

Impact of temporary conversion on the community: Categorisation and current case studies from Europe

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Abstract: The subject of the use of the existing is nowadays a necessary part of thinking about architecture in the context of sustainability and ecology. What we have is often perceived as a limitation to be adapted to—this article tries to counterpose this phenomenon and thus to see it as a potential. The article works with the notion of architectural conversion to look at the possibilities of reusing the unused, focusing on the potential of the in-between time, i.e. the phase between the unused space and its new function. It is this in-between time that offers the space to temporarily grasp the problem of empty spaces. This research explores the concept of a temporary change in the function of a space that is planned and will not be repeated. Temporary conversions emerge as a likely potential strategy for revitalising vacant spaces and promoting community engagement. The article analyses case studies of temporary conversions from Europe to understand their impact on local communities. Key findings include the potential of temporary conversions to: stimulate the community to actively engage and encourage community participation in shaping their neighbourhood, recycle used elements or materials from a temporary conversion for another purpose, add underused sites to the mental map of residents, test new concepts before making permanent changes, bring diversified forms of artistic and cultural activities to the environment, and contribute to a more vibrant and inclusive urban environment. The article also highlights the importance of considering the life cycle of temporary interventions, which is understandably mostly shorter than the life cycle of standard long-term interventions, and their potential for long-term benefits. Such conversions can continue after their end and survive their temporary existence, through positive and beneficial impact for the community.

Keywords: architecture, conversion, temporary, community, Europe

INTRODUCTION

"Houses are demolished not because they have become obsolete, because they do not function well, because they symbolise fallen regimes. These are all proxy arguments. Their problem is that they are a nuisance. New intentions promising a fabulous vision superimposed on the motive of profit. One of the many that, in sum, have led us to a global megaproblem." (Paňák, 2021) Today's society has an extensive building stock, one part of which consists of actively operating buildings and the other part of empty, unused ones. These are buildings of different nature, size, condition, importance, and typology, which are most often empty due to the loss of the original function, the loss of the need for such a large capacity of the function that was the purpose of the building in a given area or due to the lack of flexibility in adapting to new requirements. The demolition of existing buildings to accommodate new projects remains a common practice in Slovakia as summarised by the architect Pavol Paňák. Those that are not destroyed are often awaiting their renewal. Between the stage when buildings are empty and the stage when they undergo renovation, time passes during which they are difficult to integrate into life, and it is not exceptional for abandoned buildings to fall

into disrepair. The same phenomenon can be seen in the case of public spaces that have lost or never had a defined function and are waiting for its (re)definition. In our conditions, it is customary that public spaces are no-man's spaces, which means that their activation is all the more difficult.

The in-between stage, when a space is not fulfilling its original function and is waiting for a new purpose and/or use, in the life cycle of buildings and spaces may not be a limitation but on the contrary it can be a potential that can bring new attractors to the environment and support the local community. The interconnectedness of temporary conversions to the community can be observed at several levels such as getting input from the community before implementation, involving the community in the design process, or the community's interest in new impulses in their neighbourhood after they have been created. The reuse of existing buildings and spaces can also be looked at in terms of environmental sustainability and circular economy which attempts to avoid the consumption of new and use existing. This principle helps to mitigate the ecological footprint created by demolition and new construction, but it also has a direct impact on the activation of local collectives and on local employment precisely by

offering such opportunities (Sidorová, 2020). Temporary conversions can have an impact on the community even after their duration is over. They can become a driver that leads to the creation of other projects in the locality, they can be recycled and reused, or they can validate the needs and demands of the community.

The issue of temporality, adaptation and reuse is crucial nowadays, and not only for the architect. There is a general view that the cultural sector has begun a transformation from a static to a dynamic state, and the themes of adaptation, temporariness and ephemerality are currently dominant in all areas of architecture, where they go hand in hand with the themes of sustainability and inclusion. Çisem Soyly, a research assistant at Istanbul University working on temporary architecture, talks about the origins of this transformation in the mid-20th century, when architects and artists began to realise the static nature of architecture, despite the dynamic and fast-paced nature of the era. It was at this time that architectural studios and artists began to offer the first alternatives. (Soyly, 2019) Despite the fact that this phenomenon has been going on for some time, the need to consider the principles of reuse continues to grow stronger with each new building and each new dilapidated building that is added.

The paper categorises conversions based on duration and period of repetition. The categorisation explains what the research considers as temporary conversions and what characteristics they have. By examining case studies, it is shown that one of the most frequent temporary functions of objects and spaces in Europe is art since, as a multidisciplinary phenomenon, it can influence individuals and society as a whole. At the local level, it can act as a catalyst for change in cognitive processes, social interactions, and collective perceptions of reality. By bringing new perspectives and stimulating reflection, the arts can make an important contribution to the development of dynamic and inclusive communities. The second type of temporary space purpose that is frequent in Europe is community-social functions that encourage community participatory design, in most cases aimed precisely at the future permanent 'programme' of the space in which it takes place. The bureaucratic and organisational complexity of temporary architectural projects often becomes their driving force, and often commerciality wins out over communality. This paper traces the impact of temporary changes in the function of spaces, objects, or parts of them, and uses a comparison of case studies to evaluate the different forms and degrees of the intervention's impact on the community after the temporary conversion has ceased. The research works with case studies in a European context to trace the impact of temporary architecture on the local community.

CATEGORISATION

Speaking about architectural change of use, it is important to explain the concept of conversion, which together with restitution, anastylosis, restoration, reconstruction, adaptation, and modernisation is a way of approaching the restoration of buildings and spaces (Gregor, 2008). As Peter Lovich mentions in his dissertation, in English-speaking countries the term "adaptive reuse" is widespread for conversion, which is generally defined as the "*adaptation of a building to a new purpose*." (Lovich, 2009) Conversion is referred to abroad as adaptive reuse. In the Slovak environment, based on Slovak sources such as Gregor or Lovich mentioned in this article, the term conversion is established. Therefore, in this paper, we use the terms conversion and adaptive reuse as synonyms. The term conversion is difficult to understand in terms of exactness since it is not precisely defined. In a broader context, conversion can be understood as: "the act or process of changing an object from one form, use, or system to another." (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2024)

One of the definitions of architecture conversion is by Hana Zemánková which characterises conversion as "the set of processes by which, after the demise of the original purpose of a building or set of buildings, their spatial structures are preserved and adapted for new uses in an appropriate manner." (Zemánková, 2003) Charles Moore was one of the first to define conversion in his article "The Search for a New Urban Form" as the process by which an existing building or space is adapted to a new purpose. In this research, we therefore understand conversion as a change in the functional content of a space, object, or part of it. The literature also does not provide a strict boundary to understand what is and what is not an architectural conversion. Due to the ambiguous definition of conversions, it is currently difficult to grasp certain types of approaches to conversions terminologically and to name them. Therefore, for the purpose of our paper, we categorise conversions as follows:

1. By the expected duration of the newly proposed feature:

- Temporary conversions (planned for a fixed period),
- Permanent conversions (planned for an indefinite period).

2. By repetition frequency:

- One-off conversions,
- Repeated conversion (multiple times),
- Periodically repeated conversions.

Temporary one-off conversions

Based on the previous categorisation of conversions, we next describe a combination of two approaches. By combining them we gained a specific type of conversion we discuss below. The paper considers as temporary conversions those conversions that are intended for a certain operational period already at their inception. A specific predetermined duration is planned or only an assumed duration of conversions is foreseen for functions where a specific duration cannot be determined. As Simona Kolimárová explains, temporary buildings usually have the character of buildings for crisis management or buildings for temporary events such as festivals. (Kolimárová, 2020) For this thesis, it is the temporary conversions and their temporary functions that are of interest to us. The period to which the conversion refers can vary in duration from a happening of a few minutes to an installation of several months.

As one-time conversions, we understand those conversions that were created for a purpose, and after it was fulfilled, they were terminated and physically removed from the place where they were located and never repeated in the same form and the same place. The combination of temporariness and disposability creates a distinct group of conversions represented in large numbers, especially abroad. They represent the entry of an activity, process, or element into an existing space. Since it is a temporary programme—planned for a specific period of time, the conversion is also temporary. Temporality allows for the penetration of disciplines, the infiltration of ideas, and the experimental testing of new concepts (Kolimárová, 2020). Conversions realised for one-time use are interdisciplinary works that are often at the interface of architecture and art in their ephemerality. It is exactly the conversions that are characterised by their temporality and non-repeatability that are the target group of the case studies in this research.

CASE STUDIES

The article traces contemporary case studies of temporary conversions and their impact on the local community. The basic definition of a community is that it is "a group of people who live in a particular area, country, or share common interests and goals." (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2024) In this article, we focus on the community that falls within the immediate vicinity of the temporary conversion site and thus can be directly affected by the temporary conversion. These are communities within a single neighbourhood or city. Specific impacts and community descriptions are defined for the case studies.

The word 'contemporary' in this research refers to the time period of the 21st century that we are interested in. In this paper, we have narrowed our focus to case studies that have been conducted over the last 15 years. There are many contemporary implementations of temporary conversions for art purposes in Europe, however the group that meets all the intended criteria of this research is more marginal. In selecting the case studies, the research focuses on the implementation of conversions that meet the conditions of categorisation in terms of duration as temporary conversions, in terms of repetition as conversions realised just once, and at the same time those, for which it is possible to track their impacts on the local community after the end of their duration.

However, it should be mentioned that several unused reference examples from Europe of a similar nature are included in the publication *Meanwhile City, How Temporary Interventions Create Welcoming Places with a Strong Identity* (Marko and Lisa, 2022) and some similar case studies from the Slovak context in the publication *Nepredat! Zveľadiť!* (Sidorová, 2020). The paper works with three selected case studies from Europe, namely one example from Italy, one from England, and one from Slovakia to track the impact on the local community after the duration of the temporary conversion.

The Theatre of the useFULL, Rural Studio, 15th Biennale di Architettura, Venice (IT), 2016

The project was created on the occasion of the fifteenth Venice Architecture Biennale (2016) and presents the temporary conversion of a part of the Corderie dell'Arsenale, which originally served as a hall for the production of ship ropes and cables, into a temporary theatre. The concept, which puts design and the local community at its centre, was created by Rural Studio (Auburn). The studio has a long-standing commitment to participatory design and involving the community in both the design considerations and the design process. The temporary theatre was designed using suspended spring mattresses and insulation panels, cabinets that create a labyrinth leading into the theatre in which benches are made of stacked insulation panels. (Fig. 1) The choice of materials or elements from which the theatre was composed was not random but based on the list of needs of two local initiatives with which the studio has established partnership.

This is a local initiative of the Assemblée Sociale per la Casa (ASC) and the Cooperativa Caracol project. The former, a local initiative, rehabilitates abandoned social housing and provides shelter for homeless people. This initiative operates at a local level (in Venice) and supports marginalised groups of the local community, especially homeless people. The second, Cooperativa Caracol is a supportive research group. Thanks to the collaboration with these initiatives, the project met with a large response of the local homeless community, precisely thanks to the list of elements they have prepared. From the list, the authors selected only the elements necessary for the installation as they describe in the in-

terview: "The list we received was much longer, so we chose to include in our space only those materials needed to create it. For example, we decided to use spring-coil beds in their original packaging, considering them as see-through panels offering a glimpse of the inside from the hallway." (Zorretto, 2016)

The Theatre of the useFULL is a concept expressing the process of transformation. From the beginning of the concept's formation, it has considered collaborating with the local community, making the installation largely waste-free. After the 15th Biennale, materials and furniture were donated to the aforementioned community-based initiatives and re-used. Thus, this case study presents a temporary conversion that, at its inception, contemplates the consequences of its existence and presents a responsible approach to the awareness of its temporariness and the certainty of its demise, to which it responds in terms of sustainability and, at the same time, in terms of support for the local community.



Fig. 1. The Theatre of the useFULL, Rural Studio, 15. Biennale di Architettura, Venice (IT), 2016. (Photo: Timothy Hursley, source: Zorretto, 2016)

Folly for Flyover, Assemble Studio, Create festival, London (UK), 2016

The temporary structure is based on the idea of a stubborn homeowner who refused to move to allow the construction of a motorway. The temporary structure that represents his house is designed so that the peak of the gabled roof is wedged between the east and west lanes of the motorway. The Folly project, born out of the Create London initiative as part of the Create festival, has transformed this space into a vibrant place for arts and culture. Curated by the Assemble team and in collaboration with the Barbican Centre, a diverse range of events have taken place here, from classic animated films to experimental audio-visual works. During the evenings, the stairs of the building were transformed into an impromptu cinema, where the audience watched open-air screenings of films. The function of the temporary building was cultural and communal, focusing mainly on performative forms and screenings.

The building was designed as a giant construction kit that allowed volunteers with any level of skill or commitment to participate in its construction which took less than a month. The structure consisted of scaffolding filled with clay and timber bricks. (Fig. 2) The temporary structure was complemented by elements of public space such as a waterside pier from which cruises were organised to the nearby Olympic complex. Thanks to the intervention, this site under the bridge came to life for nine weeks. Volunteers had the opportunity to get involved in the simple construction process—which was also used by people from the local community who live in the area. The participation of volunteers

in the construction was one of the community aspects of this temporary object. The joint construction of the facility allowed the community to come to terms with the existence of this unused space under the highway, which in all likelihood some of them would not have visited otherwise.

"Over nine weeks, 40,000 locals, artists, and visitors from across London came here to perform, eat, watch, and engage in workshops, talks, walks, and theatre." (Assemble Studio, year unknown) At the end of the duration of this temporary conversion, the building was dismantled and the materials were used to create a playground at a local school, which helped to support the local community. As the temporary installation of Folly neared the end of its duration, it brought investment from London Legacy Development to the site which transformed the space under the motorway bridge into a permanent public space. Architectural studio Muf architecture / art has designed a public space that allows the continued use of the site by the general public and brings a new quality to the local community that has been living with the existence of this place during the temporary conversion.



Fig. 2. Folly for Flyover, Assemble Studio, Create festival, London (UK), 2016. (Photo: David Vintiner, source: ASSEMBLE, 2011)

City for Children, Metropolitan Institute Bratislava and the City of Bratislava, City for Children project, Bratislava (SK), 2023

One of the long-term goals of the city of Bratislava is to create a city (not only) for children. This concept presents a form of design that focuses on diverse groups of inhabitants, including children. The leading principle is that a city designed for children works for everyone. The City for Children project applies various forms of community participation in improving their neighbourhoods and especially the immediate surroundings of schools. So far, the largest projects of this programme have been temporary conversions of spaces around Vazovova and Mudroňova schools. This case study further focuses on the conversion of the area adjacent to the Vazovova Primary School in Bratislava.

The temporary conversion of a public space at the intersection of two streets (Mýtna and Vazovova) in the city centre involved the demarcation of a space that served as a lane of the road into a public space for pedestrians with regard to their safety. The original traffic solution offered a relatively generous unused space in the centre of the intersection. During the temporary conversion, the traffic layout and empty space were streamlined, creating a safe, physically demarcated pedestrian zone and it was necessary to find out how people would use it. Temporary urban furniture was installed in this space and part of the road was repainted with bold colours and playful motifs to attract (not only) children. Participatory engagement with the school's pupils, their parents, school staff and people from the surrounding area heralded a

temporary conversion—tactical urbanism. This process was planned by the city to take into account the needs of the local community as much as possible. Proving the concept through a temporary intervention facilitated data collection, monitoring the traffic situation and the behaviour of people in the area which helped to think more accurately and correctly about the permanent change. Last but not least, it was this intermediate time during which the space was temporarily used and helped the residents to get used to the change in traffic organisation and also to the existence of the new public space that was previously part of the road. During this time, people were also able to voice their complaints or concerns. Over a year, the City for Children project managed to create both a temporary conversion and a permanent conversion of the public space, drawing on the practical experience and participation of the local community. (Fig. 3)

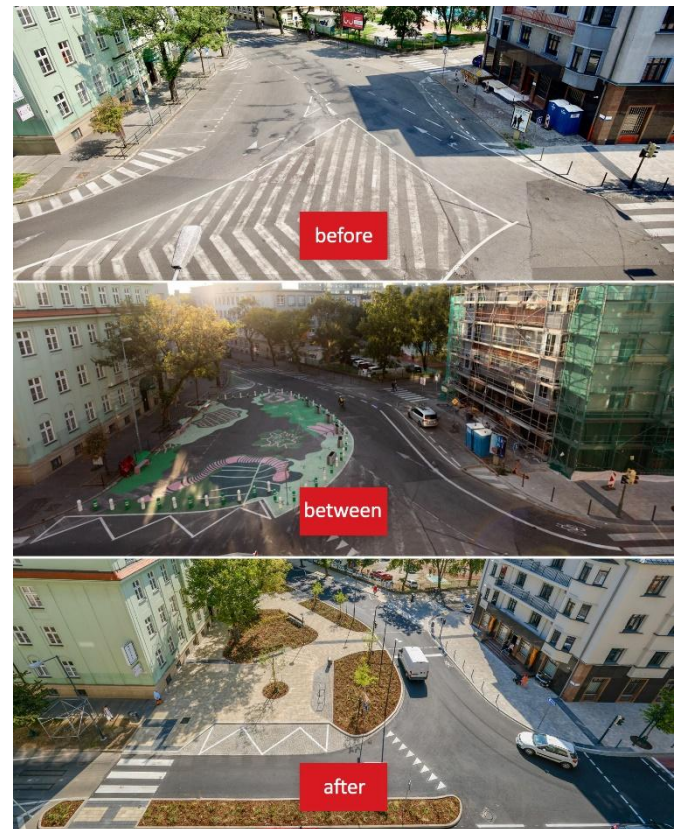


Fig. 3. City for Children project, Top—before, middle—temporary conversion, bottom—final conversion, Metropolitan Institute Bratislava and the City of Bratislava, City for Children, Bratislava (SK), 2023. (Photo: Marek Velčák, Veronika Gežík, source: Mesto Bratislava, 2024)

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

In the beginning the article points out the complexity of the terminological grasp of the issue of conversion—change of the function of architecture and indicates a wide range of possibilities of grasping and interpreting this concept. The research has attempted to categorise conversions in a way to understand the diversity of conversions and at the same time in a way to define the conversions that are the subject of this paper. It focused on a more detailed definition of a temporary conversion created for a single use and analysed their impact on the local community using case studies from Europe in recent years. It can be concluded that the phenomenon of temporariness in this type of conversion prompts a more intensive reflection on the life cycle of these conversions, sustainability, circular economy and the impact on the community which is shown by the study of the case studies. Last but not least, it turns out that temporary conversions can also contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage by often using it as their backdrop themselves, as suggested in the research by

Alessandro Zorzetto: *"Heterotopia of ephemeral architecture plays a temporary but fundamental role in the regeneration of the city's historical-architectural heritage."* (Zorzetto et al., 2022)

The comparison of the case studies suggested a possible wide range of approaches to the creation of temporary interventions that have a direct impact on the community, from the approach of community participation in the conversion indirectly and before the conversion itself occurs—naming their needs that are not related to the conversion as in the project The Theatre of the useFULL in Venice, through participatory designing of the future conversion by direct experience of the temporary conversion as in the project City for Children project, to stimulating the activation of a long-unused space thanks to the temporary conversion Folly for Flyover in London. By comparing case studies, the research suggested a link between temporary conversions and their impact on the local community, which varied qualitatively across the case studies. Based on research and case studies other than those used in this article, we can conclude that the link of temporary conversions to community is very common, especially in large cities in Western Europe. In Central and Eastern European countries (such as Slovakia) the number of such conversions is marginal but shows an increasing tendency.

The temporality of the conversion does not necessarily imply the temporality of its impact. Temporality seems to be a good precondition for activation (of the local government, the investor, the community etc.), thanks to which more and more projects can emerge, in places that were unused before the temporary conversion. Temporality can serve as a testing device to validate ideas for long-term intentions, precisely through the reflection of the local community that is associated with the place and knows it. Temporary conversion can contribute to the diversity of the programme in neighbourhoods, allow the showing of closed objects to people, can bring a new attractor to the site, and they can even have interdisciplinary overlaps beyond architecture. The paper concludes that research and comparison of case studies and other related research show that the community aspect can prolong the life cycle of temporary conversions which may not end with the demise of the conversion itself but may translate into long-term benefits for the community.

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