

# Architecture beyond permanence: temporariness in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban architecture

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**ABSTRACT:** Architecture has always had an obsession with time. Architects from different places and generations have struggled to make buildings able to last for decades, or even centuries. Permanence, or the ability to defy time, has traditionally been considered the most desirable architectural quality. Although, throughout history, temporary interventions have constantly played a key role in defining urban spaces, architects have generally regarded them as a minority practice not deserving much attention. Things have changed in recent years. Increasingly, architects understand temporariness as a potential answer to some of the most pressing problems of contemporary cities. Being adaptive and quick to build, temporary interventions can help architecture bring life back to vacant lots; or provide vitality and dynamism to the most distinct urban spots; or restore a sense of home and urbanity in post-disaster camps. In 21<sup>st</sup> century architecture, temporary buildings have a special place, both for their intrinsic flexibility and for the formal / spatial possibilities, they offer to architects: due to their very characteristics, temporary buildings are often pure space, free from the constraints of function and time-fighting. The paper aims to analyze strategies and objectives of temporary interventions in the context of 21st century urban architecture, through case studies from the last two decades.

**KEYWORDS:** pop-up architecture, temporary interventions, city-making, meanwhile urbanism

## INTRODUCTION

Architecture has always had an obsession with time. Architects of different places and generations have struggled to make buildings able to last for decades or even centuries. In a discipline full of different views on virtually every aspect of its theoretical and practical nature, there is instead a general consensus on the idea that time is the enemy. Permanence, that is, the ability to endure over the years, has traditionally been considered the most desirable architectural quality. In a way, architecture's relationship with time reflects the way societies deal with the very idea of death: buildings have often been understood as an instrument to make something survive over the years. Where humans cannot go, and neither do civilizations, buildings sometimes can: they thus become a sort of time-capsule, able to transmit to distant futures the intimacy of private events - as is the case with the Taj Majal - or the complexity of an entire cosmovision- such as the Greek temple. It is therefore not surprising that the history books of architecture mainly tell the story of the buildings that stand still. This is something that makes sense in many respects. Only buildings still physically present can provide direct information about the architectural ideas of a civilization and, more generally, about how a society related to the territory and tried to give tangible form to abstract and immaterial concepts. Architecture gives a knowledge that cannot be transmitted with words, images or anything else but architecture. The spaces that societies produce are their most faithful mirror, as Lefebvre commented (Lefebvre, 2009).

Nonetheless, the idea that permanence should always be the ultimate goal of architecture presents some remarkable problems. The first is that the very notion of permanence is an illusion: every building is temporary. Some last less, others more, but in the end, each will have to surrender to time. It is temporariness, not permanence, the truth about architecture. Permanence is a reassuring concept, letting us believe that we have real control over time and its effects, over the devastation produced by history and societies. It is a tale we tell ourselves to imagine that our buildings, and with them our civilization, are safe from unpredictable circumstances or simply bad luck: from those unexpected events that can destroy even the most solid and well-built constructions - like the fire that burned down

the library of Alexandria, or the earthquake that devastated the Colossus of Rhodes, for example. The other problem is that the paradigm of permanence does not seem capable of effectively addressing some of the most urgent problems of the inhabited landscape. All over the world, societies are undergoing profound transformations that are occurring very quickly. Some challenges are emerging which require quick, short-term responses from architecture and the sciences of the territory. One of these challenges is the increasing flow of people migrating from their homes, whether because of war or the consequences of climate change. In 2018, there were more than 70 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, increasing at a rate of 25 units per minute (UNHCR, 2018). Displaced persons do not usually settle in a specific place for a long time; they rather often move. In cases like this, permanent traditional architecture cannot be an adequate response; other solutions must be found if we are to successfully deal with one of the most dramatic problems of our time. Nor can permanent architecture always be the solution to the most pressing problems of contemporary cities. Some of them demand flexible solutions that the usual approach – top-down, permanent interventions – cannot provide. This is even more true in a situation where the economic and financial crisis has taken a lot of resources away from the construction sector, so that the traditional operational model is often no longer practicable.

The question of whether permanence should still be understood as the prominent architectural paradigm becomes even more relevant when one considers that there is an alternative approach, active since the origins of the discipline: that is, ephemeral, temporary architecture. Throughout history, temporary architecture has played a key role in defining the relationship between humans and places. The emergence of a temporary typology such as tents was one of the oldest architectural gestures, and made possible the transitory way of life of nomadic societies. Many cities were born as temporary settlements, such as those founded as Roman camps. And it is through ephemeral constructions that cities have, historically and still today, renewed their image on special occasions, as festivals or celebrations. Temporary interventions have sometimes also facilitated the construction of permanent buildings: it is well known the case of the *Basilica Palladiana* in Vicenza, for which the architect had previously had to create a 1:1 scale model of one of the arcades. Despite this, architects have often regarded temporariness as a minority practice not deserving much attention. Things have changed in recent years. Increasingly, architects understand that some of those problems that cannot be addressed through permanence can be more effectively dealt with through ephemeral interventions. The adaptability of temporary interventions enables them to be useful in both consolidated urban environments and transitional ones, such as camps. Also, they can be developed either as bottom-up, extitutional practices of communities autonomously caring for a place, or as top-down approaches to address complex situations.

## 1.0 POP-UP NEIGHBORHOODS

In the last century, cities around the world have undergone profound transformations. As the world's population grew, and the number of people living in urban environments increased, cities began to expand in ways never seen before. In just a few decades, they became something very different from what they had been in the past. Only fifty years ago, cities could be understood, studied and designed as if they were a single piece of architecture, as Aldo Rossi commented (Rossi, 2018). With this, Rossi intended to point out the objectual qualities of cities, which, however large, had a formal, material and spatial coherence that allowed to understand them as unitary and quite homogeneous organisms: exactly as if it were a piece of architecture, designed not by a specific person or firm, but by society over different generations. Nowadays, however, it seems difficult to share this view. Many cities have grown to such dimensions that they cannot be perceived as a giant architectural object, but rather as a territory, where each neighborhood usually has its own formal, socio-cultural and economic characteristics that make it different from the others. The largest cities in the world have expanded to a degree impossible to imagine only a few years ago. The urban area of New York today is approximately 11 thousands km<sup>2</sup>, which is more than the entire extension of a country like Lebanon; the Greater Tokyo Area is more than 14 thousands km<sup>2</sup> (Demographia 2019). This transformation goes hand in hand with other problems endemic to so many contemporary cities, namely the lack of public spaces, an excessive programmatic homogeneity of their areas and, all too often, poor design.

All of this has already changed the way people relate to their cities. Big cities have lost their human scale, becoming territories difficult to perceive as friendly environments. As a result, it is increasing the

role of neighborhoods in providing citizens with spaces suited to their needs. This is not only a matter of size, or the facilities available in a specific context. This is also about whether a neighborhood offers the possibility to strengthen those social bonds without which a city is only a lifeless set of buildings. Neighborhoods have always been the privileged settings in which to cultivate urban relationships. But today their function of community builder is becoming even more important, precisely to counteract the loss of human scale in the urban environment. In recent years, cities have implemented multiple strategies to strengthen the capacity of neighborhoods to build communities; one of these is urban acupuncture (Solá Morales, 2008). This expression, coined in the context of the Barcelona Olympics but adopted later by planners around the world, refers to all those punctual, one-off interventions that have the potential to produce benefits on a larger scale. Architectural interventions are one of the possible instruments of urban acupuncture, but there are others, such as the celebration of events of all kinds taking place in the street. Everything that makes a city pleasant, vibrant, full of life, can be considered as urban acupuncture (Lerner, 2003). In this sense, one instrument of urban acupuncture that is becoming increasingly relevant is temporary, pop-up architecture (St.Hill, 2016). The term "pop-up" refers to any intervention of rapid construction and ephemeral duration, whether it is an architectural object, the renovations of an interior or the refurbishment of an outdoor space. When the goal is to revitalize a neighborhood and its community, these type of interventions have some distinctive qualities that help achieve the purpose. There are some aspects of pop-up architecture that do not belong to the permanent, and that make them better adapted to certain situations. While permanent interventions take some time to be carried out, pop-up architecture is very quick to build. Permanent interventions remain in place for a long time and therefore block the ability of a lot to change according to the evolving needs of communities. Pop-up architecture is instead very flexible: it occupies a site for a short period of time, and disappears after a while leaving it open to new modifications. While permanent architecture, by its very nature, is static, pop-up architecture is very easy to disassemble and assemble in different locations: in fact, it can also be mobile. Flexibility, quick construction and mobility are key factors in the use of pop-up interventions to revitalize neighborhoods, since they provide spaces with a dynamism and adaptability that permanent intervention cannot give.

In the last years, pop-up architecture has become one of the preferred instruments of tactical urbanism, an approach to the city that aims to improve neighborhoods through small-scale, low-key interventions (García, Lydon 2015). The work carried out in the Central District of Rotterdam by ZUS - Zones Urbaines Sensibles provides a good example of this approach (Koreman, van Boxel 2015). In 2011, after the financial crisis, a planned development in the central district was cancelled. This led to vacancies in many existing office spaces and to a general lack of activity in the neighborhood. Over the years, ZUS revitalized the district through a series of ephemeral, strategic interventions at its most sensitive points. Their first action was to transform an empty office block, the Schieblock, into a civic laboratory housing different collective services - such as stores, bars, workshop spaces and an urban farming roof. They then started to perform tactical operations in outer space, mainly through short-term interventions. One of such operations, probably the most relevant, was the construction of a crowdfunded temporary bridge 400m long, to provide proper pedestrian access to the area. The other interventions varied in scale and function, ranging from community gardens, to temporary spaces for culture and debate, to a nightclub meant to give vitality to the space 24 hours a day and a series of pop-up shops designed to give people a reason to stick around. In 2018, as a result of the new vitality and improved connection of the district, ZUS could also build public garden on the roof of the former Hofplein station. The Decorators applied a similar approach in the regeneration of different neighborhoods in London. In 2011, together with Atelier Chan Chan, they built a pop-up restaurant in east London's Ridley Road market, with the intention of helping local economy and, at the same time, providing the community with a meeting place (The Decorators, 2011). The architects prepared the brief together with the community, listening to their needs and concerns. Following this interchange of views, they decided to build the temporary restaurant, designed as a place where people could trade raw ingredients bought at the market for cooked meals (Fig.1). In 2013, in a similar situation, they promoted at Poplar's Chrisp Street Market a programme of events aimed at highlighting the importance of the market as a civic space. In this case, their intervention relied more on the actions undertaken than on the construction of buildings. They set up a radio station in an empty unit, where people could share views about the importance of the market and its future. Starting from this feedback, they installed new temporary



market stalls to host activities such as boxing, music and cinema, while also providing an infrastructure for outdoor eating.

**Figure 1, 2:** On the left, Ridley's temporary restaurant. Source: (The Decorators, 2001)  
On the right, Campo de la Cebada. Source: (El Campo de la Cebada, 2011)

## 2.0 MEANWHILE URBANISM

Temporary interventions are also an effective strategy in the reclamation of urban voids. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, urban voids were mainly seen as spaces to be filled with new buildings, so that the city could keep growing. Today, however, the way in which they are perceived has changed; so has their role within the urban environment. Large cities have become hypertrophic organisms where it is more likely to feel the necessity to subtract elements, than to add new ones. Urban voids, previously considered mainly as places where new buildings could emerge, are increasingly understood as structural elements of the city: their relevance lies precisely in being empty (Gunwoo, 2016). In a context where some parts of cities may appear to be too dense, urban voids become important because they are an interval, a pause from an over-built fabric. They help the city not to feel too claustrophobic, providing spaces where the air can flow and the gaze is free to move without being interrupted by the walls. Also, they are places where the most diverse activities can be performed, thus fostering social relationships and public life. Temporary interventions in this sense are becoming increasingly important for various reasons. First of all, they make urban voids suitable for collective use through minimal modifications, without changing their nature as empty spaces, which is the very reason for their relevance. A good example of this approach is provided by a project by Cedric Price. In 1999, participating in an architectural competition to reclaim a vacant lot in Manhattan near the Hudson River, Price proposed keeping it empty and implementing only small, temporary modifications (Isozaki, 2003). He was the only participant in the competition who did not propose to fill the void with large-scale buildings. As he explained, the reason to do so was the lot was an important green lung for the whole neighborhood, for its nature of empty space, but also because it allowed the air coming from the river to enter the city. Another reason for the relevance of temporary interventions is their own flexibility. Being in place only for a short time, they allow for future modifications more suited to the changing demands of the city. This approach has been called “meanwhile urbanism”, and consists of short-term actions intended to occupy a lot with events and activities until a more lasting intervention can be carried out (Arévalo Martín, 2015). In this way, lots are prevented from becoming neglected and forgotten, and can continue to play an active role in the city. Meanwhile urbanism is not an approach of new invention. Aldo van Eyck, for example, employed a similar strategy when working for Amsterdam City Council. From 1946 to 1975 he designed more than 700 urban playgrounds, mostly made of few elements and light structures (De Roode and Lefaivre, 2002). Some of them occupied vacant lots, and aimed to reclaim them while waiting for a permanent intervention. By doing so, he intended to make the city a pleasant place for children, and at the same time ensure that all of its spaces could participate in urban life.

Even if meanwhile urbanism is not a new approach, today its importance is increasing. Economical crisis had a huge impact on cities, which do not always have the necessary resources to build some planned development. Sometimes, permanent interventions cannot be carried out simply because of lack of money, both in the public and private sectors. It is in such circumstances that meanwhile urbanism, whether extitutional or promoted by city councils, becomes a major strategy: for its ability to



bring abandoned lots back to life, for being cheap, and for its short-term nature that allows for its replacement after some time. In many European cities, meanwhile urbanism was the instrument that prevented different areas from becoming derelict. The work of ZUS in the Central District of Rotterdam is a valid

Figure 3, 4: On the left, *Estonoesunsolar*, Calle San Blas 94. Source: (Di Monte, Grávalos 2009)

On the right, Kumbh Mela temporary city. Source: <https://worksthatwork.com/4/constructing-the-worlds-biggest-disassemblable-city>

example of such a strategy. But in the last years similar approaches can be recognized in a number of cities. This is the case, for example, with the experience of *Campo de la Cebada*, in Madrid (El Campo de la Cebada, 2011). In 2006, on a lot in the city center, a building was demolished to make way for a new sport complex. After the demolition, however, the planned development had to be stopped due to the financial crisis. As a result, a large, vacant and useless lot was opened in the very heart of the city. Since then, and for many years thereafter, the neighbors autonomously reclaimed the lot through low-key, short-term operations. They filled it with temporary furniture and plants, invited street artist to paint its walls, and, most important of all, constantly organized events that would invite people in (Fig.2). In a few years, the neglected lot became one of the most vibrant and lively places of Madrid. A similar example is provided by *estonoesunsolar*, a series of interventions carried out in Zaragoza by Grávalos Di Monte arquitectos from 2009 onwards (Di Monte, Grávalos 2009). Following the same logic of ZUS interventions, but within a program promoted by the city council, Grávalos Di Monte built temporary interventions in several lots in the city. The intention was to occupy the lots while the city council developed a plan for permanent interventions, but also to foster the relationship between the neighbors. For this reason, all interventions were carried out through a participatory process, in which communities were able to share their views and observations. Over the years, *estonoesunsolar* allowed the rehabilitation of 29 vacant lots. Two of them were located in the San Pablo neighborhood, in the historical center of the city, one on Calle San Blas and the other on Calle de Las Armas. In Calle San Blas, Grávalos Di Monte transformed the lot into an urban garden, mainly through the placement of some wooden pallets full of different botanical species (Fig.3). Similarly, the lot in Calle de Las Armas was turned into a garden by filling it up with plants and placing two pop-up structures formed by containers, intended to serve as rooms where activities related to gardening could take place.

### 3.0 TEMPORARY SETTLEMENTS

Temporary interventions are not only useful when recovering public spaces in consolidated urban environments; they can also help shaping transitional ones. This is the case with ephemeral urbanism, that is, the design and construction of temporary settlements related to particular events. These events can be of a religious nature, as is the case with the Hindu festivity of Kumbh Mela, one of the most striking examples of transitional settlement in the world. Every four years an ephemeral city is built on the banks of the Ganges, near Allahabad. Such city is not only composed of tents and pavilions, but houses all the basic infrastructure of a big metropolis: running water, electricity and, in the 2013 event, 18 pontoon bridges, 38 hospitals, 30 police stations, 30 fire stations and 35,000 toilets (Acciavatti, 2015; Mehrotra, 2017). During the weeks of the celebration, this city can end up accommodating several million people.



But also events of another nature, related to leisure or art, can result in remarkable examples of temporary settlements. The Burning Man, for example, is an artistic / communitarian gathering held at Black Rock City, an ephemeral city in the Black North Desert of Nevada. Each year, thousands of people

**Figure 5, 6:** On the left, Cardboard Cathedral in Christchurch. Source: (Ban, 2013)

On the right, Home for all in Rikuzentakata. Source: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/home-all-rikuzentakata>

come together for a week for a celebration that ends with the burning of a temple and of a giant wooden statue representing a man.

The experience of these settlements could be useful to architects also in humanitarian situations, such as refugee or post-disaster camps. Architecture has culpably ignored the situation of these camps for too many years, for the same reasons it overlooked ephemeral interventions in general. This was mainly due to the idea that only through the paradigm of permanence can architecture positively contribute to the inhabited landscape, and that only buildings that last can leave a strong mark on a context. This is why for a long time temporary camps have not been the main interest of architects, since they are necessarily the place of transience and short-term. They are cities built to disappear - in fact, in the very idea of community, the sooner they disappear, the better. Traditionally, architecture has contributed to post-earthquake recovery mainly through the design of new towns, or the reconstruction of damaged ones. This, of course, is a highly desirable approach, which architecture must continue to pursue even more, finding ways to properly build or rebuild cities that can be as solid and beautiful as ever. Still, it is also crucial that architects do not forget the importance of working in the transitional settlements that people inhabit right after the earthquake. Communities can end up living for months, sometimes even years, in these camps; it is too long to think that architecture should not be concerned. In such cases, the paradigm of temporary architecture is the only one capable of providing an effective intervention. Furthermore, developing strategies to intervene in post-disaster settlements could help architecture understand how to deal with similar situations, such as refugee camps, where architects have been almost totally absent so far. In recent years, the commitment of architects to temporary settlements has been increasing. Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, for instance, has been working his entire career in post-disaster camps, designing several projects aimed at improving the lives of communities facing such a challenging situation (Bruderlain, 2014). Sometimes he designed temporary houses, like the prefabricated wooden complex for the 2016 earthquake in Kumamoto, or the paper log shelters he built in camps around the world. Sometimes he designed instead entire camps, always with the objective of providing communities with an environment as welcoming and pleasant as possible. This is the case, for example, with the temporary settlement of Onagawa, created in response to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami (Ban, 2011). The camp was built using shipping containers, assembled to form multi-storey houses similar in size and typology to a traditional domestic space. Such a settlement, however low-key it may appear, is a real attempt to reproduce the atmosphere of home in a situation where all domesticity seems to be denied. Ban considered that, even if post-disaster camps are temporary, it is important to build a sense of normality and routine as soon as possible, to prevent communities from falling apart. Domestic space, in this sense, plays a key role.

A distinctive feature of many of Ban's temporary interventions is the use of paper as main material. Paper is cheap, easy to find and, if properly processed, allows for the construction of very solid structures. But it would be a mistake to think that Ban's only concern, in his disaster relief projects, is to build quickly and economically. In fact, in his interventions, especially those made with paper, a clear intention can be recognized to show that post-disaster buildings do not have to be trivial or unattractive. Many of his projects prove him right, such as the paper church in Kobe, built in 1995, or the cardboard cathedral in Christchurch, New Zealand, built in 2013 (Fig. 4). The first project is especially interesting since it shows the intrinsic flexibility of the concepts of temporality and permanence (Fig. 5). Designed to be a short-term intervention, the church actually lasted ten years in its place (Ban, 2005). Later, it was disassembled and sent to the village of Taomi in Taiwan, which had suffered a major earthquake a few years earlier. Rebuilt there, the paper church is now one of the main attractions in the area. The relationship between permanence and temporality is therefore quite ambiguous: no architecture is permanent, as time will eventually prevail. But a temporary intervention, in certain circumstances, can last for a period of time comparable to that of so-called permanent architecture.

A similar example of disaster relief project is provided by the experience of *Home for All*, a programme started by Toyo Ito as a response to Tōhoku 2011 earthquake and tsunami (Ito, 2013). The objective of *Home for all* was to address the lack of public facilities in post-disaster camps through the realization of small temporary civic centers. Ito considered that in such camps public life is not a luxury, but a necessity, and that therefore the construction of buildings acting as social condensers could really improve the condition of communities. Several architects participated in the program - among them Sou Fujimoto, Ryue Nishizawa, and Kazuyo Sejima - which eventually led to the construction of fourteen temporary pavilions in camps all over Tōhoku region. The interventions, however different, followed a similar approach, involving communities in a participatory process. All the pavilions were quite simple and unpretentious, partly because deadlines and resources did not permit otherwise, partly because everything in such situations seems to call for sobriety. In Rikuzentakata, Inui, Fujimoto and Harata, along with Toyo Ito, built an urban kitchen, that is, a place where people could go to cook, share a meal and spend some time together. Their intention was to build a pavilion that, although temporary, would become a landmark for the camp, acquiring social and symbolic values. For this reason, they built it using trunks swept away by the tsunami, as a metaphor for the possibility of not surrendering to the disaster and starting all over again.

## CONCLUSIONS

Temporary architecture always played a significant role in shaping cities and the territory. From the tents of ancient nomadic societies, to the ephemeral constructions changing the image of cities on special days, to contemporary pop-up interventions, temporary architecture has been around since the beginnings of the discipline. However, architects have overlooked this approach for too long, considering it a minor practice unable to adequately address the problems of the inhabited landscape. This is due to the misconception that temporary interventions cannot achieve remarkable architectural qualities, due to their quick construction, their relative cheapness and their short-term nature. But this is simply not true. The reason why temporary interventions have always been present in the history of architecture, in all places and times, is because they provide something that permanent interventions simply cannot. They are adaptable, flexible and can be easily replaced and relocated, thus giving communities the chance to shape their place as they see fit. Permanence and temporality are not opposite paradigms, but complementary: each gives architecture something that the other cannot give. Both must be taken into consideration when shaping the territory, to see on a case-by-case basis, which is the most useful. It seems that recent events, such as the real estate bubble and the resulting crisis in the construction sector, have led architects to rediscover the qualities and potential of temporary interventions. However, it would be a big mistake to assume that such an approach can only be useful in a situation of scarcity. As contemporary experience shows, temporary interventions can be useful in the most diverse circumstances. Cities and territory are facing problems that need urgent and out-of-the-box responses. Sometimes thinking out-of-the-box can mean inventing something totally new; sometimes it can mean rediscovering something very old that is strangely suited to the present time. This seems to be the

case with temporary interventions; a tool architecture must not do without if it is to properly address contemporary and future challenges.

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