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Essays

Defining temporary tecture with Kosmos Architects

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In a new publication, the Swiss-Austrian practice Kosmos Architects lay out a definition and propositional thesis for identifying a new metric in the production of space. Rather than permanent edifices of stone and concrete, this volume — generally illustrated with a rich selection of photography and drawing — celebrates the ephemeral expression of “teature”. *This essay was excerpted from Temporary Tecture (Birkhauser, 2025) edited by Kosmos Architects.*

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect — Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas.

Architecture as a reflection of our society facilitates the development and transformation of our community. Following the transition from an industrial to an informational society, traditional methods of construction lack the rapidity and flexibility necessary to respond to the changing needs of our society. These new challenges—social, economic, political, environmental, technological, and climatic—are pressing the architecture and construction disciplines to change. However, this change hardly happens, and even if it does, it cannot adapt to the pace of the transformation of the contemporary world. Utilitarian temporary structures, which are built of necessity and designed to be easily assembled and disassembled, respond to changes in needs in the most direct way. They deserve to be looked at and analysed as a snapshot of reality, an immediate reflection of actual problems and societal demands. Temporary architecture is an important element of the infrastructure. This mute urban layer ensures the functioning of multiple processes in the city, from construction and deconstruction to maintenance, guidance, and protection. It substitutes for the functionality of architecture when there are no resources or time for permanent construction. These permanently present, temporary elements create a visual identity along with architecture and landscape. Yet due to their categorisation as temporary, they almost remain invisible to the public. For the same reason, they lack consideration and reflection by architects, theorists, and urban designers. What could architecture learn from temporary structures? In a series of essays combined in the publication contemporary architecture we will explore this question.

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Heating of the construction site during winter, Zurich, Switzerland. © Kosmos.

Ideal City vs. Real City: Parallel Realities

The series of early Renaissance Italian paintings depict the utopic “La Città Ideale”—the Ideal City—as imagined in the humanistic philosophy of his time. Streets and squares in the images consist of purely architectural objects —harmoniously designed and well-proportioned houses, facades, fountains, and churches. The city looks unusually sterile and does not carry any traces of urban life or human activity. The ideal city, being conceived in accordance with the dictates of the rational and moral objective, is entirely architectural. It does not leave space for the appearance of any extra, random, temporary, or nondesigned urban layers. In contrast to that utopian vision, an image of any contemporary, busy, and active city shows that a substantial part of its urban landscape is constituted of various infrastructural and temporary structures that support and cover architecture, define borders, provide security, maintenance, directions, advertisement, protection from the environment, fire safety, and facilitate transportation. These structures play an important role in the urban quotidian life, facilitating it and being present physically, but at the same time, often stay unnoticed and almost invisible. As mentioned in Robert Venturi’s and Denise Scott Brown’s Learning from Las Vegas, “Signs inflect toward the highway even more than buildings.”¹ The same happens with auxiliary and temporary structures, which can sometimes visually, spatially, and even technically impact cities more than permanent buildings. Nevertheless, due to their ephemeral and utilitarian character, these structures are almost excluded from both the field of architectural discourse and the public’s perception. Being purely utilitarian, these objects are free from aesthetic judgment and cultural influence. That makes these structures freer than traditional, designed architecture and eventually more innovative, both technologically and aesthetically.

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Architects have always been inspired and influenced by technology: Le Corbusier referred to machines and ships in his architecture;² Walter Gropius, to factories and industrial architecture.³ Industrial buildings and structures have always been symbols of brave and innovative spatial compositions. The naked functionality of these structures based on purely technical requirements triggered many architectural movements and design ideas. Nevertheless, nowadays industrial buildings are packed in more compact and generic volumes and even one of the most technological manufacturing plants of today—the Tesla Giga factory in Nevada—does not offer any new, inspiring formal language.

On the contrary, temporary infrastructure, being excluded from the sphere of architectural interest, has kept its roughness and straightforwardness. Its aesthetic is fair to its structural meaning. Temporariness and short construction time allow it to use the latest achievements of technologies in structural as well as material aspects. These structures give insight today into what architecture will look like tomorrow and show us what temporary architecture can learn from temporary structures. This is why we titled the book contemporary architecture.

What is Contemporary Architecture?

ARCHITECTURE

By definition, architecture, with its root archi— (Greek: chief, main) has an author and, therefore, authority. In the case of anonymous infrastructural buildings and temporary structures, a better definition would be merely tecture (from the Greek tekton: builder). The word anonymous is not used in its exact sense because almost every structure has an author— even if the author is unknown. The anonymity reflects the attitude rather than the factual absence of an author. Anonymous buildings are free from the political views, religion, ethnicity, and psychology of the author, and therefore distill their meaning to the structure.

CONTEMPORARY

The temporary character of tecture adds another coordinate— the time component— to the subject. Entering into a short-term relationship with the context, this type of construction manifests itself as an event, an intervention. Temporary structures are not trying to appropriate, consume, or complete their context. That is yet another reason why tecture is almost absent in the professional architectural and historical discourse. At the same time, speed of assembly allows temporary structures to use the most recent construction technologies and address the latest challenges of assembly on-site.

Often, this makes temporary structures more innovative and daring than modern, long-term construction developments.

"Temporary structures are not trying to appropriate, consume, or complete their context."



Sandbag barricades against floods in Moscow, Russia. © Kosmos.

Bio

KOSMOS is an architectural practice with offices in Zürich and Graz, which collaborates virtually across the borders. The office realises projects of diverse scales: from a door handle to a city plan and of different types: from art installations and pavilions to big public, residential, cultural and infrastructural buildings.

Notes

¹ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972), 51.

² “The house is a machine for living in.” Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture, trans. Frederick Etchells (London: John Raker, 1931), 4.

³ Walter Gropius, “The Development of Modern Industrial Architecture, 1913,” in Form and Function: A Source Book for the History of Architecture and Design 1890–1939, ed. Tim Benton, Charlotte Benton, and Dennis Sharp (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1975), 54–55.

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Published 28 Aug 2025

Reading time 6 minutes

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