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Letter on "Urban mining"

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Handa, Rumiko, "Letter on "Urban mining"" (2016). *Architecture Program: Faculty Scholarly and Creative Activity*. 42.
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ON “TEMPORARY” (SUMMER 2016)

As a former Cambridge and Boston resident while at MIT, and now a longtime New Yorker, I very much appreciated the tactical urbanism theme of your summer issue. Demonstrating an urban initiative by a temporary installation is always preferable to renderings and models. I fondly remember a long-vanished bus stop on Mass. Ave., across from MIT, fashioned from an old bus sliced down the middle. It was at once a shelter, demonstration of bus construction, and brilliant lesson in urban transit.

My recent experience with the installation of PlayCubes play environments on the Greenway near Chinatown was a similar example of a temporary intervention having an unexpectedly major impact. Spending time at this site allowed me to speak with residents and watch kids use this installation. They were delighted, and even teenagers flocked to climb and sit on it—as did several adults. Parents said this simple addition had transformed a formerly underused, barren plaza into an active area for their kids. As in the Times Square example, where temporary chairs and tables became permanent, many voices were raised to request making this installation permanent and to repeat similar installations elsewhere along the Greenway.

In our age of instant digital communication, a “pop-up” can have a wide impact on public awareness and understanding of public space.

RICHARD DATTNER FAIA
Principal, Dattner Architects
New York City

The original Tent City, described by Ken Kruckemeyer AIA in “Occupy Copley,” confirmed what today is self-evident: that residents have a legitimate stake in the neighborhoods in which they live.

Urbanistically, Tent City connected to its place in the city: it featured ground-floor retail spaces, individual entrances at stoops along the street, materials and forms sympathetic to the Victorian South End. Yet it simultaneously looked to the

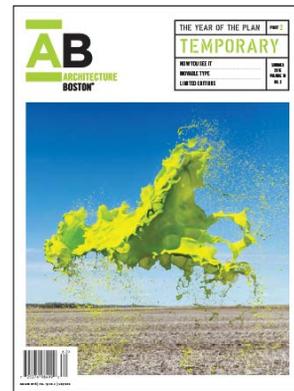
future in a way few projects did at that time—compare it to the Copley Place Mall, Tent City’s hermetic neighbor and contemporary. Socially, Tent City was a new model in which individuals with dramatically different incomes would live together.

Opening in 1988, Tent City required 20 years of intense effort by a dedicated group of volunteers, neighbors, city officials, and a cohort of often uncompensated legal, financial, and design professionals whose shared goal was to meet the nearly intractable need for housing. The process of creating permanent affordable housing today is even harder. The need for multi-source financing—and the regulatory and administrative complexity that accompanies it—is daunting. It’s time to ask those institutions with greater resources and capacity to more vigorously support the enterprise of affordable housing.

ROB CHANDLER FAIA
Principal, Goody Clancy
Boston

In her excellent article “Source material,” Jean Carroon FAIA issues a critically important charge to the design and construction industry: most buildings today have appallingly short service lives that contribute significantly to global warming, and we desperately need to do better, which involves three principles: reuse existing buildings whenever possible; design new buildings for long lives, both in durability and detailing, and make the structural systems robust and the spaces flexible and easily adaptable to unforeseen future uses; and design building systems and components for disassembly and reuse at the eventual end of their long service life.

Rome, the “Eternal City,” is eternal in large part because it has consistently employed these principles for the past 2,000 years. Michelangelo never designed a new building—all his architectural works were interventions on existing



buildings. With their robust structural systems, tall ceilings, ample daylighting, wide stairs and egress paths, and flexible spaces, Renaissance palazzi were easily adapted into apartment buildings, embassies, museums, and academic buildings. When colossal public baths from antiquity were no longer needed, cut stone blocks, clay tile, and timber framing were easily removed and reused in constructing new buildings in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and beyond.

Until we start designing and constructing buildings that have much longer initial service lives, and even longer serial lives thereafter, we are not truly being sustainable, no matter how many boxes we can check (white roof? bike rack?) or what plaque hangs in the lobby.

MATTHEW BRONSKI PE
Fellow, American Academy in Rome
Associate Principal,
Simpson Gumpertz & Heger
Waltham, Massachusetts

“Urban mining” (in “Source material”) may be a new term, but we have a long history of repurposing layers of a building that has become obsolete. Ise Shrine in Japan is rebuilt every 20 years; each time, dismantled columns, beams, and other components are bestowed upon other shrines, which reuse them in high veneration. The Coliseum had been a mine for stone and metal since the fourth century, and in 1452, Pope Nicholas V, intending to rebuild Rome, reportedly removed 2,522 cartloads damaged by an earlier earthquake. The ancient arena’s travertine can be found in buildings throughout the city.

In 16th-century England, King Henry VIII took lead from roofs and gutters of monasteries, then sold the properties to fund military campaigns. At Fountains, near York, the purchaser's son had his residence constructed on the monastic grounds, sourcing materials from abbey buildings, including a spiral staircase that was kept intact. At Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy, the courtyard façade's door and the window frames and balconies we see today have existed since the 1920s, brought from a Gothic palazzo demolished earlier.

Granted, our times are politically and economically different. Yet, with a renewed mindset, we can find value and beauty in the reappropriation of buildings' layers.

RUMIKO HANDA, PHD
Author of *Allure of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent*
Interim Associate Dean and
Professor of Architecture
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

"Temporary" highlights an important movement that has the capacity to ignite positive change. This issue came out as The Trustees of Reservations launched an initiative to create site-specific, curated art installations at our historic properties. It was reaffirming to read thought leaders who see temporary as a permanent trend.

Geoff Edgers conveys in "License to Thrill" how ephemeral structures have the power to stimulate transformative experiences. This is what we hope to accomplish as we invite visitors to the scenic and cultural sites we preserve and protect. Nina Chase's "Model Behavior" illustrates how prototypes can help cities address issues related to rising sea levels and blighted land—an exciting concept as Boston continues its visioning process for the waterfront and support of the arts, something we are honored to be involved in through a Barr Foundation grant. Rebecca Roke's "Transitory Nature" suggests that temporary structures encourage observation of nature's seasonal cycles and create an engaging way to experience a place.

Our pop-up model of Crane Beach "brought" one of New England's most popular beaches into Boston this summer for passersby to experience, with programming designed to illustrate the importance of protecting natural habitat to help address rising shorelines and erosion caused by climate change. The Trustees was founded 125 years ago by visionary landscape architect Charles Eliot to set aside "bits of scenery like a museum holds art or a library holds books." While it is our mission to carry on this legacy for everyone, we must also be adaptive, just like human nature and temporary art, to keep the next generation engaged in celebrating and protecting our culture and our communities.

BARBARA ERICKSON
President and CEO, The Trustees
Boston

I enjoyed Geoff Edgers' survey of some of Boston's art in public places, especially his acknowledgment of Krzysztof Wodiczko's extraordinary Bunker Hill Monument piece. That said, I don't know if the issue is the comparative merits of temporary versus permanent art in public places. The distinction is more about the uses to which imagination, both the artist's and the viewer's, can be put: compare, for example, the Edgar Allan Poe item at the corner of Boylston and Charles streets to Jaroslav Róna's Kafka memorial in Prague sited between a church and a synagogue: both are bronze and both are permanent. That's about it.

It's imperative to acknowledge, in such a survey, the work going on—and the civic and aesthetic results of that work—in neighborhoods such as Jamaica Plain, with Urbano Project and the Hyde Square Task Force, and Four Corners, with the Dorchester Arts Collaborative. Robert Irwin has said that "the question is how you can take art out into the world." BostonAPP/Lab—Arts in Public Places—has, through its workshops and other projects, been focused on trying to find answers to that question, emphasizing the imperative of civic

engagement and, in so doing, defining what is meant by "the public" and by "the place." The goal is to link those definitions more forcefully to the art that emerges—whether permanent or temporary.

RON MALLIS
Executive Director, BostonAPP/Lab

Boston has, indeed, turned a corner in its receptivity to public art as Geoff Edgers postures in "License to Thrill." That is why the city must continue to embrace temporary works. Now is not the time to put the brakes on and declare a style for one monumental sculpture, like a cut-and-paste copy of *Cloud Gate*. We need a few more laps around the track.

Public art is at an inflection point. You may define it as design intervention, while your neighbor imagines a Richard Serra bisecting a plaza; meanwhile, your community leader envisions an artist at the center of a socially engaged project giving voice to disenfranchised youth. In the midst of this redistribution of cultural meaning among artists, curators, and the public, Boston's urban landscape is being reimagined at the speed of light. We cannot expect every new permanent building or plaza to carry meaning, stimulate wonderment, or provoke civic dialogue. This is the work of artists and temporary public art.

Temporary gives us the freedom to try new characters and discover which types of work engender the progressive city we aspire to create. It allows us to develop a public art identity. With enough successes and, yes, failures, Boston can be a leader in redefining public art for the 21st century.

KATE GILBERT
Director of *Now + There*
Boston

I read "Movable type" by Robert Kronenberg with great interest. Small-scale interventions in the urban environment have spiked in recent years. These structures seem to stretch well beyond the boundaries of architecture and plant themselves feet first into the realm of social activism. Whether

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Pamela de Oliveira-Smith · psmith@architects.org

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Boston Society of Architects and other American
Institute of Architects chapters in New England.
Subscription rate is \$35 per year. Call 617.391.4000
or e-mail architectureboston@architects.org.

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ISSN 1099-6346



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ephemeral or deconstructible, they are a response to a problem. At least the good ones are. As architects, we are trained to be problem solvers. Combine that training with a new generation of architects focused on autonomy and self-achievement, and the possibilities of these small gestures are limitless. They allow us to take our ideas off the page or screen and make them real, to create a sense of place within our environment. They give us permission to experiment. Collaboration with other disciplines and the general public creates an architecture for all.

More architects need to embrace this quiet revolution and create local solutions to local problems. Take, for example, a group like the Mad Housers in Atlanta. Volunteers, not architects, are building temporary shelters for the homeless. The AIA Small Project Practitioners provide them with assistance, through a design competition in 2015 to come up with ideas to improve the construction of these shelters. I like to think of these pop-up structures as our way of giving back to the community we live in. We have a duty as citizens to participate in the world around us, to leave it better than how we found it. If all of us did one small project with social impact a year, imagine how much we could change.

JEAN DUFRESNE AIA

Co-principal, SPACE Architects + Planners
Chicago

At the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, we're particularly interested in collaborating with designers, artists, and engineers on temporary experiments in the streetscape. For the past two years, we have held the Public Space Invitational (PSI), a civic design competition that aims to make Boston's civic spaces and infrastructure more intuitive, beautiful, and delightful. So far, PSI-winning teams have built projects that brought a tidal vibra-phone to the Congress Street bridge, provided pop-up learning opportunities on the Rose F. Kennedy Greenway through a portable reading room, and activated the mezzanine of City Hall with

brightly colored skateboard tape.

The invitational has become part of a series of initiatives by Mayor Martin Walsh to engage and support Boston's creative community. Our method of improving the city focuses on creating small, human-scale experiments. We are working to provide more opportunity for people to test a variety of interventions that can provide the basis for long-term, substantial improvements in their neighborhoods and look forward to creating innovative ways for residents and visitors to experience Boston.

NIGEL JACOB, *Co-chair,*

MICHAEL LAWRENCE EVANS,

Program Director

Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics

Boston

"Temporary" is thought provoking, inviting one to ponder what is not. I am old enough to have experienced one piece of "permanent" Boston infrastructure—the Central Artery—imagined, planned, permitted, constructed, and torn down so it could be replaced by another, all in fewer than my 70 years.

Then there is the Parthenon, which we think of as a ruin yet it survived intact for 2,000 years before a munitions explosion 500 years ago created the relic we see today. Or consider Rome, a site of continuous human habitation for 10,000 years. The streets have risen over the structures left behind. Where one used to climb steps to enter the Pantheon, itself a piece of urban renewal, now one walks down a ramp. Think of all the permanent structures buried under the architecture of that city.

It is striking that our imaginings are so limited by human perception—in this case, time. All human constructs are temporary: coming, going, lasting, or ephemeral. Place and time continually interact. We build up and tear down. The test of "good" is time, but even good is temporary.

FINLEY H. PERRY, JR.

Founder, F.H. Perry Builder Inc.

Hopkinton, Massachusetts