

Temporary zones: alternative spaces or territories of socio-spatial control?

Alessandro Petti

I dedicate this text to the one and a half million Palestinians in Gaza who, after several days in total isolation, without light, without gas or food, demolished the walls that were holding them prisoner and crossed the border at Rafah.

Throughout the 1990s, in several European cities, there was a growing awareness that those areas that hadn't been the target of urban-planning projects – the urban voids, the terrains vagues – weren't dead or merely abandoned places, but areas that could accommodate emerging lifestyles, which were in some way alternative to the ones proposed by the official city. While the formal city has been establishing itself, the attention of researchers has increasingly shifted towards those zones of the city which the projects have yet to reach, towards provisional zones which can be activated or deactivated according to their needs. A type of light architecture that can be implemented without waiting for the long periods of time required by urban plans, and come up with practical solutions to contingent problems. Berlin is perhaps the city that best embodies this dual path: on the one hand, the promise of a new city built through major urban restructuring projects and, on the other, a judicious informal microtransformation that has learnt how to take advantage of the delays, voids and hollows left by official planning. After the fall of the Wall, the city offered a large number of spaces that the formal city had failed to occupy, a diffuse amount of empty spaces waiting to be filled. A number of informal practices have found room in these zones. Instead of considering empty spaces as voids awaiting a better future, they have been designed and used for temporary or complementary activities with regard to the planned and formal city; this is how new collective spaces have emerged: local gardens, low-energy housing. This is the case of the Toddesstreifen the so-called «death strip», which was previously used as an uninhabitable and impassable place of separation and, after the Wall fell, was «occupied by anarchist groups who saw in that liberated territory the most suitable place to put into practice a system of life constructed from below, which was alternative to the capitalist and consumerist one.»¹ Throughout the 1990s, these practices concerning the temporary use of places became widespread throughout Europe and in the United States. The paradigm of the temporary has established itself as the space of the possible, as a space equipped with its own autonomy and legitimacy, and not just as a space that expects to be the focus of a project.

Some years have passed and today these types of spaces and practices have been enshrined in official governance practices. In the best-case scenario, they have become – to use town planners' jargon – «good governance practices», and, indeed, they have lost what is perhaps their most interesting and innovative aspect: the unprogrammability of events and situations, which makes them alternative places to the official city. Like a kind of curse, and despite the best of intentions, these places slowly and inexorably lose their characteristic vitality as soon as they are «discovered and organised» by the *res publica*. Thus, in most cases, the obsession with, and paranoia about safety have transformed the paradigm of temporality into a veritable strategy of control and repression: quite the opposite of what it had been designed for. Temporary spaces, which have an exceptional nature that is alternative to the system of rules implemented in the city, have become the spatial and juridical instrument which is used to control and repress all lifestyles that are deemed «dangerous». In this respect, it is interesting to compare the completely different ways in which a series of temporary occupations can transform a stadium in Warsaw and one in Bari. One of the biggest stadiums in Poland was built in Warsaw in 1955 and, throughout the 1980s, it expanded into a vast «market operating outside the law», offering low-cost products. Over 4,500 businesses set up premises there, providing employment for more than 20,000 people. To date, attempts by the authorities to move the market to another location have been in vain.² This aspect of usage, on the margins of legality, with alternative practices of temporary solutions which subsequently become permanent, are reflected in similar, yet completely opposite, transformations. In Bari, in August 1991, some 20,000 people who had arrived from Albania in makeshift boats were interned in the San Nicola Stadium, which for a few days became a real concentration camp, before they were deported back to Albania. Indeed, this episode paved the way for the institutionalisation of temporary holding centres in Italy, places where individuals who were considered too numerous, dangerous or merely superfluous could be interned. The term used to refer to these holding centres, «centres of temporary permanence», contains a paradox,³ which, in reality, makes explicit the true hidden matrix of socio-spatial governance, under which provisional nature is transformed into a rhetoric justifying the setting up of places that, under normal conditions, would simply be outside the scope of the law. The temporary becomes a permanent exception. These places appear suspended and separate from the city that surrounds them, and the people who are shut away inside them have been dispossessed of their rights that are recognised in the juridical order they are governed by. The temporary holding centres are juridical and spatial measures designed to suspend the rights enshrined in the Italian Constitution (right to reside) and international law (right of asylum and human rights). This means that the paradigm of temporalities is no longer just an informal practice carried out from below, but an instrument used increasingly as a form of police control and governance. It isn't just used as a tool for «managing the space of immigration», but it also erodes the citizens' rights. A clear example of this is the G8 Summit in Genoa, when the old town, a traditional space where, historically, European citizens have seen their rights recognised, was «temporarily» suspended from the spatial and juridical order to which it belonged. Indeed, the security plan, which had been ready since 1999, envisaged a special biopolitical partition consisting of the division of the city into a number of zones inside which the rights recognised by the Italian Constitution were suspended: a) the red zone, subjected to maximum surveillance, which was declared off-limits and where any shows of dissent were prohibited; b) the yellow zone, a type of buffer zone between the red zone and the city, where other activities were prohibited, such as public demonstrations. The zone represents a

condition of temporality which, under emergency measures, could easily become permanent and whose true political and spatial roots are mired in the notion of a camp. Indeed, Agamben defines the camp as «the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule. Here, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of order based on a fictitious situation of danger, acquires a permanent spatial layout which, as such, nevertheless remains constantly on the margins of normal order».4 The Genoa model has been replicated in Prague, Nice, Naples, Gothenburg, Davos and everywhere the control of dissidence and social conflict becomes necessary.

We began by describing temporary zones as liberated spaces and, with Agamben, we have come to define camps as spaces suspended in the contemporary city, where the exception becomes permanent and the human being is reduced to bare life, to being someone stripped of their rights. The birth of the camp can engender a crisis in the very idea of the city as a democratic space. Spaces of suspension are no longer found inside or outside the city: they represent a kind of third space inside which a growing number of individuals are confined. Convened by a greater need for safety, spaces of suspension can be considered as true forms of spatial and social control. They re-emerge whenever a crisis occurs in the relationship between territorial space and the population. It is by no means a chance occurrence that they first appeared in the colonial context, as an instrument for governing the native populations; and afterwards in Europe, at the time of the fall of the spatial-imperial order; and, finally, today, when the link between territory, state and population is once again undergoing a crisis due to the disintegrative action of migrations, economies and global communication. Convened as an exceptional means of preserving the established order, as a necessary measure for tackling extraordinary situations (migrations, wars, terrorism), over time they became permanent forms of government. Following the Arendtian hypothesis according to which the true purpose of the camp is the production of citizens subjugated to power, spaces of suspension may be considered as the medium whereby power «governs» the population.5

Suspended spaces are the territory which the outsider must be expelled from, places shut off and suspended inside the spatial and social order they should be part of: emergency temporary locations, temporary protected areas, zones d'attente, centri di permanenza temporanea, places that Federico Rahola defines lucidly as «definitively temporary zones»: «The impression is that the temporary character evoked by the names of the camps, like the provisional condition (quite a different matter) they materially enforce, creates a short circuit with their indefinite persistence in time and their widespread existence on the deterritorialized, apparently smooth surface of a world that seems to be definitively "one" (but whose unity continues to be challenged by enormous inequality, by flagrant imbalances, by constant exploitation) and fully re-establishes the political character of the border they impose.»6

Temporary zones seem to fluctuate continuously between control and freedom, between dominance and resistance. This is an age-old struggle which is countered, on the one hand, by the attempt to conquer spaces of freedom, and, on the other, by the power that always seeks to invade every space. It is hard to say which came first: the free zones that power seeks to occupy, or the power structures that men try to counteract with forms of resistance. What is certain is that, today, both forms use temporality more as an instrument of control than resistance.

Conclusions

It seems to me that, today, the «discourse on temporality» has taken at least two different paths. On the one hand, there are those who are trying, once again, to invert the relationship between dominance and resistance in favour of the latter. One of the many experiments of this type is the concept of temporary autonomous zones,7 a liberated place where the verticality of power is replaced spontaneously by horizontal networks of invisible, fleeting relationships, autonomous islands that maintain contact between one another, updating the former models adhered to by 18th-century pirates and applying them to a number of experiments of ancient and recent utopian communities. Black Rock City, the venue for the Burning Man Festival, is a temporary autonomous zone that brings together over 45,000 people every year. Built in the desert, the city is completely dismantled when the event is over. All forms of trade and commerce are prohibited here, its inhabitants bring everything they will need with them and they are committed to leaving no trace of their activities, in a gesture that clearly condemns the consumerism of the formal North-American city.8 Furthermore, more opportunistic and less ideological strategies and practices exist. Temporary zones that arise by taking advantage of certain particular conditions, such as the border zones in which the abolished space and time let new landscapes emerge, such as those formed by the lorries temporarily abandoned on the border between Italy and Slovenia9 or the walking restaurants in Hanoi, Vietnam,10 parasitic restaurants in the middle of the street, open 24 hours a day, which occupy space provisionally and create new meeting points. Other pure survival strategies emerge, such as the blue-tent settlements of homeless people in Tokyo,11 the cars where people sleep in Milan,12 the temporary camps set up by people of no fixed abode. Of course, these two paths aren't always so divergent. The people living in Cairo's cemeteries13 basically put into practice solutions mostly imposed by necessity, using their spirit of adaptation, but it is also true that they create a crisis in the rational model of the city and, precisely because of this, propose an implicit political model.

It is perhaps our job to know how to see these places and talk about them. But is this enough? How can we finally construct a post-it city that can escape control and institutionalisation, a city that, in the final analysis, knows how to reinvent itself continuously? Or, on the contrary, if power has already definitively occupied temporary practices, mightn't it be time, for whoever is interested in new spatial and lifestyle forms, to face up to overt power and start working on the concept of permanence, monument and stability?

1. Banausenhausen, Manuela Schininà and Paloma Merchán Taribo, 2007.
2. Jarmark Europa, Matteo Ghidoni and Katarzyna Teodorczuk, 2007.
3. The Italian term, centri di permanenza temporanei ('centres of temporary permanence') contains a paradox or contradiction in terms (translator's note).
4. Agamben, Giorgio, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics), anford University Press, 1998.
5. For a broader treatment of spaces of suspension in the contemporary city, see Petti, Alessandro, Arcipelaghi e enclave. Architettura dell'ordinamento spaziale contemporaneo, Bruno Mondadori, 2007.
6. Rahola, Federico, Zone definitivamente temporanee, I luoghi dell'umanità in eccesso, Ombre Corte, Verona 2003, p. 19.
7. Bey, Hakim, T.A.Z: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Autonomedia, New York 1991.
8. Do and Undo, Ilaria Mazzoleni, Martha Read and Roberto Zancan, Burning Man Festival, Temporary City in the Nevada Desert, 2007.
9. Movimenti di confine, Isabella Sassi, 2006.
10. Streetfood Hanoi, Pola + Alad, 2007.
11. Tokyo Voids, Shiuian-Wen Chu and Ana Dzokic, 1999.
12. Old Wreck City, Cecilia Pirovano and Federica Verona, 2007.
13. Informal Urbanism, Sandi Hilal, Charlie Koolhaas and Alessandro Petti, 2006.



<http://www.ciutatsocasionals.net/englishEXPOCOWEB/textos/textosprincipalcast/petti.htm>