Northumbria Research Link

The Mediapolis Q&A: Mara Ferreri's *The Permanence of Temporary Urbanism* and Ella Harris's *Rebranding Precarity*

by Mara Ferreri and Ella Harris

Mara Ferreri and Ella Harris discuss their books *The Permanence of Temporary Urbanism: Normalising Precarity in Austerity London* and *Rebranding Precarity: Pop-Up Culture as the Seductive New Normal*.

Mara Ferreri: Our two books — [*Rebranding Precarity*](#) and [*The Permanence of Temporary Urbanism*](#) — have come out a few months from each other, and both are about the phenomenon of temporary and pop-up spaces and practices in London after the 2008 financial crisis and the introduction of austerity measures. We share a long-term engagement with questions of temporariness and urban precarity, and I feel that our books approach similar themes and practices in somewhat different ways. I'd like to start with a question of terminology.

In your book and in [previous work,](#) you have chosen to explore the "pop-up city," its cultures and spatialities. In my work, I juggled different terms for a long time before finally settling on "temporary urbanism" as an umbrella term able to move beyond specific projects, but I understand that we also have slightly different aims in our research as well as in the disciplines of reference. Do you find that the focus on pop-up (as opposed to other, cognate terms such as temporary, meanwhile, provisional, and short-term) has enabled you to deepen your contribution to a specifically termed phenomenon, or did you find that it has presented some limitations?

Ella Harris: I found a similar challenge in deciding what term to move forward with in my research. There are so many different terms in use, and often they seem to be deployed fairly arbitrarily by temporary space practitioners so it's hard to make any clear-cut definitions. I ran with "pop-up" because I think it captured the affective nature of temporary use that I was trying to focus on — its glamorisation. Temporary use, temporary urbanism, and meanwhile use don't have those connotations of style and desirability that I was trying to pinpoint. Equally, I think pop-up captures the glibness of the logics I was describing. An idea I've been thinking about since publishing the book is that it's not just places that *pop up.* Logics too are often generated and deployed very quickly to serve particular purposes and the term pop-up captures the potential insincerity of these sort of fast-food logics. We've seen this during Covid where logics like "bubble" and "household" have been very quickly generated to serve a purpose but because of the speed of this generation and their presumed temporariness they don't necessarily sit very easily with the more durational logics we live by.

Where *Rebranding Precarity* focuses on imaginaries and logics, your book is very attentive to the practicalities of access to and retention of space in the city — looking closely at how these micro battles over the right to the city play out between creative practitioners, policy makers, local councils, space agencies, etc. I was wondering about how negotiating these battles impacts on the identities of temporary space users. I found it really interesting reading

your accounts of how space users feel conflicted between the ideals they want to live up to and the discourse they have to parrot to access space and would love to hear more about this. Specifically, what kind of subjects do you think are produced as temporary space users undergo these micro battles for space and negotiate this tension between ideals and pragmatism? Who is the ideal temporary space user as imagined in dominant discourse around temporary spaces and how far are actual people able to shift and contest this?

MF: The production of specific subjectivities has always been a key concern in my research. In the book, I discuss temporary urbanism not only as a practice, but as introducing a more profound transformation in subjectivities, imaginaries and horizons for action. I think that the pop-up subjects imagined by the logics of neoliberal and austerity urbanism present many overlaps with the normative templates of on-demand workers in the networked and gig economy (or "gigification" of many economic activities through zero hour and flexible contracts) and of entrepreneurial, nomadic and flexible city dwellers, uprooted and uprootable as needed/desired. To answer your question, the tension is, to me, less about ideals and pragmatism on an individual level and more about the extent to which temporary space practitioners and users can resist such mechanisms of subjectivation by counterposing other values, such as commitment to a neighbourhood over time, as in Studio at the Elephant, or commitment to maintaining a network of practitioners, as in]Performance Space[. There is a dimension of radical emplacement there which is both materially and ideologically hard to pursue without engaging in more antagonistic politics.

EH: In thinking about our books together I was interested in the relationship between temporary use and entrepreneurialism. Firstly, I'd like to hear your ideas on how temporary use might have changed meanings of work. Secondly, I'm curious about the relationship between the temporary space users you spoke to who were doing community orientated projects and those who were doing something more straightforwardly entrepreneurial. Was there any conflict or tension between users with these different agendas?

MF: I actually think that it is the change in cultures and meanings of work that has paved the way for the contemporary incarnation of temporary use! The values of entrepreneurialism are clearly key to temporary urban practices, and this is something that your case studies such as Secret Cinema and supper clubs show too. In terms of difference, in my research on artistic and cultural projects, I often found that the boundary between entrepreneurial and community-oriented projects is not so clearly delineated. This has to do with degrees of professionalisation of practitioners, and can shift over time as people and projects gain recognition or become more institutionalised. In the UK after 2008, the lines were further blurred with the establishment of policies and cultures of "social entrepreneurship" and "community interest companies," rebranded under the Big Society's promotion of voluntarism and civic enterprise. The very language we use to describe these different and potentially alternative agendas needs to be rethought, I think.

EH: I really liked the phrase "alterity trope" in your book, which you use to describe the assumption in temporary use that decay breeds creativity and that interstices are inherently subversive. This seems very important to how temporary use works. It makes me think of Sarah Banet-Weiser's work — which I wonder if you know? For example, she talks about how the car company Chrysler ran adverts after 2008 that used the dereliction of Detroit as a branding trope. I'd like to hear your thoughts on where this alterity trope leaves people who are trying to do genuinely subversive things with temporary spaces. Are new tropes and

discourses needed to enable this? Are they being produced? And what do/should they look like?

MF: This is an excellent set of questions! I am not familiar with Banet-Weiser's work, but my intuition would be to move the discussion to the performativity of branding, which reproduces certain narratives but also presents the potential for something new to occur — for a transformation in message, a 'subvertising' to use a dated term. Squatting and other more antagonistic urban and housing practices are constantly testing the boundaries of the case for reclaiming vacancy through use. Subversion is defined by the tensions it creates with an established order: in my book I try to show how that tension has been performatively renegotiated, discursively and in practice, in what I term "the entangled field of temporary use." The political challenge there, for me, is to harness the seductive powers of temporariness as alterity — to ask harder questions about private property, land ownership, displacement, dispossession and who takes key decision about urban futures. And often that seduction is more affective and embodied.

What I really enjoyed in your book is your engagement with the experience of the pop-up, and the seriousness with which you tackle the atmospheric and affective dimensions of the phenomenon. The chapters on immersion, secrecy and surprise as key components of the culture of pop-up are fundamental to grasping the aesthetics of this logic and its impact on those who participate in its audiencing and performative reproduction. On this, the question which I have asked in my own ethnographic research into the experiential dimension of pop-ups and other temporary spaces, is how generalisable are specific subject positions and experiences of the urban? This is the kind of question I have often been asked by political and social geographers over the very narrow, Western and relatively privileged use of "precarity" to talk about property guardianship, for instance, or the insecurity of artists' live-work spaces compared to the extreme precariousness of homeless shelters and bed and breakfasts.

EH: When I was writing *Rebranding Precarity* I tried to make it really clear that this is a book about London and that the atmospheres and logics produced by pop-up culture in London are quite specific to the circumstances in that city at the time I'm writing about in the book. I think that all the logics described in the book operate in other settings, but the specific ways they operate and are felt will be different across different cities and countries, because they're so tied up with experiences of place, place-based identities, and the economic conditions and social histories specific to a given area.

In relation to precarity, I agree that it's dangerous to conflate experiences, and certainly the case studies in *Rebranding Precarity* show people in very different situations. However, I think we can use other terms to foreground these different levels of insecurity and inequality while using the term precarity to foreground something that is shared, even if it has very different stakes in different settings, and use that commonality to reinforce solidarity.

MF: One of the key arguments in your book is that pop-ups are a form of "compensatory culture" and a distinctive one at that for "having compensatory functions but being branded as aspirational," like "austerity chic." I am really intrigued by this insight and I would like to hear more about the distinction between those notions, but also, perhaps in a more materialist and political vein, hear more about the branding aspect of it. Who/where/how is precarity being rebranded? And who is the audience of that rebranding? I am also wondering about the affects of the paradox of secrecy, as you say, in this rebranding — manufacturing a sense of agency while in fact falling into the marketing ploy.

EH: Yes, compensatory cultures are key to how I understand pop-ups and related phenomena. In fact, I think a lot of phenomena can be understood as compensatory cultures — ways of living that are second best or last resort set-ups but that we've come to think of as desirable and even aspirational. I think this process of rebranding is essentially done for everyone and by everyone who partakes in a compensatory culture, because it relates to a structure of feeling. The rebranding takes place when enough people decide to invest positive emotions and affects in things that are actually a deterioration, in order to generate a collective atmosphere of excitement out of what could otherwise be felt as precarity or decline. There's a lot of self-branding within this. It's in people's interest to feel like they're making active choices and living a life they want to live, so phenomena like pop-ups allow people to experience this agency and creativity, even if life choices are in many senses actually waning. This was something I tried to make clear in the book: how complicit we all are in producing and reproducing logics that Lauren Berlant would say are a form of "cruel optimism," that give us hope but ultimately hinder what we're trying to achieve — in this context, alleviating precarity.[1]

It's interesting how you relate secrecy to agency. I hadn't thought of that! But you're right that the idea of something being secret makes you feel like you're in the know, like you're on to something, and that's definitely part of the rebranding that pop-ups enact — generating feelings of agency in a time when there are fewer options available.

MF: This rebranding is tightly connected to the visible manifestation of urban crises. You write "urban crisis has particular spatiotemporal characteristics, defined by uncertainty, instability, fractures and gaps." My question, which I also tried to grapple with in other work,[2] is to what extent the most visible spatiotemporal evidence — vacant space — is *necessarily* a symptom of urban crisis, or whether we should reject simple homologies between vacancy and crises and reflect on how urban vacancy has been culturally produced as a problem to be solved with the purpose of reaffirming productivity, growth and entrepreneurial uses as normative. I'd like to hear your thoughts on this.

EH: Yes, I agree with this. Obviously, a rise in vacant space does follow from economic crisis, often. But vacant space is also used as a kind of straw man problem that can disguise more structural and ideological issues that aren't being solved, like the conditions that led to the financial crash in the first place. What's more, as we've both seen, the "solutions" to vacant spaces can actually cement those structural and ideological issues by normalising the temporariness and provisionality of jobs, creative spaces and welfare provision.

I think this also raises an interesting question of how many other ideological issues are purportedly "solved" through space, like moving people to council housing in other cities to "solve" the lack of provision in London.

MF: This point on "solutions" for me resonates with another important question that I didn't engage with so much: the centrality of sharing, which you discuss in the case of supper clubs, but also in its intertwining with other forms of sharing (scarce housing and other spaces) and the wider context of the gig economy. In the last eighteen months, most spontaneous and voluntary sharing has been suspended due to Covid-19 restrictions, while sharing out of necessity and overcrowding has come to the fore, again and again, as a symptom of the unsustainable and unhealthy living conditions caused by rising housing prices, intermittent employment and speculation. Yet sharing has also been a response to this pandemic: do you think that some of the spaces and practices you encountered have been able to shift to a more

solidarity-based form of organising, or have they frozen in the passage? Has the performance of authentic encounters through sharing been superseded by authentic sharing?

EH: I'm not sure about the specific projects I looked at in the book as I haven't been able to follow up with them, but anecdotally I do think a lot of small businesses have been able to shift their ways of working during the pandemic to help in their local communities, while also maintaining a presence and support base when not able to open their premises (for example, running delivery services). And I think a more authentic model of sharing has emerged during the pandemic, as evidenced by mutual aid groups which obviously have an anarchist lineage. At the same time, though, I worry about the "bubble/household" mentality encouraged in lockdown, and how far this will bolster a paranoid neoliberal model of care where we look out first and foremost for those in our immediate family, at the expense of a broader model of caring communities.

MF: I think that the possibilities of other models of caring communities in cities is a key political challenge right now. Going back to the question of subjectivity raised earlier, I do wonder about how the political scenario and responses have changed. Reading about the "stunted" and "shrinking" lifeworlds of younger and not -so-young adults in post-2008 Western cities, the centrality of the (im)possibility of housing oneself and one's loved ones is undeniable. The last chapter on "the meantime" and the PLACE/Ladywell case study is particularly depressing, and I think you really bring to the fore the mundane effects of the micro-tenant and non-attachment ideologies — the "morals of the meantime" — behind pop-up (social) housing. While you analyse compensatory survival tactics to make those spaces more homely, did you find any resistance?

EH: Well, I think that compensatory survival tactics, at least in the specific case of pop-up social housing, are a form of resistance, because they are a way that people in emergency accommodation assert their right to make home. Maybe all compensatory cultures have a resistive element in that sense — in keeping spirits up in difficult conditions, even if they can also serve to normalise and glamorise those conditions. I suppose that's the paradox of cruel optimism: compensatory practices are a way of resisting defeat but they ultimately undermine the futures we want to create for ourselves if they're not paired with structural changes.

We did also find some more explicit resistance. I talk in the book about one woman who had defiantly nailed a fireplace into the wall of her pop-up temporary accommodation. Compared to the other compensatory home making practices this was very much a "f**k you , I won't shrink myself to live within your rules." But even these defiant acts were more effective in retaining a sense of self than in actually changing material housing conditions.

I hoped that the pandemic might change the landscape of housing quite significantly. We've had the "everyone in" policy and the eviction ban which have both shown what can be achieved when there's political will. And alongside those policies, the stay-at-home mandate put a spotlight on how unequal people's home environments are, showing the difference between young people trying to spend all their work and leisure time in a flat-share with no garden, working on their beds and negotiating other people's routines, and then celebrities, politicians and just generally better off people having a nice time hanging out in their hot tubs, trying new baking techniques, and finally making use of their usually neglected studies. Unfortunately, housing policy seems to be picking up where it left off, but I think we're still to see the impacts of a generation that might have been radicalised when it comes to housing politics.

On this topic, while my book looks at housing and home within its exploration of pop-up logics this isn't something that comes up in yours, although I know you've researched housing and home extensively too. I'd be interested to hear why you kept these ideas fairly separate and what connections you would make were you to bring them together? Would these be similar or different to the connections I made in *Rebranding Precarity?*

MF: I can imagine how bizarre the absence of housing must look. While writing the book, I did wonder whether to include a chapter on housing, as indeed I had planned in the original proposal. I also think that the precarisation of housing and dwelling in the broadest sense is inextricably linked to the surge and diffusion of temporary urban ideas and practices. I have explored similar themes to those raised in relation to property guardianship, short-term lettings and squatting, and I have increasingly become drawn to housing issues and politics as an activist, researcher and founding editor of the *Radical Housing Journal*. But in the end, the absence of housing from this book was a deliberate decision to maintain a narrower focus, partly because my theoretical and methodological approach to housing issues has somewhat shifted by embracing questions of [commons and commoning](#), and the wider politics of [solidarity, direct action and collective models of decommodification, such as housing co-operatives](#). These lines of investigation, although related to changes that occurred after and due to the 2008 financial crisis, go fundamentally beyond this specific period, and also beyond London, looking at post-recession housing and cooperative movements in Catalonia, Spain, and beyond.

EH: We both situate our books in post-2008 London. While we acknowledge the importance of the lineage of temporary spaces I think both books identify a rupture in imaginaries that's specifically located in relation to this economic crash. I'm curious about how far the idea of being 'post' crisis and 'pre' renewal is integral to how temporary use works and what this means about its long-term presence in cities? Is temporary use growing out of this post/pre temporality and merging with more durational temporary activities as in the sharing and gig economy, or does its persistence in cities suggest we're still in (or back in) a post-crisis world?

Rebranding Precarity talks about pop-up culture as a "new normal," and obviously there's been a lot of talk following Covid-19 about what the "new normal" that follows this crisis will look like. I wonder what you think about the role of temporary space in this new, new normal? And also what lessons we can take forward from our books about the production of a (now old!) new normal in thinking about how certain elements of the Covid crisis might be normalised and glamorised rather than alleviated?

MF: These are all excellent questions that go to the core of how we conceptualise 'crises' and crisis responses. I similarly argue that temporary urbanism emerges from the reconfiguration of a specific crisis moment into the glamorisation of an expanded and recurrent urban and social crisis landscape. And perhaps the relevance here is not temporary uses per se, but rather the ways in which a crisis — any crisis — is used to introduce or entrench logics of precarisation, as a material and symbolic precondition for contemporary dispossession.

EH: Yes, I think we can see pop-up culture as one iteration of a broader mechanism of temporary place making as crisis response — a mechanism that has a lineage and a future. Temporary and provisional place making are often deployed in various crisis scenarios. I think our books are beneficial for looking at the particular ways this mechanism has been

mobilised and made meaningful in the past decade or so in London. And from there we can think about how pop-up has changed that mechanism, and how it might evolve further from there, as it's taken forward into future crisis scenarios, like the Covid-19 pandemic.

MF: While the manuscript was submitted in the very early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, I do wonder to what extent many of the urban crisis policy responses we have witnessed since bear similarities in terms of their power to first introduce provisional, "emergency" and makeshift transformations, and then formalise them as a retrenchment of neoliberal logics.

Bringing it back to placemaking and the reproduction of cities, spaces become sites of policy intervention during crises: the remaking of space provides the hope of a spatial solution to all sorts of problems. These temporary changes can then influence blueprints for long-term urban transformations, and 'pop-up' provisional logics are firmly at home within rapid mobilisations and emergency responses in a given territory. With Covid, pop-up food shops, pop-up hospitals, and temporary bike lanes are already becoming experiments in urban policy. The question, for me, is how much these responses and their wider acceptance are steeped in previous responses and imaginaries. My point about "the alterity trope" is that past histories and imaginaries play an important role in the process of normalising practices that, as you say, are compensatory. The mutation of these crises responses then become an important way into politicising current conditions, and here the question is whether more politicised and solidarity based responses to Covid-19 — as well as the major mobilisations that have taken place during the last year, particularly the powerful Black Lives Matter movements, will shift the grounds of the "new normal" to come.

EH: The title of my book refers to pop-up's role in shaping the "new normal" after the 2008 crash. And I definitely agree that temporary and provisional place making strategies deployed during Covid will become part of the "new new normal" we're emerging into now. For example, changes in where we work seem likely to stay. I think looking back at pop-up, and thinking about how temporary solutions in a crisis situation became normal and even desirable ways of creating cities, is an important reminder for how we study this current era. We need to look at the emergency mechanisms being deployed during Covid and trace which of these are becoming lasting ways of organising cities and collective life more generally, and of course think about what the stakes of this could be. Equally, we need to think about how radical and solidarity based responses to a crisis can be engulfed with neoliberal strategies for getting back to business as normal, something we both identify in the post 2008 context, and which undoubtedly will be the case in the "new new normal" too.