POLITECNICO DI TORINO
Repository ISTITUZIONALE

The seductions of temporary urbanism

Original
The seductions of temporary urbanism / Ferreri, M.. - In: EPHEMERA. - ISSN 1473-2866. - ELETTRONICO. - 15:1(2015), pp. 181-191.

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2973370 since: 2022-11-24T17:21:52Z

Publisher:
Ephemera Journal

Published
DOI:

Terms of use:

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

Publisher copyright

(Article begins on next page)

11 October 2026

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2015
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(1): 181-191

The seductions of temporary urbanism

Mara Ferreri

In the current discourse of low-budget urbanity, there is a special place for projects and practices of temporary reuse. While the idea of temporary urban uses is often understood as encompassing a highly heterogeneous variety of practices and projects, and defying strict definitions (Bishop and Williams, 2012), the currency in common parlance of terms such as pop-up shops, guerrilla gardens and interim uses bears witness to the existence of a shared imaginary of marginal and alternative temporary practice (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013; Hou, 2010). It is a complex composite imaginary, which draws upon and is constituted by often radically different and contrasting practices and positions. The differing and at times highly incompatible genealogies are a central component of its allure: 'temporary reuse' appears to be a floating signifier capable of encompassing a wide variety of activities and of fitting a broad spectrum of urban discursive frameworks.

Its core promises and narratives, however differing, are remarkably seductive and capable of attracting spatial practitioners' energies and sensitivities across a range of political positions, which includes experimental and alternative fringes of mainstream architecture, planning and cultural production. This note attempts to offer a few critical entry points into the seductions of low-budget temporary urbanity and its ambiguities and assumptions. Drawing on the analysis of a range of public statements and texts, it will discuss the construction of 'the magic of temporary use' and the implications of the discourse of temporary urban connectivity for organising and self-organising under conditions of austerity urbanism.

The magic of temporary use

> Temporary use has already become a magical term: on the one hand, for those many creative minds who, in a world ruled by the profit maxim, are trying nevertheless to create spaces that reflect and nurture their vision of the future; and, on the other, for urban planners to whom it represents a chance for urban development. (Urban Catalyst, 2007: 17)

Temporary urban use has been heralded as a new form of urbanism and the 'temporary city' as its paradigm. In the early 2000s, the 'magic' performed by temporary use was pivoted on the promise of combining two seemingly irreconcilable agendas: urban planners' targets for urban development and practitioners' need for spaces alternative to the 'world ruled by the profit maxim'. Temporary projects, it was argued, enabled to experiment and pilot low-budget, sustainable, more localised forms of site-specific coming together (aaa/PEPRAV, 2007), often with the more or less publicly stated hope of influencing wider societal dynamics in the long term. At a time of relative economic prosperity and investment in urban development schemes, temporary projects allowed forms of direct appropriation and use at the margins of mainstream urban practices, and at times aligned with campaigns and forms of neighbourhood organising to identify and preserve public spaces and buildings from neoliberal dynamics of privatisation (Isola Art Center, 2013).

The ground for the shift from marginal to mainstream was arguably prepared by the professionalization of temporary uses through publications addressed at planners and urban policy-makers, such as the Urban Catalyst Project (2001-2003), which gathered strategies, typologies and examples of temporary reuse across Europe, and their survey of almost 100 temporary uses (2004/2005) which became the basis for the popular *Urban pioneers: Temporary reuse and urban development in Berlin* (Urban Catalyst, 2007). While the notion of 'pioneering' was not intended by the authors to evoke in any way the critique of the relationship between 'pioneering' practices and the new urban frontiers of gentrification discussed by Neil Smith in his seminal *The new urban frontier* (Smith, 1996), their idea of pioneering practices and spaces combines the often disadvantageous and raw material conditions of low-budget and DIY temporary practices with specific 'frontier' urban sites in cities undergoing rapid transformations. Following a 'romance of danger' (*Ibid.*: 189), this is the familiar narrative of pioneering 'unused', unpolished and derelict buildings or land.

A core appeal of temporary urban projects is thus the lure of the experimental and the pioneering, which takes on an embodied spatial dimension in the exploration and physical occupation of underused, neglected and marginal sites, as well as a dimension of praxis, where the spatial frontier becomes analogous to

the frontier of innovative and experimental practices. The 'magic' evoked in the initial citation assumes the rhetorical function of reassuring practitioners and property owners that this pioneering does not have to create antagonistic tensions with neoliberal urban development, and that pockets of creative autonomy where exploration and innovative praxis can take place outside market dynamics, are possible and even (temporarily) desirable.

Austerity London and beyond

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, and its political response in many Western European countries through regimes of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012; Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2012), the promised magic of pop-up, interim and meanwhile uses has rapidly become a panacea for many urban ailments, shifting from the margins to the very centre of cities. Vacant spaces have been increasingly presented by urban policy makers as the most visible negative symptom of the global recession, and as detrimental to the return of consumers' and investors' confidence. In an effort to counter negative perceptions, temporary projects seemed to offer a quick-fix solution in the form of positive visual and experiential fillers, which could transform a failed or stalled redevelopment project into an item of attraction for event-based tourism (Cambie, 2010).

The recent assimilation of temporary use into mainstream urban policy and planning is perhaps best exemplified by the work of the former Director of Design for London, Peter Bishop, and the photographer Lesley Williams. In the preface to their book *The temporary city*, they explain the governance framework of such a shift:

> Many city authorities in Europe and North America that are charged with the task of encouraging the revitalisation and redevelopment of urban areas are now finding that, for the most part, they lack the resources, power and control to implement formal masterplans. Instead some are beginning to experiment with looser planning visions and design frameworks, linked to phased packages of small, often temporary initiatives, designed to unlock the potential of sites. (Bishop and Williams, 2012: 3)

Bishop and William's anthology of practices is disturbingly eclectic: from large-scale public funded festival and architectural projects, to commercial branding experiments using pop-up shops, to instances of 'counterculture and activism' which include squats and other 'temporary autonomous zones' (*Ibid.*: 31). The celebration of a range of temporary urban uses comes as a direct address and encouragement to architects, planners, policy makers and other urban professionals to learn from artistic and socially-engaged practices and projects

and to think about ways of 'unlocking the potential of sites' towards the not-so-implicit ultimate aim of urban development.

In other words, the 'pioneering' examples of temporary magic are celebrated as exemplifying the kind of upbeat, experimental and creative practices needed to temporarily keep up the pretence of constant urban growth (Zukin, 1995) in the absence of real means to do so through official practices of place-marketing and re-branding. That this may be the language and rationale of neoliberal urban policy-makers in Britain is not unpredictable. Haunted by the image of boarded-up high streets, non-commercial temporary empty space reuse has been advocated through policies and public funding schemes throughout 2009 and 2010 'to help reinvigorate ailing town centres during the recession' and to encourage 'temporary activities that benefit the local community' (DCLG, 2009), particularly through arts-related activities (ACE, 2009). What is truly interesting about the discourse promoted through its associated schemes, guidelines and publications, is the extent to which it has been incorporated and drawn upon by practitioners on the ground, and the conceptual implications of such incorporation.

Since 2009, an array of professional networks, for profit and not-for-profit organisations and companies have gained visibility and proposed themselves as intermediaries and facilitators of low-budget projects of temporary spatial reuse, particularly in London[1]. As could be read on the website of the Meanwhile Project, an organisation set up to promote temporary leases for vacant shops:

> empty properties spoil town centres, destroy economic and social value, and waste resources that we cannot afford to leave idle. Vibrant interim uses led by local communities will benefit existing shops, as well as the wider town centre, through increased footfall, bringing life back to the high street. (Meanwhile Project, 2010a)

Short blurbs such as this are a call to arms to spatial practitioners, artists, urban professionals, as well as an effective summary of the overall argument in support of temporary uses. The text offers a clear and concise interpretative framework to think about spaces and people, which is appealing and seductive, as it reproduces the mainstream discourse of austerity while at the same time making it a moral imperative to intervene within it. In a condition of (alleged) social and economic scarcity, spaces and people are presented as 'wasted resources' that 'we' – an appeal to civil society (Ahrensbach et al., 2011) – cannot 'afford to leave idle' in times of recession. At the same time, the true purpose of such community-led

1 It is worth mentioning the Meanwhile Project and the report *No time to waste... The meanwhile use of assets for community benefit* (2010); Space Makers Agency and the Empty Shop Network, see also Dan Thompson's report *Pop-up people* (2012).

activities (increased footfall, that is, trade) is revealed as the economic imperative that 'we' should all strive for. The 'meanwhile' project may be community-run, community-led and community-funded, often through in-kind support, but 'our' shared long-term aim must be to support, and ultimately be supplanted by, profit-making high street activities.

Even with projects and practices that stop short of justifying their existence with the rationale of economic revitalisation, the themes of 'wasted spaces' and 'wasted resources' are recurrent. At the heart of this discourse lie two interconnected and seductive narratives: an imaginary of fluid and ephemeral urban connectivity, on the one hand, and a normative temporal horizon marking the boundaries of 'meanwhile', temporary urban uses, on the other. Critically analysing these narratives may be useful in order to tease out two of temporary urbanism's core ideas.

Urban connectivity 'on demand'

The first implicit reasoning behind temporary urbanism concerns connectivity: it reinterprets both people in need of spaces and unused spaces as social and economic 'waste'. The immediate, obvious solution to this double issue appears to be offered by the creation of mechanisms through which the two can be connected. Instead of addressing the causes of the (enforced) scarcity of available and low-budget spaces for non-commercial uses, and the socio-economic conditions that cause urban vacancy, this is a tempting simplified narrative in which symptoms are confused with causes, and solutions are offered through purely administrative, or managerial, action: vacant spaces need only to be connected more efficiently with those who need them, and scarcity will disappear.

The first seduction of temporary low-budget projects is therefore one of organisation and self-organisation: it compels to mobilise and *activate*, to connect. Yet the object of these organising activities is merely the perceptible surface of urban dynamics of inequality and scarcity. Adding urgency to the call, the connection needs to happen immediately, dynamically, as the availability of temporary resources (people, vacant spaces) is itself contingent and short-term. Drawing an analogy with new forms of flexible industrial production and its corresponding labour organisation, this is an 'on demand' model of urban connectivity.

An important and unvoiced assumption of total personal flexibility underlines this narrative. Practitioners and projects' coordinators are expected to be

'plugged-in' to 'fill' site-specific resources, which presupposes, at times naming it explicitly, the existence of networks of individuals – 'pop-up people' – in precarious or intermittent employment, which can be mobilised at a short notice and be available on a full time or near full time basis for an intensive period of time (Thompson, 2012). In celebrating flexibility and agency, this narrative neglects the contingent arrangements necessary for projects of temporary use to take place: the uncertain preparation, the delays in gaining access to sites, in finding resources and funds to sustain them, the need to draw from personal networks at short notice and the organisational issues that this can bring to an urban project, just to name a few.

The stress on the resourcefulness, agency and ingenuity of urban practitioners is not only a successful rhetorical device to brush aside material considerations: it also offers a mode of identification with the values of flexibility and connectivity under conditions of scarcity. Lacking material resources, it allows the celebration of precariousness and insecurity as a position of power, rather than of powerlessness, in regard to the possibility of intervening in urban dynamics.

In the meanwhile

If the first narrative refers to practitioners, the 'creative minds' of the opening quote, the second concerns the relationship between temporary projects and the interests and agendas of policy-makers and urban planners. As clearly stated in the preface of *Urban pioneers*, there are two types of temporary urban projects:

> There are fleeting, transitory events that reside only for a moment in the city or alternatively, those that 'stay out' at one location for a longer time, until its more classical use once again becomes viable. (Urban Catalyst, 2007: 18)

Event-based uses and longer uses, thus, both equally temporary as the finitude of their duration is determined by the temporal boundary of a returned viability of 'classical uses', that is, of profit-making activities. In this scenario, the term 'meanwhile' rather than 'temporary' clearly indicates the ways in which what is lived as temporary by practitioners and users, is otherwise seen as a parenthesis in the longer term plans of property owners and developers (Andres, 2013). At the utmost, practitioners and coordinators organising these plans can hope for their activities being incorporated in the blueprint of future plans in the form of incremental development (Temporary Mobile Everlasting, 2012).

In this 'meanwhile' narrative, the fast and flexible connectivity of people and spaces is thus constructed as alternative and marginal, but not antagonistic, to the mainstream imperative of urban growth and development. If temporary

urbanism fundamentally reproduces and subordinates its incarnations to existing logics of real estate investment and speculation, then temporary practices of reuse seem to indicate, rather than a utopian future, further dispossession and accumulation of wealth in the hands of a privileged few. The appropriation of collectively produced creative value through ephemeral coming-together at the neighbourhood level has been questioned by several commentators, particularly in relation to values of networked and informal urban sociability (Lloyd, 2004; Arvidsson, 2007).

Beyond questions of recuperation, the temporal marginality of such projects is produced as positive and 'alternative' through conventional associations of short-termness and unexpectedness with dynamism, and long-termness and stability with fixity. The cherished and seductive flexibility, openness, prototypical and experimental nature of the 'temporary city', and of the many collective, low-budget projects that shape it, are to be contrasted to the allegedly closed, structured and determined urban 'everyday'. This apparently theoretical point might be useful to critically analyse the implications of the two seductions of low-budget temporary projects for the conceptualisation of modes of intervening in urban time-spaces.

The times of saving the city

If time and space are to be conceived as multiple, relational and mutually constitutive, then urban time-spaces too need to be understood as multiple and co-produced (May and Thrift, 2001). Slippages and old conceptualisations of time-space, however, still permeate mainstream urban imaginaries and the languages used to define them. As noted by geographer Doreen Massey, such conceptualisations often draw on past theorisations of the relationship between time and space grounded in a dichotomy where 'space stood for fixity and time for dynamism, novelty and becoming' (Massey, 1999: 268).

This distinction between urban space as fixed and temporary action as dynamic can be found in the unspoken assumption that temporary urban practices bring dynamism and mobility to the (allegedly static) social and built fabric of cities. In the 'meanwhile' discourse, space can be transformed in only one temporal direction, i.e. a trajectory of never ending urban economic and real estate development, while social, artistic or political projects of common use and re-appropriation, being an exception to this mainstream imaginary, are relegated to inhabit the space of temporariness. Not only this vision denies the existence of a multiplicity of time-spaces, but it also designates certain urban actors (such as

social entrepreneurs, activists and artists) as the sole agents capable to 'performing' such a rupture.

Contrary to this, and returning to Massey, it is central to retain an imagination of space as

> [T]he sphere of the existence of multiplicity, of the possibility of the existence of difference. Such a space is the sphere in which distinct stories coexist, meet up, affect each other, come into conflict or cooperate. This space is not static, not a cross-section through time; it is disrupted, active and generative. (Massey, 1999: 272)

By disregarding the open dynamism and multiplicity of urban time-spaces, rather than offering solutions to spatial scarcity, the promotion of temporary use can be seen as symptomatic of and mystifying another kind of scarcity, which could be called a *temporal scarcity*.

In celebrating temporary low-budget urban projects as forms of urban ingenuity and spatial re-appropriation, it is easy to forget that in their flexibility they also embody forms of temporal foreclosure. With the predicted growth of London and its ever-increasing land and property values, despite – and some would argue, because of – the global recession, vacant spaces are only temporarily available to those very ephemeral groups tasked with carrying out the 'creative' activities capable to bring life back to the sites. Moreover, while singular projects and spaces might be perceived as 'temporary' in the subjective experience of practitioners and their fleeting audiences, their temporariness is becoming an increasingly permanent trend as meanwhile and temporary leases proliferate, and urban planners learn the lesson.

The appeal to practitioners, professionals and activists to engage in the (temporary) disruption of what is portrayed as mono-rhythmic city may thus be simultaneously the greatest seduction and the greatest mystification of temporary low-budget urbanism. Deconstructing this narrative means to deflate the expectation of immediate change in order to retain conceptualisations of the city as continuously produced through dynamic and multiple space-times, and requires an ability to think about longer-term and wider alliances and forms of organising beyond the connectionist ideal of flexible and precarious urban actors.

On a more theoretical level, critically deconstructing the ways in which time and space are pitched against each other in the temporary urbanism narrative offers a different way of imagining temporary reuse towards a radical openness of the (urban) future.

In Massey's words:

> [T]ime needs space to get itself going; time and space are born together, along with the relations that produce them both. Time and space must be thought together, therefore, for they are inextricably intermixed. A first implication, then, of this impetus to envisage temporality/history as genuinely open is that spatiality must be integrated as an essential part of that process of the 'continuous creation of novelty' [...]
>
> [This] cannot be 'space' [...] as temporal sequence, for here space is in fact occluded and the future is closed. (Massey, 1999: 272)

Progressive urban spaces cannot be solely thought of as temporal sequences, as a meanwhile coming-together in the form of urban 'projects' where the dynamic and relational becoming of the specific site, and of broader urban processes, is foreclosed by a pre-determined temporal horizon and by the pre-emptive reasoning of profit-driven urban development.

This note aims to act as a sympathetic provocation. Neither a pre-emptive critique, nor a wholesale celebration of temporary urban use, it attempts to question the tension between the immediate seductions of temporary projects as forms of direct localised action, and the longer-term power relations at play which all too often relegate such practices to the realm of pop-up spectacle. Ephemerality and economic marginality (or low-budget urbanism) are central to ideas of the makeshift city (Tonkiss, 2013), but so is also a certain inability to visualise and imagine a future distinct from such 'on demand' urban connectivity.

The mainstream proliferation of ideas and practices of temporary urban use urgently demands a shared critical ability to recognise and understand the seductive powers of notions of urban flexibility, temporariness, resourcefulness and 'creativity', and their implications for imagining cities to come. A critique of the expected foreclosure of urban time-spaces should bear as a constant reminder of what is politically and socially at stake in 'low-budget urbanity' and its potential (in)ability to produce radically different urban futures.

references

aaa/PEPRAV (eds.) (2007) *Urban/Act: A handbook for alternative practice*. Montrouge: PEPRAV.

Ahrensbach, T., J. Beunderman, A. Fung, I. Johar, and J. Steiner (2011) *Compendium for the civic economy: What the big society should learn from 25 trailblazers*. London: 00:/in association with NESTA and design council CABE.

Arts Council England (2009) *Art in empty spaces: Turning empty spaces into creative spaces*. [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/investment-in-arts/action-recession/art-empty-spaces/]

Andres, L. (2013) 'Differential spaces, power hierarchy and collaborative planning: A critique of the role of temporary uses in shaping and making places', *Urban Studies*, 50(4): 759-775.

Arvidsson, A. (2007) 'Creative class or administrative class? On advertising and the "underground"', *ephemera*, 7(1): 8-23.

Bishop, P. and L. Williams (eds.) (2012) *The temporary city*. London: Routledge.

Cambie, S. (2010) 'Pop-ups. part 1: Creating micro-tourism', *Tourism Insights*. [http://www.insights.org.uk]

DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) (2009) *Looking after our town centres*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

DeSilvey, C. and T. Edensor (2013) 'Reckoning with ruins', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(4): 465-485.

Hou, J. (ed.) (2010) *Insurgent public space: Guerrilla urbanism and the remaking of contemporary cities*. London and New York: Routledge.

Isola Art Center (eds.) (2013) *Fight-specific Isola: Art, architecture, activism and the future of the city*. Berlin: Archive Books.

Lloyd, R. (2004) 'The neighborhood in cultural production: Material and symbolic resources in the new bohemia', *City and Community*, 3(4): 343-372.

May, J. and N. Thrift (eds.) (2001) *TimeSpace: Geographies of temporality*. New York: Routledge.

Massey, D. (1999) 'Space-time, "science" and the relationship between physical geography and human geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24(3): 261-276.

Meanwhile Project (2010a). [http://www.meanwhile.org.uk]

Meanwhile Project (2010b) *No time to waste... the meanwhile use of assets for community benefit* [report]. London: Meanwhile Space CIC, Development Trusts Association.

Peck, J. (2012) 'Austerity urbanism', *City: Analysis Of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 16(6): 626-655.

Peck, J., N. Theodore and N. Brenner (2012) 'Neoliberalism resurgent? Market rule after the great recession', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111(2): 265-288.

Smith, N. (1996) *The new urban frontier: Gentrification and the revanchist city*. New York: Routledge.

Space Makers Agency Ning Forum. [http://spacemakers.ning.com]

Temporary Mobile Everlasting (2012).

[http://temporary-mobile-everlasting.com/]

Thompson, D. (2012) 'Pop-up people: We can do so much more together'. [www.howtopopup.co.uk]

Tonkiss, F. (2013) 'Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city', *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 17(3): 312-324.

Urban Catalyst and K. Overmeyer (2007) *Urban pioneers. Temporary use and urban development in Berlin*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag.

Zukin, S. (1995) *The cultures of cities*. Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell.

the author

Mara Ferreri is a researcher in the School of Geography at Queen Mary, University of London. She holds a PhD from the same department and is currently researching value practices of temporary use in Hackney Wick, London. Among her research interests are cultural and socio-spatial dynamics of contested urban transformation and conditions and experiences of urban precarity in the global North.
Email: m.ferreri@qmul.ac.uk