The Permanence of Temporary Urbanism: Normalising Precarity in Austerity London. By Mara Ferreri, pp. 194. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2021. ISBN 9789462984912. Hardback.

Mara Ferreri’s excellent account of meanwhile use in London in the early to mid-2010s both creates an astute portrait of London’s relationship to property and development at large, and a detailed account of a specific and important moment in the contemporary history of the city’s built environment. The central thesis of the book is that the apparent pragmatism of policies which aimed to see high streets ‘revived’ by temporary use of vacant spaces has in fact become a defining feature of London’s development systems: temporary use is not going anywhere.

The book begins by outlining the ways in which the temporary appeared in policy discourses as a way to resolve the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. Ferreri points out that whilst at the time some felt there was the potential for some kind of ‘regime change’ that questioned the neo-liberal consensus, the reality was that ‘’post crisis’ London only reconfirmed the centrality of urban space and finance in the neoliberal project’ (20). Through detailed qualitative data collected by Ferreri between 2009 and 2016 the author is able to substantiate this claim as well as deftly contextualise it in the literature on financialisation in London’s built environment before and after the crisis. In doing so the book offers a rich new account of an important moment in the recent history of London’s property system.

The book makes a detailed analysis of the language around temporariness as it emerged in policy discourse after the 2008 crisis. Ferreri’s shows how the notion of ‘meanwhile use’ was always intimately tied to the notion that ‘civic entrepreneurs’ (46) could in this way unlock London’s ‘dormant assets’ (47). Whilst some well intentioned community activists saw this as an opportunity to assert some kind of a right to the city Ferreri identifies the limit of what such actors were able to achieve through a comparison with squatting. Ultimately Ferreri asserts that the discourse of meanwhile use serves to affirm ‘the legal right to private property’ (53).

Ferreri goes on to use this tension between the illusions and reality associated with temporariness in London to pry open other areas of controversy in London’s recent history. Through case studies of a series of arts and cultural spaces she highlights the contradictions at the heart of the ‘creative city’ narrative. For instance the group ArtEvict who made use of ‘forgotten spaces’ (71), despite an early commitment to an idea of transience the group eventually became permanent and institutionalised as ]Performance Space[. Whilst on one hand such flexibility can fulfil a romantic and image of creativity emerging from the edges of society ultimately it leaves artists and organisations ‘precarious and susceptible’ (79. Ferreri traces similar trajectories in Hackney Wick, where the promise of artistic freedom was lost to rising rents and property development. These case studies represent what the book calls ‘deepening cracks in the surface of the creative city promise’, that the illusion of a city which cultivates creativity is ultimately undermined by the same economic structures that such creativity contributes to.

The book looks beyond art to broader claims to the ability of temporariness to support culture. One of the most powerful case studies in the book relates to the Elephant & Castle Shopping centre regeneration programme. From 2007 the owners of the site waited for planning approval, during this time a lack of refurbishment and fear of future eviction let the centre to gradually empty. The shopping centre was only prepared to offer short term tenancy agreements, this led to the centre becoming ‘overwhelmingly characterised by affordable independent retailers and services owned by and serving the diverse local ethnic mix’ (94). In parallel to this the landlords also invited temporary arts projects into the site, such as a two year ‘pop-up’ by the Royal Court Theatre between 2008 and 2010. But the efforts to engage the community through these temporary projects also created some ambivalent effects, whilst the property owners may have sought to embellish the reputation of the site projects like ‘Studio at the Elephant’ provided opportunities for political projects such as ‘the Latin American Workers Association’ (102). The Latin community in Elephant and Castle took the opportunity to use these projects as a space to organise, ultimately feeding into campaigns that actively opposed the development and advocated for the local community such as Latin Elephant. It is in this ambivalence that Ferreri is able to trace a subtle and important analysis of her subject matter, acknowledging that temporariness is at once a mode to co-opt both culture and local communities into the transformation of the capital and a mode of engaging with space that might also enable ‘agonistic encounters that not only puncture the dominant framing but may even contribute to the formation and development of new political alliances’ (113).

Policies of austerity combined with economic depression made the idea of the ‘temporary’ an potent area of discourse during the period in which Ferreri’s research was completed. Ferreri shows systematically but also with great nuance where the ‘profound disconnect’ (141) between temporariness and the realities and dynamics of everyday life in a city such as London. Temporariness in this sense is a fuel for what Ferreri terms a ‘resurgent entrepreneurial urban agenda’ (142). At times art and culture have provided a smokescreen for the very real harms done to London’s communities by rapid urban profiteering. Ultimately she warns us against the any hope for the transgressive potential of ephemerality (154): ‘Temporary urbanism redefines modes of relation to the city and to urban dynamics through an entrepreneurial gaze that sees places as underused assets’ (160). This book is rightly pessimistic about any claimed positives arising from temporariness in the city, Ferreri believes that the conditions of transformation which might create justice in London are necessarily revolutionary: ‘space and time need to be reclaimed’ (168).

This book is an essential account of a period of time in which London embraced new patterns of urban development. The language of crisis that fuelled the use of austerity to justify the wholesale transformation of the welfare state is mirrored in this account of temporariness in London. A more precarious and unjust set of conditions have been presented to the people that live and work in the city as a glamorous future, but Ferreri has carefully demonstrated that this promise was an illusion. I do wonder if there might have been more scope to explore the radical possibilities of ephemerality in the final chapter of the book, I was left thinking of Judith Butler’s writing on precarious life, the notion that precarity is at once a fundamental quality of life and a something which when distributed unevenly is a source of great injustice. The politics of scarcity and private ownership are perhaps the greater villain that the temporary per se. This said, Ferreri’s argument is robust and persuasive throughout, and I may be falling into the same trap that she describes so well.