

BOOK REVIEW
A CALL TO EPHEMERAL URBANISM

MAÍRA C. DAITX

Architect. University of São Paulo PhD. Candidate

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From a research project to an exhibition, and then to formalization in the pages of a book. *Ephemeral Urbanism: Does permanence matter?* gathers photographic and quantitative records on the construction of ephemeral landscapes on an urban scale, a detailed immersion in the largest religious event in the world, the Kumbh Mela, and finally, the exhibition of the research results, at the 2016 Venice Biennale. Unlike most of the books on temporary architecture, this work expands the discussion on the temporariness of spatial production to the scale of the city, becoming one of the main bibliographic productions on the subject.

Through examples that were carefully separated into seven “ephemeral landscapes”, illustrative drawings help us to understand construction techniques and the relationship between these spatial manifestations and the fixed environment. In “Religion”, “Celebra-

tion” and “Transaction”, the authors immerse us in the most diverse forms of temporary spatial organization, carried out not by architects, urban designers or planners (although this technical presence is necessary for some of them to happen), but by the union of popular forces, common beliefs and feelings. In “Extraction”, “Disaster” and “Refuge”, we ask ourselves what are the real differences that separate the spaces between a “camp” and a “city”, when, in fact, both end up being practiced in the same way. For that argument we are directed through examples with social constructions and material organizations larger than the urban settlements usually considered permanent. The authors question how temporary settlements can be used politically as a form of control and power in “enemy” territories, permanently changing the environment to which they were inserted.

Regarding the examples brought to us, perhaps the only slip-up performed by the group was to include manifestations like Occupy in Hong Kong and the occupation of Tahir Square, in Egypt, as spaces of refuge, when, in fact, they have organizational structures much more related to military tactics insertion and presence maintenance in conflict zones. We are surprised not to see other huger demonstrations resulting from these same forms of political manifestation, such as Occupy Wall Street and the ones in London, which lasted longer than its respective origination. This point, however, makes us realize that, like the cities and human settlements analysed in the book, the research on the *Ephemeral City* is also open to changes. When one reads this book, it will be impossible not to think which examples from our daily lives could be added to the already abundant list of ephemeral landscapes. (Could we expect a second edition, perhaps?)

Another remarkable point before reading this book is understanding its different construction temporalities. The chapters are not organized according to the time-order of data production. Historically speaking, its content started from incitements of the 2012 research project coordinated by the two authors –Rahul Mehrotra and Felipe Vera– for the study of Kumbh Mela, the largest religious event and human concentration in the world, held in India. Actually, the text about Kumbh Mela present in this book was previously published in another book, called *Kumbh Mela. Mapping the ephemeral Mega City* (MEHROTRA & VERA, 2015), which comprises the central and only chapter that looks closely into a single case: “Kumbh Mela: Extreme case”.

The content on ephemeral landscapes (entitled “Ephemeral Urbanism”), mostly developed by Felipe Vera, comes before the Kumbh Mela’s chapter. However, its examples were collected simultaneously (2013-2016) to the Kumbh Mela’s research project in an almost independent way, through discussions and disciplines taught by the university professors involved in it (including the partners José Mayoral and Jeannette Sordi, among others). This chapter operates as a catalogue of temporary camps, cities, markets, religious and celebratory events and gathers together almost all pictures and drawings included in the book. It works as a visual complement of the theoretical introduction at the beginning of the book –in fact, as we read it, we will miss photos and images to aid understanding all the correlations between all the different landscapes and locations discussed by the authors–. In order to get a sense of its dimension, there are more than 300 different pictures of ephemeral landscapes with a brief description of around 50 of them –a huge work done by the team involved in the project.

From the contents gathered during both these research projects came the exhibition at the XV Venice Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism held in 2016, whose installation sought to reconstruct the techniques and materials (bamboo, ropes and fabrics) of the Kumbh Mela’s festival. Records on the exhibition and an appreciation written by the Chilean architect and biennale’s director, Alejandro Aravena, are organized in the last chapters of the book, its main unpublished content. This part summarizes all of its questionings. It also reveals the meaning and origination of the book cover and its provocative title: *Does permanence matter?* At least during the development of the

exhibition's concept, the examples demonstrated that permanence *didn't matter* so much for certain types of urbanity, once long-term resistant forces of informality and ephemerality had made their ways into the entrails of stable cities and in no-man's land for many generations. This emphasis on the *informal* characteristic of urban space, focused here on temporary settlements, reflects the personality of Rahul Mehrotra's line of research, which is also characteristic of other works, like his article about the *Kinetic City* and his last books about Mumbai and Bombay. Their focus on Kumbh Mela also reflects the importance that India and the Indian-born architect, with a distinctive perception of time-space cycles, had on the command and development of the contents gathered in this book and exhibited in the Biennale exhibition.

The direct association between ephemerality and informality might be one of the main weaknesses of the theoretical discussion initiated in the first part of the introductory chapter – “The Kinetic City as Ephemeral Urbanism”. If one associates directly –that is, uncritically–, formality with permanence and informality with ephemerality, one can easily be misguided into believing that formal forces of urban space production aren't ruled by temporary rhythms, a fact that is far from being true. Actually, formal forces of dominance manage and conduct many examples gathered in the book, such as those from “Extraction”, “Military” or “Refuge” chapters. In these cases, temporality is a mid-term solution for political and territorial conflicts and space is managed by a temporal exceptionality inside the long-term stable logic of urban space reproduction. Additionally, in other cases, from “Celebration” or “Transac-

tion”, some of the ephemeral landscapes might be understood as a product of a macrologic of capital reproduction, in which spatial consumption and once-in-a-lifetime experiences are stimulated and created to expand capital accumulation and to sustain this economic model through time.

This misunderstanding of urban production rhythms and forces might be read as an unfortunate attempt to directly adapt the writings about the *Kinetic City*, a concept developed by Mehrotra in his 2008's article (which doesn't mention the word *ephemeral* even once), to the idea of an *Ephemeral Urbanism* – already presented in *Ephemeral Urbanism: Cities in Constant Flux* (2016), a book with basically the same content of *Does permanence matter?* Therefore, despite that some informal and temporary settlements (the ones studied by Mehrotra in his countless works) might be considered ephemeral urbanism (or a way of creating urban space based on its ephemerality), such as informal markets, independent religious manifestations, nomadic camps, etc., others are far from touching temporariness, like informal housing settlements that commonly (and historically) become permanent (i.e. Brazilian favelas, Indian slums, shanty towns, among others). In short, samples from the kinetic city might be part of an ephemeral urbanism, but not all forms of ephemeral urbanism are part of the kinetic city.

As we continue reading, it is clear how the introduction was composed of multiple writing temporalities. The topics “Ephemeral Urbanism” and “Negotiating the Ephemeral: Between Absolutism and Coexistence” comprise most of the critical content of the book. Here, the authors detail the examples illustrated in

the following chapters, but also quote other events and situations that are missing from the book. This leads us to believe that these topics were developed after the publication of the texts on Kumbh Mela and the ephemeral landscapes. Besides, it is also here where authors like Koolhaas, Agamben, Han, Arendt and Agier are used to discuss the social and political implications on each kind of ephemeral landscape. Furthermore, wider arguments on heritage and memory, power and control, *nomos* and *polis* are wisely introduced to encourage experts on these subjects to consider multiple ephemeral spatialities when debating urban space production.

Finally, both the “Preface” and the “Afterword”, respectively written by Richard Sennett and Ricky Burdett, comprise the last cycle of writings used in the construction of the book. Sennett’s preface refers directly to the [research] project, not the book itself, as a way of reinforcing the questions its theme brings up, instead of the answers it tries to give. His ideas on the Open City and its derivations might result of his understanding of *Ephemeral Urbanism* as a work in progress instead of as a final production. Burdett’s afterword does a good job in contextualizing the book, the research projects and the Biennale exhibition as important reflections on the contemporary city through the lens of ephemerality, connecting these productions to the present spatial urban condition of increased fragmentation and inequality and reduced environmental responsiveness. Through his eyes, Mehrotra and Vera’s works are a reflection of their own contemporaneities, as well as the questions they raise.

This non-linear construction enables us to read the book in multiple directions, in such a way that each chapter stands by itself.

Mehrotra and Vera’s book invites us to think about why we consider some spaces ephemeral and others as permanent, going beyond time compositions. Their insight makes us realize that, from a historical point of view, every city could be considered ephemeral when one analyzes it through time cycles that go beyond the duration of human life. However, we should not see this fleeting characteristic, intrinsic to any form of spatial manifestation, either as a fatality or as a product of nihilism. In contrast, it is an opportunity for learning from the concrete adaptive forms that are already capable of giving us a version of the urban space that is not based only on aspects of stability and closeness.

Thereby, one of the most interesting examples of the book might be the Ise Grand temple in Japan. In the introduction, the authors show how we can sustain history and culture for centuries through teachings and moments of renovation and reconstruction. On my view, the understanding of heritage (and thus, permanence) through an immaterial basis, more open and adaptable to the conditions of the present, is another important insight of the book. According to the authors, history is preserved by an eternal present built by practice, and not by the materiality of the same built space, which reproduces unreal scenarios for touristic and economic reasons.

The most interesting examples found in the book are those originated in Eastern countries and cultures –the same region and place of birth of Mehrotra. The concepts of *anicca* or *anitya* (impermanence) play a fundamental role in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, three different schools that share the same principle: the impermanent condition of the world, where

nothing lasts and everything is in a constant state of change. These ancient philosophies preach for the apprehension of time, not understood as a line towards an always progressive future, but as composed of cycles, in which ends are as important as the act of creation and its development –an eternal rebirth. This is the main question that the authors ask their readers: How can we incorporate aspects of this

understanding of the world into our dominant way of making cities? How can we make impermanence matter as much as permanence did for all our earlier generations? In this regard, our present hyper-concentrated, accelerated urban conditions could turn our concepts of urban thinking and creation upside down, as well as this book, intended to fracture the idea of cities as eternal and immutable spaces.

RAHUL MEHROTRA & FELIPE VERA:
Ephemeral urbanism. Does permanence matter?
LISt Lab. European Union, 2018 (original edition of April 2017), 409 pages.

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