

Mara Ferreri, *The Permanence of Temporary Urbanism: Normalising Precarity in Austerity*
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In 2012 I moved into a studio in an arts organisation legally called Pop-Up Initiative CIC (Community Interest Company) based in a huge old office building in the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne. Artists gradually moved in, constructing walls and creating makeshift studios in the open-plan spaces. Eventually the building became home to over 80 artists and spawned similar studio complexes and arts organisations across a 12,000 metre squared block. The whole block was, and still is, part of an Accelerated Development Zone, due for redevelopment which was stalled owing to the 2008 economic crisis. We paid no rent, and at the time the Council offered an 80 per cent discount in business rates relief to CICs. Because we saved the owners, (two of the richest men in the UK), money through the rates relief, they ended up paying us to be there – a sort of informal kickback. In the end the building was razed but the land was never permanently redeveloped; it made way for more profitable meanwhile use in the form of a “container village” housing bars and cafes – recreation overtaking cultural production.

This story echoes many of the case studies that Mara Ferreri discusses in this book and that have become synonymous with urban policy following the 2008 crisis (yet, as Ferreri highlights, these approaches also have a longer history associated with counter-cultural art, architecture, and social movements). Using the term “temporary urbanism”, Ferreri refers to festivals, community gardens, political occupations, squatting, social enterprises, public art commissions, temporary performances, and the ubiquitous container villages, which often make use of “vacant” buildings and land. These approaches were seen as a panacea for struggling high streets, stalled development sites, and slimline local authorities in the wake of the economic crisis and, as Ferreri highlights, were written into the planning and economic development policies of many councils. Pop-ups were viewed as innovative, creative, and experimental – a place for the unexpected – but it was often based

upon the spatial stigmatisation of places and communities which were seen to be in need of cultural “activation” in order to make them more inviting and visually pleasing for outsiders and visitors. In many senses, as Ferreri shows throughout the book, temporary urbanism is merely the latest “revanchist” urban policy that does little to aid communities suffering from years of economic and social neglect, and which, at worst, can lead to processes of gentrification and displacement.

This is a much-needed book in a field that has spawned a lot of literature, of which some has lacked criticality. Ferreri’s previous work on gentrification (Ferreri 2020; Lees and Ferreri 2016) and housing commons (Ferreri and Vidal 2021) provides a solid grounding from which to undertake a critical study on the subject. Ferreri offers a longitudinal, grounded analysis of temporary urbanism projects in London, having undertaken qualitative research for ten years with groups and projects during a period of economic crisis and ensuing austerity policies. The value in this situated approach is that she offers deep insight into the inherent power structures that exist within projects/organisations and between them and public/private institutions. Through this longitudinal approach Ferreri was able to follow projects as they began, grew, faltered, stalled, moved, and ended. It is a rich methodology, simultaneously offering a sensitive eye on the case studies through deep ethnography, whilst also being attentive to the wider landscape of austerity, economic crisis, and financialised urban change.

Whilst the first chapters situate temporary urbanism within the broader post-2008 social and economic landscape, and discuss the value of a situated, longitudinal approach, the central chapters develop the ethnography. In Chapter 4, Ferreri follows the redevelopment of Elephant and Castle’s 1965 shopping centre that fell into decline after a lack of maintenance and in preparation for the wider “regeneration” of the area, which included the demolition of the famous Heygate Estate as well as the shopping centre. Ferreri follows the emergence and development of a series of participatory artist interventions/pop-ups housed in vacant shops. Being supported by the landowner, this community-orientated programme was aimed at activating empty shops, generating social activity, and community outreach – what Ferreri

terms the “staging of urban sociability” (p.90). Ferreri traces the tensions and difficulties which arise between local people, artists, and the centre owners. In one case, a project which started as being critical of the ensuing redevelopment of the area, eventually ended up with the artists partnering with Tate Modern and taking money from the developers to fund a programme of activity, leading to the artists being discredited by a local anti-regeneration action group. This example speaks of a wider story of community-oriented practices being subsumed by private developers and capital, and/or being professionalised and institutionalised through the involvement of large cultural institutions. Ferreri provides another example of a small, politically-engaged performance company who set up temporary home in an ex-industrial complex in Swan Wharf, Hackney Wick (across the river from the Olympic Park), only to be replaced soon after by the Barbican. This is a typical story of arts organisations being replaced by more profitable large institutions, “creative industries” of high-tech start-ups, incubator spaces, design firms, and flexible workspaces. In the end, the company moved to Folkestone to find cheap rents. Here Ferreri touches on the role of “artwashing” by local authorities and developers, which, within her book’s context, refers to a process in which art and artists are brought in to “activate” or “warm up” a space planned for redevelopment, making it look glossy, cool, and vibrant. Consequently, projects are used to gloss-over processes of gentrification and community displacement. This is an argument which could have been expanded in the book, particularly through emerging work on “community artwashing” through which socially-engaged artists are directly employed by public/private actors to engage with communities undergoing, or under threat of, redevelopment and displacement (Pritchard 2020).

In the penultimate chapter, Ferreri provides an insight into the institutional actors, political frameworks, and policies which have made temporary urbanism so ubiquitous. These actors include not only local authorities, land/property owners and developers, but also property agents and companies specifically set up to link people and organisations to vacant space. She highlights that temporary urbanism is an exercise in “copy-paste cultural and urban policymaking” (p.11) in which projects are used as testing grounds for local

development strategies for cash-strapped councils. In this narrative, places are viewed as underused assets waiting to be reawakened through spectacle. Ferreri argues that whilst many local authorities may celebrate the “innovation” and entrepreneurialism of temporary urbanism, they are, at the same time, supportive of punitive political responses which criminalise alternative ways of inhabiting cities, such as squatting, and foreclose alternative accounts of who the city should be for and how it should be developed. As a result, from the perspective of the local authority, projects and organisations should not be oppositional in their work, and they must not interfere with the “business as usual” activities of investors and developers involved in the ultimate transformation of these sites into upmarket neighbourhoods.

In the final chapter, Ferreri extends her theoretical analysis on precarity, which she engages with in a two-fold manner: firstly, drawing attention to the emergence of a new type of “flexible subject” – the precarious, freelance worker who works in the “temporary city”; and secondly, discussing the impacts of temporary urbanism policies and practices on communities at the hard end of austerity policies, who are fighting for homes, jobs, and welfare. Drawing on Boltanski and Chiapello’s book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), Ferreri highlights that in this new climate “permanence and continuity are devalued” (p.152) as citizens are expected to be mobile and flexible in their work, home, and social lives. Yet all that is liberated through this arrangement is the flow of capital which itself thrives on the ability to be limitlessly adaptable. She argues that the temporary projects emerging from the economic crisis should be seen as contributing to, and facilitating, a landscape geared towards greater work, life, and place precarity. Yet many people and communities depend on consistency through long-term support and rooted community-based organisations. Temporary projects are often parachuted into places without understanding the problems stemming from multiple forms of social and economic disadvantage, as well as isolation from institutional power. In an era of austerity, local authorities use these “drag and drop”, transferable temporary projects to provide welfare programmes and build social

infrastructure. Yet with a lack of local context and no sustained financial support, these projects do little to genuinely support hard-pressed communities.

The strength of this book is that it uses deep ethnography and a longitudinal analysis to prompt some big questions around who cities are for in an era of reduced local authority spending and growing urban inequality. As Ferreri points out, there is no longer stability of function and use for our cities and so they become increasingly insecure for those citizens of limited economic means, who, in many places, are increasingly subject to policies aimed at extracting value from land through redevelopment. Whilst Ferreri wrote this book prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, we can only wonder whether there will be a whole new raft of temporary urbanism approaches parachuted into neighbourhoods and urban centres in coming years in the absence of long-term funding structures and in response to the crisis of high street retail.

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