

The importance of temporary urbanism in deconstructing cities and shaping the post-pandemic city research agenda.

The Large Glass (forthcoming)

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It has now been several decades since temporary uses and projects have been deployed in cities under several rationales including re-inhabiting vacant and derelict spaces, fostering creative and innovative forms of urban living and making, allowing experimentations and testing new ideas, led by artists, local businesses, communities etc.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the importance of temporary uses globally; streets, buildings and open spaces have had to adapt to unprecedented times to allow new practices, uses and regulations (e.g. social distancing)². This highlights two important features explaining the rise and eagerness for what I will call and define later as 'temporary urbanism'. First, cities, the built environment, public and open spaces need to be thought through and (re)designed allowing for flexibility and malleability in the way they are used. This should allow them to adapt to changes driven by socio-economic mechanisms along with individuals' behaviours. Second, the importance of adaptability in the urban making process has to be better recognised and conceptualised, in order to allow spaces to adjust more easily to changes hence enabling both resiliency and sustainability within the built environment.

Planners have been perceived for some time as the most reluctant built environment practitioners in engaging and allowing such processes of change and the eagerness towards temporary approaches of urban making had been driven by artists, architects and urban designers. The planning and the urban development process have recently started to fully embrace the idea of non-permanent uses and more transient occupations. This has resulted in a shift towards initially bottom-up temporary experimentations, which were driven in relatively spontaneous and alternative ways, to top-down mechanisms where both landowners, developers and/or local authorities clearly acknowledge the value of temporary transformation in periods of transition and neo-liberal regeneration mechanisms. This has led to the recognition and spread of the concept of temporary urbanism.³ Up to that time, ephemerality, transience, liminality, pop-up, tactical, DIY were used to for example characterise temporary projects.⁴ Such urbanism can be defined as the processes, practices and policies of, and for, spatial adaptability, allowing for the activation of a space in perceived need of transformation, and, thus, impacting the surrounding socio-economic urban environment.

¹ Andres, L & Zhang, Y (ed), 2021, *Transforming Cities Through Temporary Urbanism - A Comparative Overview*, Springer, London

² Deas, I., Martin M., Hincks, S., 2020, Temporary urban uses in response to COVID-19: bolstering resilience via short-term experimental solutions, *Town Planning Review*, <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2020.45>; Law, L., Azzali, S., Conejos, S. 2020, Planning for the temporary: temporary urbanism and public space in a time of COVID-19, *Town Planning Review*, <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2020.48>

³ Madanipour A., 2017. *Cities in Time: Temporary urbanism and the future of the city*. London: Bloomsbury; Andres & Zhang "Transforming Cities"; Law, L., Azzali, S., Conejos, S. 2020, Planning for the temporary: temporary urbanism and public space in a time of COVID-19, *Town Planning Review*, <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2020.48>

⁴ Harris, E., 2015, Navigating pop-up geographies: urban space—times of flexibility, interstitiality and immersion, *Geography Compass* 9(11), 592–603.

The multiple, mutually constituting and ineluctably entangled relationships between temporalities and spatialities in urban spaces have been widely debated by urban studies scholars encompassing questions of scale, duration, and the agents of production and consumption⁵. Consequently, both the 'temporal' and the 'urban' can be understood, combined and deployed in various ways, tied especially to the very specific disciplines and professional bodies that intervene in the planning and designing of urban environments. Though better understood, the concept of temporary urbanism is still not clearly defined and this short paper, based on past and ongoing work, aims to flag up some of the key features of 'temporary urbanism' in both research and practice while opening new research avenues in light of the post-pandemic city debates.

To do so, I will start by deconstructing the relationship between temporariness and rhythms of cities and identify three types of temporary urbanism; I will then highlight what the core components of temporary urbanism are and will finish by reflecting upon the role of temporary urbanism in the post-pandemic context, hence highlighting the future research areas for this field of study.

1- What is temporary urbanism?

Although attention and focus on temporary uses has only started to occur since the 1990s in a context of severe urban transformations, in which cities witnessed both the impact of neo-liberal policies and significant shifts towards urban living and development (urban shrinkage, spread of dereliction in city centres, decline of high streets ...), cities have been characterised by adaptable and flexible use of space for a very long time. Here the term 'mutability' is important as a conceptual lens; mutability of urban functions and uses of space, leadingⁱ to the transformation and reuse of spaces is constitutive of the urban condition.⁶ This was already the case in Roman and medieval cities and the process of temporary transformations just diversified and expanded. An important perspective here, shared with Madanipour⁷ is that temporariness is associated with the rhythms characterising urban spaces; Those rhythms can be conjunctural and driven by socio-economic mechanisms (de-growth, de-industrialisation, etc.) or more punctual, dependent on opportunities and needs arising (artistic, cultural, leisure or economic needs for example). Similarly to Madanipour⁸, I share the view that several urban theories allow those rhythms to be deconstructed such as Lefebvre⁹ and his work on 'differential spaces', the production of the city and the use of 'rhythmanalysis' to understand the interrelation of space and time in the understanding of everyday life.¹⁰

⁵ Madanipour "Cities in Time"; Madanipour A., 2018. Temporary use of space: Urban processes between flexibility, opportunity and precarity. *Urban Studies*, 55(5), pp.1093–1110; Bishop, P. 2015, From the Subversive to the Serious, *Counterpoint*, 235(03), 136-141; Bishop, P., 2019, Urban Design in the Fragmented City In Rob Roggema, *Contemporary urban design thinking: the Australian approach*, Springer, pp. 71-94; Bishop, P. and Williams, L., 2012, *The Temporary City*. London: Routledge; Harris "Navigating pop-up geographies"; Martin, M., Deas, I. and Hincks, S., 2019, 'The role of temporary use in urban regeneration: ordinary and extraordinary approaches in Bristol and Liverpool', *Planning Practice and Research*, 34, 537–57; Martin, M., Hincks, S. and Deas, I. 2020, "Temporary use in England's core cities: looking beyond the exceptional", *Urban Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098019898076>

⁶ Andres L., 2009, La ville face aux incessants changements de ses formes et de ses fonctions : la mutabilité comme constitutive du fait urbain in ROSBOCH M., BERTRAND G. (Eds.), *Le dinamiche del cambiamento. Cultura, cittadinanza, economia nelle regioni alpine occidentali tra età moderna e globalizzazione*, Libreria Stampatori, Turin, pp 51-66

⁷ Madanipour "Cities in Time"; Madanipour "Temporary use of space,"

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lefebvre, H., 1991. *The production of Space*. Blackwell: Oxford; Lefebvre, H., 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*. A&C Black.

¹⁰ Andres, L. and Kraft, P., 2018, *New directions in the theorisation of temporary urbanism*, AAG New Orleans.

Now, temporary spaces and uses drive change and enable both visible and invisible transformations in diverse urban settings. Temporary urbanism embraces adaptability and allows urban spaces to change use, meaning, and role within the urban fabric. They foster experimentation: their highly localised nature means that they can be tailored to unique uses and users (which include local communities). Such urbanism allows the rise of distinct urbanity and sense of place, which in some cases, can bring a creative and edgy character to an area (and, paradoxically, lead to a wider process of gentrification). Temporary urbanism as such isn't straight forward and significant conflicts of use, during and once a temporary project is (supposedly) completed, can occur. Temporary urbanism can also be rejected by local communities when perceived as excuses to raise land values or to be inappropriate with regard to local needs.

As we note and explain in our latest book¹¹, there are three types of temporary urbanism, all interfering in one way or another with urban rhythms and citizens' lives.

The first form of temporary urbanism is bottom-up temporary urbanism.; In this configuration, temporary uses and projects sit outside of any formal planning frameworks and hence are usually led by individuals or collectives (e.g. artists, activists, community members). Temporary urbanism is here embedded within a context of transition and a context of weak planning¹², in other words, during a period of several years when no formal and planned transformation (within a clear masterplan) can occur (due to various financial, economic, planning deadlocks). Weak planning, by essence, is permissive and characterised by its lack of co-ordination, strategic guidelines, clear objectives and control by any higher authority¹³. It hence welcomes flexibility and adaptability. Such bottom-up temporary urbanism is strongly connected to 'everyday' needs of local communities and, hence, to gaps in the urban fabric¹⁴. Within bottom-up urbanism, we include a wide range of temporary uses from squatting to temporary uses connected to the informal economy (e.g. temporary street shops) to more pacified and community-led projects (e.g. temporary playgrounds, temporary gardens), hence promoting out-of-the-box thinking, which challenges formal planning arrangements in contexts of transition¹⁵.

Second, top-down temporary urbanism, reflects the latest thinking in which temporary uses and projects are no longer perceived as blockages for redevelopment but, on the contrary, as ways to leverage change and activate early-stage transformation in formal settings. This type of temporary urbanism feeds directly from neoliberal planning and development, supported by recent changes in the global economy, alongside new technologies, flexible working practices and activities which are part of the knowledge economies.¹⁶ In this form, temporary urbanism is planned and constructed by those who hold the decision-making power (i.e. landowners, developers, local authorities etc.). It can still occur in a context of transition and longer-term transformations, however, temporary initiatives are no longer merely seen as informal responses to urban challenges but form part of more formal re-imaginings of cities and neighbourhoods, within wider strategies and visions of urban transformation.¹⁷

¹¹ Andres & Zhang "Transforming Cities,"

¹² Andres, L., 2013, Differential spaces, power-hierarchy and collaborative planning: a critique of the role of temporary users in shaping and making places, *Urban Studies*, 50(4), pp. 759-77.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Temel, R. and Haydn, F. (eds). 2006. *Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the Use of City Spaces*. Basel: Birkhauser; Oswald, P., Overmeyer, K and Misselwitz, P. 2017. *The Power of Temporary*. DOM Publishers : Berlin

¹⁵ and the makeshift city. *City*, 17(3), 312-324

¹⁶ Bishop and Williams, "The Temporary City"; Oswald et al "The Power of Temporary"; Bishop "From the Subversive"; Bishop "Urban Design"

¹⁷ Andres & Zhang "Transforming Cities,"

Finally, hybrid temporary urbanism¹⁸ highlights the variable nature of temporary urbanism and its complexity. This is the most recent configuration of temporary urbanism and is highly significant in the current pandemic context. Hybridity is here reflected in the processes of bricolage amongst key stakeholders who construct and develop temporary uses, meaning that boundaries between regulatory powers and power to take back ownership of spaces (specifically open/public spaces) are blurred. In this form, the boundaries between top-down and bottom-up are unclear as such projects rest upon more immediate and quick adaptation. They lead to local empowerment and adaptability in the process of making spaces and making those spaces viable and liveable for all.

2. Characteristics and Applicability of Temporary Urbanism

There are three key concepts structuring temporary urbanism:¹⁹ adaptability, activation and trajectory. Those three concepts are intrinsically linked to the values given to temporary projects and their settings along with their process of transformation. Any form of temporary urbanism activates different forms of valorisation. Value is, here, understood as not only an economic and financial construct but also as a social and cultural construct.²⁰ The notion of value highlights the intrinsic nature of temporary urbanisms as responses to crisis, contexts of transitions and, more importantly, major or minor dysfunctions in the urban (development) system; it also stresses their roles in generating alternative trajectories of transformation, with diverse spatial, economic and social repercussions, and forms of valorisation. Finally, it sits within a process of transitioning within a wider trajectory of transformation, as a form of testing what values and outcomes can be generated; using temporary interventions here is anticipatory and strategic particularly towards changing the perception of an area and, of course, correlatively, to land values.

Temporary urbanism is often deployed when certain 'deficiencies' are identified in the built environment and the wider development process (e.g. empty sites or units, lack of spaces to play, and areas 'in need' of transformation with low economic values). Considering the sites used for temporary purposes, such deficiencies can be seen a consequence of dysfunctions and loss of value that occurred in the past. The historicity and meaning (i.e. memory) of a space (social and cultural value) prior to any temporary intervention – and what it may become in future – are key factors in understanding the positioning, success and appropriateness of temporary urbanisms. In terms of historical uses and meanings, this means accounting for how 'non-use' or 'vacancy' is apprehended, and how it operates as a 'trigger' for temporary uses or engenders a perceived 'right' for appropriation by its new users. For spaces where a change of value and/or image is sought, taking account of extant communities, identities, meanings, memories, and uses is fundamental to imagining a successful trajectory of transformation. This attunement to the values of a site is a key constituent of processes of activation and to dynamics of economic and financial valorisation based on an increase of land values. The process of valorisation is then informed by how the property market operates and fluctuates and what its needs are (typically housing), which is linked to how the perception of an area changes.

Temporary urban interventions, thus, constitute one or more alternative dispositions to the future.²¹ They speak to how the future of any urban space might be valued in different ways, by different stakeholders, and of the tensions between these processes of valuing. The (often) diverse, flexible and often experimental orientation to the future found within temporary urban interventions is an

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Andres and Kraft "New directions,"

²⁰ Tonkiss "Austerity urbanism,"

²¹ Anderson, B., 2010. Preemption, precaution, preparedness: Anticipatory action and future geographies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(6), pp.777-798.

important issue for questions of adaptability and (re)valorisation through activation. Such interventions test innovative options with regards to uncertain futures – whether in terms of the use of a specific local site, or the broader temporalities and spatialities of regeneration, development and/or masterplanning in which an individual site might be situated.

Linking temporary urbanism to value is important particularly when aiming to transfer the concept of temporary urbanism beyond the Global North to the Global South.²² The idea here is to recognise the role, and hence both social and economic values, of temporary urbanism expressed in more informal and insurgent forms of urbanism.²³ Alongside derelict buildings and underused car parks, there exist different types of informal settlements as well as temporary occupations, from street vendors to leisure or cultural spaces in cities of the Global South. This exemplifies the importance of temporary urbanisms in promulgating liveability and the manifold ways in which residents and newcomers ‘activate’ spaces viewed as ‘vacant’, often for everyday survival purposes.²⁴ In this context, “temporary and informal dynamics act as alternative substitutes in places experiencing real difficulties in creating, implementing and enforcing formal planning processes”.²⁵

The recognition of such dynamics puts a focus on citizens or voluntary-sector organisations engaging in activities that alter their immediate surroundings through processes of localised place-making (ibid). It, thus, represents a re-interrogation of the bottom-up form of temporary urbanism listed above. Now, linking temporary urbanisms to insurgent urbanism allows planning as a formal process, which tends to ignore and reject informality, typically in the South or East African contexts and the more “informal processes of *alternative-substitute place-making* which enable individuals and communities to shape their living environment”²⁶ to be distinguished. The key driver behind alternative and temporary actions is the distraction of the immediate, i.e. the need to survive through place-based localised initiatives. Now, the question of survival sheds light on the ability of temporary urbanism to respond to very quick and sudden changes, typically in the current COVID-19 context.

3. Temporary urbanism in the post-pandemic city: opening a new research agenda

The 2019-2021 period will be remembered as the years where the Covid-19 pandemic appeared, spread and devastated the world economic system. It will also be remembered for creating a complete shake up as per how cities have been developed and used to date, re-questioning our relationship with density, to how we work, socialise, travel, etc. Reflections towards the post-pandemic cities along with immediate responses to this unprecedented situation sheds light on temporary urbanism specifically with regard to more adaptable use of buildings and spaces and the importance of a proactive and flexible planning system.

²² Andres, L., Bakare, H., Bryson, J., Khaemba, W., Melgaco, L., Mwaniki, G., (2019) Planning, Temporary Urbanism and Citizen-led Alternative-Substitute Place-Making in the Global South, *Regional Studies*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1665645>

²³ Miraftab F., 2009, Insurgent planning: Situating radical planning in the global south. *Planning Theory* 8:32-50; Miraftab F., 2016, Insurgency, Planning and the Prospect of a Humane Urbanism. Keynote Speech. World Congress of Planning Schools “Global Crisis, Planning and Challenges to Spatial Justice.” 3-7 July 2016, Rio de Janeiro. Available from: https://www.academia.edu/5009516/Displacement_Framing_the_global_relationally; Miraftab, F. 2017, Insurgent practices and decolonization of future(s). In Gunder M, Madanipour A, and Watson V (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of planning theory*. Routledge: London and New York, 276-288. Miraftab F., 2009, Insurgent planning: Situating radical planning in the global south. *Planning Theory* 8:32-50.

²⁴ Andres et al “Planning, Temporary Urbanism,”

²⁵ Ibid., 2

²⁶ Ibid., 9

During the pandemic, due to lockdowns, to social distancing measures, and to shifts in individual behaviours impacting mobility patterns in cities, various, but similar, forms of temporary urbanisms have spread across most cities in the world; though more thorough research is needed in this area, insights from Law et al²⁷ along with Deas et al²⁸ have demonstrated how temporary transformations of spaces along with temporary re-arrangements of spaces have occurred. Interestingly enough, both academics and practitioners are now sharing the view that flexibility in the design of cities and spaces is crucial to ensure their resiliency.²⁹ As noted by Deas et al³⁰, “one consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to stimulate policy-maker interest in how urban land and buildings can best be used as part of the wider public health response. The result has been a surge of temporary uses in cities around the world, as well as new thinking about how and when to deploy short-term uses of urban space.”

The pandemic has highlighted the principle that adaptability and flexibility need to be better thought through to better address new, unprecedented challenges and sudden changes in urban rhythms. This includes responding to unique health needs, leading to the conversion of buildings and facilities along with adapting spaces for everyday local purposes. For the first time and within a very short period of time, the three types of temporary urbanism (top-down, bottom-up and hybrid) have occurred simultaneously, and within similar patterns of development, across the globe. As demonstrated by Law et al and Deas et al³¹, stadiums, conference centres and parking have been transformed into temporary recovery facilities and hospitals, hotels have been used as quarantine centres or to house homeless people and ice rinks and air hangars have been used as temporary mortuaries. Public spaces and street furniture have been also radically changed to allow social distancing (e.g. wider pavements and footpaths), maintain economic activities (e.g. restaurants using pavements for outdoor dining) and accommodate new individual mobilities (temporary cycling lanes, one-way circulations in parks, etc.).

These are unprecedented and sudden changes. As a result, a range of key new areas of study are emerging with wider research implications as per the future directions of travel of this field of temporary urbanism:

Up to now, debates characterising temporary urbanism had mostly stayed away from the issue of health; both temporary urbanism and health were sometimes linked via issues of well-being and liveability in line with how temporary uses could foster and renew a sense of space and ownership in an area. The way temporary urbanism has been mobilised during the pandemic demonstrates its role as a response to virus transmission specifically; there is now a direct correlation between temporary adaptations and transformation and public health rationales as a response to sudden needs and forced behavioural changes in periods of sanitary crisis.

Second, the connection between temporary urbanism and mobilities has to date been under-researched. Until the COVID-19 crisis, sudden shifts of modes of transport, including reducing car lanes to provide space for cyclist paths, were impossible; it was a long and painful process due to lobbying on behalf of different interests and conflicts (for example in Paris). The pandemic and the spread of different and individual transport modes along with the temporary rearrangements set up

²⁷ Law et al. “Planning for the temporary,”

²⁸ Deas, I., Martin M., Hincks, S., 2020, Temporary urban uses in response to COVID-19: bolstering resilience via short-term experimental solutions, *Town Planning Review*, <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2020.45>

²⁹ Crump, L., 2020, Meanwhile uses in the city – should this be the new normal? <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/progressingplanning/2020/07/06/meanwhile-uses-in-the-city-should-this-be-the-new-normal/>; Law et al. “Planning for the temporary”

³⁰ Deas et al “Temporary urban uses,” 2

³¹ Law et al. “Planning for the temporary,”; Deas et al “Temporary urban uses,”

to accommodate those new mobilities, has had a decisive role in promoting the wider sustainable transport agenda for local policy makers. Local citizen voices gained more weight particularly in contexts of restricted mobilities due to lockdowns. This, again, is an unprecedented area of inquiry (flagged up by Deas et al³²) and further research will for sure occur concerning the role of temporary urbanism as a trigger for significant political shifts in decision making, particularly towards sustainable and more resilient transport systems.

Third, temporary urbanism and its global (not localised – I insist) application shed light on the relationship between temporary uses, temporary transformation and urban resilience. Temporary urbanism had to date barely been linked to the disaster management and resilience literature.³³ Similarly to how urban resilience has been engaging with safety and terrorism³⁴, temporary urbanism will feed into those debates. The way temporary urbanism was used during the pandemic suggests how regulations and ways of designing cities and spaces need to be challenged to allow for more adaptability and flexibility. For sure, this will be reflected in new regulations (promoting more flexible regulations, for example, with the relaxation of English planning regulations to allow temporary changes of use to enable business continuity³⁵) where a shift towards more flexible forms of ‘place shaping’³⁶, enabled by ‘weak planning’ frameworks is needed, rather than more structured and rigid masterplans, which leads to a place-making process³⁷ lacking adaptability, and, hence, resilience. Now, this raises significant questions as to how planning education and the wider built environment disciplines will respond to this challenge. New skills and training will be needed to achieve such a shift; existing current models for designing cities and spaces will be challenged and it is worth noting here that temporary urbanism isn’t, to date, a topic taught in many Higher Education curricula.

Conclusion

To conclude, drawing upon recent changes in the way temporary urbanism has been researched, and recognising it as a tool and driver of urban transformation, and more recently as a central element in rethinking the post-pandemic city, this paper argues for a wider recognition of this concept as a tool to deconstruct urban transformations and for re-thinking cities in the future. Temporary urbanism has been, and will be, playing a key role in understanding cities and thinking about their resilience for several reasons. First, it allows traditional neo-liberal forms of production of the city, which led to very generic spaces, lacking in identity and sense of place, to be challenged; Second, temporary urbanism embraces locality and local needs with a shift of focus back to individuals as drivers of activations and shapers of spaces. Third, it reinforces the importance of ‘space’ not as a gap to fill but as a place to shape and design in an agile, localised and context-specific way where rhythms and dynamics of the everyday are clearly acknowledged (both in the Global North and Global South contexts). Finally, while bringing together both research and practice, it is currently seen as a new model for designing post-pandemic urban environments, acknowledging the fact that unprecedented changes and shifts will affect cities in the future.

³² Deas et al “Temporary urban uses,”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Coaffee, J. and O’Hare, P. (2008) Urban resilience and national security: the role for planners, Proceeding of the Institute of Civil Engineers: Urban Design and Planning, 161, Issue DP4, 171-182.

³⁵ MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) (2020), ‘Government to grant permission for pubs and restaurants to operate as takeaways as part of coronavirus response’, press release, 17 March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-grant-permission-for-pubs-and-restaurants-to-operate-as-takeaways-as-part-of-coronavirus-response>.

³⁶ Andres “Differential spaces, power-hierarchy,”

³⁷ Ibid.