

Importance of Temporary Architecture and Permanence as an Obsolete Notion

Çisem Soylu

T. C. İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi

Email: cisemsyl@gmail.com

Abstract—Permanence is one of the qualities that has been attributed to architecture since the early ages of human settlements for several reasons such as economical, religious or nationalistic motivations. However, the paradigm shift that accompanied modernism has changed the ways that humankind lives and produces; the phenomena of obsolescence has emerged and new economical approaches as well as daily practices have shifted to a short-termed perception of time and the pace of change has accelerated. Creative destruction has become the fundamental point of origin to the modern design and construction practices. Primarily investigating the meaning of permanence - absolute and relative permanence- and the drivers of building permanent structures based on the value of architecture both theoretically and historically, this study aims to examine the obtrusive conflict between the modern transformation towards short-termism and the building culture that remained solid in terms of temporaryness. Initiations for discovering ways of building temporary structures or applying short-termed or reusable materials have great importance today, although many examples of temporary architecture may be seen throughout the history of humankind, for a more sustainable, mobile and humble architecture. The conclusion objective of this paper is to track the first modern responses to the interchangeable urban texture during the second half of the twentieth century and how the idea has evolved in time, arriving to the recent applications of temporary modals in the means of structure and material. It is crucial that architecture adapts to this relatively new conjuncture as building life spans are dramatically decreasing and natural resources are at critical levels and temporary structures may be the answer.

Index Terms—permanence, obsolescence, creative destruction, temporary architecture

I. INTRODUCTION

“In time, the Rockies may crumble,
Gibraltar may tumble,
They’re only made of clay” [1]

The lines cited above are from the famous jazz song *Our Love Is Here To Stay*, written by Ira Gershwin and performed by Nat King Cole. What can be understood from the song is, be it natural or artificial, everything that

is material may fall apart and cease to exist some day. Although, there is a fourth line to the verse: *Our love is here to stay*. Meaning it will last forever; strong and permanent. When we think about our lives, relationships, surroundings; we might easily find that permanence is mostly a comforting idea and quested for while temporaryness is more likely to keep us on the edge. We tend to approach short-termed solutions with suspicion and consider them to be the last resort next to the permanent ones. It is a matter of security and prosperity.

Facing the end of something good is never a lovely idea, just like life itself and as humanbeings we have always been in the search of something to overcome this “nasty” truth. While art itself is represented as a way to conquer death, this is not the only way. There is an old saying in Romanian, listing the three things one should do in her life: Have a child, plant a tree, build a house. A child, a tree and a built house; all these three would, in a sense, pursue our existence as our contributions by outliving us. We might die but, hopefully, our child would keep living, our tree would keep growing and our house would endure as reflections of ourselves. However, the child would grow old and leave her place to her own offspring, the tree would fall to the ground, the house would perish someday.

Although it is delusional, desire for permanence is a motivation that shouldn’t be disregarded or underestimated, in life, in politics, in art. Architecture, as seen in the saying “build a house”, is no exception to this. Along with many exceptions, this desire can be read throughout the history of architecture and the change of heart that accompanied modernity is evident. What has changed and why? Is it only today that the world started considering temporary structures and landscapes and why is it important that it is done? But first of all, what does permanence mean?

II. THE CONCEPT OF PERMANENCE

The Latin word *permaneō* is established by two parts *per-* (“through”) and *maneō* (“i remain”). Together they make “i remain through”, as an everlasting existence. [2] Permanence, in English, has the meaning of lasting, continuing, on going. The basic definition is not enough to understand the idea of permanence, it is related to other concepts. In the Ancient Egypt, it was believed that the pharaoh would live an eternal life and his endlessness

was based on him being a demigod; so their eternal houses, pyramids, were built to be majestic and permanent.[3] In the early utopias (Thomas More's Utopia, François Bacon's New Atlantis, Tommaso Campanella's City of the Sun etc.), fictions of ideal civilizations were described, unchanged for centuries, ever to remain the same like a frozen picture. [4] History books are filled with stories of cities that were never aspired to fall, Carthage, Babylon, Pompeii, Troy... [5] Putting aside the fact that all the pharaohs ever existed have ceased to exist, all of the cities mentioned above have fallen and none of those utopias are actualised; there must be a reason that they were aspired to be permanent, eternal. The answer might be found in a discipline, where the job definition is to keep certain objects at the state they were first found for as long as possible: archivism.

"The materials in archives are separated from the great mass of all the records ever created and are marked for special attention and treatment because they possess what is frequently identified as permanent value." [6]

What is remarkable in James M. O'Toole's expression above is the emphasis at the end: permanent value. If being a demigod would not make a person valuable, then what would? What utopia narrators were after was a system, so ideal that would put an end to history, a system of perfection. The great cities, empires in history, beside of being great, had great value of power, treasures and natural or artificial beauties. It should be safe to say that the idea of permanence is related to divinity, perfection, greatness and, if appropriate to say, arrogance.

III. THE VALUE OF ARCHITECTURE

There are more than one aspect to understanding the value of architecture in terms of the idea of permanence. Remembering Filarete's interpretation, "The building is conceived in this manner.", architecture is much like "giving birth", architect being the mother. [7] Architectural performance, just like giving birth, is perceived as a miraculous phenomenon. Considering the two meanings of "conceive" in English, both "getting pregnant" and "having an idea", not only the built structure itself, but the intellectual effort, the creative idea in the design is something to be treasured by the architect. In this context, the term "creative" deserves a second look. The root of the word, "create", according to Cambridge dictionary, means "to make something happen or exist". [8] There is a hidden "out of nothing" at the end of the definition though, giving it the sense of a godlike act. Hannah Arendt, in her book Human Condition, relates the human acts in the quest for permanence is based on their aspiration "to be of a 'divine' nature", which explains the godlikeness attributed to architecture. [9] It is known that neither buildings nor ideas, are created from nothing; just as buildings are physically formed by the combination of sub-elements, new ideas appear from the relations of knowledge and former ideas and so are they both mortal.

The relationship between mortality, death to be more precise, and architecture is another aspect. It was Hegel

to say "Architecture is something appearing in the place of death, to point out its presence and cover it up: the victory of death and the victory over death." [10] Architecture is a memento mori, according to Jane Jacobs and Stephen Cairn: a reminder of death. [11] Yet, it is also a way to cope with this fact, an act against the very existence of death. Not just by outliving us, but also by being a solid representative of our volatile essence, built structures are the standing guards between us and death. This phenomenon can be understood by not separating these two aspirations, but by comprehending them together; like how the pictures of lost ones both remind death and give comfort by not letting them to be forgotten at the same time [12]; architecture, in this case, is the mediator of existence.

Alois Riegl starts his book, *Modern Cult of the Monument*, describing the monument as an artefact that is produced by an individual to transfer his crafts to the later generations and keep them alive by doing so. [13] But when John Ruskin wrote "When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight not for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them, 'See! This our father did for us.'" [14], he was not only writing in a sentimental tone on a personal basis, but also with nationalist affection. Paul Connerton suggests that Britain's excessive preservation cautions in 1960s was to re-enforce national identity and restore solidarity after the decrease of their international dominance in 1959. [15] Architecture, being an instrument of public communication [16] and a semiological manifestation, features as the obdurate narrator of a civilization for the present public and the next generations; the narrator of integrity and prosperity.

Desire for permanence in architecture can be read in a practical context as well as conceptual. Through a primordial prospect, as stated by Vitruvius in his *The Ten Books on Architecture*, durability is one of the three qualities architecture is aspired to ensure: *Firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas*. Discussing the construction of a city wall Vitruvius writes: "In the thickness there should be set a very close succession of ties made of charred olive wood, binding the two faces of the wall together like pins, to give it lasting endurance. For that is a material which neither decay, nor the weather, nor time can harm, but even though buried in the earth or set in water it keeps sound and useful forever.", proceeding with indicating that not only city walls but every substructure should be built in this manner to have a long lifespan. [17] However, he terms this long-lasting not as permanence but as durability, while implying that a well constructed wall would stand strong "forever". In this context, it is possible to subclassify the notion: relative permanence (long-lasting) and absolute permanence (forever). Absolute permanence is against nature, everything decays, everything dies. Relative permanence on the

other hand is changeable depending on the culture; needs and practices of the user, and the characteristic of the era.

IV. CREATIVE DESTRUCTION AND OBSOLESCENCE

The answer to the question of “value” has changed and evolved throughout history, however, there was a time, not so long ago, where the term was on the edge of a wrecking ball. When Schumpeter wrote about capitalism, his most remarkable conceptualisation was what he termed “creative destruction”. [18] Originally being an economical term, it identifies what Marx suggests about capitalism, the total destruction of pre-capitalist economy [19], although it is not limited with trading or politics. Creative destruction, to simply define, destroying the old, to make way for the new, was the zeitgeist of modernism. Modernity was the removal of rubbish standing in the way of knowledge and enlightenment, while modernity meant wrecking what’s old and out of fashion for the cutting edge. As a contradiction to its perfectionism, modernism was liquid and obsolescence was its essence. “In America in the later 1920’s and during the Depression, manufacturers found that a designer or, more commonly, a stylist could give a product what is now called ‘added value’, but what was then termed ‘eye appeal’ - in other words the stylist could make a product more appealing, more desirable and more likely to be purchased than its competition.” [20] According to Nigel Witheley, eye appeal was not the only thing that designers added to the product; starting from the twentieth century in America, products have been designed with built-in obsolescence, to encourage consumerism for the sake of a standing economy. Fashionable period for an average domestic product was then two to three years, which is a long duration compared to today. As Georg Simmel puts it, the more aggressive capitalism gets, the faster fashion changes. [21] Architecture, again, is no exception to this phenomenon. Obsolescence creates deserted buildings or areas, and demolitions which are appetizing opportunities for re-development and renewal. [22]



Figure 1. New topographics of a man-altered landscape [23] – Bernd and Hilla Becher, Preparation Plant, Harry E. Colliery Coal Breaker, Wiles Barre, Pennsylvania, USA, 1974; Hilla Becher, 2009

Constant change became the only constant of the modern city: a compulsive cycle of demolition and construction. (Fig. 1) “In 1930, H. H. Richardson’s famous Marshall Field Wholesale Store (1884-86), only

forty-four years old, tumbled beneath the wrecker’s ball to be replaced by a parking lot. One year earlier, again in Chicago, another pioneering modern structure, the steel-frame Tacoma Building by Holabird & Roche (1887-88) met a similar fate at the age of forty-one, replaced by a taller skyscraper.” [24] Abramson states that neither of these buildings were at the end of their physical life span, and there are many more examples of demolished landmarks in Chicago and New York, wrecked while they could still serve. Not only in America, but in metropolises and big cities, demolishing and construction sites became the constants of urban life. (Fig. 2) Due to obsolescence, both aesthetical and technological, actual life span of buildings started to fall dramatically. Abramson cites real estate executive George T. Mortimer: “It has been my experience that most buildings over 20 years old cannot be made to pay.” [25] According to Jacobs and Cairn, in the 21st century, this number is even lower. [26]



Figure 2. One hundred signs of demolition by Wang Jinsong, 1999, a collection of “chai” (literally demolish) implicating the demolishing area. [28]

Marshall Berman, in his book *Everything That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, suggests that “even the most powerful bourgeois buildings are disposable and this is what they draw their power from” and adds, “their allure comes from the fact that their substantive power and solidity is of no use.” [27] In this context it is safe to say that there has been a paradigm shift with modernity; in a capitalist system, not permanence, but constant change is the signifier of wealth, well-being and prosperity. What highlights itself in Marshall Berman’s statement though, is the hidden discrepancy between “disposable” and “solidity”. Temel did not overlook this contradiction that nests in the core of modernism: “The requirements of an accelerated capitalist economy ... conflicts with the immobility of real estate.” [29] However short-termed in reality, modern buildings are constructed in a relatively permanent manner. This contradiction of modernist building culture reminds Italo Calvino’s *Sofronia* from *Invisible Cities*, [30] where there are two districts; one with reconstructable and relatively temporary structures, and another with banks, plantations, schools constructed in stone, marble and concrete. The plot twist to Calvino’s story is where he writes that one of these two districts is deconstructed, moved and reconstructed in a different part of the town every year, although not the temporary one but the one with massive kargir or concrete buildings. What is obtrusive about modern capitalist construction systematic is this contrast between its methods and the foreseeable consequences. Can architecture adapt to this conjuncture?

V. TEMPORARINESS in ARCHITECTURE

Temporariness has been associated with poverty, shortage of facilities and inaccessibility of resources due to its unfortunate record of usage in disaster or post-war areas, [31] refugee camps, squatting and humanitarian aid initiatives in Africa, Latin America or Asia; [32] while permanence is with luxury, comfort and certainty. It is the 21st century that temporary architecture and temporary landscape projects are popularly projected on a different perception, as if it doesn't have to be so abstained but might be an opportunity, although the concept of temporaryness is not a recent invention in architecture or urban design. In the ancient Shinto culture of Japan, the shrines are built to be reconstructed every twenty years (or even less). Two parcels next to each other host both shrines, occupied and dormant.[33] Decay and death are as accepted as birth in the circle of life in the eastern culture. Nevertheless, the western culture isn't a stranger to temporary structures either. "The first visual records of temporary structures, mainly coins, date from Hellenic times. But there are scarcely any records from then till the Middle Ages, and a coherent history emerges only in Renaissance. At that time such structures became a distinct genre, an art form to be cultivated, throughout Europe. This genre reached its perfection in the Baroque when political conditions most favourable. However, it subsequently declined to the point of dying out in the mid-nineteenth century gave way to an industrial equivalent." [34] Barbara Chabrow explains that temporary structures held a great importance in social occasions in Renaissance and Baroque. Decorative wooden structures coated with stucco or canvas, painted to imitate stone or metal and ornamented with sculptures, paintings, emblems and inscriptions were constructed in public areas for celebrations and mournings; arches and temples along with wine-fountains were built for celebrating victory, marriages and birthdays of important people. (Chabrow) After the Industrial Revolution, temporary structures were favoured by architects and corporations for national and international exhibitions; the most famous being the Chrystal Palace.[35] Eiffel Tower of Paris, built temporarily for the 1889 World's Fair, is still standing in its original location.

Aside from the temporary fairgrounds, 20th century architecture was mainly static notwithstanding the dynamism and speed of the era. After the mid-century, aware of this fact, some architects and artists started offering alternatives. Archigram published Plug-in City, designed by Peter Cook, in 1964. The idea was to supply an urban infrastructure that facilitates an ever-evolving urbscape. Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon, exhibited in 1974, was a project of a worldwide network of cities for nomadic "Homo Ludens". Cedric Price, being "against architecture of permanence and durability" ("slow architecture" in his words), focused on flexible, adaptable and self-destructing designs such as Fun Palace, Lung for Manhattan and London Zoo aviary.[36] With the 21st century, temporaryness became a "trending topic". Along with the pop-up culture emerging in

Britain, temporary features from urban furnitures to bars and restaurants started to literally appear on the steets and squares of London.[37] And not only in England, architects accross the globe are searching for the answer to the same question: How can architecture be short-termed?

VI. RECENT EXAMPLES OF TEMPORARY STRUCTURES

There are a wide range of temporary ideas in architecture. Using degradable or reused materials, portable or deconstructable structures or temporarily transforming obsolete buildings are along the options. Although there is a long way for temporary architecture to become wide-spread, current initiatives are already paving it.

A Christchurch of Shigeru Ban

In 2011, an earthquake caused great damage on Saint John's Church in New Zealand. It was decided to have a transitional church that would serve as an edifice and a hall for public events like concerts, exhibitions etc. until the new permanent cathedral was built. Shigeru Ban's idea for a temporary cathedral was to build it out of cylindrical cardboard parts. (Fig. 3) The 700 seated church was constructed with 86 isolated cardboard tubes that weighted 500 kilograms each, concrete foundation, polycarbon roof, timber and steel; and had an estimated life span of ten years. [38]



Figure 3. Christchurch of Shigeru Ban, <https://www.archdaily.com>

B Belgian Beer Cathedral

Another (con)temporary cathedral, by Brussels based V+ Architects, was built out of Juliper beer crates. (Fig. 4) 33.000 pieces were used in the construction of the cathedral, built as an extension of the Atomium Expo 58 in Brussels. [39]

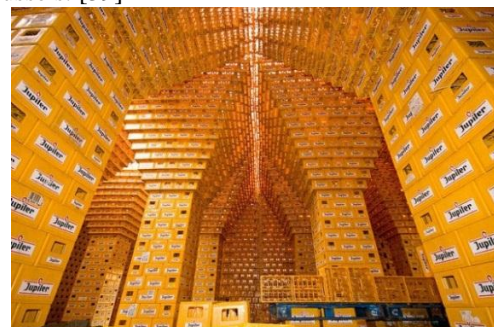


Figure 4. Belgian Beer Cathedral of V+ Architects <https://popupcity.net/>

C Thermo Poly Rock

Concrete was the signature material of modernism for its possibilities in terms of shape and convenience of production; however it is neither reusable nor easily biodegradable. The Welsh company Affresol invented a plastic-based material as an alternative to concrete called Thermo Poly Rock (TPR), which is produced from recycled plastics and minerals. (Fig. 5) They claim that it is possible to build pre-fabricated low carbon houses with this sustainable material and it is stronger than concrete. [40]



Figure 5. Thermo Poly Rock implementation
<https://www.affresol.com/>

D Foldable House

Temporary design can be considered both on a material basis and the aspect of adhesion to the land. Italian architect Renato Vidal's foldable house design is corresponding to the latter. (Fig. 6) The house can be folded, removed and reinstalled and can be modified according to the needs of the user. Vidal claims that installation takes six to seven hours and doesn't need extra foundations. [41]



Figure 6. Foldable house installation <https://www.madihome.com/>

E Snooze Box Temporary Hotel

Snoozebox is a company that provides temporary accommodation solutions. (Fig. 7) Their designs are based on shipping containers and support all the basic hotel services for up to 400 rooms. Installation of a hotel takes three days at most and containers can be deconstructed and reused. [42]



Figure 7. Snooze box site <https://snoozeboxhotel.co.uk/>

F Portable house

Another option is giving obsolete and deserted buildings a new purpose. Bangkok-based design team all(zone), as a solution for the housing crisis, offers a portable house called Light House. (Fig. 8) Bangkok is a metropolis that has survived economical crises and has many incomplete or deserted buildings. All(zone) installed Light House modules within a dormant parking lot.[43]



Figure 8. Portable house implication
<http://www.allzonedesignall.com/>

G Cinerolium

Cinerolium is a project initiated by a group of artists, Assemble, in London, turning an old bus station in Clerkenwell Road into a temporary pop-up cinema. (Fig. 9) The group has transformed the dormant building with donations and found materials.[44]



Figure 9. Cinerolium interior <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/>

VII. CONCLUSION

Permanence is a phenomenon that conducts human activities. Desire for permanence is one of the core motivations of both individuals and societies. Architecture as both a practical and a cultural discipline, has reflections of this aspiration. "Death, destruction, and deterioration represent the negative, anxiety inducing flip-side to a range of enduring and sometimes contradictory assumptions about built architecture's defining attributes: it's material durability, its creative genesis, its productive aesthetic value." 'Buildings must die' sounds provocative yet it is true, and there are ways to implement this knowledge to architectural design. New methods to "create" temporary architecture is emerging and recent examples are paving the way.

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Çisem Soylu was born in İzmir, Turkey in 1990. She studied architecture in Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and is currently a graduate student in İstanbul Technical University, Architectural Design Master Program. During and after graduation, she has worked in several offices as Designer, Technical Drawer, Construction Manager and Project Manager. She is currently working as a Research Assistant in T.C İstanbul Kültür University in İstanbul.