



Review of 'Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the use of City Spaces'

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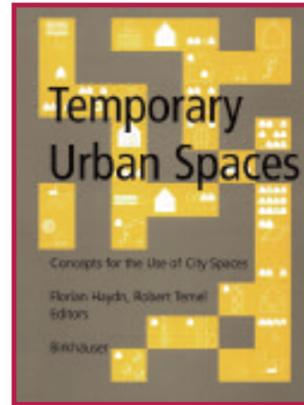
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TEMPORARY URBAN SPACES: CONCEPTS FOR THE USE OF CITY SPACES

Florian Haydn, Robert Temel
Editors



Belfast -like most cities- has large areas of underused or abandoned land. Left not just in the wake of post industrialisation, or by ruthless infrastructure impositions but also by the unique spatial dilemmas of 'the troubles': 'contested ground', 'peace walls' and the strange limbo of 'interface areas'. Beyond this, the city's changing identity and wave of new developments are leaving urban spaces caught in time: awaiting new futures while fossilized with the fragments of the past. Belfast is symptomatic of this rise and fall of urban cycles.

Much has been made of the transitional beauty of urban 'abandonment' and many photographers and artists have engaged, portrayed and documented it. But rising property values and speculation soon hoovers-up these residual spaces and turns them into real estate almost overnight. But is it possible to imagine and invent alternative approaches for the 'unprogrammed' voids of our cities? Can we reclaim an active social agenda beyond the master plan? Is it possible for architects to think beyond the next speculative building? Perhaps this new book can provide some answers.

Taking the notion of the 'temporary' as an urban theme, and politics, practice and desire as sub-themes, 'Temporary Urban Spaces' uses ten essays by architects, filmmakers, sociologists, cultural theorists and urban activists,

and thirty-five case study projects to explore different ways to participate and intervene in the city.

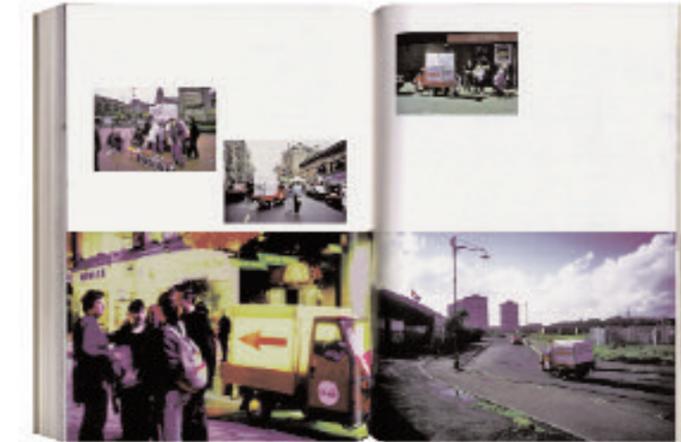
Placed in a wider perspective, all uses, functions, and programmes in the city are in one sense temporary. But the degree of 'temporariness' is usually legally sanctioned and deliberately controlled by event permits and planning regulations. But the temporary can inject diversity and social interaction in a different timeframe, and in a way impossible to the usual patterns of architecture and planning.

Often the 'temporary' is only possible on the basis of the 'illegal act'. The 60's and 70's squatting trend -a recycling and densification of the abandoned-sets a precedent in many European cultures where this subverting of the planning laws has ultimately created richer social networks and uses. Pre-conditioned by the 'logic' of the real estate market, we assume it to be the only prime factor in the way our cities live or die. But this book illustrates the potential of other ways of thinking and intervening in the social, political, legal, emotional and spatial dimensions of our cities.

If we are still living amidst the ghosts of the modernists zoned city, then it is the Situationist that can best counter this Fordist nightmare. Peter Arlt in his essay reminds us of the Situationist

aspiration to "...convert churches into children's playgrounds and abolish museums and redistribute their collections into pubs and café's". Many of the projects shown in this book: small installations, performances and events, deliberately provoke social action and question existing urban conditions, as did the Situationists. "Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible!" Their wish to open the Paris metro stations at night for events, inspired the London based 'Space Hijackers' to have a party on a tube train on the Circle Line -but only in the tunnels, and not for long, before the transport police arrived to turn it off.

Small events can have a big impact. They can actively charge places with meaning, and bring communities closer together by stimulating social networks and knowledge, which in turn may ultimately create a different urban practice. As Florian Haydn reminds us "public space is constantly being constructed." ▶



▶ Some of the projects shown are very simple, low cost and direct. Like the artist who arrives with a car full of stones and gets local people to paint the name of the person they love on them, before making them into a garden of memory in an empty urban space. Or 'Permanent Breakfast' that invites people on 1st of May to share food together and reclaim the street. Having initially started in Vienna it has now snowballed into an international event.

Sometimes the 'temporary' is a moveable forum: a soapbox or arena for debate and action. Such as the three wheel transporter (a bright red Piaggio Ape) of Glas(Glasgow Letters on Architecture and Space). In its Urban Cabaret project Glas worked with local communities to open up awareness on housing and social policy. With their van, they brought mobile exhibitions, discussions and multi media events out to people living in peripheral housing estates and isolated communities.

In Berlin there is a well established culture of using abandoned buildings to transform them with new temporary uses and 'socialscapes'. Sometimes it can be a building with a difficult past - such as the Palast der Republik. So too in the Netherlands where there is also a history of public participation and protest. OpTrek -a mobile project office based in the large redevelopment area of Transvaal in the Hague- relocates

with each demolition of the building it occupies into another new temporary home. They are concerned with social and spatial changes that are taking place in the immediate environment around them and for which OpTrek takes on the role of 'witness' and organises films, lectures and events to encourage participation.



At times the 'temporary' is all about minimal structures: the construction of a pavilion, a moving newspaper kiosk, the use of shipping containers as temporary galleries, wrapping the columns of an underpass with a plastic membrane. Or no structures at all, and just ask people to plant poppies to change the colour of vacant land.

One of the largest temporary events cited is the Paris Plage. For five weeks during mid-July to mid-August the Georges Pompidou motorway in Paris is closed and replaced with a beach. 3,000 tones of sand cover the tarmac and prove what the Situationists always believed: "Sous les pavés, la plage!"

This is a compact and useful book that is referenced throughout with lots of web sites that explain the work, projects and ideas beyond the limits of the page. It opens our perceptions to other ways of thinking about the city.

But what of Belfast? It has no project in the book. Yet, is it possible, to imagine people having breakfast together along the 'peace walls' or pulling them down to turn them into beaches? The temporary can have a catalytic effect. ●

Paul Clarke

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