

**ROWAN MOORE**  
ARCHITECTURE CRITIC



**F**OR a few weeks this summer, London, a heavy place of bricks, steel and concrete, will be invaded by another, lighter city of patterned canvas and laser-cut plywood, of tents and towers and pavilions. Then, just as suddenly as it has appeared, it will disappear, leaving traces only on the memory. Brought into being by an unseen Prospero, it will melt into the air.

It will be like a wonky medieval encampment, scattered across London's boroughs. It will include Portavilion, "one of the most ambitious contemporary art projects to take place in London's public realm", in which four artists will create structures in four London parks. The first, by Dan Graham in Holland Park, is already there.

Then there's the London Festival of Architecture, which opens on Friday. This will include a "Fresh Flower", a structure that will migrate around the sites where the festival is being held. There's also a temporary lido in Southwark with bathing pools and sauna, while Montague Place, behind the British Museum, will be filled with a zigzagging construction. Outsized furniture

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will make the courtyard of Somerset House into "London's largest living room".

The Lift, a brightly patterned, tent-like mobile performance venue for the London International Festival of Theatre is already up in Stratford, and will travel to the South Bank. The Hayward Gallery's Psycho Buildings show has also already opened, with its domes and lakes spreading over the gallery's concrete terraces.

Bright young architectural practices like Carmody Groarke, 6a and AOC will stake their claims on London's public realm, offering a premonition of a future when, laden with knighthoods and honours, they will be shaping the Tate extensions and skyscrapers of the 2040s and 50s.

The cavalcade will culminate with the eighth of the Serpentine's annual pavilions, the series in which great architects who have never built here finally get their chance. This year Frank Gehry, at the age of 79, who has built in Berlin, Paris, Barcelona, Bilbao, Basel, Prague, New York, Los Angeles and even Dundee, is permitted to dip his toe in the London water for the first and probably last time.

Temporary architecture offers a holiday from the slowness and weight of permanent buildings. It offers a glimpse of an alternative world in which our surroundings could change at will. It gives a freedom — not encouraged in multi-million pound structures — to be sensuous, to pursue an idea or be playful. Hence the idea of a pattern based on Rapunzel's hair, which decorates the Hairywood installation in Covent Garden. One of the most beautiful works of architecture of recent times was the Blur, an artificial cloud of vapour created on Lake Neuchâtel for the 2002 Swiss Expo.

Ephemeral buildings can change



**Cut glass:** Dan Graham's Triangular Pavilion with Circular Cut-Outs in Holland Park, part of the Portavilion contemporary art project

# Welcome to the temporary city

For one summer only, London will play host to a series of spectacular pavilions designed by star architects. Why do we not put as much thought into our permanent structures?

cities. The ideas of Italian renaissance architects, which went on to influence town halls, museums, colleges and private houses all over the world, were often tried out as stage sets and decorations for Medici weddings and other ceremonies. In 1929 Mies van der Rohe assembled sensuous planes of marble and water into his Barcelona Pavilion, a structure which influences office lobbies and minimalist apartments to this day. The Eiffel Tower and London Eye were both described as temporary when first built, and used the licence of ephemerality to smuggle otherwise unacceptable ideas into Paris and London.

In the 1960s, architects dreamed of

buildings you could inflate, or geodesic domes you could drop by helicopter, or structures that allowed you to plug into electricity and water wherever you wanted. Some were even built, but then these dreaming architects grew older and acquired practices, business premises, professional indemnity insurance and status anxiety, and returned to constructing solid, permanent, immobile buildings, much as their predecessors had done.

But these 1960s dreams are suddenly back in vogue and the current wave of temporary structures reflects a mistrust of the fixed and monumental inspired by that decade. It also reflects an effervescence among architects which,

for now, is surviving the credit crunch.

The results are to be enjoyed. The next few weeks offer an impromptu, if somewhat demented, expo of architectural haikus, squibs and sketches, each one a glimpse of what future buildings could be like. A moment like this is unlikely to come round again. It feels like an idea at its peak: it is hard to imagine another summer in the near future where there will be so much.

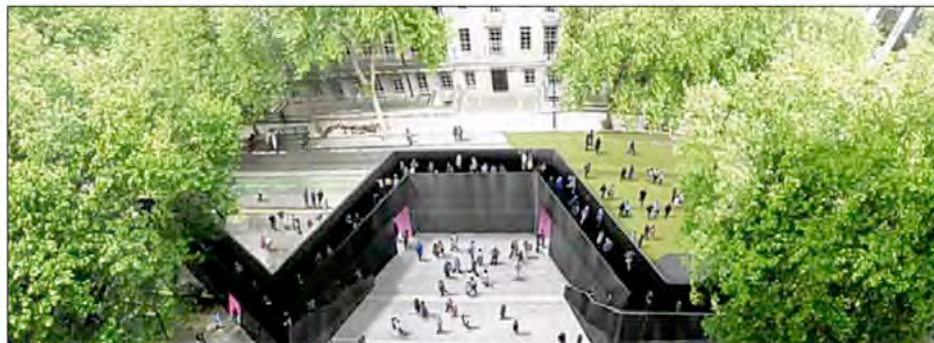
And that is as it should be. For, among the charming distractions of the temporary structures, far less charming permanent buildings are going up without notice or debate. Go to Stratford to see the Lift and you will also see this future Olympic epicentre punctured

incoherently with cheap new towers, arranged with no semblance of an idea of creating a public whole greater than the sum of its (private) parts.

When the flurry of flowers and towers have gone, we will return to the previous reality of cracked pavements and roads butchered by utility companies. Almost unnoticed, a new railway bridge has been thrown over Shoreditch High Street to take the East London Line extension, a structure of stunning banality which will be there for ever.

While the Serpentine Gallery is to be applauded for bringing so many geniuses to London, its pavilion has also acted inadvertently as an alibi for the capital's collective failure to employ such architects to build anything more substantial. The roll-call of past pavilion designers — Hadid, Libeskind, Ito, Niemeyer, Siza, Koolhaas and Snohetta — is also a list of architects who have built little or nothing here since.

When the insubstantial pageant has faded, leaving not a rack behind, there will be a choice. The flurry of pavilions could be treated as a palliative, a distraction from the lack of aspiration and imagination in permanent buildings, and the insufficient commitment to raising London's public spaces. Or they could be an inspiration, evidence that the skill and commitment of good architects can contribute to the quality of cities, and should be applied to the large and the permanent as well as the small and the temporary.



**Here today:** Fast Forward, a pavilion designed by Rabi Hage, built using E-Manufacturing. Above: a zigzag walkway in Montague Place by architects Carmody Groarke