



## Temporary uses of vacant and abandoned urban spaces in Latin America: An exploration

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# TEMPORARY USE OF VACANT AND ABANDONED URBAN SPACE IN LATIN AMERICA: AN EXPLORATION

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## ABSTRACT

Temporary use has become an increasingly focal subject in the fields of planning and urban policy. However, research has focused mostly on Europe and the United States, with little attention being given to temporary use in Latin America.

To add relevant cases and broaden the theoretical debate, this article presents an exploration of temporary use in different Latin American cities, from Mexico to Argentina. It charts temporary community centres and ephemeral art galleries that arise in historical abandoned buildings; new urban gardens that flourish over the ruins of monumental modernist housing projects from the 1960s; parklets and pocket parks that appear amongst overlooked deteriorated spaces; and abandoned plots that are transformed into temporary cinemas and playgrounds for children and their families. Furthermore, the article illustrates how these existing environments—often private, inert, and abandoned—are temporarily appropriated as lively spaces open to the public and transformative for cultural and urban practices in Latin American contexts. Finally, the article contextualizes the various examples in theoretical debates on everyday urbanism and do-it-yourself urbanism, showing the unique dimensions and learning points from the Latin American scene.

## KEYWORDS

Temporary use, Latin America, everyday urbanism, do-it-yourself urbanism

## INTRODUCTION

‘Were you inspired by any other project?’ I asked.

[The project] was inspired by the movie . . . Everything occurs in a small town in Italy, where there is one movie theatre, an emblematic one, which was the only entertainment in town. One day a very popular movie was going to be shown and when the movie theatre was full the doors were closed, leaving outside a lot of people who could not enter, and a riot almost starts. Then, the leading character . . . responsible for projecting the movie . . . sees what is happening outside, uses a mirror as a reflector to project the movie on a building in the plaza across from the cinema, allowing all the people that were left outside to enjoy the movie. It is such a beautiful scene, one of my favourite movies, which inspired the name and the concept of the project.

Excerpt from an interview with the representative of Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza, Puerto Rico, 29 March 2018

Every Sunday, during the years of 2011 to 2013, a vacant plot in the Calle Loíza in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was transformed by a young film director and her sister into an open-air cinema called Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza. The project was received with so much enthusiasm that soon others wanted to take part in the physical and social transformation of this space. It was then that the lethargic walls that confined the plot were animated with artistic murals; the open-air cinema was enhanced with self-made, urban furniture; festivals, like the Plenazo Callejero, loaded the plot with music; the National Circus of Puerto Rico packed the space with acrobats; and the Alternative Book Fair filled the void with written thoughts. The project concluded and the space became vacant again. However, it inspired others to continue the process of actively transforming the city they live in, even if temporarily.

In the last twenty years, temporary use has become an increasingly studied subject in fields related to architecture and urban planning. However, research has focused mostly on Europe and the United States, with little attention being given to temporary use in Latin America. Consequently, the aim of this study is to provide an understanding of how the phenomenon of temporary use is unfolding in the Latin American context.

In this article, the term temporary use is employed to refer to ‘temporary activation of vacant and underused land or buildings.’<sup>1</sup> This activation takes the form of a temporary appropriation that deliberately transforms these spaces. I employed qualitative research methods to collect, document, classify, and analyse projects related to temporary use, and contextualized the various examples in the theoretical debates on everyday urbanism and do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism. *Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza* represents one of the twenty-four projects of temporary use explored in this study.

In what follows, I will introduce two theoretical debates—do-it-yourself urbanism and everyday urbanism—both of which surround temporary use. I will provide an overview of how temporary use unfolds and is studied in the context of Europe. I will present the historic context of Latin America in order to explain why its cities have high rates of vacant and abandoned urban spaces. I will then introduce the projects as viewed from the lens of their temporary uses. Furthermore, I will discuss the role of vacancy, abandonment, ruination, and private property as it relates to temporary use.

## TEMPORARY USE: A GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Temporary use falls under the broader umbrella of so-called temporary urbanism. Although temporary appropriations of urban space are not new to cities, especially not in Latin America, little theory has been generated about this phenomenon. However, Panu Lehtovuori et al.<sup>2</sup> offer a starting point to the study and understanding of temporary urbanism by classifying it into two big groups: do-it-yourself urbanism and everyday urbanism. Temporary use is located in the intersection of both.

### **Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and Everyday Urbanism**

Do-it-yourself urbanism is defined as ‘small-scale and creative, unauthorized yet intentionally functional and civic-minded “contributions” or “improvements” to urban spaces.’<sup>3</sup> The activist organizations temporarily appropriating abandoned built or unbuilt spaces are self-organized groups that use very few resources in order to transform the spaces, achieving not only spatial but social transformations as well. It can be argued that these acts of transforming urban space through this truly conscious process are a direct reaction to the perceived flaws of urban planning.

On the other end of the spectrum, everyday urbanism encapsulates space appropriations utilizing the city for festivities, protests, or the improvement

of livelihoods for the individuals who temporarily claim it, such as street vendors. Douglas Kelbaugh<sup>4</sup> refers to these appropriations as ‘urban design by default’, because these appropriations are not meant to transform the spaces, as is the case with do-it-yourself urbanism, but the transformation of the urban landscape happens ‘by default’. This research is particularly interested in projects of temporary use that aim to deliberately transform the vacant or abandoned urban spaces they appropriate.

Relevant to this article is the peculiar everyday urbanism characteristic of ‘blurring [the] boundaries between public space and private life’.<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Vallance et al.<sup>6</sup> call for a new definition of ‘public space’ and for the re-evaluation of ‘the political potential of the “public-isation of the private”’ since temporary use increasingly blurs the boundaries between private space and public life—this is strongly the case in Latin America.

### **Temporary Use in Europe**

Several books related to temporary urbanism have been written, providing multiple examples of temporary urban spatial interventions.<sup>7</sup> However, the research conducted by the team of Urban Catalyst is one of the most thorough studies focused on temporary use of abandoned built and unbuilt spaces.

Starting their research in Berlin in the early 2000s, the Urban Catalyst research group documented and analysed several projects of temporary use in five different European countries. The study resulted in a set of tools and strategies aimed to help ‘catalyse’ urban development through temporary use.<sup>8</sup> These strategies have been particularly effective in attracting developers back to cities with high building vacancy rates, such as Berlin, Leipzig, and Amsterdam.<sup>9</sup>

### **Deeper Analysis of Temporary Use**

The research group Urban Catalyst found different kinds of temporary users as well as different types of temporarily appropriated spaces.<sup>10</sup> According to the relationship between temporary users and space, three categories were created: ‘reserve/niche’ used mainly by refugees, migrants, and dropouts; ‘playground/parallel universe’ used by part-time activists; and ‘incubator’ used by start-ups and migrants. Moreover, they analysed the ‘effect of temporary uses on the development’<sup>11</sup> of a site and noted that while some temporary uses can have no lasting effect on the site, others help set impulses to further development or consolidation of the site for permanent use. They can coexist with other permanent uses or become dependent on others. Some of

the temporary uses may pioneer urban use of the site and others may be established temporarily while a permanent institution is displaced and replaced. Lehtovuori et al.<sup>12</sup> provide a 'comprehensive analytic framework' to further study the spatial conditions in which temporary uses emerge in the context of Europe and the United States as well as their different goals. In their research, three main typologies of spatial conditions were found: urban central areas, currently underused areas, and areas losing significance. Furthermore, it was analysed how public authorities have incorporated temporary uses in the development of urban areas.

The projects documented in Europe emerged in a context of abandonment produced by the deindustrialization of western European cities, such as Berlin and Amsterdam. In the context of Latin America, vacancy, abandonment, and ruination are prevalent reasons of the temporary use phenomenon as well. The following section will provide a brief historical overview to help explain the causes of vacancy, abandonment, and ruination in Latin American cities.

### **Vacancy and Abandonment in Latin America**

In the last ten years, Latin America has seen the emergence of temporary use projects of abandoned and vacant, built or unbuilt urban spaces. However, Latin American cities have also seen a surge in building vacancy and abandonment, with little research being conducted in order to understand the causes in the broader Latin American context—in Mexico, vacant housing had not been included in censuses until 2010.

In this section, I will provide a brief and general historical overview to help describe some factors that have led to the rise in the number of vacant and abandoned spaces in several Latin American cities. It is worth noting, however, that each project of temporary use I have documented is set in a distinct context, which comprises its own reasons for being in a state of vacancy or abandonment, and a much deeper and detailed discussion about the particular causes of abandonment on each case and country is beyond the scope of this article.

### **The Rise and Fall of the Social Agenda**

From the late fifteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, Latin American countries were either under Spanish, Portuguese, or French ruling. By 1825, most countries had gained their independence from the old continent.

However, old practices remained, in particular the uneven distribution of extensive areas of land in the hands of a few owners, called *latifundios*.<sup>13</sup> In the early twentieth century, several countries revolted against the unequal land distribution. Mexico was the first country, and arguably the most notorious case, in which the agrarian revolution resulted in a more equitable division and distribution of land to farmers with the creation of the *ejidos*, a communal form of land tenure used for agriculture until its reform in the early 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

From the 1930s to the 1970s, Latin American cities underwent extreme growth, becoming some of the most urbanized regions in the world—in 1970, 57.3 per cent of the population of Latin America lived in cities.<sup>15</sup> Their economic and social progress was the result of the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) policies which were put in place to promote internal growth.<sup>16</sup> By the 1950s, Latin America had become ‘the leading region among developing countries in terms of social expenditure and coverage.’<sup>17</sup> During this time, governments were strongly involved in urban development, especially regarding workers’ housing and in architecture. These social programs are manifested in the monumental and experimental modernist social housing estates that were built throughout the continent.<sup>18</sup>

This social agenda was interrupted in all of Latin America, beginning in Chile, when in 1973 the socialist government of Salvador Allende was overthrown by a military coup. The new military regime of Augusto Pinochet gave way to the liberalization of the economy, with reforms ‘advised by US-trained economists’, which ‘would become commonplace throughout Latin America.’<sup>19</sup> The new economic policies, known today as neoliberalism,<sup>20</sup> transformed the way cities would develop in the years to come.

## THE NEOLIBERAL LATIN AMERICAN CITY AND THE PATH TO VACANCY

Neoliberal economic policies have strongly influenced the growth dynamics of Latin American cities, leading, either directly or indirectly, to vacancy and abandonment, particularly in major urban centres. The free-market economy created new urban poles prompting a change from rural-urban to inter-urban migration patterns, thus leaving behind socially and physically fragmented cities.<sup>21</sup>

### **Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Panama**

As previously mentioned, in Latin America, the neoliberal experiment began in Chile, one of the most urbanized countries in the region to this day. The effects of the new economy did not manifest in high vacancy rates (5.8 per cent).<sup>22</sup> A probable explanation is that in the 1990s, Chile's government decided to return to some social projects to expand its 'social expenditure'.<sup>23</sup> However, the initial abandonment of the social welfare state is still visible in its public infrastructure. One of the projects documented in this research revives an abandoned public space located in a modernist social housing complex at the heart of Santiago (see Pasarelas Verdes).

As with Chile, in Colombia (6.22 per cent)<sup>24</sup> and Peru (8.75 per cent)<sup>25</sup> the free-market economy did not result in visible vacancy or abandonment rates. Notwithstanding, these cities attested an evident sociospatial polarization, the growth of informality—in the form of labour and habitat—and an increase in rural and urban violence, particularly in Colombia and Peru. Inequalities and violence promoted extreme urban segregation which translated into the proliferation of 'gated communities' on the periphery of cities and the further fragmentation of the cities into formal and informal dichotomies.

Although the free-market economy has not yet led Panama to high vacancy rates (8.18 per cent),<sup>26</sup> it has influenced Panama City's urban 'hyper-growth' described by geographer Sadoff as 'neoliberalism on drugs'.<sup>27</sup> The skyline of the city, comprised by an extreme conglomeration of modern high-rise buildings, is a deceiving image which disguises Panama's 'high rates of urban poverty, social exclusion, insecurity, and environmental deterioration'.<sup>28</sup>

### **Argentina**

In contrast to the four countries having just been explored, the following three countries—Argentina, Mexico, and Puerto Rico—have some of the most staggeringly high vacancy rates in the region and, as will be discussed, these are closely related to the imposition of the neoliberal agenda. According to Alejandro Portes et al.,<sup>29</sup> 'no other Latin American country witnessed a more fervent implementation of the open-markets model than Argentina'. In 2001, Buenos Aires hit an unemployment rate of 20 per cent.<sup>30</sup> By 2010, almost 24 per cent of the city's housing stock was vacant and the country had a total housing vacancy rate of 18 per cent.<sup>31</sup> The city of Tucumán, where two projects have been documented for this article, has a vacancy rate of 15 per cent.

Despite the high rate of vacancy, the Argentinian State continues to produce and 'commercialize' social housing to counter the country's housing deficit,<sup>32</sup> thus further aggravating the phenomenon of vacancy and abandonment. However, Argentina is not the only country in Latin America applying the free-market model to produce social housing in spite of its high vacancy rates. As will be seen in the following section, the Mexican government too has been very active in the production of social housing, a great part of which remains uninhabited.

### **Mexico**

In the 1990s and within the framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA),<sup>33</sup> the Mexican government modified the law protecting the communal land use of the *ejidos*. Up to 1992, the land of the *ejidos* had been 'non-transferable, unseizable, and inalienable'<sup>34</sup> and 'could not be converted to urban use.'<sup>35</sup> The reform of 1992 loosened these prohibitions and allowed for the privatization of this once communal land.

Under the influence of these neoliberal ideologies, the Mexican government started to intervene less in the production of urban infrastructure and housing, instead granting this endeavour to a few private developers.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, developers profited from the reform of the laws once protecting the *ejidos* by being allowed to buy and develop any land they acquired, regardless of the location. This practice has since been poorly regulated and has created a focus on the production of 'social housing' which is still highly subsidized by the state.

According to Maria Teresa Esquivel Hernández et al.,<sup>37</sup> this has led to the overproduction of cheap and small social housing estates of poor quality located in urban peripheries with most of them lacking proper infrastructure, thereby 'generating urban locations without logic.'<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, the overproduction has surpassed the demand for this type of housing and the vacancy rate has increased. In 2010, approximately 5 million houses in Mexico were vacant.<sup>39</sup>

Vacant and abandoned social housing complexes represent only one typology of the vast and poorly quantified empty urban space in Mexico. Other reasons cause vacant and abandoned spaces as well. Closely related to neoliberalism and globalization, the so-called war on drugs has emptied several cities in the north of the country;<sup>40</sup> the declaration of historical city cores as world heritage has contributed to their abandonment; and natural disasters,

such as earthquakes, have demolished hundreds of buildings over the years, leaving vacant plots where once buildings stood.

### **Puerto Rico**

In Puerto Rico, natural disasters play an important role too. Moreover, the strong neoliberal economic policies of the country have contributed to exacerbate the problem of vacancy and abandonment.

According to the United States Census Bureau, an estimated 330,000 of houses in Puerto Rico were vacant in 2016, representing 21 per cent of its total housing stock.<sup>41</sup> Arguably, migration is the main cause of house vacancy on the island. According to Jorge Duany,<sup>42</sup> by the mid-twentieth century 2 million Puerto Ricans had migrated from the island and the ‘proportions of this exodus are staggering considering that the population of Puerto Rico’, to this day, has not reached 4 million.

An important fact to keep in mind is that Puerto Rico has never become a sovereign country. After being a colony of Spain, it was invaded in 1898 by the United States and became an ‘unincorporated territory’ of the country in 1901. Sixteen years later, in 1917, Puerto Rican people were granted U.S. citizenship but did not gain the right to vote in federal nor congressional elections.<sup>43</sup> However, they did gain the right to travel freely from the island to the mainland of the United States—where they gained voting rights for federal elections.

In 1947, the Industrial Incentives Act—also known as ‘Operation Bootstrap’—was implemented to industrialize Puerto Rico and to modernise and develop its economy, granting tax exemptions to US corporations. As a result of this, agricultural production declined and unemployment rates increased, thus motivating a strong wave of migration to the United States. In the early 1940s, 96 per cent of the population of Puerto Rico lived on the island. It is estimated that today the majority of Puerto Ricans live on the mainland of the United States.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the dependency of Puerto Rico on the United States has grown since, becoming more evident after a Category 4 hurricane hit and devastated the island in September of 2017.<sup>45</sup> This natural disaster has prompted a new wave of migration<sup>46</sup> and it remains unknown how this phenomenon will contribute to space vacancy in the cities.

It is likely that the number of vacant and abandoned spaces in Latin America will continue to rise, especially if neoliberal urban planning practices are allowed to continue. If neglected, vacant and abandoned spaces may become the ruins of modern society. Nevertheless, they should not be disregarded, because

[i]n ruins, things usually assigned to specific functions become jumbled, and the absence of any ordering imperative allows for a more unscripted and loose engagement with space and materiality.<sup>47</sup>

In the coming sections, I will present projects that appropriate such vacant and abandoned spaces to transform and activate them with diverse and dynamic temporary uses.

## METHODS OF EXPLORATION

Beginning by collecting and documenting projects of temporary use, I produced a case catalogue. I proceeded by organizing and classifying the information to provide a general understanding of the documented projects. Finally, I produced thin descriptions to analyse and define the main temporary uses. The selected cases share two criteria. They are projects of temporary appropriations of vacant and abandoned spaces within urban areas with the aim to deliberately transform the spaces they temporarily claim. Please note that this research does not include other kinds of appropriation of urban space such as squatting or street vending.

### Data Collection

To gather the projects' data, I carried out an online questionnaire published in social media and sent via email to acquaintances. I used the word-of-mouth technique, searching participants in social media, in particular on Facebook and in architectural blogs including *Dezeen*, *ArchDaily*, and *Plataforma Arquitectura*. I followed seminars and conferences related to place-making, such as Place-making Latinoamérica 2017, which helped me find activist organizations appropriating vacant and abandoned spaces. I conducted specific internet searches in Spanish, using keywords and key concepts such as 'temporary use', 'temporary appropriations', 'appropriation of abandoned house', 'intervention of abandoned building', and 'art in abandoned building'.

In order to learn more about each case, I analysed news articles and images, followed the projects on social media, in particular on Facebook,

where projects are often well-documented chronologically and in real time. Furthermore, I conducted twelve interviews with key actors involved in the materialization of the projects to whom will be referred to as activists from now on. The layout of the interviews was divided into three main sections and it combined semi-structured questions as well as open questions that led to narrations. The first section was about the interviewee and the organization. The second section was about a particular project. The third section was about the relevance and meaning of the project to society in the way it relates to the specific country and to the broader context of Latin America.

I began the interview by asking for personal information about the interviewee, such as name, age, level of education, and profession. These questions were followed by an open question encouraging the interviewee to narrate stories about the past in order to help the researcher understand the motivations behind the projects and the reasons the organization exists in the first place.

In the second section of the interview, I asked the activist to recount, from the beginning to the end, how the project had unfolded. If necessary, I asked for specific details about the context of the project, such as the type of ownership, physical characteristics of the site, or why the space was vacant or abandoned. I continued asking for specific information about the project, such as dates, how the site had been found, who had participated in materializing the project, and which materials and resources had been used. In addition, I asked which activities had taken place and who had been allowed to participate in those activities. However, most of these questions were answered during the narration.

For the last part of the interview, I asked the activist to talk about the relevance of the project in the context of their specific countries and in the broader Latin American context, such as the role of other organizations, universities and governmental institutions, and what architects and urban planners might learn from these experiences. I ended the interview by asking the activist to be referred to another project related to temporary use. New projects were added to the project catalogue.

These narrations allowed the interviewee to share information about the projects, which went beyond the scope of the more structured questions and thereby helped the researcher understand the projects holistically.

Nevertheless, only specific answers were relevant for this article and further analysis on the narrations is needed to fully understand the phenomenon of temporary use in the context of Latin America.

### **Data Organization and Classification**

After collecting the data, I organized the projects by the names of the activists, the names of the projects, and the year in which the projects took place. I classified the projects by 'spatial contextual characteristics' which include four categories: country of origin, type of space, type of property, and a special spatial characteristic. Subsequently, I produced thin descriptions<sup>48</sup> about each project and analysed how each of them had temporarily used the appropriated space. Table 1 describes the organization, classification, and categorization of the different projects of temporary use.

### **Country of Origin**

This research found twenty-four projects from seven countries in Latin America: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Puerto Rico. Eight projects were located in Puerto Rico, representing the territory with the most temporary appropriations found. I collected data on five projects from Mexico; three projects were found in Colombia as well as in Panama; two in Peru and Argentina; and one in Chile. It is worth noting that the projects charted in Puerto Rico and Mexico were all conducted independently by different groups of activists. In the other cases, the projects were conducted by the same group respectively.

### **Type of Space**

As mentioned earlier, all of the selected projects were temporary appropriations of vacant or abandoned spaces. Hence, these appropriations unfolded within an existing immediate physical context which can be either a built or an unbuilt environment. In the urban context, a 'building' represents the built environment and a 'plot' the unbuilt. These make up the classification of 'type of space'.

From the twenty-four projects analysed, fourteen fall under the category of 'building' and ten under 'plot'. Categorized as 'building' were projects that unfolded inside a constructed space, mostly confined by walls and a roof. However, I included projects that appropriated ruins, such as the projects La Perla in Puerto Rico and Proyecto Aupa in Argentina, into this classification. In both cases, the structural elements of the appropriated building are still

present, although most of the construction is strongly damaged or missing. Another distinctive project classified as a 'building' is Pasarelas Verdes in Chile. The project emerged on an elevated platform which is not confined by walls or a roof. However, this platform was designed and constructed to connect several buildings, thus becoming an added element to the buildings.

The predominant characteristic of the projects classified as 'plot' is the openness of the spaces they claim. These spaces can be large open pieces of land or smaller urban voids, such as remnant spaces between buildings. For example, the project Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza, Puerto Rico, appropriated an urban void of 200 square metres contained in three sides by adjoining buildings while remaining completely open to the street. Alternatively, Huerto Roma Verde, Mexico, covered an open area of approximately 8,000 square metres of land in a highly populated neighbourhood in Mexico City.

### **Type of Property**

I organized the projects according to the type of ownership and paired it with the condition of occupancy: vacant, abandoned, or intestate. Under the classification of 'type of property' projects were categorized as 'public and abandoned', 'private and vacant', or 'private and intestate'.

The category of 'public and abandoned' includes spaces that are owned by the state and have been abandoned for several years. These spaces can be buildings, plots, public squares, or even streets, as was the case in the project Galería Ballindamm which for one year appropriated an unused street in the city of Queretaro, Mexico, transforming it into an art gallery, a café, and an open-air movie theatre once a week. In total, nine projects fall into this category.

The category of 'private and vacant' comprises ten projects that materialized on private property which at the moment of its appropriation was vacant and may have been awaiting future use. Therefore, these spaces are not considered to be in a condition of abandonment. Usually in these cases, the owner of the property is contacted and permission is granted to the activists to use the space under certain agreements.

The category of 'private and intestate' is specific to the Latin American context. This category refers to private property which remains in a legal condition called 'intestate'. Intestate commonly means that the property owner died without leaving a will. In this case, a legal process called intestate

succession will occur. This process varies depending on the country. Usually, the property rights will be transferred—in the following order—to the next of kin, spouse, or to the State. In the case of Puerto Rico, for example, when the property right is transferred to the Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico), the property rights will automatically be relinquished to the University of Puerto Rico.<sup>49</sup>

### **Special Spatial Condition**

Additionally, several projects share an interesting spatial characteristic. They have either materialized in the plot where a building has been ‘demolished’ or in a building that is due ‘to be demolished’. The projects Huerto Roma Verde, Huerto Romita, and Huerto Tlatelolco in Mexico City, rose on the land left by buildings demolished after a disastrous earthquake shook Mexico City in the year 1985.

Moreover, demolition is the core concept of the three Lavamoatumbá projects in Colombia: Los Rosales, Tsunami, and Galería Fénix. The group Lavamoatumbá, meaning ‘we are going to take it down’, invites urban artists from all over the world to Bogotá, Colombia, in order to intervene in buildings that will be demolished. The interventions take the form of large graffiti and conceptual artistic installations, becoming a type of alternative urban art gallery. The relevance of demolition as an important characteristic of temporary use will be discussed later in the article. In total, eleven projects share this special spatial condition.

### **Thin Description and Temporary Uses**

After reviewing the information collected, I produced thin descriptions of each project, consisting of a few paragraphs describing what the project is about, who is responsible for the project, where it takes place, how the project is financed, and which resources are used. Moreover, I included the main activities occurring in each case, which helped me determine the new temporary uses added to the vacant or abandoned sites.

### **FINDINGS**

Each project possesses its own attributes and aims. Furthermore, a series of diverse activities can take place even within a single project. However, in accordance with the objectives of each project, I was able to identify the following four main temporary uses: ‘art and urban art’, ‘centres for urban agriculture’, ‘diverse cultural activities’, and ‘public amenities’.

## Art and Urban Art

In total, six projects fall into the category of ‘art and urban art’. These include all three Lavamoatumbá projects in Colombia, accompanied by Casa Tomada in Mexico, and the two Arte Nómada projects in Panama. In all of

Country	Name of activist organization	Interview date	Project name	Project year	Type of space	Type of property	Occupation status	Special spatial condition
Argentina	1319.TreceDiecinueve	23.1.2018	Intervención Construir el Proyecto Aupa	2013	Plot	Private	Intestate	/
				2017	Building	Private	Vacant	demolished
Chile	Students FAU	x	Pasarelas Verdes	2013 -	Building	Public	Abandoned	/
Colombia	Lavamoatumbá	2.3.2018	Lavamoatumbá-Galería Fénix	2017 -	Building	Private	Vacant	to be demolished
			Lavamoatumbá-Los Rosales	2015	Building	Private	Vacant	to be demolished
			Lavamoatumbá-Tsunami	2015	Building	Private	Vacant	to be demolished
Mexico	Caudal	22.3.2018	Casa Tomada	2016 - 2017	Building	Private	Vacant	/
	Derivé Lab	9.3.2018	Galería Ballindamm	2013 - 2014	Plot	Public	Abandoned	/
	La Cuadra	x	Huerto Roma Verde	2012 -	Plot	Public	Abandoned	demolished
	Sembradores Urbanos A.C.	x	Huerto Romita	2006 -	Plot	Public	Abandoned	demolished
	Cultiva Ciudad	15.3.2018	Huerto Tlatelolco	2012 -	Plot	Public	Abandoned	demolished
Panama	Arte Nómada	2.3.2018	Arte Nómada I	2016	Building	Private	Vacant	/
			Arte Nómada II	2017	Building	Private	Vacant	/
			Temporal	2016 - 2017	Building	Private	Vacant	/
Peru	Nomena/Lateral	x	Intervención en Miraflores	2015	Building	Private	Vacant	to be demolished
	Ocupa tu Calle	25.4.2018	Plazoleta de la Integración	2016 -	Plot	Public	Abandoned	/
Puerto Rico	Casa Taft 169	6.3.2018	Casa Taft 169	2013 -	Building	Private	Intestate	/
	Michelle Malloy Campos	29.3.2018	Cinema Paradiso en la Loiza	2011 - 2013	Plot	Private	Vacant	demolished
	La Gestoría	Communication via email	La Gestoría	2017	Building	Public	Abandoned	/
	Taller Creando sin Encargos	23.2.2018	La Perla	2013	Building	Public	Abandoned	/
			Parada del Almendro	2017 -	Plot	Private	Intestate	demolished
	La Maraña	21.2.2018	Parque Estrella	2015 -	Plot	Public	Abandoned	/
	Brigada Puerta de Tierra	27.4.2018	Plaza Vivero	2015 -	Plot	Private	Intestate	demolished
Infanzón			2015 -	Building	Private	Intestate	/	

Table 1. Organization and classification of temporary use projects from Latin American countries.

these examples, vacant buildings were used to exhibit art and urban art from emerging groups and/or amateur artists. In some cases, the buildings themselves even became an essential element of the artistic object. Moreover, all of the projects have been categorized as 'building' and as being of 'private and vacant' property. Figure 1 is an example of the 'art and urban art' category.



Figure 1. Photograph of the interior of the building appropriated for the project Lavamoatumbá-Tsunami, Bogotá, Colombia (2015). Image courtesy of Lavamoatumbá.

These projects/events were mostly transient, but the duration varied from one weekend to a month, a year, or even open ends. In addition, in most cases the project was comprised of several smaller temporary events taking place on different sites. Some projects were site-specific with temporary events taking place within them. Although the main objective of the projects/events was to exhibit or even sell art, these exhibitions were accompanied by other activities, such as workshops and concerts accessible to the general public and free of charge. Moreover, as one interviewee pointed out, these ‘art galleries’ became a platform for other under-represented artistic groups, such as culinary artists, musicians, and feminist writers.

### Centres for Urban Agriculture

This category is represented by Huerto Roma Verde, Huerto Romita, and Huerto Tlatelolco in Mexico, as well as Plaza Vivero in Puerto Rico. A *huerto* is defined by the Real Academia Española as a ‘piece of land or plot where vegetables, legumes and fruit trees are planted’.<sup>50</sup> However, since the size of the land of each project varies considerably, all projects have slightly different particular objectives, ranging from only providing workshops related to urban agriculture and permaculture, as is the case of Huerto Romita—only 80 square metres—to being extremely productive *huertos* that can



Figure 2. Aerial image of Huerto Tlatelolco in Mexico City, Mexico (2012). Image courtesy of Cultiva Ciudad.

sell its produce to restaurants and rent growing beds to others interested. Figure 2 is an example of a productive centre of urban agriculture.

These four projects have been categorized as 'plot' and most of them fall under the category of 'public and abandoned' property, with the exception of Plaza Vivero where the activists took over a 'private and intestate' 'plot' to transform it into a meeting point for the youth of the community of Puerta de Tierra in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In this space, they grow medicinal plants and take care of the precarious, mostly abandoned built environment of the area.

Huerto Roma Verde, Huerto Romita, and Huerto Tlatelolco share a distinct characteristic. They stand on the land left from demolished buildings following the earthquake of 1985. These lands are publicly owned, but have never been reclaimed and were therefore found in a state of abandonment.



Figure 3. Photograph of Proyecto Aupa, Tucumán, Argentina (2017). Image courtesy of 1319. TreceDiecinueve.

### **Diverse Cultural Activities**

The seven projects that fall under the category of 'diverse cultural activities' are spatially diverse as well. Therefore, some projects have been classified as 'plot' while other have been classified as 'building'. Some of them intervene private properties and others intervene public properties. Moreover, all of them have different time frames and are directed at different audiences. All projects are related in so far as that they have housed different, mostly cultural, activities open to the public and free of charge.

Proyecto Aupa and La Perla are primarily focused on the needs of children and youths. In Tucumán, Argentina, Proyecto Aupa (Figure 3) transformed a soon-to-be demolished building into a playground where children and their parents could do activities together. In Puerto Rico, La Perla was studied through the eyes of the children living there. They would later help transform a 'modern ruin' into a community centre for the children.

Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza in Puerto Rico initially transformed a 'private and vacant' 'plot' into an outdoor cinema. However, over the years, diverse cultural activities have taken place there, such as a performance of the National Circus of Puerto Rico and the hosting of the Alternative Book Fair. Temporal in Panama City was a project that appropriated a 'private and vacant' 'building', transforming it into what the activists called an 'art bar', where for five months art workshops, live music performances, art exhibitions, and screenings in a cinema took place. La Gestoría in Puerto Rico was a project that appropriated a 'public and abandoned' unfinished 'building' belonging to the University of Puerto Rico, transforming it into a cinema or an open mic space. Ever since a devastating hurricane hit the city in September of 2017, it has been serving as a community dining area for those in need on various occasions.

Casa Taft 169 was a project that appropriated a 'private and intestate' 'building' located in the neighbourhood of Santurce in San Juan, Puerto Rico. With the help of neighbours, the space was transformed by the activists into a self-organized civic centre and has since become the community's meeting point for the discussion of matters related to the built and social environment of Santurce. After Hurricane Maria, Casa Taft 169 has been providing space for children to attend classes and for storage of goods to be distributed later on to those in need.

## Public Amenities

These projects are not all located precisely in spaces considered ‘plot’ nor are they all public property. It has been quite challenging to define their classification. The meaning of the term ‘public amenity’ is the function of the projects as a substitute for public service which should be provided by the State in the first place. Figure 4 is an example of a project categorized as public amenity.

Parque Estrella, Plazoleta de la Integración, Galería Ballindamm, and Pasarelas Verdes are all projects transforming abandoned public spaces. After being unused for over forty years and becoming a garbage dump, Parque Estrella, a public park in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was cleaned and transformed by the community into a kind of public square where different activities can be held. In the city of Lima in Peru, the Plazoleta de la Integración was revived by the community using colorful, self-built urban furniture made out of recycled wooden pallets. The project Galería Ballindamm in Mexico appropriated an unused street for one year and transformed it into a multifunctional public space, exhibiting not only art and movies, but occasionally becoming a temporary café as well. Pasarelas Verdes is a project that reopened the access to the elevated platforms of the modernist housing complex Remodelación



Figure 4. Photograph of Parada del Almendro, San Juan, Puerto Rico (2017). Image courtesy of Taller Creando sin Encargos.

San Borja in the centre of Santiago de Chile in Chile, organizing a series of temporary actions to bring life to the platforms, such as a project called *Musica+Plantas* (Music+Plants) in which anyone can visit the walkways, bring a plant, and help clean while listening to live music.

The front yard of a 'building' in the neighbourhood of Miraflores in Lima in Peru was transformed into a public parklet for three months. The intervention, *Intervención en Miraflores*, appropriated a building that is of 'private and vacant' property and waiting 'to be demolished'.

*Intervención Construir el Vacío* and *Parada del Almendro* (Figure 4) are two very different projects which are both located on a 'plot' of 'private and intestate' property. *Intervención Construir el Vacío* in Argentina was an appropriation of a private plot used by the neighbours as a public space, primarily to walk their dogs. The space was transformed into something resembling a public plaza filled with urban furniture and different activities, ranging from film screenings to a fashion show. *Parada del Almendro* in Puerto Rico is a bus stop designed and built on a 'plot' of 'private and intestate' property to substitute the new non-functional bus stops, which are part of a controversial project called *Paseo Puerta de Tierra*, a 'waterfront infrastructure project and commercial development'.<sup>51</sup> As one of the interviewees told me, 'the new bus stops (in *Paseo Puerta de Tierra*) do not provide shade nor a place to sit and one bus stop was placed in front of the doors of a store which could afterwards no longer be opened'.<sup>52</sup>

### **Time Frames, Duration**

All of the studied projects have different temporalities. Some lasted only one day, as is the case with *Intervención Construir el Vacío*, while the project *Proyecto Aupa* lasted ten days. The two *Arte Nómada* projects are a three-day event recurring every year. *Lavamoatumbá-Los Rosales* and *Lavamoatumbá-Tsunami* were opened to the public for approximately one month and no longer exist, as is the case with *La Perla*. The parklet of *Intervención en Miraflores* lasted for three months. *Temporal* lasted five months. *Casa Tomada* and *Galería Ballindamm* appropriated their respective spaces for one year which were later used for several more transient events. *Pasarelas Verdes* is a recurring temporary appropriation/event. *Lavamoatumbá-Galería Fénix* has no time limit so far, as is the case with *Casa Taft 169*, *Parada del Almendro*, *Plaza Vivero*, and *Plazoleta de la Intervención*.

Although Huerto Romita, Huerto Roma Verda, and Huerto Tlatelolco have no time limit, one interviewee mentioned that due to the fact that the projects appropriate public property, their duration is dependent on how incoming governments react to the projects and whether or not they might be inclined to use the space for other purposes.

### **Resources**

It is worth noting that the projects are self-organized and get little support, if any, from the municipalities and governmental agencies. Therefore, they materialize with very few resources, volunteers being the most important one. In order to transform these spaces, which have not been used or taken care of for a long time, cleaning squads made up of volunteers, are organized. Materials are donated by private companies or by members of the community. For example, a pharmacy donated the cameras used for a scavenger hunt taking place in La Perla in order to study the area. In the case of Casa Taft 169, the neighbours donated paint to transform the façade as well as plants to add to the small *huerto*. Pasarelas Verdes periodically organizes cleaning squads which take place alongside concerts and vegetable planting sessions for the elevated *huerto*.

In some cases, more unorthodox methods are used in order to finance elements for the projects. The three women architects, founders, and members of the collective Taller Creando sin Encargos organized a brunch with dishes prepared by themselves and for which they charged ten dollars in order to buy some of the materials used in the project La Perla. The two projects presented in this article conducted by these women architects and activists, La Perla and Parada del Almendro, were organized within the framework of the Workshop de Arquitectura Colectiva for which participants pay a fee that is used to cover some of the costs of the projects.

The first project realized by the group 1319.TreceDiecinueve, Intervención Construir el Vacío, was financed with their personal income. However, in 2016 they applied to and were awarded funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation for Proyecto Aupa. Casa Taft 169 got support from the Museum of Contemporary Art in order to finance art courses for the community.

As mentioned before, most of these spaces are privately owned, which means that special synergies take place between the owners of the spaces and the activists who transform them. In the case of Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza, the owner lent the space to the activists in exchange for it being taken

care of and cleaned occasionally. However, after several months, the owner started charging a monthly fee of one hundred dollars. 1319.TreceDiecinuve made a contract with the real estate company owning the building used to house Proyecto Aupa. If the spaces are publicly owned, usually permission is asked from the municipality in order to use the space. However, the appropriation by some projects started illegally and was later legalized, as is the case with Casa Taft 169.

## DISCUSSION

The collapse of the welfare state and the implementation of neoliberal economic policies have strongly influenced urban development in Latin America and have exacerbated the phenomenon of vacancy and abandonment in different cities. Yet, vacancy and abandonment are of vital importance to temporary use because, under these conditions, different sociospatial transformations can be experimented with and other forms of urban public life can be expressed.

As the study shows, all the projects documented create a different kind of public space, which is active, designed, and built by the community. Nevertheless, two thirds of the projects take place on private property. One reason can be attributed to the fact that governments have surrendered urban development and the production of urban infrastructure to private markets. Focused on economic profits, the free-market city is not interested in producing spaces for the common good. Thus, not surprisingly, new public space has not been at the forefront of urban development. It can be argued then that Latin American cities present a deficit of public space alongside its housing deficit.

Another reason which explains the unfolding of temporary use in private properties is that public space in Latin America continues to be a contentious political space. Public space is produced with an autocratic vision suppressing a more diverse interpretation of public space created by the community. As the projects documented prove, citizens want to be participants in the transformation of the built environment around them. Cinema Paradiso en la Loíza is a good example of different communities in the city who found a venue where they could shape new experiences and imagine a different city in the private, vacant plot of Loíza Street.

Temporary use in Latin America aims at creating a different form of public urban life which mirrors diverse points of view. It is similar to the aims of

the majority of projects of temporary use documented in research taking place in Europe. One important difference, however, is that while temporary use in Latin America continues to be a marginal and poorly understood phenomenon, in Europe it has gained recognition by scholars, planners, and governments, where cities with high vacancy rates have implemented temporary use as a strategy to reinvigorate them. Notwithstanding, in some cases, temporary use has become part of the toolkit of the free-market city and it has been used—or misused—to increase land value in underdeveloped neighbourhoods rather than to enlarge the repertoire of different forms of co-created public space, at times gentrifying neighbourhoods.

Research on temporary use in Latin America, North America, and Europe indicate that cities need to provide outlets for diverse uses and other forms of expression of urban public life which go beyond the confinements of private property, vacant spaces, and abandoned spaces. In order to achieve this goal, the pervasive protection of vacant and abandoned property—private and public—must be challenged, and in an era of global warming, the neoliberal production of the city must be strongly contested. Moreover, the use of the existing building stock should be considered and a new social agenda must be put into place in order to return, particularly to Latin America, the values of the common use of the city.

## CONCLUSION

I began this exploration by contextualizing temporary use within the theoretical debates of do-it-yourself urbanism and everyday urbanism. The projects that have been presented in this article deliberately transform vacant and abandoned urban spaces, a transformation consciously undertaken by citizens rather than governmental institutions. Due to this conscious process of transformation, temporary use is more closely related to do-it-yourself urbanism than everyday urbanism. While everyday urbanism also represents citizen-led transformations of urban space, these actions are not deliberate. Of interest in this article when it comes to everyday urbanism, however, is the observation that it tends to insert private life into public space. As has been discussed in the previous section, the majority of the projects documented in this article depict a similar yet opposite phenomena in which private properties accommodate public life.

Subsequently, I reviewed how the phenomenon of temporary use is unfolding and has been approached in Europe. I then presented a brief historical analy-

sis of Latin America in order to explain the reasons for the many vacant and abandoned urban spaces in the cities of the region. In a final step, I introduced the twenty-four projects that were collected, documented, and analysed.

Information gathered from the analysed projects revealed that vacant and abandoned spaces can be activated with a wide range of uses and creatively transformed using only few resources. Private spaces provide a niche for experimental projects from the outset. It was observed that vacancy and abandonment are an absolutely necessary condition which allows for new and innovative temporary uses, and also shows that the city has become intangible and is in need of outlets for diverse uses and other forms of public space. The support of temporary uses can help provide those outlets.

Further research is needed to gain insight on the motivations behind these projects and to identify the relationship between temporary uses and their physical, social, and economic contexts. Understanding the processes that bring these projects to life can provide insight into other forms of architecture and city planning.

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