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### When Context is an event

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# When context is an event

## - on temporary and performative architecture

BY BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN,  
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The increasing importance of the experience economy for the other sectors of the economy has brought about a marked growth in the number of new cultural buildings. More than 1,200 museums, concert halls, art galleries and other cultural centres have been built in Western Europe during the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> A very large number of the new cultural institutions are extremely exclusive buildings into the bargain, and they represent some of the most outstanding contemporary architecture. Simply think of the Tate Modern in London by Herzog & De Meuron, Luzern Culture and Congress Centre by Jean Nouvel or Kunsthau Graz by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier. Good examples from the Danish scene would include Zaha Hadid's extension of Ordrupgaard Museum, CUBO's transformation of Nordkraft in Aalborg and the Natural Science Centre in Bjerringbro by NORD Architects. Personally, I have great expectations for the coming Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, but the most classic example of the experience economy's potentially successful interplay with architecture is probably the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Frank Gehry's signature project in the Basque country has actually been elevated to the status of a model for economic revitalisation and best practices in relation to the re-contextualisation of the city as a cultural and entertainment zone. Even the oil-wealthy clan regime in Abu Dhabi has gone along with the trend and has just bought one Gehry/Guggenheim – and, so as not to fall behind any

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other state, also one Nouvel/Louvre, one Norman Foster, one Zaha Hadid and one Tadao Ando. The sheik's power-shopping for cultural icons on Saadiyat Island<sup>2</sup> involves much more than a transition to the experience economy; it tells us something about how cities in the post-industrial economy are being manoeuvred into position as spectacular producers of entertainment, education and events. In popular terms, culture is an expanding business area that provides the architect order with many excellent jobs because architecture in general (and not just 'starchitecture') has become a significant catalyst for development.<sup>3</sup> Investments are huge, and all the new cultural institutions are naturally not only symbols of a flourishing civil society, they are also big business for both state and private players. The spectacular icon in Bilbao is being copied diligently as a business model in countless different contexts, but as a rule, the purpose is the same: to re-align economies with a long-term, permanent transformation of cities and the public sphere as a consequence. Architects have been designing cultural buildings for centuries. Naturally, the challenge is to continually rethink the institutional framework to create new, hybrid forms,

try out new technologies and develop the cultural space. And in this connection, the profession has a long-standing, proud tradition to build on. The new, and in this connection, interesting aspect of the development is that the expanding cultural industry is to a great extent event-oriented. Many of the experience economy's programmes are events that do not necessarily need a static or permanent architecture as a frame for their manifestations. There are hundreds of exciting cultural offers outside the Guggenheim and the Louvre, and far from all art exhibitions and concerts are housed in traditional buildings with permanent addresses. A large number of cultural arrangements, both great and small, establish their own context and temporary spaces. Some types of cultural event deliberately try to think out of the box and actively experiment to influence and challenge established urban environments, for example by initiating and stimulating types of behaviour that are not normally at home in the places where they are actually played out.<sup>4</sup> Some cultural events travel around with their own scenographic architecture, and others take the form of events that primarily take place over time. The point is that all of these new, ephemeral cultural institutions have gained relatively great importance for the economy of the knowledge and experience societies and thereby nourished the flowering of an exciting academic field that could be called the *architecture of the temporary*.

### Temporary architecture as an 'experimentarium'

A great deal of temporary architecture has been built down through history, and architecture has broadly speaking always worked with the scenographic aspects of everything from cities and landscapes to intimate spaces. Temporary architecture and event scenography are nothing new in this sense, and there are many good examples of temporary constructions that constitute significant architecture-historical references. The world exhibitions or Expos, as they are known today, are probably the most prominent exponents of this tradition and, at the same time, good examples of how temporary constructions have functioned as the objects of important architectonic experiments and as showcases for technological advances. Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace from 1851, Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion from 1929, which has been rebuilt and ensured a permanent existence into the bargain. Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 housing complex from the Montreal Expo 67, Buckminster Fuller's megastructure from the same year, or MVRDV's stacked landscapes from the Hannover Expo 2000 which sharply formulated some of the themes the drawing office later worked to realise in several different contexts. Still other, less temporary cultural events have also distinguished themselves as significant arenas for architectonic experiments. The Serpentine Gallery in Kensington

Gardens has been inviting prominent architects to design temporary pavilions on the lawn in front of the permanent exhibition building since 2000. In Berlin, the architect network, Raumlabor, has had temporary architecture as a special field since 1999. Raumlabor works in a place-specific manner and with mobile installations that are transported to various cultural events. They take part in cultural life as designers, but at the same time, their work has a clear activist character. Their constructions are often instruments with a political point that aim to do more than simply confuse the creative class or other target groups of culture consumers. Their installations function as critical scenographies that challenge the concrete urban space and point to new forms of application. They could be called "disquieting ducklings"<sup>5</sup> which, with relatively simple means, completely distort the given context through deliberate mood changes. An example of this is their "kitchen monument" where a gloomy, dirty room under a motorway was briefly transformed into a cheerful local street kitchen. It is necessary to be in the right place at the right time to experience Raumlabor in action. The physical construction disappears rapidly, and the long-term effect of their projects is first and foremost established through memory. The physical context remains untouched, but the memories of and the narratives about the place have changed. All projects are connected with a certain event and are designed to disappear as soon as the occasion for them is no longer present. The members of the group therefore very deliberately strive to document their work, and they have developed a communication strategy that, in a certain sense, turns their work into a physical dimension of the new social media. A kind of Twitter architecture that transmits a vital physical message here and now – which is immediately afterwards filed in blogs and other publications. And in this connection, the event can become a virtual catalogue of interpretations which, for "initiated" internet surfers, will change the experience of the place for ever.

Temporary architecture often has an activist and social dimension, which is expressed in the works of the Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban, in particular. He has designed a large number of temporary constructions for refugees and victims of natural catastrophes in Italy, Turkey, Haiti and, most recently, Japan. Raumlabor's activism criticises places and events and comments on them. Shigeru Ban's temporary architecture rather has the character of direct humanitarian aid, and he often uses students as active helpers. At the other end of the spectrum, in the experimental interface between architecture, art and land art, there is the artist duo of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, for example. Their work often attempts to bring out a "different" beauty in buildings and landscapes – somewhat in the same vein as Olafur Eliasson. These are people who enrich the profession of architecture by not being *just* architects.



**Panorama view of Vintergatan at Roskilde Festival 2011**

Vintergatan's many different spaces allow it to function as a lounge area and a meeting place. The design is very open and accessible; in this way Vintergatan facilitates shorter and longer stays equally well.

**Photo:** Henrik Ejnar Rasmussen.

**Text:** Frederikke Sophie Bastrup & Sigrid Marie Poulsen.-



The heritage of events

It lies in the definition of temporary architecture that it is built up, used and taken down, after which it falls into the category of combustible material at the waste disposal station or is stored and later built up again. But there are also good examples of temporary architecture that go further as their own aftermath or for which plans have been made as to how a given design can be transformed and enter into a new or changed context. As a material that can be recycled in a resource-related sense, as a reusable modular system in a constructive sense, as something functional that can be used for another purpose, and with regard to form as an object that undergoes a metamorphosis. Temporary architecture with a long-term, strategic starting point is an exciting development area that is highly relevant for many types of cultural event, one of the biggest of which is indisputably the Olympic Games. The temporary functions of the Olympic Games give impetus to comprehensive building activities, and candidate nations spend mind-boggling sums of money on vying to host them. Former Minister for Culture, Brian Mikkelsen, who was also the Minister for Sport, did not believe that Denmark could afford or had the stature to submit a bid for the Games, and this international event is clearly becoming a project for the great nations. The Chinese authorities’ handling of the Games in 2008 is an excellent bad example of how cultural events and temporary architecture can interact. The Olympic Games in Beijing lasted from 8 to 24 August, and the authorities razed several historically valuable residential areas to the ground for the purpose of building a new urban quarter, which today is a monumental ghost town. Mega-events such as the Olympic Games can naturally be utilised strategically and this is already in full swing in London. In this case, the event, which will take place next year, has led to the high-speed transformation of the run-down Lower Lea Valley industrial area.

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The Olympic Games in London will in all probability set a new standard for the exploitation of the event as something other and more than a PR stunt on a gigantic scale. There is often talk of the “legacy” after the Olympic Games, and the transformation of the temporary architecture of the Games will take years, but the ambition is that the event will benefit local people and give the entire quarter a decided lift.

Musicon and its virtual sister city

Each year at the end of June, the show ground at Roskilde is transformed into the fifth biggest city in Denmark, complete with residential quarters, market places and service institutions. Roskilde Festival has architects to plan and design the event which attracts more than 100,000 people and involves about 25,000 volunteer helpers. The festival is naturally a musical event, but the arrangers want to do more than simply entertain people, and they have experimented with

the development of temporary installations for many years. Work is carried out purposefully at the festival to create new social spaces and opportunities for self-expression with the help of various types of temporary architecture. The well-defined physical space and the limited time horizon of the festival define a very special framework within which everyday, collective social conventions can be exceeded, something the temporary architecture helps to support and stimulate. In this sense, Roskilde Festival is a kind of laboratory for trying out new public arenas. The festivities and the music programme last for eight days, but the effect of the social pressure-cooker is lasting and potentially rich in perspectives. Sociologists and urban researchers are in full swing studying the event’s dynamic and its implications for the world outside the fence.<sup>6</sup> Festival arrangers have collaborated with various educational and research environments for many years, and even Roskilde Municipality has finally discovered the opportunities that lie in a more committed partnership with the temporary city. A secretariat has been set up, and the establishment of a sister city on the other side of Holbæk motorway, which is intended to build on the festival’s synergy effect, is well in hand. “Roskilde Municipality will create a neighbourhood which will strengthen the city’s opportunities in the field of experience economy.”<sup>7</sup> The new “creative neighbourhood” is called Musicon, and the intention is that it will “be a motor for the transformation of Roskilde into a city with even sharper focus on culture, cultural business, education, events and housing.”<sup>8</sup>

This publication deals with context and understanding context, and it is naturally interesting in this connection that an event such as Roskilde Festival can bring about a completely new urban development. That event can so to speak create cities, and that context is not just something we inherit and carefully build on, but is also to a great degree a result of the narratives and the events we create here and now. This perception may appear banal, but in a Scandinavian context, there has been a long-reigning, highly static view of context as an almost holy character alliance between place, climate, history and the building tradition which has often made it necessary to confront the past or to begin from scratch if new thinking was required. In this sense, performative and temporary architecture open up a new middle path based on active participation and ensure new types of ownership and inclusion in urban development.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Carsten Thau “Arkitekturen i kulturens strømme - betragtninger i anledning af nutidig byudvikling”, in Jensen, J.B. (ed.): *Kulturplaner - fra velfærdsplanlægning til kulturel byudvikling*. Copenhagen: Bogværket, 2008.  
<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.saadiyat.ae/en/masterplan/saadiyat-cultural-district.html>.  
<sup>3</sup> See Marling, Gitte; Kiib, Hans & Jensen, Ole B.: *Experience City.dk*. Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2009.  
<sup>4</sup> At the more political end of the scale, the Love Parade in Moscow can be mentioned. The arrangers attempt to confront the extensive homophobia in the Russian state apparatus by turning up in front of official buildings and other 'hetero-monuments' in tight underpants.  
<sup>5</sup> *The Disquieting Duckling* is the title of an Asger Jorn painting from 1959. “The disquieting duckling took its point of departure in the fear caused by the atomic bomb’s mushroom cloud, but the motif with the outside duckling in the little pond has been the subject of many interpretations. In our day, it could be an illustration of the fear created by genetic engineering.” ([http://www.dmol.dk/billede\\_info.asp?genst\\_id=16380](http://www.dmol.dk/billede_info.asp?genst_id=16380))  
<sup>6</sup> Most recently, Marling, Gitte & Kiib, Hans: *INSTANT CITY @ ROSKILDE FESTIVAL*, Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2011.  
<sup>7</sup> <http://www.musicon.dk/webtop/site.aspx?p=3398>.  
<sup>8</sup> Op. cit.

Staff, Roskilde Festival project, the bachelor’s degree programme 2010/2011: assistant professors Stefan Rask Nors, Rasmus Grøn­bæk Hansen, Helle Christensen, Annette Svane­klink Jakobsen, Christian Dahl, Thomas Clemmensen, Stefan Darlan Boris, Christian Carlsen and associate professors Lena Kondrup Sørensen & Boris Brorman Jensen.



**Daylight rendering**, - captures how the installation fills out the empty site and makes it an inspiring place to be. **Rendering:** the students. **Text:** Frederikke Sophie Baastrup & Sigrid Marie Poulsen.

Architecture students designed and built an installation at Roskilde Festival 2011

By Sigrid Marie Poulsen & Martin Lynnerup, bachelor students

**At this year’s Roskilde Festival, it was possible to experience a new, interesting habitat designed by bachelor students from Aarhus School of Architecture. The installation integrated space, light and materials in a novel way, and the initiative-takers from the festival were extremely enthusiastic about it when they revealed the winning proposal during an event at the school.**

Vintergatan

The installation was called Vintergatan, which means the Milky Way in Swedish. The title refers to the principal motif of the installation: a ribbon of light that framed the space in front of the Pavilion Stage. During the day, the installation was a natural resting place and somewhere to hang out between concerts. During the night, it created a ribbon of light that was a preferred gathering place for the many visitors to the festival. The installation comprised various triangular modules that could be combined to create a multitude of distinctive, exciting spaces. It “grabbed” the flow of people and provided a setting for life in the area. In addition to establishing a place to sit in and relax, Vintergatan was a prominent landmark in the area. The Vintergatan project was designed with the focus on the use of reusable materials – and within the framework of a very limited budget. It was a challenge to get such a great effect from cheap, simple materials: “Most people can come up with good ideas, but the challenge is realising them – especially on a tight budget, and we were obliged to be creative in a completely new way”, related architecture student Anja Nørgaard.

New collaboration

The project was the result of a collaboration between Roskilde Festival and Aarhus School of Architecture in which 125 bachelor students worked for two months to develop it for the festival’s Pavilion area. The basic need for seating and shelter was the point of departure for the development of the installation. Roskilde Festival also wanted the students to develop the installation to create an extraordinary spatial experience for festival visitors. The Pavilion area, where the installation was built, is the festival stage for up-and-coming musicians and a base for the creative “growth layer”. And that was precisely the reason why the aspiring architects’ installation was located there. “The result of the collaboration with Aarhus School of Architecture far exceeded the expectations we had before we began the project”, said Signe Brink Pedersen, project manager for Roskilde Festival’s cultural partnerships.

Realisation

The students from the school were responsible for building the entire project. They had to travel to the area a week before the festival began, wield drills and get their hands dirty. And it was a new challenge for all of the year’s 125 students to work together as a team. The collaboration gave them a unique opportunity to follow a project all the way from the drawing board to reality. “It was great to have the opportunity to realise a project at such an early stage of our studies”, was the verdict of architecture student Jorge Gonzalez. In addition to Vintergatan, two smaller projects were also built and designed by architecture students: “Nature Box” and “Northern Lights”.

The new bachelor’s degree programme

Cooperating on projects is part of the academic and educational development of the school’s bachelor’s degree programme, explains Associate Professor Boris Brorman Jensen, Aarhus School of Architecture: “One of the intentions of the Roskilde collaboration was to bridge the gap between theory and practice by allowing teaching to take its point of departure in down-to-earth problems and provide students with concrete experience in realising their projects”.