

# Ephemeral Reuse

Festivals and Public Space in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris

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## Abstract

While adaptive reuse is often associated with the transformation of permanent buildings, this paper examines ephemeral architectures as reusable and adaptive spatial forms and their potential for creating sustainable communities. Both ephemerality and adaptive reuse are historical constants. Their recurrent, symbolically charged interventions have long participated in making and remaking urban space. This paper undertakes a comparative case study of late-eighteenth-century royal and revolutionary festivals in Paris. Drawing on archival descriptions and images, it analyses ephemeral spatial compositions and construction logics with a focus on reuse. Each approach balances spatial aesthetics, performance, and cost differently and encodes distinct conceptions of social order within public space. Spatial comparison and historical contextualization of political-administrative hierarchies demonstrate the mechanisms by which ephemeral reuse functions as an operative strategy for the long-term structuring of public space. The findings motivate design and management principles—bridging reversibility, accessibility, and spatial composition—that translate historical event practice into contemporary strategies for ephemeral reuse. Conceived as a critical architectural strategy, ephemeral reuse displaces centralized planning authority toward event-based, reconfigurable infrastructures, opening possibility spaces and offering prefigurative models for inclusive, iterative city-making in contemporary urbanism.

Keywords: Ephemeral Architecture, Lightweight Construction, Urban Instruments

## Introduction

This paper foregrounds the concept of ephemeral and reusable adaptivity in public space, whose influence exceeds its brief material presence. Ephemeral derives from Greek *ἐφ' ἡμέρας* (“for the day”, *ἐπι + ἡμέρα*) and in biology denotes short life spans that nonetheless complete life cycles (Alfaro d’Alençon et al. 2016, 8). Reuse, on the other hand, comes from Latin *re-* (“again”) + *uti* (“to use”), and adaptive from *adaptare* (“to fit, to adjust”). In twentieth-century U.S. English, the dictionary Merriam-Webster recorded adaptive reuse (1973) as «the renovation and reuse of pre-existing structures [...] for new purposes», a building-centered definition that nevertheless signals the broader normative turn from demolition toward redeployment (Wong 2023, 6). Together, these concepts point to an event infrastructure oriented to high reuse and low impact—non-invasive, quickly installed, design-efficient assemblies (Janković, Stanković 2020, 164–165)—and, through temporary appropriation, to evolving uses and deeper identification with spaces and cultural heritage (Melis et al. 2020, 197).

Understanding architecture not as a collection of mere objects, but as a complex sets of relations follows the idea of socially produced space introduced by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 2013, 142). Together with the temporal-spatial understanding of Friedrich Achleitner, who says «*Jede Planung ist falsch, die Qualitätsunterschiede liegen nur in der Länge der Zeitspanne, bis die Fehler sichtbar werden*»<sup>1</sup> (Achleitner 2007, 74), these premises constitute the paper's foundations and analytic linkages, grounding an account of events as operative situations in which design techniques, organizational procedures and authority relations produce the city. The empirical focus is late-eighteenth-century Paris, comparing royal (*Ancien Régime*) and revolutionary festivals. Both political systems mobilized large, time-bounded events; structuring attention and movement at urban scale. They diverged, however, in spatial design, representational programs, and the logistics of reuse. Setting these formations in contrast clarifies how ephemerality was engineered, governed, and spatially composed and how these practices inscribed permanently into the urban fabric. Methodologically, the study combines comparative-historical analysis of archival descriptions and images, analysing the locations and construction techniques of the historical practice. The inquiry addresses three main questions: first, how do temporally limited assemblies inscribe lasting form in urban space; second, which technical and institutional conditions enable ephemeral and adaptive reuse; third, how are spatial design choices connected to configuring distinct orders of publicness and patterns of authority?

### Contemporary Events and Urban Planning

Today, events are managed through the project template – fixed scope and budget, a defined life cycle with sequenced phases from initiation to closeout (Bladen et al. 2018, 47). This template originates in large engineering works, while the co-evolution of project and program management remains underexplored in spatial planning (Van Buuren et al. 2010, 3). Operationalizing reuse in ephemeral projects is complex across multiple levels. At the governance–strategy level, ambitions stall in the absence of inter-organizational coordination or limited participation (Husukić 2023, 197). At the ownership level, short, terminable leases and insecure property relations undermine incentives to maintain, store and redeploy inventories (Lange 2007, 62) and at the labour level, event production frequently relies on precarious contracts, constraining inspection, repair and safety procedures required for redeployment (Ferrerri 2021, 165-167). Technical conditions are equally determinant. Lightweight systems for ephemerality often rely on composites or glue-laminated layers that hinder separation and recycling, limiting circularity (Hafkamp 2005, 112). Joints designed for multiple assembly-disassembly cycles require higher durability and capacity, adding mass and cost that can erode the advantages of lightness (Crowther 2016, 71). Where these preconditions cohere, ephemerality affords a specific performance that reuse can stabilize and amplify: Processual flux allows space to be functionalised and de-functionalized quickly, lowering the weight of consequences and accelerating decisions (Falkeis et al. 2022, 50). Events also shape images of place and generate intangible impacts that outlast the occasion (Cudny 2016, 87). In some instances, conceptually strong and culturally significant practices consolidate into permanence through material translation, ritual reiteration or vernacular institutionalization (Petrova 2017, 262). Policy discourse, however, has at times recoded improvised, informal or even illegal practices as the enfant terrible of planning, and historical associations with shanty and squatter settlements burden

contemporary temporary use with negative connotations (Alfaro d'Alençon et al. 2016, 7; Oswalt et al. 2013, 9). Conceptually, the contemporary event can be a governance-embedded tool for iterative reconfiguration of public space. Its capacity to sustain ephemerality and reuse hinges on the coordinated fit between organizational arrangements and technically cycle-robust assemblies.

## Historical Context

In early modern Paris, architecture and urbanism functioned as state techniques for shaping civic conduct. Building regulation from 1607 consolidated a juridical-aesthetic order of straight alignments and lawful cornice heights; irregularities were reclassified as defects to be corrected, and permits tied construction to codified lines and profiles (Dell 2025, 133–135). Parcellation and increasingly precise cartographies brought the everyday fabric under a normalizing gaze, while commissioned images linked the staged event to memory and subsequent plans, creating a reflexive loop between representation and urban procedure (Dell 2025, 133). The Place Royale condenses this transition: a cleared, framed square where humans learned open-space behaviour through orchestrated assemblies, fusing ritual sovereignty with an emerging disciplinary urbanism that reorganized difference within the city rather than merely at its wall (Dell 2025, 133). In this frame, festivals are not marginal entertainments but instruments for producing spatial and social order.

## Royal Festivals

Under the *Ancien Régime*, festival power rested on a tightly organized apparatus: «the power of these ephemeral events [...] would have come to nothing without the rigor of a complex and well-considered system of event production» (Monin 2008, 155). Posts, barriers, frameworks and lights «organize the festival space», «set limits, draw contours and precisely outline the site», straightening irregular squares and masking discordant fronts to present «exemplary urban arrangements» (Fig. 1). Processional layouts were «calculated according to points of view» (Monin 2008, 158). Material practice centred on scenographic elements: demountable timber frames painted canvas; «illusion drove this art», with imitation marble and stone in wood, cardboard, plaster and daub introducing the very idea of stability and luxury (Monin 2008). In a city yet without ordinary street lighting, chandeliers, candelabras, torches, fireworks and lanterns inverted “nature” at night, while raised orchestral stages optimized sight and audibility across crowds (Monin 2008, 161). The compositional result was to complete hierarchical street orders through calibrated viewpoints and theatre-derived façades, staging the city as an auditorium of distinctions—not merely aesthetic gradations, but explicitly social hierarchies of rank and precedence that regulated who appeared, who saw, and who was seen within the ceremonial field (Ozouf 1988, 3). The immediacy of these scenographic constructions, capable of temporarily imposing a disciplined visual order onto irregular urban fabrics, informed durable programmes of urban beautification by demonstrating how such alignments, rhythms and façadal logics could later be materialised permanently in stone (Monin 2008, 161). The festivals ran on logistics of reuse. Illuminations were repaired and adapted; scaffolds, trestles, orchestra floors and artificial flowers were sorted after each event and stored in municipal depots, like Parisian ramparts or the attic of the *Hôtel de Ville*. The lighting scheme (Fig. 1) in the *Rue de la Ferronnerie* was erected for the marriage of Madame Première in 1739 and reused in 1744



Fig. 1. Festival decorations, Rue de la Ferronnerie, Paris, 1745. (Martin Marvie, *Musée Carnavalet*)

for the return of Louis XV (Monin 2008, 162). Furthermore Jacques-François Blondel proposed modular motifs that could be reassembled for different designs, and permanent foundations under the paved area for were built for ephemeral structures (Monin 2008). Supply chains signaled both scale and cost: «several hundred» northern pine boards from Danzig, Prussia and Sweden were brought into Paris for major machines (Monin 2008, 172). The events made the central power of the monarchy legible, yet contemporaries also condemned its expense. Voltaire asked: «Ne ferons-nous pas honteux à la fin de nous borner à de petits feux d'artifice, vis-à-vis d'un bâtiment grossier, dans une petite place destinée à l'exécution des criminels ?»<sup>2</sup> (Voltaire 1750, 78; Monin 2008, 161).

### Revolutionary Festivals

Revolutionary practice inverted the premises of courtly spectacle and redirected reuse toward symbolic and functional adaptation: Assigning new meanings to buildings and spaces, churches were adapted as Temples of Reason, royal signs and thrones were publicly destroyed, and spatial geometries and orders overwritten (Ozouf 1988, 279). As shown in Fig. 2, the cathedral *Notre-Dame de Paris* is only visible in the background and its spatiality overwritten by the ephemeral installations. Processional layouts and field arrangements adopted amphitheatrical spatialities—broad, open perimeters and radial orientations—ensuring reciprocal visibility across expansive, unroofed grounds; a central altar or colossal column functioned as an omnidirectional point of orientation legible from all sides (Ozouf 1987, 159; Ozouf 1988, 130). The communal planting of Liberty Trees within processions functioned as a ritual of civic unification and spatial inscription, marking sites while binding participants into a shared republican polity (Ozouf 1988, 5). Where *Ancien Régime* festivals staged culture's domination of nature through pyrotechnic spectacle, the revolutionaries

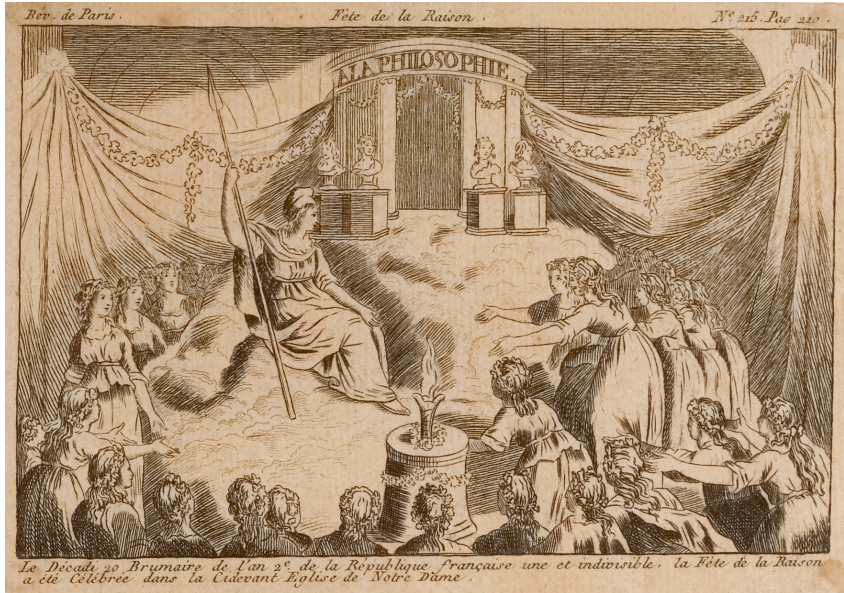


Fig. 2. *Fête de la Raison*, Notre Dame de Paris, 1793. (anonymous engraver, Musée Carnavalet)

condemned fireworks as waste and advanced an immanent aesthetic of nature (Ozouf 1988, 3). Vegetal scenography—festoons, garlands, branches and artificial mountains—overwrote existing symbols, and circulated as a transferable code beyond Paris (Ozouf 1988, 149).

### Ephemerality and Authority

The juxtaposition of royal and revolutionary fêtes clarifies how ephemeral architecture and reuse strategies were calibrated instruments for political intent: While the ephemeral structures completed and accentuated the spaces for the royal festivals, the ephemeral structures of the revolutionary festivals overwrote and changed spaces. Royal festivals articulated the political hierarchies with spatial configurations. Reuse here served to maximize the effect of an impressive spectacle. Monin characterizes the festivals as «a lucid and impertinent art that reconciled the realities of difficult urban settings with the requirements of a client whose ambition was to offer the world the spectacle of a triumphant monarchy» (Monin 2008, 178). Revolutionary festivals articulated accessibility to a collective and decentralized public not only during the event, but also through participatory dynamics of construction (Fig. 3). This practice recoded space with comparatively “lighter” material means: Conceptually following Eco, the festivals operated as open works, activating a framework intentionally designed to be completed by engagement (Eco 1989, 21). In Corboz terms an “imaginary Paris” was constructed in which political aims were pursued together through reweighting and recombination of existing sites (Corboz 2014, 112). Or as Mona Ozouf describes «The Revolutionary festival worked for the homogenization of mankind. This explains



Fig. 3. Civic Construction, *Fête de la Fédération*, Paris, 1790. (anonymous engraver, *Musée Carnavalet*)

the meaning of its renunciations: it was not a demolition enterprise but the search for a sacralizing foundation» (Ozouf 1988, 279). Civic equality was staged by unifying spaces and material adaptations carrying inclusive and available aesthetics (festoons, garlands, branches, costumes) that could be iterated beyond Paris.

## Conclusion

Following Massimiliano Tomba, the Parisian revolutionary practices exemplified multiple assemblies: clubs, sections, and districts practised the possibility of a plurality of authority for a short moment in history (Tomba 2019, 22). For Tomba, «global, social, and political space must be interpreted as entirely temporalized», traversed by heterogeneous rhythms in conflict (Tomba 2019, 7). This plurality is not merely theoretical but consequential for democratic processes: it widens access to the means of spatial composition and distributes a plurality of authority in public space.

This historical case study repositions adaptive reuse beyond the transformation of permanent buildings. *Ephemeral reuse as a spatial praxis expands architectural agency across temporal scales*. Contemporary tactical urbanism operates through small increments of adaptive change assembled from varied resources; assemblage thinking and actor-network perspectives help trace how such temporary constellations cohere (Stevens, Dovey 2023, 180). As Certeau insists, a tactic «depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing.” Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them.» (Certeau et al. 2002, 23). In the sense suggested

by Situationist notation systems – whose accuracy increases with iterative experimentation (McDonough 2009, 111) – the contrast between royal and revolutionary fêtes demonstrates that the efficacy of adaptive reuse does not correlate linearly with material investment. Instead, the case reveals how minimal, iterated, and symbolically charged interventions can restructure public space more profoundly than materially intensive scenographies. Contemporary adaptive reuse strategies must therefore refrain from extensive material interventions and foreground the temporal and cultural conditions of a project. As Mona Ozouf explains, Rousseau’s fondness for a “festival without object” rests on the idea that the highest civic art consists in “gather[ing] men together for ‘nothing,’” that is, assembling people with minimal material or spectacular means so that they constitute themselves as a collective through their own presence (Ozouf 1988, 207). In this sense, the historical comparison clarifies that adaptive reuse depends as much on organizational conditions (modularity, demountability) as it does on decentralized authorship, participation, and co-production. It remains contested how far ephemeral works altered the permanent city of Paris. Corboz reads the *Plan des Artistes* of 1793 as an instrument that «would have adapted existing urban conditions to the new revolutionary institutions» (Corboz 2014, 112). Even so, Dehaene notes that the operations of Haussmann can be read as formally indebted to procedures rehearsed in festival—the delayed crystallization of iterative event logics into urban form (Dehaene 2004, 11).

## Notes

1. Translation by author: “Every planning is wrong; the differences in quality lie only in the length of time until the mistakes become visible.”
2. Translation by author: “Shall we not at last be ashamed to content ourselves with small fireworks opposite a coarse building, on a little square meant for the execution of criminals?”

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