shepherd, Repowering London and Green Man Skills Zone. Each organisation acted as a two-way conduit, bringing ideas and concerns to meetings, and feeding back developments to their respective communities.⁶

In 2016 the GLA approved funding for LJ Works. Engagement surveys determined that the site should be used for low-cost, mixed-use workspace and growing space. Co-design workshops, community engagement events, site visits and the employment of local construction SMEs, involved Loughborough Junction residents at every stage of the process.⁷ The front building was constructed using the WikiHouse system enabling community build workshops.

Loughborough Junction

LJ Works launched in 2023. The site provides below market-rate makerspace, studios, meeting rooms, co-working, a kitchen and coffee roastery.⁸ It brings vibrancy to the area, demonstrating the power of community-led initiatives in local regeneration. Meanwhile Space will operate the site for its first five to seven years before transferring stewardship to a local community group.



LJ Works launches
Image: Mark Chilvers

Do you have a favourite project?

LJ Works

Emily

Loughborough Junction is a really good demonstration of how we have no idea what is going to come of us being there when we start working in a neighbourhood, and trusting the process of listening and caring about a place to achieve the best possible uses of vacant spaces.

As is often the case, when we began we would be turning up at one door and have squatters running out the back. The local community's response is that they don't like us, they think that whatever we're doing they don't want it. But the care, attention and relationship building means that eventually you get people saying, "I really like this, my auntie's going to come down and talk to you."

Here we've given people a place to test their ideas – we've taken 15 spaces on in the arches, which led to LJ Works, a permanent workspace. That's really what meanwhile use is about: improving things as you go, using the space that is there in an organic, phased, progressive way that benefits people who are there, and who get to shape it as it goes.

Blue House Yard + Queens Parade

Eddie

I like Blue House Yard. We got it done really quickly, it was low budget and you just wouldn't believe, walking into it now, how little it took to achieve. And it's still standing.

Likewise Queens Parade. It's a knackered old building, but it would just be there blighting the corner of Willesden Green if we weren't doing what we're doing. We've really worked that relationship well – the landlord is happy to let us be there until they need it back.

The Hithe

Emily

I love The Hithe because it's small and it's an experiment. I really didn't know whether it was going to work or not.

The project came up and my design brief was delivering something demountable, that cost less than your standard build cost. The obvious thing would have been to do shipping containers, but I don't agree that they're really demountable or that they provide quality space. We wanted something good quality.

IF_DO and the Meanwhile Space team took the vision I had and made it concrete, developing it into this incredible building.

The space is doing lovely things for the community. Volunteers are helping shape the garden; different people are coming along and contributing different things.

Eddie

What I'm proud of is that out of a small footprint that would otherwise be doing nothing we are able to create a project. And it's the culmination of these small-scale, local projects that makes community within a town or city. Big developers may create the infrastructure, but our projects are what makes a place sing. They bring a bit of humanity.



Blue House Yard, N22
Image: Jan Kattein Architects





Image: Mike Massaro

The Hithe was commissioned by Southwark Council in 2018 to transform a vacant site constrained by a vehicle tunnel and railway line. The purpose-built demountable building is a circular economy demonstrator project designed by IF_DO Architects, to be relocated within the borough after its current 10-year window. This adaptability brings value to new neighbourhoods and enhances the return on investment.

Designed to meet the needs of locals based on community engagement, The Hithe contains affordable studios, a communal area and a community garden. Incubator spaces offer local freelancers, entrepreneurs, artists and small businesses low-risk space to work and grow their businesses. The community garden provides a meeting space for local people – encouraging diverse groups to work together, to take stewardship over their area, participate in creative activities and spend time outdoors. It also promotes biodiversity and acts as a pollution filter in a highly polluted area. Other local businesses benefit from The Hithe's striking aesthetic, visible from the surrounding areas including from Rotherhithe overground station, which draws footfall in the direction of Albion Street retail.



Image: Mike Massaro

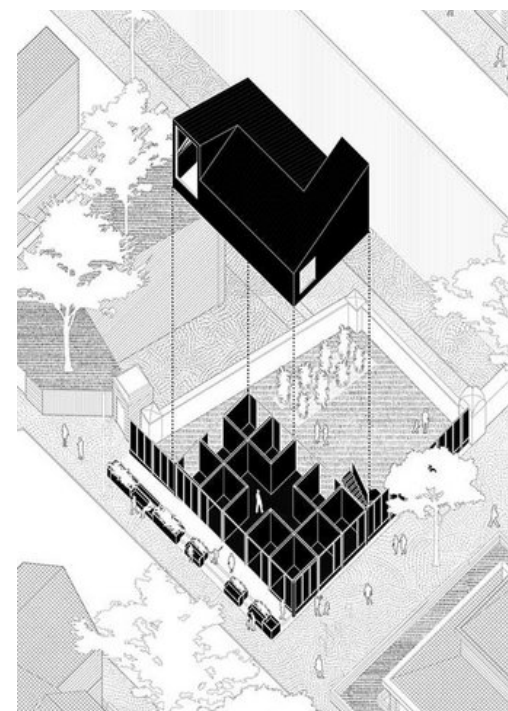


Image: IF_DO Architects

"A circular economy is one in which stuff is kept in use for as long as possible, delivering the highest value it can, for as long as it can. So rather than making, using and then throwing stuff away (a linear system), a circular economy means looking at each of those stages for new ways of cycling materials and value back into the system – using materials and products again and again, in many different forms."

- ReLondon

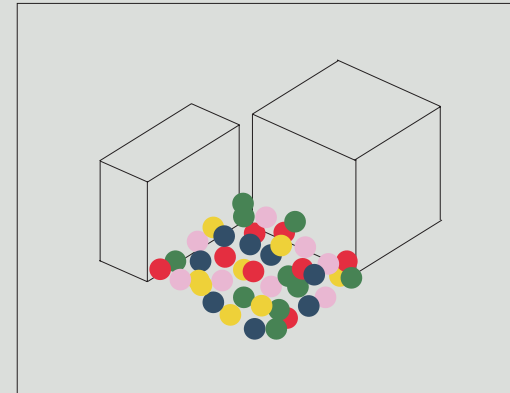
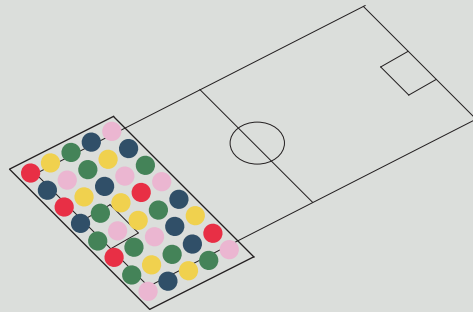
Innovation

The Hithe was designed to be fully demountable and relocatable, enabling its long-term use beyond the 10-year lease of its current site. It sits within the site's existing foundations, which minimised the need for new concrete in its construction. The frame is made of lightweight steel and timber.

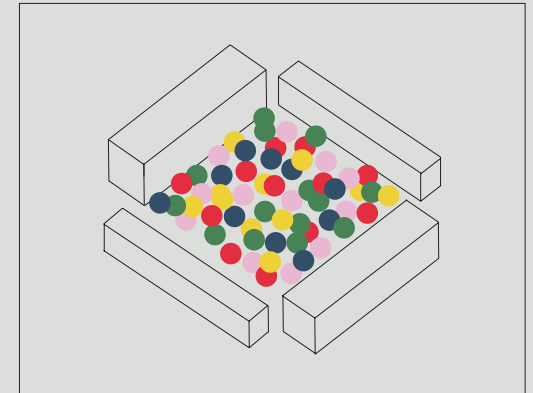
The Hithe

What is a small site?

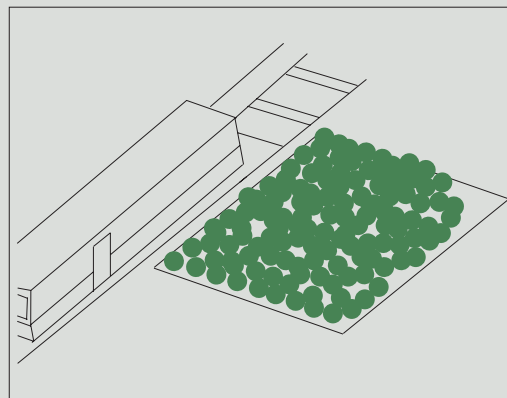
Small sites are those that fall below 0.25 hectares in size. That is 2,500sqm or just under a third of the size standard football pitch. Some examples include:



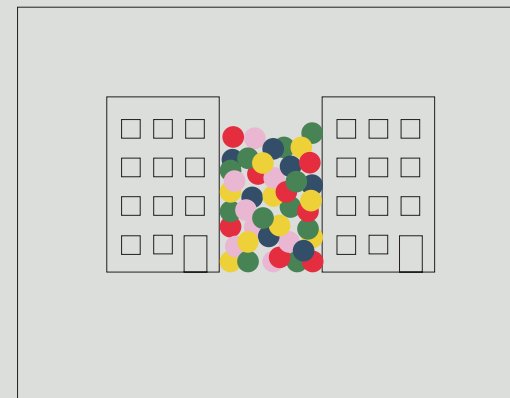
Infill development



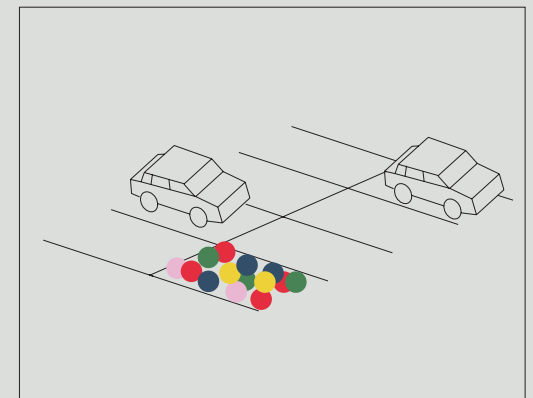
Corner infill



Urban wasteland



Car park



Backland



1. 2022



2. Hugel mounds



3. Pergola



4. 2024



The Hithe Community Garden is a testament to the power of collaboration. Weekly volunteer sessions over the last couple of years have transformed the site from a pile of rubble into a vibrant green space to be used for public events and creative activities.

The design

Decisions have been made collaboratively stage by stage. They have been influenced by volunteers' input and knowledge and adapted to the quirks of this tricky site. As it is located above the entrance to the Rotherhithe tunnel and the overground station, nothing can be planted within a metre of its perimeter and we are unable to dig down.

Distinctive features include Hugel mounds, a permaculture technique which creates a highly fertile soil; a greenhouse and edible beds; and an iconic, colourful pergola designed by a Hithe tenant's intern, which provides a place to gather within the garden, and creates a distinctive landmark visible from outside the site. The structure was painted and built during co-design sessions with the garden volunteers.



The Hithe Community Garden



Weaving station

Danger
Deep Ditch
Keep Out

BRUNELWHARF
COMING SOON 2016
cubix

On partnerships

Having seen a lot of change in the industry over the last 15 years, Meanwhile Space has a flexible and fearless approach to tackling challenging spaces, solving problems alongside and in partnership with our clients and stakeholders. We rely on partners to lease us property, through which we can deliver our projects, so partnerships are crucial to our business. It's a dynamic way of working; you're bringing together almost a joint venture, where each partner is valued for their contribution and trusted for their input, skills and experience. Typically, we partner with a local authority, developer or housing association, where they have either a problem building or a site that they want to activate for community benefit.

By virtue of the kinds of buildings and sites that are typically available for meanwhile use, many of them are problem buildings, challenging or small sites, or there is a market failure of some kind. This means we may be able to use them, but it is not straightforward, and highly likely we will be required to work together as a team with our clients and stakeholders to solve problems in unexpected ways.

And that's what makes it interesting, challenging to unpick and risky to deliver. It's our job to try and unlock that. Initially we might be paid a fee to do some of the strategic thinking to work out what or if a project is viable, and then we will go on to the delivery and operation of that site.

The landlord always expects some kind of return, which could be financial or in the form of social value. How much that can be really depends on the market and the opportunity and how well we as a team can work in partnership to maximise the opportunity

the vacancy presents. But it is ultimately the landlord that benefits financially through the cost savings of vacancy (business rates, insurance, standing charges) or the long term income generated from civic pride, placemaking and destination creation.

In recent years, the nature of partnership working, particularly with local authorities, has changed. We care about places, buildings and people, but increasingly we are expected to shoulder unreasonable risk in order to see a project through to operation. This means for the first time that our business is repeatedly under threat as local authorities become more risk averse, and often demand small businesses bear that risk on behalf of the public sector in the name of protecting public money.

How to maintain an approach that is creative, flexible and fearless, to be able to tackle challenging spaces with tenacity when costs have rocketed, and all spend and actions are scrutinised, is a real issue for many of our public sector partners who feel unable to take the same risks they were previously able to.

When these risks are carried solely by Meanwhile Space, it is too much to expect of a small social enterprise, but together we are greater than the sum of our parts, each bringing different skills, experience and perspectives to get the job done. When this partnership working is successful, as Southwark proves with the Hithe, and Lambeth showcases with LJ Works, and as Ecoworld and Poplar Harca demonstrate in the following pages at Aberfeldy Street; it can transform vacancy and dereliction to deliver extraordinary benefits to local people and their neighbourhoods.



A Temporary Fix panel discussion

Partnership in action

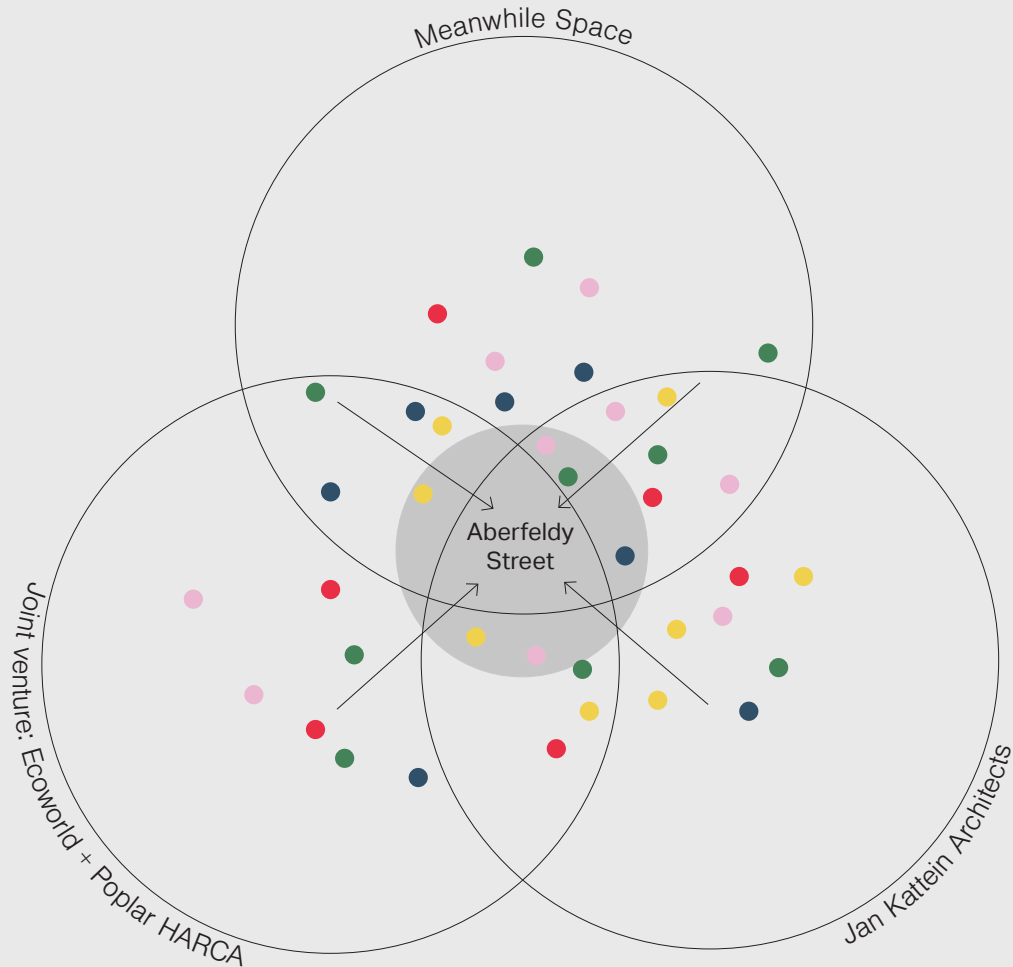


Image: Jan Kattein Architects

Aberfeldy Village, is a JV partnership between EcoWorld London and Poplar HARCA. In August 2019, Meanwhile Space were commissioned to deliver a meanwhile programme of interventions on Aberfeldy Street. The project aimed to drive footfall, incubate local independent businesses, bring new and existing communities together and improve the perception of the area, creating a lasting legacy.

The scheme involved the delivery of eye-catching visual streetscape improvements designed by Jan Kattein Architects, business support and events. The Start Here programme invited local businesses to occupy vacant high street units and offered existing traders extensive business support. Enhancement of street façades included artwork inspired by local Bangladeshi kantha heritage. Community engagement was pivotal to the project's success, fostering a sense of pride and creating an inspiring high street where existing and new residents could gather.

Eight new local businesses joined the Start Here programme and five existing business went through a tailored support programme. Meanwhile Space put on five events including

taking part in the Open House Festival, Idris Elba's Fight Club, Festival of Light, Aberfeldy Spooks and Aberfeldy Fun Day, in addition to local businesses organising their own events. A large portion of businesses involved reported growth, the scheme has received multiple awards, press, blogs and social content.

Partner list

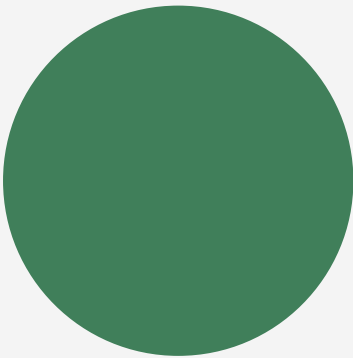
Arch Co	LDA
Architecture 00	Lewisham Council
Architecture Foundation	LJAG
Arup	LLDC
AtkinsRéalis	Locality
Avison Young	Makespace Oxford
Big Issue Invest	Meanwhile Foundation
Birmingham City Council	Met Works
Boano Prismontas	Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing
Bow Arts Trust	Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Brent Council	Montagu Evans
Brighton & Hove City Council	Network Rail
Brixton Green	Newham Council
Buckinghamshire Council	North Somerset Council
City of Barcelona	Notting Hill Housing Group
Clarion Housing	Nuveen
Craigavon Council	Oxford City Council
Croydon Council	Populo
Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities	Power to Change
Ealing Council	Public Works
East Sussex County Council	Runnymede Trust
EcoWorld	School for Social Entrepreneurs
GLA	Southwark Council
Goldsmiths University	Spiral
Gort Scott Architects	Stevenage Council
Greenwich Council	Sutton Council
Groundwork London	Technology Strategy Board
Hackney Council	The Decorators
Haringey Council	The Vaults
Harrow Council	Tibbalds
Hastings Commons	Tower Hamlets Council
Hastings Council	Tree Shepherd
Hillingdon Council	Turner Works
HUB Group	UnLTD
IF_DO	Urban Space Management
Islington Council	V7
Jan Kattein Architects	Waltham Forest Council
Jericho Road	Wards Corner
JP Morgan Chase Foundation	Westminster City Council
Lambeth Council	Workspace Group
Land Sec	

This list represents a cross-section of past partners and is not exhaustive.

Image references

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