

‘You Can Use My Tights’ or: The Phenomenon of Temporary Solutions

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ABSTRACT *A provisional solution is a makeshift designed to fit temporary circumstances. It is the result of the motivation to act in an unforeseen or imperative situation or an emergency and the subsequent decision: this is how we are going to tackle this problem for the time being. Provisional solutions are integral to our professional and private lives and have their use in our homes, at building sites, in urban planning and in space travel. In the following text we will quote a popular film scene and an old fashioned example of vehicle technology to illustrate the main characteristics of provisional solutions. We will then explore these characteristics in depth with the help of three examples from the context of art and urban planning and refer to the current discussions in space-oriented planning. Pointing out the differences between the provisional solution and other interim measures in use, we will also highlight the potential of temporary measures in the planning context: they provide a course of action in uncertain conditions.*

KEY WORDS: Provisional solutions, temporary uses, process-oriented planning, experiments in open space planning and sustainability

Introduction

The consequences of the globalization of our society such as population shrinkage, an increase in unoccupied areas and buildings, unemployment and rising impoverishment, to name but a few, affect the tasks of urban development and planning which are faced with a double strategy: planning involves the handling of vague and yet undefined developments as well as difficult tasks requiring decisive action (Sieverts, 1997, 2001). The shrinkage of towns and regions and the vacancy of entire districts have become particularly volatile as the need for visionary and long-term solutions clashes with the pressure to act and the resulting short-term, often pragmatic emergency solutions. In this context, we witness a boom of ‘temporary’, ‘ephemeral’, ‘transitory’ and ‘provisional’ projects, but the question is whether they are actually feasible concepts (Schild, 2005). For years, the discussions on such temporary projects in planning have included anything from glorification to disapproval; however, a differentiated theoretical identification of this phenomenon has often been avoided. For this reason, our paper focuses on one of these temporary phenomena: the provisional solution which we will explore in depth on the basis of

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three examples: 1) *Provisional Promenade Beverello Pier* in Naples, 2) *Wochenklausur* in Vienna, and 3) *Bataille Monument* at the documenta 11 in Kassel. Our reflections are based on the thesis that provisional solutions have properties which, when implemented in planning processes, provide significant conclusions for the purpose of qualitative empiricism. However, as this does not apply to every provisional or temporary project, our paper aims not only to explain the phenomenon of provisional solutions but also to cover their possibilities and limitations.

The chosen examples are from different contexts but all deal with the possibilities and the impact that provisional solutions can have on urban planning: the *Bataille Monument* at the documenta 11 in Kassel is an artistic project that, as far as the content is concerned, could well be a local community project. The *Beverello Pier Promenade* is an urban planning project that demonstrates the implementation of a provisional solution doubling as a test concept and generating vital information on the potential of a public space and the requirements of those who use it. It stresses the usefulness of a solution that can actually be experienced and built upon in later planning. The example of the artists' group *Wochenklausur* gives special emphasis to the aspect of action, showing how in individual cases a minimum of means can spur people into action or relieve social injustices with an ability which is integral—if almost invisible—to our daily repertoire of action: provisional solutions are used on a daily basis at building sites, in planning processes and stages, etc.

Our paper aims to throw light on this unnoticed virtue and to promote its recognition, practice and calculated implementation, not only in emergencies.

Limiting Factors Often Promote Working Solutions

In the Hollywood movie *Apollo 13*, a group of scientists and engineers manage to square the circle in an emergency situation: three astronauts in space are in danger of suffocating because of an exploded oxygen tank and a defective air filter. Despite all precautions and careful planning the engineers are faced with the problem of finding a way to connect the air filter systems of the space shuttle and the lunar landing craft (one of which is circular and the other square), and succeed by using basic tools. In the high-tech showpiece space shuttle, the three astronauts' lives are saved with the help of a piece of cardboard, a urine pouch, a tennis sock and adhesive tape. This scene illustrates the mechanism of provisional solutions: depending on the means available in the given circumstances, they are the result of the motivation to act in an unforeseen emergency and the decision: this is how we're going to tackle this problem for the time being. The astronauts' lives are on the line; there is precious little time and there is no stock of spare parts. Consequently a working solution based on the means available in the given situation had to be found. The decision to take a calculated risk by abandoning the tried and tested solution in favour of the only possible solution is crucial for such unusual measures. A much-quoted if less spectacular example is the nylon stocking doubling as a fan belt in engines of older model cars. In the case of the torn fan belt we see the same necessity for spontaneous action in the situation—you want to continue your journey—as well as the use of 'misappropriate' means to provide a temporary solution to an emergency. The mechanism at work is not exactly new. The knowledge that limiting factors often promote creative and innovative solutions has long been instrumental in creative methods.

The Mechanism of Provisional Measures and the Connection with Improvisation

Provisional measures, although triggered by an immediate need, are characteristically far-sighted and based on general practical know-how that is suddenly put to use. The action resulting in a provisional measure could best be described as a spontaneous act within an immediate reference framework. The connection with improvisation is obvious: 'to improvise' means 'to create something without preparation, off the cuff' (Kluge, 1995). The term can be traced back to the 18th-century Italian word *improvvisare* of the same meaning and *improvviso*: 'unexpected, unforeseen, unsuspected' (*ibid.*). Improvisation is an art in itself and a widely recognized skill, for example, in music and dance. The conceptual proximity to the art of improvising and the often surprising 'misappropriation' of materials and means may explain our fascination with functioning provisional solutions, and, what is more, it is fun to try out different things and get the right answers. Every time we come up with a provisional solution we make the seemingly impossible possible by using our wits. There is an element of unconventionality, unorthodoxy and flexibility in the aesthetics of provisional solutions. Because of the demanding circumstances of their creation (little time, limited funds, absolute functionality) they focus on the problem at hand in a convincingly simple way.

Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm characterizes the provisional as 'effortless, spontaneous and flexible' and states: "In our world the qualities of plainness and improvisation are becoming ever scarcer. We can't handle them. Waterpipes and light cables need to be under plaster, rough spots be covered, we live and breathe the aesthetic ideal of the hermetically sealed surface. Anything out of the ordinary (natural disasters, accidents, etc.) leaves us in a state of shock" (Hoffmann-Axthelm, 1994, p. 47).

The creation of temporary solutions appears to depend on specific surroundings, specific material properties and the recognizability of a connection between material and construction. The old Volkswagen Beetle could be fixed whereas modern, electronically equipped vehicles are less susceptible to makeshift solutions. In this context we need to look at the downside, the shortcomings and failures of temporary solutions. A spontaneously created makeshift solution is likely to be perceived as a bad job and indeed often only lasts for a short period of time before it has to be replaced. This indicates the ambivalent nature of the provisional measure. Far from being the perfect solution it does point the right way by providing a working yet reversible interim arrangement that has proven extremely useful in process-oriented planning.

Two Examples, Two Contexts: Provisional Solutions in Art and Urban Town Planning

Camillo Sitte, master builder and town planner (1843–1903), whose ideas made a powerful impact on urban development and planning was an early days advocate of provisional measures, recommending their implementation as they facilitate an *in situ* inspection of planned constructions, especially for the interested public. For major developments, he suggested the construction of "temporary exhibition buildings made of boards and whitewash serving as models of the planned constructions so that even the layman would be able to experience their overall effect and the public opinion would be in a position to decide whether or not to go ahead with the project" (Sitte, 1909, p. 184).

Provisional solutions are ideas made real in line with the meaning of the terms *pro visum*: to have before one's eyes, and *videre*: to see, perceive, recognize, both of which share the same origin as provisional. The intended solution can be experienced via a makeshift substitute. Provisional solutions play an important role in the planning and production process by providing answers to the question: is this the right idea for this particular location? They facilitate the testing of an idea within a setting and the swift implementation of functions and ways of use until a permanent solution becomes available (they are often delayed by endless disputes concerning a location or prolonged planning procedures). This implies that the construction of an interim solution requires a vision of the completed project, referring to that which is yet to come with the impression of a more complete and sustainable solution. In this sense temporary solutions both call for action and offer a potential for continuity.

The following three prominent examples summarize the specific characteristics of provisional solutions:

- 1) The Provisional Promenade at the Beverello Pier in Naples (built in 1998) exemplifies the swift provision of a solution on a trial basis (as Camillo Sitte suggested) (see Figures 1 and 2). During the planning phase for the re-development of the Naples harbour the initiators tested a new procedure: they synchronized three steps that would normally follow each other. In addition to two plans covering the entire area and a new terminal, a third plan for a temporary promenade was immediately realized. The wooden promenade replaces a wall separating the harbour and the old part of town thus turning a rather hostile place into a friendlier environment. The Provisional Promenade at the Beverello Pier reflects one detail of the project in progress by means of an inexpensive, easy-to-mount construction. In its concrete shape the provisional measure can promote the basic concept. As the wooden structure gradually disappears during extended planning processes it develops into a promise of progress: "the material of the interim solution is like a clock that shows how much time has passed since the start of the planning process, measuring delays, indicating holdups and preventing drawbacks all of which are frequently the cause for failure of projects of this size" (Boeri, 2000, p. 16) (see Figures 3 and 4).
- 2) Thomas Hirschhorn's Bataille Monument, erected for the 'documenta 11' in Kassel (2002), is a very good example of the ambivalence of the provisional measure mentioned earlier: it's unconventional, effortless, captivating aesthetic versus bungle (see Figures 5 and 6). The artist chose five locations in the vicinity of the disadvantaged Friedrich Wöhler housing estate in Kassel which as a group form the Bataille Monument, a memorial in honour of the author and philosopher Georges Bataille for whom Hirschhorn feels great respect. He realized the plans in collaboration with local residents. Regarding provisional techniques it is remarkable to see how Hirschhorn plays the significant features of the provisional measure. Although the appearance of the locations is marked by lack of materials and expertise, the artist is fully aware of their aesthetical and social significance. The Bataille Monument turns the notion of 'monument' upside down. Usually the person honoured by a monument is placed on a pedestal, unmistakably above the heads of 'ordinary' people and the chosen material is stone or metal since it is meant to last. The provisional monument is



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figures 1 & 2. The Provisional Promenade at the Beverello Pier in Naples, Italy, is an inexpensive, easy-to-mount construction. *Photograph:* Francesco Jodice, Boeri Studio, Milan, Italy.

a contradiction in itself. While endeavouring to break down barriers, it uses the active involvement of local residents in the construction process to rouse their interest in the person to be honoured. Where its purpose is concerned the very existence of the monument is sufficiently convincing for without it there would be an empty space. Thus, symbolic meaning can be added to the different aspects of the aesthetic of the provisional measure.

- 3) The members of the Austrian group of artists *wochenklausur* bring the idea of the provisional measure to a head by going into a one-week retreat during which they work with utmost concentration and dedication albeit to a tight schedule on a specific problem. Their projects provide a quick-fix solution to deal with this problem if the willingness is there. The provided provisional measures stress the fact that it is possible to take action, leaving no room for excuses and strongly



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figures 3 & 4. The provisional solution is like a clock that shows how much time has passed—the Provisional Promenade at the Beverello Pier in Naples, Italy. *Photograph:* Francesco Jodice, Boeri Studio, Milan, Italy.

emphasizing the subsequent improvement of circumstances which, however, cannot be forced. These projects are a result of the perception of glaring social problems which our society tends to marginalize. They challenge us to take a good look at the problem and realize that something can be done without much effort.

Due to their experimental characteristics provisional measures achieve a degree of clarity in unclear, uncertain situations and point the way towards results, orientation



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figures 5 & 6. The temporary Bataille Monument at the documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany turns the notion of a lasting 'monument' upside down. *Photograph:* Antje Havemann, Aachen, Germany.

and subsequent action. In this context, Rachel Kaplan described the 'trial run' and the 'unfinished' characteristics under the heading 'small experiment' as vital aspects of a strategy of action: "Given the many social and environmental problems that beg for workable solutions, and the many exciting efforts that go on with no effort at evaluation or dissemination, the small experiment approach fills a vital niche" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 171). The provisional measure is a mixed blessing, opposed to the need for safety and yet owing its existence to the hoarding instinct which is a result of

this need. Provisional solutions rely on an existing but somewhat imperfect store which, were it perfect or nearly perfect, would provide all the essentials to come up with a 'proper' rather than a makeshift solution. Provisional solutions are ideal go-betweens between chaos and strict planning for neither of these extremes in their aesthetical and physical reality is an option: chaos is too frustrating whereas strict planning is a non-existent construct (if it existed it would be dead). Accordingly, the provisional measure is difference put into practice.

Sustainability and Acceptance of Temporary Measures

The nature of the provisional solution is determined not only by the circumstances surrounding its creation and the specific characteristics of its form but also by the fact that it is not meant to last. The provisional solution stands for a transition, an interim arrangement and so belongs to the great number of limited period projects that have increasingly been employed in the field of urban planning and development. For years the debates surrounding interim arrangements and temporary measures have taken into account their ambivalent nature, however, a theoretical definition of the phenomenon has so far been skirted. While the perception of 'planning as a process' has become a widely integrated part of the professional mainstream, temporary concepts appear to be a yet ungrasped phenomenon. Martha Schwartz, for one, looks upon 'temporary gardens' as good ways of testing new designs. "You can try different things and you get to see the final result sooner" (Schwartz, 2001, p. 31). Due to the growing tendency to turn everything into an event or festival (Häußermann & Siebel, 1993), others voice their concern, saying that this trend causes garden installations to descend to the level of short-lived events. "The garden has become part of the fast-moving art event culture, we now have event-hopping garden tourists", says Jürgen Milchert (1998, p. 3). The event as a form of temporary use of public spaces is viewed somewhat critically by the professional body because it attracts a non-specific, rather meaningless public attention that collides with the purpose of temporary solutions as proposed by the initiators (Gebhardt *et al.*, 2000). Phenomena such as "deregulation and transition to flexible use of space" have contributed to an increase in interim solutions for 'normal' urban use, for example, housing or parking (Kamleithner & Kohoutek, 2004, p. 14). More often than not, the expressions 'temporary', 'transitory', 'ephemeral', 'provisional' and 'interim' are used any which way without a clear definition and quite a few projects jump on the bandwagon, because 'temporary' is trendy, the underlying indifference of the projects is convenient and the association with art can help solve administrative and financial problems. These projects, pretty to look at but basically empty, hardly leave anything but a fleeting impression.

One elemental question is that of the sustainability of temporary measures, from temporary gardens to installations in public space. The issue of the meaning and content of such projects in the context of urban planning is particularly interesting in connection with artistic projects that will attract a lot of attention from the media and the public which usually evaporates just as quickly as it materialized. There is a trend toward a cooperation between the arts and urban planning. Artists are involved with social, environmental and urban planning; landscape architects and architects are trying their hand at artistic projects to tackle the growing problems of

unoccupied buildings and unemployment (Bianchi, 1999; documenta 11, 2002; Sieverts, 2001; Selle, 1994). But not every temporary measure is art, even if it employs artistic techniques. It becomes art only when it is placed within the system of art, that is, when it is discussed, criticized and assessed or classified in an artistic context (see e.g. Luhmann, 1995).

The question of sustainability applies to both fields. As long as the artist is not solely concerned with his own fame the effect of his work can be measured by the degree of irritation it can cause and its unaffectedness by trends. Wolfgang Zinggl of the aforementioned group *wochenklausur* points out that interfering art projects could fail to be more than a mere treatment of symptoms and even distract from the necessity of government action. "Nevertheless", he continues, "this is no reason to not act, we must try to do whatever is possible to remedy the worst deficits". He emphasizes the need to take temporary actions further by demanding political action. Temporary measures initiated and implemented in this way are much more than events; they become a chosen course of action in vague conditions.

Status of the Exceptional

Initially the temporary element will create extra space, for example, for street parties, marathons through the city, the permission to camp for a night in the countryside in Sweden. As long as it's temporary there seems to be an abundance of possible land use. Temporarily, social rules can be ignored and monotonous routine broken. Klaus Bußmann, curator of the three-month exhibition *Skulpturen Projekte Münster* writes: "the discrepancy between the generous consent to short-lived exhibitions and the difficulty to obtain authorization for the permanent installation of artwork is a major problem". The authorities gave a green light to projects that "under normal circumstances would have taken years to come into realization. The exceptional enthusiasm was entirely due to the fact that the exhibition was to last for just three months, the problems started when we applied for the permanent installation of some of the work" (Bußmann, 1992, p. 132).

'Berlin's smallest public swimming pool' is yet another example of this aspect. In the summer of 1999, Peter Arlt, a sociologist, built a public swimming pool in a vacant lot in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. He used four industrial skips filled with water and 17 tons of sand serving as a beach. There was also a stretch of lawn, a shower and a toilet. The local authorities put an end to the fun on the grounds of "running a public bath without license". When 'Berlin's smallest public pool' was officially declared 'art in public space', there was no further trouble from the authorities (Kreuzer, 2001, p. 19). Susanne Kreuzer wrote in an article: "Peter Arlt's work allows for more freedom in the use of public space. This unbureaucratic, immediate approach interferes with set discourses and demands reactions. (...) Peter Arlt demonstrated (...) not only the possibility but the necessity to overrule conventions, guidelines and red tape and conquer the murky terrain of legal and social obligations" (*ibid.*).

Daniel Buren, one of the participating artists of *Skulpturen Projekte Münster* explains the correlation of temporariness and the acceptance of controversial or unusual works of art: "Any work displayed for a limited period of time will convince even the worst sceptics. All you need to tell them is that they won't have to suffer for long. It's just this one exhibition" (Buren, 1997, p. 504). Walter Grasskamp tells of

the difficulties an artist may encounter if he hopes for the success of his work in terms of it being accepted by the residents. He will soon come to realize “as do the residents that he may have hoped for too much—there is no unanimity” (Grasskamp, 1989, p. 152). He concludes: “That leaves the snowman as our lowest common denominator (...) he has a number of advantages that fit the problematic situation: he is popular, his symbolism is well rooted in the collective awareness, he is inexpensive and, most significantly, not meant to last” (*ibid.*). Temporary measures award the work the status of the exceptional (‘just this once’) but also point towards the possibility of installing unusual experimental projects on a permanent basis. Because of the underlying idea of before and after and their short-lived existence, provisional measures convey a sense of ease and open-mindedness. These characteristics can be useful in reducing initial fear during negotiations between the creators of temporary arrangements and those who are to authorize them (Buren, 1997, p. 504). The possibility to change at any time to that which is not ‘the real thing’ or not an ‘entirely serious’ option reduces the project to a manageable, less intimidating size with no obligation to be perfect and suited to meet highest demands.

Provisional Solutions State: Something Can Be Done

In conclusion, we can say that space-related planning is burdened with urgent topics and a multitude of unsolved problems that require attention. In a vague, not clearly foreseeable situation, provisional solutions offer the possibility to experiment. In a complex, planning-related context the provisional solution allows for hands-on experience on a trial basis and hints at options once it is no longer in use. As an option to act in uncertain circumstances temporary measures can provide answers to the problems at hand and promote an ongoing search. With the help of a provisional solution a poorly defined problem can evolve into a clearly defined one. Employing such measures is a way of saying: “We do not have all the answers and we cannot say where it is all going but for the time being there is something that can be done”.

In these times of scarce funds many urgent projects are delayed because communities and states think carefully about the allocation of these limited funds. Provisional measures are usually implemented when there is no prospect of a ‘proper’ solution in the near future or if a situation has reached the critical point where action can no longer be postponed. Provisional measures as pragmatic interim solutions serve a clear purpose, their manufacturing is well known from ordinary everyday life and the reason for their installation is obvious. This strategy is furthermore based on the assumption that as a first step, provisional measures cannot cause any harm as they are reversible. All this adds up to an apt method in any planning processes aiming for the establishment of new concepts, those depending on a high level of acceptance on the part of residents or those marked by the lack of long-term solutions. However, a certain level of aesthetics and a conscious choice of means are absolutely essential. Although provisional solutions, as well as other temporary measures, show that result-oriented and momentarily satisfying action is possible, they need to meet a minimum of design requirements, at least in public space. The ‘charm of the imperfect’ is one thing but the impression of something that was carelessly cobbled together is not desirable. The designing of public space depends on the acceptance of those who use it and therefore a cheap or

rundown appearance should be avoided. Here is a way to test the limits of consent from the urban public. In an artistic context, the scope for experimenting is wider because of the experiments' social status of the exceptional which allows for more autonomy as demonstrated by the Bataille Monument in Kassel. The acceptance of temporary provisional (or reversible) projects is more likely to increase with the involvement of those who use them in the installation as this promotes a bond and enables the users to experience first hand the production process with all the difficulties and costs involved. This is where the need for further examination and trial of the essential aspects of action and the use of provisional measures becomes obvious.

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