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Permanent vs temporary: a struggle within city transformations

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Abstract. Permanence and temporariness are two counterposed terms that characterise architecture and urban transformations. This essay intends to address some of the many interpretations of this binomial: from the role of urban permanence and the temporaneity of use, as addressed by Aldo Rossi in *The Architecture of the City*, to the concept of the temporary duration of the life of buildings and the concept of conservation, presented by Rem Koolhaas with his research *Cronocaos*. Next, the fundamental role of unplanned areas is analysed as a place for experimentation of the temporary, as a means to test future scenarios, taking as an example the survey conducted by the Urban Catalyst group, and then concluding with the experience of the IPA - Institute for Public Architecture, in the desire to reduce the transitory nature of living, avoiding gentrification and offering a permanent living condition to the most disadvantaged social groups.

The examples presented are intended to illustrate how architecture and the city often live in the balance between permanence and transience, that there are no absolute instances and that only a well-structured architecture, on a formal basis that refers to a collective memory, can embrace the continuous transience of function and always remain vital within the urban organism.

Keywords: Permanence; Temporariness; Architecture.

The temporary/permanent binomial marks the very essence of architecture and the city, whether buildings or portions of the city, a conflict that represents a crucial point in urban transformation processes. The city is by its nature structured by a continuous antithetical relation between permanent and temporary, where the myth of permanence clashes with the fact that the city is a dynamic entity where the crystallisation of the status quo is to be considered pure utopia.

1. Permanence of form / Temporariness of function

The literature related to urban studies, the nature of cities and their transformations in history were brought to synthesis by Aldo Rossi in the essay *The Architecture of the City*,¹ where from the first chapter, devoted to the structure of urban facts, he introduces the concept of function, mentioning the rich and articulate conception given by French geographer Georges Chabot.² While Chabot classifies the main functions of the city into military, commercial, therapeutic, intellectual, religious, and administrative, he also states that these functions are transient and elementary rather than permanent facts in the city: for Chabot, function is a moment of urban life, thus assuming a value of temporariness. Rossi, in the introduction to his treatise, criticizes naïve functionalism; the critique of functionalism should for Rossi be seen as a new theory of architectural composition, reiterating the concept that function is not permanent. Function is understood in an algebraic sense, which means, as Rossi himself writes, that its values are knowable one in function of the other, and that more complex links are established between function and form than the linear ones of cause and effect, which are then contradicted by reality. The permanence of function, expressed through regulatory instruments and the zoning of urban plans, becomes a principle of simplification of reality and

¹ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Oppositions Books, IAUS, NY, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982; I ed. it. L'architettura della città, Marsilio Editori, Padua 1966.

² Georges Chabot, *Les Villes: aperçu de géographie humaine*, Armand Colin, Paris 1948.

humiliation of imagination and freedom.³ For Rossi, the layering of the contemporary city highlights the relation between the permanence of traces, the foundational elements of urban structure, the presence of monuments and at the same time with its constant changes, with fluctuations dictated by the economic and social context and the changing needs, where the obsession with the permanence of the plan has given way to a quest toward flexible planning, capable of responding to temporary needs. The demand for new uses has given rise to the development of strategies for structuring more flexible plans that have given rise to temporary use initiatives to meet ever-changing needs.

Non-permanent solutions have always been perceived as secondary because dictated by uncertainty, by the awareness of their transience, in contrast to a Western culture based on the concept of permanence. Aldo Rossi's essay *The Architecture of the City* showed how, through a different perception between past and present, it is possible to recompose the picture of an urban culture. Referring to the concept of permanence proposed by Marcel Poëte, Rossi brought attention to urban facts and on how the present helps us to understand the strong elements of the past, the generating elements of urban form.⁴ Rossi, while recognising the value of permanence of monuments, addresses his view to the discontinuity of use, to the impermanence of function, and to the vitality of these primary elements.⁵

The permanence of form and the transience of use, the adaptation of use, is clearly expressed by Marcel Poëte when he states that one cannot fully grasp the meaning of urban life if one does not distinguish the “urban being”, constituting - in itself - the social aggregate that essentially forms the city, from the “urban form” with which the city presents itself materially to our eyes: “Now it is to the urban being that biological laws need to be applied. Form is nothing more than the inert matter, shaped or arranged by the being and which, therefore, is not to be confused with. Adapted to its needs when it was created, this form only corresponds to it imperfectly when subsequent generations use it, still preserved, as there is a permanent background. The successive generations that make up the urban being succeed one another and it is the form - which remains - that expresses the urban soul”.⁶ In 1968, in his first Blue Notebook, No. 1 dated 19 June, Aldo Rossi elaborates the concept of form: “If there is the possibility of a series of operations on architecture, these can take place on the basic form” and “the use of the building is the task of architecture”,⁷ to reiterate how the formal, the typological structure, embodies the theme of permanence, but opens the space to a transience of its use. Rossi points out how architecture is characterised by a continuous change in the use of architectural type, as a logical form is connected to use and not to a predetermined function. The type, thus, represents an element of permanence of a formal structure, classifiable, categorisable, independent from a function and related to a use that can change over time and then is able to represent a character of temporariness.

With *The Architecture of the City*, Rossi attempts to define the points that characterise architectural type, stating that type is constituted by the needs and aspirations for beauty; is unique and yet very

³ Aldo Rossi, op. cit. (1966) p. 7.

⁴ Luigi Manzoni, Una reinvenzione infinita. Città, architettura, evoluzione e temporalità in Marcel Poëte, in *Architettura & Tempo, Percorsi multidisciplinari di ricerca*, Vol. III, a cura di Antonio Lavarello e Davide Servente, GUP, Genoa University Press, Genoa 2020, p.174.

⁵ Aldo Rossi, op. cit. (1966), p. 51.

⁶ Marcel Poëte, *Paris, son évolution créatrice*, Vincent & Fréal, Paris, 1938.

⁷ Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, quaderno n.1, 19 June 1968, Electa/The Getty Research Institute, Milan, 1999.

diverse in different societies; is related to the form and the way of life; it is something permanent and complex; it is a logical statement that precedes form and constitutes it.

The topic of permanence is investigated by Rossi through a careful analysis of monuments, as examples of collective memory, as primary elements capable of accelerating the process of urbanisation of a city and, referring to a wider territory, elements that characterise the processes of spatial transformation of the same territory. The type governs monuments and primary elements, determining their permanence and continuity with history, but at the same time allowing a continuous adaptation to reality and to the needs with which it is dealing. Persistences, according to Rossi, are detectable precisely through the monuments, the physical signs of the past, but also through the persistence of the layouts and the plan, and again he recalls Marcel Poëte who noted how the urban facts are sometimes endowed with a continuous vitality, sometimes they fade away and only the form, the physical sign, of the *locus* remains.⁸

This vision brings attention to the urban structure that is characterised by urban facts, monuments and primary elements that represent the topic of permanence, memory, and historical continuity and can accommodate the transformations and transitory needs dictated by reality. The areas, defined by Rossi as residential areas, constitute a kind of plain ground, and assume a secondary value, even if relevant, regarding the complex combination of the city with the coexistence of urban facts and residential areas.

2. Monuments, permanences and a building's lifespan

Today we are witnessing a reversal of the point of observation. The monuments and the established city take a subordinate place to the surroundings, to everything that is not clearly definable as a drawn and recognisable part of a city, but that is for all intents and purposes part of the urban organism. Now, the space between established urban structures and the so-called minor architecture, meaning, for example, social housing and industrial buildings, becomes the subject of urban transformations, driven by new needs, and it is precisely through the network between formal and informal architecture and use of space that new strategies for the contemporary city come to be defined.

In the 2010 Architecture Biennale, Rem Koolhaas with his exhibition *Cronocaos* shifted the focus to secondary public heritage, particularly social architecture, at a time when legislation on permanence and preservation had defined rules that discriminated against some categories of buildings whose role in the urban structure was certainly not secondary. What are the rules that define the lifespan of an architecture? Everything is focused on preservation, but for Koolhaas it is at the same time necessary to make an argument about architecture that no longer plays any role in the urban organism and can in a sense be erased: "There is an over accelerating rate at which architecture has been declared as an item of permanence". From this, Koolhaas extrapolates that the next step, prospective preservation, would presumably predefine a building's status as monument, even before it is physically manifested. In response, Koolhaas presented a theory of its opposite, not what to keep but what to erase and abandon.⁹ "In a global groundswell of revulsion, one particular genre has escaped the embrace of preservation. Open season has been declared on postwar social architecture. At its zenith, a strong public sector created the conditions in which architecture as a social project could flourish. At its nadir, a public sector, debilitated by the market, destroys it. There is now a global consensus that postwar architecture – and the optimism it embodied about architecture's ability to organise the social

⁸ Aldo Rossi, op. cit. (1966), p.52.

⁹ Peter Bishop, Lesley Williams, *The Temporary City*, Routledge NY, 2012, p. 15.

world – was an aesthetic and ideological debacle. Our resignation is expressed in the flamboyant architecture of the market economy, which has its own built-in commercial expiration date”.¹⁰

If monuments, or what is called monument by regulations, represent the myth of permanence, social architecture, such as postwar architecture, is not considered, thus it represents architecture with a finite time and is therefore temporary. Koolhaas notes how preservation requires the development of a theory of the opposite: not what to preserve, but what to surrender, what to erase and abandon.¹¹ In the accompanying report to the exhibition, Koolhaas addresses the critical issues, ambiguities and contradictions related to the issue of building preservation by stating that the criteria for selecting buildings for preservation are by definition vague and elastic, because they must embrace all the conditions the world contains; he also notes that time cannot be stopped, but in the “arsenal of preservation” there is no consideration of how to manage its effects, how the preserved can remain alive and at the same time evolve, transform, and change their function. Koolhaas points out that in conservation there is little awareness about how different cultures have interpreted permanence, or variations in materials, climate and environment, which in themselves require radically different modes of conservation, and that with its unspoken ideology, conservation prefers some authenticities above others. Other buildings - typically those that are politically difficult - are suppressed, even though they are crucial to the understanding of history. The continuous emphasis on the preservation of the exceptional - that which is worthy of preservation - creates its own distortion. The exceptional becomes the norm. There are no ideas to preserve the mediocre, the generic, to give permanence to common buildings,¹² but a city is not made only by monuments. The generic, the incomplete, the transient, and the vague become part of the urban organism. Their use, even temporary, can be the impetus for a process of urban development related to the redevelopment of urban areas.

3. Informal processes of temporariness

Cities have at their disposal an enormous number of vacant buildings and land. Although these are potentially attractive in the long term as sites for urban development, their currently indeterminate and temporary nature is precisely what makes them fertile ground for a wide range of creative uses. Vacant areas, parking lots, vacant buildings, and unplanned spaces are now quickly becoming particularly vibrant places in many cities: clubs, bars, start-ups, arts scenes, migrant economies and informal markets, recreation and nightlife take up residence in these places that urban planning and the real estate market initially fail to develop. This is often where innovative cultural productions and vital public spheres are found. Temporary use of these spaces can be the mechanism for understanding the needs and their potential for development and become the point of observation on how society evolves, not to satiate a market will, but as an act of care.¹³

In this shift of perspective, the focus moves from form to use; it is use that determines quality; the type of use, even temporary, is what makes vital a monument, an architecture or even a forgotten portion of the city. The extent to which temporary users can be consciously placed in spaces for which there is still a lack of medium-term development prospects - almost as agents of revitalisation - was investigated by a research project commissioned by the Berlin Senate and a symposium held with

¹⁰ Rem Koolhaas, *Cronocaos*, Log n.21, Anyone Corporation, NY, 2011, p.122.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p.123.

¹² <https://www.oma.com/projects/venice-biennale-2010-cronocaos>

¹³ Borasi G. (ed.), *A Section of Now: Social Norms and Rituals as Sites for Architectural Intervention*, CCA-Canadian Centre for Architecture, Spector Books, Leipzig, 2021, p.7.

representatives of the city administration, real estate agents and temporary users, followed by an exhibition on Space Pioneers in 2007. Through the research, exhibition and publication entitled *Urban Pioneers*,¹⁴ a survey was conducted where one hundred different types of temporary use of vacant sites were mapped, models were created to demonstrate the potential of temporary use for urban development, and guidelines for temporary users were established.

This research has given rise to ongoing insights into the new uses of these areas that elude precise classification. In particular, the Urban Catalyst research group coordinated by Philipp Oswalt, Klaus Overmeyer and Philipp Misselwitz has devoted several years to these unplanned phenomena in five European countries, analysing their hidden logic. Based on its own involvement in several European-scale projects, Urban Catalyst has described the ways in which informal processes can find their way into urban planning and what urban planners can learn from intermediate users.¹⁵ Their study has focused on understanding the temporary uses, of unused spaces within cities. The topic is treated in a very pragmatic way; there are no references to architectural composition, instead economics, laws and politics are discussed. Philipp Oswalt had already carried out research on the development of the city of Berlin, published in the volume *Berlin Stadt ohne Form: Strategien einer anderen Architektur*¹⁶ where he had analysed urban development and had openly criticised the work of Hans Stimmann, senate building director for urban development in Berlin, and the planning developed under his leadership in the 1990s. His research had focused not on monuments or the form of the city, but on the free spaces between buildings, investigating possible transformations and uses, including the different natures of temporary use. In 1998, speaking of Berlin as a 20th-century city, he wrote that “The central themes of the city: emptiness, fragmentation, heterogeneity, multiplicity, temporariness, formlessness, and subversion reveal a high degree of innovative potential. It remains to be hoped that, despite all trends toward restoration and economic exploitation, the city does not fully return to normal, but retains its particular identity and uses this to develop potential which points the way for the future”.¹⁷

We are facing a further reversal, the priority is no longer the formal structure of architecture, the element of permanence that can accommodate different uses, but the formless space that can take on new meaning through use. The form of architecture takes a back seat to let users transform and informally plan the space. The research developed by the Urban Catalyst group, on *The Power of Temporary Use*, was able to highlight the various ways in which urban planning could incorporate informal and temporary processes, analysing them as an important lesson for understanding the changes in contemporary society. Temporary use of space has been classified through a typological matrix that can give structure and order to the different possibilities of use, a classification which is useful for replicating different strategies and to give them a name.

In the chapter Patterns of the Unplanned,¹⁸ the authors have identified nine different types of temporary use of space and have assigned to each of them a name that can describe the action: STAND IN, which takes advantage of the lapse of time between the previous use and the next use; FREE-FLOW, where the function continues but is moved to new areas as opportunities arise;

¹⁴ Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung Berlin, H. Lauinger, T. Hauck, S. Frech, M. Wirth, G. Grandinetti, M. Neumann, *Urban Pioneers*, Jovis Verlag, Berlin (2007).

¹⁵ Oswalt P., Overmeyer K., Misselwitz P.: *Urban Catalyst. The Power of Temporary Use*. Dom Publishers, Berlin (2013).

¹⁶ Oswalt P.: *Berlin Stadt ohne Form: Strategien einer anderen Architektur*. Prestel, Munich (2000).

¹⁷ Oswalt P.: Berlin, City of the 20th Century. In: Wiesel M., Berlin / Berlin, Catalogue for the Berlin Biennale, Berlin (1998).

¹⁸ Oswalt P., Overmeyer K., Misselwitz P.: *Urban Catalyst. The Power of Temporary Use*. pp.35-51, Dom Publishers, Berlin (2013).

IMPULSE, meaning new use of a space that results in its new characterisation; CONSOLIDATION, where temporary use becomes time-limited and is regularised with permits; CO-EXISTENCE, where two different uses coexist because one of them remains of niche; PARASITE, where temporary use demonstrates the possibility of indefinite use; PIONEER, where a place used is transiently used for another activity, but that activity is successful and is thus carried on over time; SUBVERSION, where temporary use strategically establishes itself in the spaces of an ongoing use and subverts it; and DISPLACEMENT, where permanent use is temporarily moved to another place and then relocated. This change generates an impulse for renewal of activities.

This mode of temporary use of space consistently guides new planning, becomes a tool to prevent the constant process of gentrification in contemporary cities with transformation processes driven 'from below' and not imposed for purely speculative matters dictated from above by market laws.

4. Against temporariness

Another example of the clash between temporary and permanent practices in the city is a countercultural one, presented as part of the international seminar *TEMPORARY Citizenship, Architecture and City*,¹⁹ where activist Monxo Lopez, architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld, member and founder of IPA - Institute for Public Architecture, and architecture historian Susanne Schindler brought attention to the case study of New York with a presentation titled Mott Haven: Birthplace or Graveyard of Planning Ideas?

They focus their intervention on the need to avoid temporary accommodation and instead find permanent solutions for the inhabitants of the Mott Haven district. Today, as Susanne Schindler wrote in an article titled *Model Conflicts*, the main concern of residents of low-income neighbourhoods is displacement not through disinvestment, but through gentrification. This struggle can be seen through some of the areas targeted by the Model Cities survey half a century ago, including Mott Haven in the Bronx, East Harlem in Manhattan, and East New York in Brooklyn, but the city mayor's response is towards more housing construction rather than a comprehensive approach to address inequality.²⁰ There is a general search for stability, for the elimination of inequalities, for permanence, and there is now a focus on the removal of conditions of temporariness and uncertainty, especially in areas that after years of disruption, degradation and crime, have begun to recover, is very high.

In an interview with the New York Times,²¹ Monxo Lopez said that gentrification had brought him to the Bronx from Brooklyn after his neighbourhood of Fort Greene had changed dramatically. Local stores and restaurants had closed, replaced by pet stores and boutique pizzerias, while corner delis had become more upscale, and the face of the neighbourhood had changed. Monxo Lopez, who is among the founders of South Bronx Unite, an activist group that is challenging the speed of development, also noted that everything was becoming more fragmented, and the neighbourhood's atmosphere was being lost. In 2006, real estate guru Barbara Corcoran decreed that the South Bronx was among the top five most desirable real estate markets in the nation, saying that public money was flowing in, that the arrival of artists and musicians could improve the area, and that the opening of expensive bars and clubs was a sign of an area on the upswing. Lopez said that fear then turned to outrage when developer Keith Rubenstein announced the construction of luxury towers in Port

¹⁹ *TEMPORARY Citizenship, Architecture and City*, curated by Ascari P., Borsari A., Trentin A., International Conference, University of Bologna, 2021/11/09-12.

²⁰ Schindler S.: *Model Conflicts*. e-flux Architecture, July (2018).

²¹ Gonzalez D.: Interview with Monxo Lopez. New York Times, 3 Sept. (2017).

Morris, an area he tried to rename “The Piano District”; there was the idea of rebranding the area, prompted by the arrival of boutiques, cafes, and new temporary businesses, with the neighbourhood branding as a means for speculative activity. Lopez saw these operations, imposed top-down, as an effort to erase the history of the neighbourhood and the cultural and social achievements of a community, in favour of speculation. The residents of the neighbourhood were not involved or considered, now all these new businesses are at the centre of attention and the ones that have served the community are ignored and the history of the community, through good times and bad, has been erased. Lopez hopes development can be slowed and he has embraced the idea of a Community Land Trust to obtain city-owned buildings or lots that can be turned into local anchors, such as cultural centres, to act as a barrier against speculation and transience. But the real and continuing crisis, he said, remains affordability: with Bronx residents paying a higher percentage of their income for rent, the city needs more affordable housing: “We know that neighbourhoods change”, he said. “We’re not afraid of change. What we don’t want to see is those who want to remain to be displaced.”²²

This is a real battle for social justice, centered on people and on the neighbourhood community. In this context, the IPA - Institute for Public Architecture²³ is trying to define a future in which design is used as a tool for facilitating social justice and where the public sphere has a voice in all decisions that shape the built environment: they use design to challenge social and physical inequities in the city. They address urgent issues of design and policy by mobilising a network of activists, professionals, government officials and community stakeholders and seeking funding from federal, state, and municipal agencies.

The empty spaces between buildings and the unused areas of neighbourhoods are not the places where to experiment with the temporary, but to seek for permanence, stability and neighbourhood identity. Through precise design interventions, the architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld has been able to design living spaces for the homeless and underserved classes, to interrupt a process of uncertainty and temporariness by providing permanent housing.

In these projects, whose stakeholders are non-profit organisations dedicated to providing services and permanent housing to populations with special needs, unused spaces are exploited; there is a return to the typological research that characterised the studies presented by Aldo Rossi in *The Architecture of the City*, with an emphasis on the distinction between monuments and residence areas that are community spaces, places for living. There is a return to the character of the place, to the collective memory, to the sense of belonging, to all the elements able to guide the project toward solutions for reproducing the idea of the city that has been lost.

The courtyard buildings, galleries and blocks constitute types in continuity with history, they are the elements of permanence that place the project in continuity with the old and recent past, with a clear and recognisable typological structure that can transform itself and offer new possibilities for new uses.

In an article describing the work of Kirschenfeld Architects on affordable housing, the historian David Grahame Shane points out: “In a surreal twist the infill housing of the underprivileged suddenly takes center stage on the Grand Concourse to serve a new, upwardly mobile bourgeoisie, a fluid networked generation left out of New York City’s current housing equation. These micro moves would invigorate the city and Grand Concourse from within and from the bottom-up, offering a new,

²² *Ibid.*

²³ <https://www.instituteforpublicarchitecture.org/about> last accessed 2022/08/30.

wired, hyper-flexible Existenzminimum dwelling type to the currently endangered ‘creative class’ whose participation is crucial for the city’s future.”²⁴

These micro moves wish to testify that a well-structured architecture, grounded on a formal basis that refers to the collective memory, is able to embrace the continuous transience of function and to remain vital and persistent in the urban organism.

²⁴ Shane D.G.: Restoring the Urban Dream. Affordable Housing in New York. Bauwelt no. 110, 19-21, (2012).