Urban Planning
2026 • Volume 11 • Article 11659
https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11659

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Open Access Journal

Leveraging a Street Festival for Lasting Transformation in a UNESCO World Heritage Neighbourhood

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Submitted: 31 October 2025 **Accepted:** 25 March 2026 **Published:** 17 June 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Temporary Use and Value Creation in Urban Contexts" edited by Hilde Remøy (TU Delft) and Chiara Mazzarella (TU Delft), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i512

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how a temporary cultural event has impacted the repositioning of a neighbourhood and led to urban revitalisation. The analysis is based on the Kaya Kaya street festival, a private bottom-up initiative in Otrobanda, part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Historic Willemstad, Curaçao. By temporarily using vacant (historic) properties and underutilised public spaces to host cultural activities, Kaya Kaya has played a key role in positioning the neighbourhood as an attractive and artistic place. Drawing on interviews and theories on temporary use, the economic impact of cultural events, and bottom-up initiatives, the study analyses how the event has shaped experiences, perceptions, and actions that have led to long-lasting impacts on the neighbourhood. It demonstrates that although events have a temporary nature, they can generate multiple long-lasting social, economic, and physical values that create new opportunities for their surroundings. Short-term event impacts are easy to quantify, but longer-lasting urban effects before and after are often overlooked by property owners, developers, investors, and policymakers. This case study aims to contribute to wider research on urban strategies by offering insights into how events as temporary use can be strategically leveraged to revitalise historic neighbourhoods while addressing benefits, risks, and limitations.

Keywords

cultural events; temporary use; urban revitalisation; world heritage sites

1. Introduction

This article explores how a cultural street festival functions as a form of temporary use and how it can translate vacancy into multi-dimensional place value in a historic neighbourhood, while also addressing risks

and trade-offs. Vacant properties in historic urban neighbourhoods are often the result of economic decline, deindustrialisation, or negligence, leading to greater risks of buildings and monuments becoming damaged and decayed (Ikeda, 2022). Over time, this poor condition of properties and public spaces can contribute to a negative perception of a place (Simons et al., 2025). To counteract this development, various studies acknowledge the potential value of temporary use as a low-cost, quick, flexible, and creative solution that acts as a catalytic tool for urban revitalisation (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Madanipour, 2018; Oswalt, 2004), especially in declining urban areas with limited financial resources and planning capacity (Andres et al., 2019; Bragaglia & Caruso, 2022; Dubeaux & Cunningham Sabot, 2018). Recent work on temporary use further suggests that its contribution to urban revitalisation is best understood as multi-dimensional place value because value in place-based interventions is rarely singular and is typically categorised into economic, social, environmental/physical, and cultural values (Jégou et al., 2016). This aligns with Carmona's (2019) conceptualisation of place value as the diverse forms of value generated by how places are shaped and experienced, and distributed across stakeholders. This framing is particularly relevant in historic neighbourhoods, where the feasibility of reuse, the condition of the built environment, and community impact are tightly interconnected.

While temporary use in real estate is often associated with short-term functions such as temporary housing, office, or art spaces in vacant properties (Karachalis, 2021), mainly framed through the relationship between property owners and temporary tenants, this article shifts attention to events as a distinct form of temporary use. Although events are time-limited, research shows they can generate long-term social, physical, and economic effects that support urban revitalisation in historic areas (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017; Richards & Palmer, 2010), by reshaping the physical urban space and contributing to a city's economy and community (Richards, 2017a; Smith, 2018). However, prior research frequently focuses on either the short-term event impacts such as attendance, spend, and visitor experience, or the long-term effects of mega-events, with less attention to how recurring, neighbourhood-scale, bottom-up, event-based, temporary use translates into integrated place value for revitalisation, with regard to physical change, economic dynamics, and community effects.

This gap is especially relevant for small-island and tourism-dependent contexts, where historic centres often combine heritage sensitivity with limited public resources, fragmented ownership, and strong external demand pressures. Yet, events as temporary use remain comparatively under-researched in Caribbean settings and within UNESCO World Heritage urban contexts. This article addresses that gap by examining a cultural street festival as a temporary use that potentially generates interlinked physical, economic, and social value, while also taking into account the risks. Prior work on unconventional cultural practices demonstrates that festivals can operate as place-making processes that shape experiences, representations, and intentions at neighbourhood scale (Rota & Salone, 2014). Simultaneously, research increasingly emphasises that the design and management of temporary events in public space matters, as these interventions can be regarded as a form of temporary urbanism that can have positive effects on their locations, contributing to social and economic gains (Behmanesh & Brown, 2025). From a real estate perspective, emerging work on temporary uses also suggests that social value can have economic implications over time, reinforcing the need to analyse temporary interventions as a combined social–economic–spatial bundle rather than isolated effects (Mazzarella et al., 2025).

Against this theoretical backdrop, this article explores the Kaya Kaya street festival in Otrobanda, a historic district within the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Willemstad (Curaçao). Dating to the 18th century, Otrobanda, with predominantly Dutch colonial architecture with Caribbean influences, contains 463 registered monuments, accounting for over half of all monuments in Curaçao (Curaçao Monuments, 2024). Socio-economic developments around the 1950s led to urban decline, characterised by abandoned properties, dilapidated monuments, and reduced activity (Ministry of Social Development, Labour and Welfare, 2011). When the Kaya Kaya festival began in 2018, Otrobanda was widely perceived as a stigmatised place to be avoided by visitors (Simons et al., 2025). As a private bottom-up initiative, Kaya Kaya gradually grew to become an established (bi-)annual event attracting approximately 10,000 to 15,000 visitors. Recent editions expanded with an Art Week and an Urban School programme in the days leading up to the main one-day paid event. The festival transforms the streets (streets meaning *kaya* in the local language of Papiamentu) into temporary stages for music, dance, art, culture, food, drinks, and social engagement.

Using qualitative analysis and semi-structured interviews, this article examines Kaya Kaya as a temporary use from an urban studies perspective, focusing on the following research questions: (a) How has the festival's activation of underused spaces for temporary events affected the physical environment in Otrobanda's historic neighbourhood? (b) How has the festival impacted the economic value of the neighbourhood? and (c) How has the festival, as a bottom-up initiative, affected the neighbourhood community? By analysing Kaya Kaya's development and neighbourhood effects, the article contributes to wider debates on the potential of temporary events as an urban strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vacancy and Temporary Use in World Heritage Cities

Structural vacancy in urban areas poses intertwined social, economic, and spatial risks. It is associated with lack of safety, weakened social cohesion, holdings costs without income, decrease in surrounding property values, and investment appetite (de Jong, 2012; Koppels et al., 2011; Remøy & van der Voordt, 2007). Vacant properties also accelerate deterioration, worsening place image and residential demand (Koppels et al., 2011). In World Heritage contexts, these dynamics can be exacerbated because conservation rules, fragmented ownership, and financing gaps hinder adaptive reuse, leaving monuments vulnerable to decay (Ikeda, 2022; Maha Shree et al., 2024). Heritage conservation literature emphasises continuous use as the most effective way to preserve historic buildings (Organization of World Heritage Cities et al., 2014). Temporary use, framed as a sustainable heritage-led strategy, can support this by enabling reversible alterations without compromising authenticity and increasing users' awareness of heritage (Ikeda, 2022).

Against this backdrop, temporary use is widely presented as a pragmatic approach, also in heritage environments, to create value for public and private parties (Bragaglia & Caruso, 2022; Karachalis, 2021; Madanipour, 2017). This value can be framed as multi-dimensional place value referring to the diverse benefits and risks generated and distributed across stakeholders such as residents, businesses, investors, visitors, and public bodies (Carmona, 2019). This multi-dimensional approach is commonly discussed across physical/environmental, economic, and social domains, with cultural value often operating as a contextual layer that highlights history and meaning in heritage settings (Jégou et al., 2016).

2.2. Temporary Urbanism and Events

In this article, temporary urbanism is used as the closest analogue to temporary use (Chang, 2021). It refers to time-limited processes that activate spaces perceived to need transformation (Andres & Kraftl, 2021), often by disrupting everyday life (Madanipour, 2017). These interventions range from "meanwhile uses" to pop-ups and festivals, as tools to activate vacant and underused spaces and to bring about urban change (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Oswalt et al., 2013). Moreover, temporary urbanism is flexible enough to adapt to its specific site and context by responding to the needs of people (Andres & Kraftl, 2021). The combination of these core characteristics of temporality, activation, and adaptability is therefore considered catalytic for urban regeneration (Colomb, 2012; Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017; Oswalt et al., 2013).

Events are a distinct form of temporary use that occupy a specific space during a specific time, literally "taking place" in both spatial and temporal senses (Falassi, 1987; Richards, 2024). Aside from time-bound activations, festivals and public events have been described as place-making processes that shape neighbourhood meanings and practices through unconventional cultural productions (Rota & Salone, 2014). Recent work further highlights that event design and management criteria influence whether temporary interventions translate into positive spatial, social, and economic outcomes in public space (Behmanesh & Brown, 2025). More broadly, Richards (2017a) states that there is a synergy between cities and events, as cities act as venues to host events while events use their catalytic power to foster urban development, and thus impact the social and spatial values (Richards & Palmer, 2010). A festival is a type of event focused on community celebration, culture, tradition, or art, and while all festivals are events, not all events are festivals (Falassi, 1987). Despite their temporary nature, festivals must provide visitors with everyday facilities such as eating areas, restrooms, and gathering spaces, all in a safe and maintained environment (Haugbølle & Forman, 2014). This enables festivals to function as accelerated experiments for testing sustainable solutions that can generate useful insights applicable across the urban environment (Haugbølle & Forman, 2014). Gold and Gold (2020) describe a process where multiple festivals held in a certain place generate tangible and intangible effects on its economy, culture, and environment.

Festivals can convert temporary activations to long-lasting transformations when channelled into permanent infrastructure and regulations, leading to urban revitalisation (Smith, 2012). However, many such changes are preconditions for staging events (Smith, 2012), and long-term effects may be intended or unintended, positive or negative (Preuss, 2007).

2.3. Risks, Governance, and Limitations of Events as Temporary Use

Critics warn that event-led temporary uses risk being exploited when they merely serve as a longer-term profit-oriented strategy, displacing temporary uses until more conventional functions become feasible (Colomb, 2012; Ferreri, 2015). Public streets and spaces may be closed for commercialised events, with prices rising to tourist benchmarks and access limited through paid, enclosed event sites (Gold & Gold, 2020; Richards & Palmer, 2010; Smith, 2018). Moreover, temporality can discourage long-term spatial visions and investment quality, and abrupt endings may leave places less attractive or harm vulnerable groups (Kelbaugh, 2002). As events draw attention and investments, they can accelerate gentrification and displacement risks (McGillivray et al., 2022), and their success may trigger conventional development that erodes the qualities that made sites distinctive (Oswalt et al., 2013; Pogoreutz, 2006). Furthermore, sponsor dependency and

weak institutionalisation can create instability and limit public benefit (Schuster, 2021). To counteract these effects, governments can adopt "resident-first" measures such as limiting closed-off event days, guarantee free-access hours and/or areas, analyse carrying-capacity limits, protect housing and local businesses, and stimulate spreading of events beyond crowded areas (Dransfeld & Lehmann, 2008).

Events alone cannot revitalise places; their effects are strongest when leveraged together with policy, planning, governance, and investment (Smith, 2012). The public sector can direct temporary use for public benefit while minimising the negative effects by controlling functions and rents (Ebert & Kunzmann, 2012) and establishing policies and agreements with clear objectives and scope (Stevens, 2018). Planners can also collaborate with organisers to provide continuity and stability that temporary projects often lack (Landry, 2006). Yet, institutionalisation carries the risk of formalising the spontaneity and undermining the creativity that makes temporary uses valuable (Pogoreutz, 2006). The type and scale of events also determine their impact. While research mainly focuses on the impact of mega-events, growing evidence illustrates that small bottom-up festivals can reframe place narratives and catalyse urban transformation (Prentice & Andersen, 2003; Richards, 2017a).

2.4. Events and Marketing

From a marketing perspective, events can generate media attention and positive associations with their host cities, benefiting creative sectors, investors, and public actors seeking to promote a cultural image (Karachalis, 2021; Prentice & Andersen, 2003; Turku et al., 2023). Festivals can also transfer positive visitor experiences to the places where they occur and, in heritage settings, reshape sense of place by disrupting established interpretations and opening space to explore cultural identities and alternative futures (Perry et al., 2019).

However, when used as urban marketing strategies, events can put pressure on the experimental nature of temporary use and exacerbate commodification, resistance, displacement risks, or other conflicts, particularly where reputational gains override local community interests (Colomb, 2012; McGillivray et al., 2022).

2.5. Events as Temporary Use in Heritage Settings

Events in heritage settings can support sustainability goals by activating underused spaces, stimulating adaptive reuse, and engaging wider publics in heritage awareness and management (Jones, 2019, 2022; Tommarchi et al., 2018). As event settings shape visitor experience, festivals can also function as testing grounds for heritage activation strategies, including redistributing visitors beyond prominent sites (Di Vita, 2022; Jones, 2022). Meanwhile, repeated events can place physical stress on the historic fabric of a site through vehicle access, event logistics, and increased footfall, potentially negatively affecting the site's authenticity (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). These dynamics underline the need for governance that safeguards resident access and aligns event delivery with heritage-sensitive guidelines and conservation priorities, for example by involving heritage experts in event planning and setting clear rules such as reversible, non-fixed installations on monuments and the use of frameworks such as the Historic Urban Landscape approach and the Sustainable Development Goals (Jones, 2019; Tommarchi et al., 2018).

2.6. Events as Temporary Use Within the Caribbean Heritage Context

Research on events as temporary urbanism in Caribbean heritage contexts remains limited, despite the region's strong links between culture, tourism, and place marketing.

Festivals are frequently used to promote historic districts and stimulate creative-economy activities in the Caribbean, with music often positioned as a cultural asset (Hernández-Acosta, 2020). Examples such as Old San Juan's Fiestas de la Calle San Sebastián and Saint Lucia's Jazz & Arts Festival illustrate both benefits in visibility, visitor spending, tourism, and investment interest, and recurring tensions around resident disturbance, rising prices, and authenticity in heritage settings (Guerrero, 2013; Walker, 2019). However, as Caribbean cities are increasingly mobilising cultural intangible heritage such as festivals for economic growth, these festivals risk being solely used for marketing purposes, neglecting the social costs for residents (Scher, 2011). In this context, small-island scale, tourism dependency, and vulnerable heritage sites can constrain both risk mitigation and the assessment of benefits and their distribution.

2.7. Bottom-Up Events as Temporary Use

Various forms of temporary use emerge in conditions where formal planning is weak, slow, absent, or lacking financial means, neglected by government and the private sector (Andres & Zhang, 2020; Oswalt et al., 2013). Within these contexts, citizens turn to temporary urbanism to compensate for uncertainty and missing uses and facilities (Bryson et al., 2018).

As a form of temporary use, bottom-up festivals are typically organised through voluntary, local networks rather than stand-alone organisations, relying on collaboration among residents, cultural actors, local businesses, public bodies, and other stakeholders (Getz et al., 2007). Research emphasises that these relationships shape what festivals can deliver locally, including trust, coordination capacity, and the mobilisation of resources beyond the organising team (Richards, 2015). As such, community impact often emerges not only during the event, but also through the organisational work surrounding it that can strengthen local legitimacy and reinforce a shared sense of ownership over place (Koreman, 2023; Larson et al., 2015). Particularly in heritage settings, festivals are often undervalued despite their potential to support heritage exploration and foster residents' sense of belonging and pride (Perry et al., 2019).

Bottom-up festivals are frequently discussed as contributors to placemaking. They activate community assets and public spaces, strengthen belonging, and support community wellbeing through shared cultural experiences and collective "making" (Brownett & Evans, 2020; Platt & Ali-Knight, 2018; Silberberg et al., 2013). Research also suggests that local rootedness and legitimacy matter for long-term value-creation, meaning that locally led initiatives that draw on local resources and respond to local needs are more likely to generate benefits that last rather than remaining extractive or externally oriented (Koreman, 2023).

Simultaneously, the literature highlights tensions and constraints. Residents may experience burdens such as crowding, noise, waste, traffic and parking pressures, enclosure of streets and public space, rising costs, and gentrification dynamics (Gold & Gold, 2020; McGillivray et al., 2022; Moisescu et al., 2019). Risks also include representation gaps and uneven participation (Brownett & Evans, 2020; Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Platt & Ali-Knight, 2018), as well as barriers created by permit, regulatory, and liability requirements for smaller groups

with limited capacity (Madanipour, 2017). Moreover, organiser objectives, including profit motives, may not fully align with broader community agendas, and the dependency on initiators can create fragility over time (de Jong, 2012; Richards, 2017b).

3. Methods and Data Collection

This study conducted a qualitative secondary analysis of an existing interview dataset collected by the authors as part of a larger study. The present study builds on prior, peer-reviewed research by the same authors based on the same case study, but which was focused primarily on place narratives (Simons et al., 2025). In that earlier study, the interviews were transcribed and analysed in the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA using open coding. During this process, a range of interview segments were coded that fell outside the narrative scope of that study but shed light on the physical, economic, and community implications of events as temporary use. The presence of these under-analysed segments provided a motivation for the present study. In line with case study methodology, the research questions are case-anchored (Yin, 2009).

For this secondary analysis, the transcripts were re-read and hand-coded to systematically extract and organise passages relevant to the current research questions. Coding was guided by the research questions and focused on a set of categories: temporary use and the activation of underused spaces; physical changes in the historic built environment, including monuments and the wider heritage setting; economic impacts linked to tourism, marketing, and real estate dynamics; the event as a bottom-up initiative associated with community impacts, participation, and local collaborations. These categories were refined iteratively through repeated comparison across the interview transcripts.

The dataset consists of 18 semi-structured interviews (6 in person and 12 online) that were conducted between July and October 2024. In addition, two follow-up interviews were conducted to elaborate on key points that emerged during the re-analysis. The duration of each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, using an interview guide with open-ended questions (Spradley, 2016) that allowed interviewees to raise issues they considered important. Interviewees were selected among participants of workshops held during Kaya Kaya, followed by additional purposeful sampling, and snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). The interviewee pool consisted of the event organisers, residents, other local stakeholders, event visitors, property owners, government officials, and event volunteers, representing a broad range of stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, ages, and relationships with Kaya Kaya and Otrobanda. All interviews were collected under prior ethics approval with participant consent permitting anonymised secondary analysis, which has been reverified and de-identified.

4. Findings

4.1. Activating Underused and Vacant Spaces Through Events as Temporary Use in Otrobanda

According to the interviewees, vacancy in Otrobanda derived from multiple, overlapping causes such as long-term disinvestment and urban decline, undivided family estates, unclear or absentee ownership, limited renovation capital, speculative holding, and stalled public projects. These conditions left buildings, including

monuments, deteriorating, and street maintenance lagging. As one volunteer recalled, “There was a lot of vacancy…monuments went further downhill because no one was there to care for them.”

Findings show that Kaya Kaya activated these vacant or underused spaces for their events through a bottom-up process that relied on long-term community connections, simple formalisations, and a “leave it in a better state” approach. The event served to beautify the area, enhance safety, and attract people to the neighbourhood, effectively showcasing the district at its best. Figure 1 provides an indication of the buildings and spaces that were activated.

Figure 1. Overview of buildings and spaces activated across festival editions.

To achieve the activation of buildings and spaces through events, the organisers leveraged their dense local ties, through informal ways like going house by house or using WhatsApp to approach property owners directly and to formalise access to event-led temporary use with simple, time-limited agreements. As one of the organisers described: “Otrobanda is a tight-knit community, so it often worked through trust and relationships. We approached the owners personally, explained our vision, and emphasised how their building could be part of something positive for the neighbourhood.” Being part of the community also led to informal inventories of which properties or areas were vacant, needed cleaning, were under renovation, or were potential settings for art, murals, or programming. Figure 2 illustrates an example of a temporary arthouse. The organisers explained:

> Because we've been working in this neighbourhood for years, we already knew which buildings were abandoned, which houses were under renovation, and which corners or alleys could become vibrant spots. The festival has always been about reactivating what is already there, so the process was very intuitive and community-driven.

Access to these spaces was typically formalised through short, simple agreements specifying the timeframe, function (installation, bar, stage, or exhibition), and conditions of use—including rent-free occupation, liability coverage, and the requirement to return the property in the same or better condition through cleaning, minor repairs, and painting.

According to the organisers, approximately 10 to 12 buildings were temporarily used during each Kaya Kaya festival (sometimes twice), amounting to about 40 to 45 properties activated over the course of the festival's history, excluding public spaces. Notably, the activations were not limited to vacant properties—partially occupied and transitional properties were also included, suggesting that temporary use can extend beyond vacant spaces alone.

Figure 2. Vacant properties temporarily used as an arthouse.

Activating these spaces was not without challenges. The variety of property owners, from public to private, and numerous undivided family estates, sometimes made it difficult to trace ownership. According to one volunteer, "The most derelict monuments are almost always undivided estates of which the heirs can't be traced." In some cases, owners only came forward once Kaya Kaya started using the space. In other cases, permission for temporary use was refused due to sale intentions, liability concerns, or distrust. Some owners required payment, which Kaya Kaya tried to avoid wherever possible to prevent setting a precedent.

Yet, there were also property owners who wanted to see change in the area and made their properties available to Kaya Kaya. One property owner explained:

> Instead of putting another business that sells clothes, I'd rather change the environment and enable Kaya Kaya to do their workshops and other activities for the people who live here, and to change the whole image of Otrobanda. These activities are of great added value because they bring different people to the area. It's also a sacrifice, though, because maybe I could've rented out that building for money. But I'd rather do it this way so that my investments also go up if the area is fixed. This is a long-term way of looking at it.

Typically, these activation processes can be slow and incremental, but framing them around a time-bound event created a clear focal point that mobilised property owners, volunteers, residents, and sponsors to act quickly. Moreover, visitors state that the temporary nature of the event increases its appeal, as people have a limited time window to come and experience the neighbourhood during the festival, as can be seen in Figure 3a.

Figure 3. Examples of temporary activations and urban improvements: (a) street activation during Kaya Kaya; (b) the mural "Life Is a Beautiful Struggle" by artist Sander van Beusekom; and (c) greening alleys with AC water.

4.2. Kaya Kaya Festival as an Urban Tool to Improve the Historic Physical Environment

Every year, the festival takes place in a different area within the Otrobanda neighbourhood. In preparation, various low-cost and mainly reversible physical improvements are carried out, consisting of maintenance, clean-ups of public spaces, streets, and gardens, basic repairs, safety upgrades, and (mural) paintings. These preparations have yielded measurable results, as reported by Kaya Kaya (2023): 400 kg of waste removed, 125 windows, doors, and yard gates restored, 40 social housing units painted, 22 monuments restored for security purposes, potholes in 14 streets fixed, approximately 75 LED lights installed, and four recreational spots created. Interviewees repeatedly linked these interventions to immediate improvements in walkability and perceived safety, saying "it used to be unsafe…now people are walking in all the narrow alleys without being afraid."

Arts and culture also contributed to the area's appeal within the built environment. From seven murals in 2018 to almost 70 in 2025, spread across alleys, squares, viaducts, and streets, Otrobanda has been transformed into an open-air gallery encompassing murals and other art forms. The murals were not only

seen as beautification, but also as a means of sharing narratives and inviting exploration (Figure 3b). One visitor explained that Kaya Kaya had shifted from "a street party" to "an urban tool," as murals "beautify the buildings" and "leave a message"—such as "Life Is a Beautiful Struggle"—reflecting the realities of life in the social housing community.

Nowadays, visitors come to Otrobanda specifically to go mural hunting and take photos, indicating that the district now offers a reason to explore on foot. Even though murals are reversible, painting them on registered monuments has at times created tensions, highlighting heritage-management dilemmas in historic districts (Breel, 2019). Interviewees largely experienced heritage as a backdrop to the event rather than a focal point. Monuments were framed as constraints—due to decay, renovation costs, and regulation—until repaired, at which point "everyone finds them beautiful." While UNESCO is mentioned, interviewees suggest that people generally "don't really know what can or must be done with it," making heritage feel like a "nice to have" rather than a lived practice.

Several activations outlasted the event time window, including the Kaya Kaya Creative Hub (a three-year lease contract with the purpose to activate Otrobanda and attract new audiences), a pop-up atelier that became a permanent atelier in Frederikstraat (Figure 4), an amphitheatre created from an underutilised public space, an empty lot transformed into a playground in Quintastraat (Figure 5), and stairways that were repaired and painted. As one volunteer describes:

> Kaya Kaya is very good at the small things that lead to bigger differences, especially for the people living there who can really use them. After the festival, some of the remaining physical changes stay in place so that the neighbourhood residents can continue making use of them.

Figure 4. Example of a temporary art gallery that became permanent in Otrobanda.

Figure 5. From vacant lot to playground.

Sustainability and adaptability were also implemented through temporary urbanism using small budgets to add more green to streets, use condensation water from air conditioning to water plants and make alleys greener (Figure 3c), create community food gardens, and provide more shade against the hot climate. One of the volunteers mentioned that "in the long-term the intention is to develop a masterplan with much more green."

Historic, empty buildings were often used for the events as pop-up bars, music performances, or art galleries. These activations changed how people perceived the spaces, prompting entrepreneurs and residents to recognise new uses for the neighbourhood. Interviewees noted a visible reduction in vacancy, with various buildings having been bought, renovated, and rented after the festival. While the process has been incremental, in one of the streets where the first Kaya Kaya was held, only one building now remains available for temporary use. Still, according to Kaya Kaya, more than 20 empty properties on the main streets have yet to be activated: "If the monuments become activated, they become safe. We save monuments and we re-use the buildings instead of building something new."

Improvements to public spaces like streets, sidewalks, street corners, and urban gardens also contributed to a greater enjoyment of outdoor street life. One resident explained:

> It really changes things, the outdoor street life. You see each other much more. The street life is what gives us pleasure, enjoyment, and togetherness. I always say it is the street, sidewalk, and corner that is Otrobanda. Everything happens out on the street.

Aside from physical improvements outlasting the events, one resident remarked that—notably—buildings and streets continue to be maintained and remain free from vandalism even outside the festival period, reflecting a broader sense of community investment in the upkeep of the area.

4.3. The Event's Role in Impacting the Economic Value of the Neighbourhood

Kaya Kaya generated footfall and visibility that translated into economic impact. Business owners reported full restaurants and high apartment occupancy during the festival week, with continuing demand after the event from tours and visitors. One business owner mentioned: "The week before Kaya Kaya…my restaurant is full." This development in year-round activity supports small vendors, and repositions Otrobanda as a destination rather than a "no-go area" (multiple interviewees). The event thus functioned as a place marketing tool: interviewees noted "for rent/for sale" signs appearing and stated that "Kaya Kaya has helped put the neighbourhood on the map."

Interviewees further linked temporary activations to a surge in investments such as acquisitions, renovations, and new hospitality ventures. A property owner observed that the festival's routine of cleaning, minor repairs, and murals "boosts property values," while others pointed to increased confidence that made transactions inside the historic district more plausible. However, with real estate prices increasing, several interviewees described asking prices for monuments as "crazy," citing high renovation costs and owners "waiting for the highest bidder," suggesting speculative behaviour.

The Kaya Kaya event also made an impact on tourism. Murals, guided art walks, and "Instagrammable" sites sustain a steady stream of visitors during and between festival editions. The increased visibility and footfall benefit tour guides, restaurants, and creative enterprises. However, during the event days, they also impose short-term trade-offs like street closures that limit access to businesses: "Every event they do, they close down the streets and people cannot reach my business…it's bittersweet but it's a sacrifice" (business owner). The economic spillovers extend beyond the initial vacant properties. Interviewees described adjacent spaces attracting new tenants, pop-ups, and upgrades—"the rest of the street benefits"—indicating that the impact of the event activations extends beyond the immediate event areas or vacant properties. Notably, the renewed image has also helped attract new residents to the neighbourhood who "want to live in Otrobanda now," increasing the demand for housing. This influx also extends to businesses that now express pride in being located in Otrobanda, or that have relocated to the area to become part of the community.

Aside from economic benefits, visitors, volunteers, and business owners raised concerns about the commercialisation of the event, describing it as "too commercial" and how it became "a huge attraction." One visitor questioned the private interests, arguing that "a small group profits…they have a commercial interest" and one business owner described a perceived "split between the festival side and the policy side," given the organisers' property holdings in Otrobanda and their stake in making the area "nice and safe."

Interviewees also consistently flagged gentrification risks, including rising property values, Airbnb conversions, and housing affordability pressures for current lower-income residents. Several argued for policies that balance economic development with safeguarding mixed residency and local enterprise.

In short, Kaya Kaya's temporary uses generated clear economic value through increased footfall, visibility, and investment appetite, while surfacing questions about exclusion, speculation, commercialisation, and gentrification.

4.4. The Social Impact on the Neighbourhood

While Kaya Kaya is organised as a private entity, it was widely framed by interviewees as a "bottom-up" or "community-based" approach because of its collaboration with volunteers and local stakeholders, and with government mainly acting as a facilitator.

Kaya Kaya's social effects were formed as much through the process of preparation as through the event itself. Weeks of volunteer tidying, painting, minor repairs, greening, and programming preparation functioned as participatory placemaking that "brought everyone together," building pride and everyday stewardship—"we now coordinate to keep the sidewalks clean" (resident). This work built on an existing cohesive community in Otrobanda, with longstanding neighbourhood groups translating their energy into visible local ownership: Youth and residents took on roles in cleaning, vending, hosting activities, and guiding walks. As one participant put it, "People felt, we can do this ourselves…they're empowered and now take initiatives."

The approach is described as emerging out of necessity, "not waiting for the government and taking matters into our own hands." This community-based initiative relied on wider networks: residents, volunteers, artists, small firms, and sponsors; some companies provided in-kind or financial support and used the festival to engage locally—"we've always felt that if we're in this neighbourhood, we should give back." The government's role was largely limited to facilitating permits and safety checks. Several interviewees viewed the community initiatives as useful "positive peer pressure" that validated community action and inspired others. The event organisers thus operated as unconventional stakeholders, bridging property owners, government, businesses, and the community to harness the potential of temporary use.

Social outcomes included stronger "social control" and perceived safety, and combining locals and visitors to participate together in music, art, and walks: "a beautiful mix…very local, yet attractive for tourists." Although Kaya Kaya is privately organised, one government official suggested that its model could offer lessons for public policy in small-island contexts. The official described it as "an adaptation measure for small islands," explaining that, because celebration is part of local culture, the festival format can help mobilise people, produce visible results, and end with a shared celebration of what has been achieved.

Limitations and risks were also widely noted. As a private-led initiative, continuity depends on a small core of initiators: "If the driver steps back, who continues?" Moreover, some ask how to ensure long-term pulling power. The interviewees also called for more government engagement in collaboration, faster permit processing, incentives for reusing vacant buildings, and a long-term vision for the area.

Residents flagged disturbance concerns, including crowding, noise, privacy, and photography in front of homes. In this respect, the temporality of the event was seen as an advantage because "everyone goes home after."

Finally, the very success that attracts newcomers can fuel gentrification and change the neighbourhood dynamics, even as some new investors express intrinsic commitments to community benefit. As one property owner summarised, "Kaya Kaya catalyses, but entrepreneurs, residents, and policy must carry it forward" to consolidate social gains and safeguard inclusion.

5. Theoretical Discussion

Kaya Kaya illustrates how vacancy and underuse in a historic neighbourhood can be converted, quickly and at low cost, into temporary activations when formal planning capacity and investments are limited. Interviewees linked Otrobanda's vacancy to disinvestment, fragmented ownership, and limited renovation capital—conditions in which bottom-up temporary use becomes a pragmatic mechanism to mobilise stakeholders, volunteers, and short-term agreements (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Madanipour, 2017; Oswalt, 2004). Consistent with research on temporary urbanism and event-led revitalisation, the festival functioned as a catalytic form of temporary use that brings people into overlooked places (Colomb, 2012; Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017; Richards & Palmer, 2010).

The article's main contribution demonstrates that Kaya Kaya generates physical, economic, and social value, while additionally illustrating how this multi-dimensional value is culturally and contextually realised in a Caribbean heritage setting. In Otrobanda, the most durable effects were tied to the street as the primary urban space. Pre-event collective preparations—including clean-ups, minor repairs, painting, greening, and safety measures—combined with the culminating shared festival moment, resonated with local cultures of outdoor sociability and the prevailing climate, rendering small improvements in walkability, perceived safety, cleanliness, and shade meaningful well beyond the event itself. This helps explain why time-limited activation translated into everyday benefits, even when many interventions were effectively prerequisites for staging the event (Preuss, 2007; Smith, 2012). Notably, interviewees also described a "positive peer pressure" mechanism, whereby repeated visible upgrades encouraged residents and owners to maintain properties, keep streets cleaner, and invest incrementally, thereby extending impacts beyond the temporary event and embedding upkeep in daily practice.

Meanwhile, heritage was largely experienced as a backdrop or constraint rather than an explicit programmatic focus. Debates around murals illustrate the governance tension between arts-led activation and conservation expectations. This aligns with calls to better integrate heritage expertise and establish clear, heritage-sensitive guidelines so that activation strengthens rather than compromises authenticity and management (Jones, 2022; Perry et al., 2019; Tommarchi et al., 2018).

Economically, Kaya Kaya's murals and art walks created reasons to visit both before and after the festival, supporting more sustained footfall and enhancing Otrobanda's repositioning within Curaçao's tourism economy, while also addressing familiar risks such as rising prices, private interests, and gentrification pressures (Gold & Gold, 2020; Richards, 2024; Richards & Palmer, 2010; Schuster, 2021). Social value was generated through both preparation and performance, with volunteering and collaboration fostering pride, stewardship, and informal social control. A notable nuance is that the one-day main event made disturbance feel limited. However, the reliance on organisers raised fragility concerns, which de Jong (2012) also identifies as a risk.

Overall, the case supports that events can catalyse revitalisation but cannot deliver it alone. Consolidating longer-term benefits and managing risks requires complementary policy, planning, and governance (Ebert & Kunzmann, 2012; Smith, 2012; Stevens, 2018). As a single-case study, findings are context-specific and the transferability may be limited. However, they address a recognised gap in research on events as temporary use in Caribbean urban heritage settings, which may offer analytical insight and practical considerations for comparable small-island historic districts.

6. Conclusion

The case demonstrates how events as temporary use can activate vacant and underused spaces in a World Heritage neighbourhood and contribute to revitalisation with physical, economic, and social effects. Conditions of uncertainty and neglect created opportunities for a bottom-up initiative (Andres & Zhang, 2020; Oswalt et al., 2013). With simple, low-cost, and reversible interventions, Kaya Kaya managed to showcase the potential of the neighbourhood, shifting the place narrative in ways that attracted collaborators, visitors, residents, and investments. Remarkably, the spaces activated through temporary programming went beyond the vacant sites, producing positive spillovers for adjacent occupied properties.

The use of the festival as a vehicle for place image and marketing led to increased footfall from locals and tourists, more investments, temporary to long-term conversions, and sustained maintenance. Moreover, it generated social value expressed through pride, community engagement, collaboration, sense of place, and ownership, consistent with prior work on the role of participation in festivals and place-making (Brownett & Evans, 2020; Koreman, 2023; Perry et al., 2019). Due to the close ties to the Otrobanda community and strong local knowledge, the initiators were able to deliver context-specific, incremental gains, showing that urban planners can learn from this approach and partner with unconventional stakeholders to help improve neighbourhoods through a bottom-up approach. In the heritage context, the findings suggest moving beyond heritage as a passive backdrop by more intentionally integrating interpretation and participation into festival programming, supported by heritage-sensitive guidelines and expertise. This could strengthen public understanding of UNESCO World Heritage while using temporary activation to support adaptive reuse (Jones, 2019; Perry et al., 2019; Tommarchi et al., 2018).

As an urban revitalisation strategy, events as temporary use can leverage time productively by preventing decay through low-cost and reversible adaptations to heritage sites, experimenting with new functions, improving visibility and economic feasibility for property owners and investors, and generating social returns in the form of pride, community participation, and safety. However, sustaining benefits requires governance and policy measures to limit risks such as gentrification, increasing prices, commercialisation, and dependency on initiators (de Jong, 2012; Ebert & Kunzmann, 2012; Smith, 2012; Stevens, 2018).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant privacy.

LLMs Disclosure

This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of ChatGPT to support grammar, spelling, and clarity. All content was reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final text.

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