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To cite this article: Ben Assiter (2022): From dancefloors to tables: socially distanced clubbing, temporary urbanism, and the gentrification of London's nightlife, Annals of Leisure Research, DOI: [10.1080/11745398.2022.2027252](https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2022.2027252)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2022.2027252>



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Published online: 24 Jan 2022.



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From dancefloors to tables: socially distanced clubbing, temporary urbanism, and the gentrification of London's nightlife

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 28 September 2021; Accepted 6 January 2022

COVID-19 physical distancing measures have had especially radical impacts on cultures and economies with conviviality at their core. In the UK, the pandemic forced the unprecedented closure of a wide range of shared social spaces, with music venues and nightclubs amongst the most prolongedly affected. Many of these spaces remained closed eighteen months after lockdown measures were first announced, with few of them – or their employees – eligible for sufficient state support (All Party Parliamentary Group for the Night Time Economy 2021). In this short article, I offer some reflections on the reinvention strategies London nightclubs were forced to implement during this period, arguing that they constitute an acceleration of longer-term tendencies toward temporary urbanism and the interrelated gentrification of the city's nightlife spaces.

During the year between July 2020 and so-called 'Freedom Day' on July 19th 2021, a small handful of London nightclubs were able to reopen for intermittent periods, provided they could negotiate the rapidly fluctuating series of national restrictions. To meet social distancing guidelines, nightclubs were required to undergo radical transformations, repurposing any available outdoor space to make room for seated table service. Crucially, while the events that took place at newly converted clubs were still sound tracked by live DJs, music was limited to lower volumes and DJs were specifically instructed to play less lively tracks than usual, to encourage and sustain static audience behaviours (Embley 2020). Uncanny signs adorned the walls of these new spaces, outlining a strict ban on dancing and any social mixing between tables, which were limited to groups of six. Despite their exceptional appearance, these restrictions evoke New York and Japan's infamous 'cabaret laws', which until only recently, deployed bans on social dancing as part of a long-standing moralism surrounding nightlife, inextricably bound up with the policing of queer and Black bodies and sex work (See Buckland 2002 and Hartley 2019). In London, where pubs, restaurants and other hospitality venues had to devise significant modifications to their routine services during the pandemic, clubs appeared subject to separate treatment, with their temporary reopening dependant on a more comprehensive strategy of reinvention, leaving them barely recognizable from

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their core identity as spaces built around music, dance and heightened sensory experience. Divorced from their more typical ecology of aesthetic, sonic and architectural particularities, the nightclub was pushed further from its already fragile potential as a space of unique social intimacies, what Luis-Manuel Garcia characterizes as ‘liquid solidarity’ (2013, 242).

With reduced capacity, limited opening hours and a ban on dancing, the pandemic ensured that the existing business model of most nightclubs was quickly rendered unfeasible, forcing them to reimagine and diversify their typical operations (VibeLab 2020). Among the small number of London venues with sufficient outdoor space to reopen, this reimagining generally followed a homogenous framework. Food and beverage economies were expanded, often featuring a series of rotating ‘pop-up’ vendors, while some venues introduced a range of different activities and entertainments, rebranding the nightclub as a multi-purpose destination, with far broader demographic appeal. Costa del Tottenham – opened in the courtyard of Tottenham nightclub The Cause – was described as ‘a sun-soaked, socially distanced, food, drink & entertainment complex’.¹ Similarly, Site 5 – opened by E1 London in Wapping – was branded as ‘a fun outdoor pub garden experience with giant games, cocktails, burgers & pizza, and the UK’s hottest DJs!’² Elsewhere, Brixton Jamm was reinvented as Brixton Courtyard, hosting ‘socially distanced socials’ with ‘world class DJs, craft beverages, cocktails & multiple street food traders’.³ Alongside detailed COVID protocol, event descriptions often included a strict no-refund policy, justified with statements explicitly emphasizing the precarious economy of the hospitality industry during this moment. In these formulations, we find none of the vague utopian evocations or obsessive insider nods toward ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1995) which have characterized much of the mediation of electronic dance music culture since the late 1980s. Absent too, are any of contemporary club culture’s increasing attempts to (re)centre marginalized groups. Instead, we find the nightclub openly and explicitly positioned as an augmented space of safe consumption; framed through the quirks and marketing gimmicks of a universalized experience economy; and subsequently divorced from many of the needs of specific social, cultural and musical communities. Perhaps most strikingly, the ways in which a multitude of different venues responded to the state of exception brought about by the pandemic was strikingly uniform, with similar approaches employed by smaller scale venues that cater to more localized audiences, as well as high-capacity venues that tend to focus on the wider-reaching programming of international touring artists. The homogeneity of this response reflects not only the breadth of the crisis faced by the full typology of nightlife spaces during the pandemic, but also the pervasive normalization of temporary urban and economic strategies, mediated through a limited spatial imaginary.

The precarious logics of temporary urbanism

In the same way that the UK government (in)famously sponsored an ill-judged advertising campaign suggesting that struggling arts sector workers could retrain for careers in cybersecurity (Bakare 2020), the ways in which nightlife spaces were forced to reinvent themselves during the pandemic followed a wide-reaching logic of individualized responsibility, in which entrepreneurialism and precarity exist in inextricable interrelation (Lorusso 2019). In this context, uncertainty is to be celebrated – reframed instead through

the aspirational language of resourcefulness and innovation. Crucially, when preoccupied by the insecurity of the present moment, such discourses can only ever produce reactive and short-term solutions, divorced from any possible engagement with more permanent trajectories.

In the context of the city, these logics have acquired a spatial form via the rise of so-called 'temporary urbanism'. Initially taking cues from squatting and other radical traditions, temporary urbanism emerged during the early 2000s to encompass a constellation of related short-term urban development strategies, described variously as 'interim', 'pop-up' or 'meanwhile use'. In perhaps its most archetypal formulation, the pop-up shop was often used as a PR stunt by brands to launch new or limited-edition products, drawing on a romanticized imaginary in which derelict space is reimagined and mythologized as a seductive urban frontier. Under the austerity measures that followed the 2008 financial crisis, the appeal of temporary urbanism gained a new urgency emerging to form a core component of many cities' regeneration strategies, a 'quick fix' that was used to 'transform a failed or stalled development' into a destination in the increasingly events-based, experience economy (Ferreri 2015, 182–183). In this way, what has often been presented as a transformative instrument – reflective of wider structural shifts toward flexibility and fluidity – may in fact function as little more than an 'interim fashion aimed at filling short-term economic gaps' (Madanipour 2017, 1). Crucially, while temporary urbanism is inherently transient, it simultaneously serves to reinforce and reproduce a corresponding logic of permanence, in which space can only truly be transformed in 'one temporal direction ... a trajectory of never ending urban economic and real estate development'. By providing space for non-commercial, artistic and community projects on a short-term basis, temporary urbanism consigns such spaces to an unending state of precarity, granting them brief glimpses of security in an existence that is 'alternative ... but not antagonistic' to the prevailing urban rhythm of assumed relentless growth (Ferreri 2015, 186–187).

Pop-ups, street food markets and the gentrification of London's nightlife

While the transformations of London's nightlife spaces between 2020 and 2021 have primarily – and justifiably – been framed as responses to a particular moment of crisis, it is useful to situate them within longer term spatial and cultural trends in the city, to retain a critical awareness of the more lasting effects that may be produced by what are positioned as temporary strategies. Writing in 2015, journalist Ed Gillett noted that the gap created by the closure of many of the UK's more traditional nightclubs had in many cases been filled by pop-up spaces, typically characterized by what he terms 'a loosely-themed "experiential" approach to music events' (Gillett 2015). That same year, *Vice* magazine summarized a newly emergent nightlife trend, defined by 'sideshows involving corporate sponsors, street food stalls, marquees, competitions, [and] generic wedding-playlist DJs' (Martin 2015). Built around picturesque locations, games or brunch, such events tended to elevate a broadened horizon of experiences for the nocturnal consumer, dissolving nightlife's already precarious social potential into a series of organized and digestible activities – a harbinger of the enhanced prescriptivism that would arrive with COVID-19. As the journalist James Greig suggested in early 2021, 'spontaneity is an urban ideal we were already losing; the pandemic is just accelerating it' (2021).

By 'reclaiming' disused urban locations as sites of dense and multi-layered consumption, these kinds of pop-up nightlife event reinforce notions of empty urban space as an inherently wasted resource – in which disuse is equated with an *economically* defined idleness (Ferreri 2015, 184). In this way, these nascent London nightlife trends may be contextualized alongside much wider-reaching urban cultural shifts in the city, perhaps best exemplified by the rise of street food markets, which are increasingly incorporating infrastructure for live music and DJs as part of a comprehensive entertainment portfolio. Despite the appearance of vibrant and diverse abundance projected by such multi-purpose, pop-up spaces, their aesthetics often masquerade what may in fact be governed by highly centralized, corporatised structures. Four of London's major street food markets: Dinerama, Model Market, Giant Robot and Hawker House are all run by a single company, Street Feast,⁴ while the revered 'third space concepts' of Flat Iron Square and Goods Way are owned and managed by the 'multi-national entertainment & hospitality operator', Venue Group.⁵ Where such spaces often present themselves as incubator platforms for up-and-coming traders and food start-ups, their appeal is generally based on the assumption that they will act as a temporary stepping stone for businesses to relocate to more permanent brick and mortar premises further down the line.⁶ Bar a few well publicized success stories (e.g. Roolant 2017), such opportunities are inherently few and far between in London's intensive competition for space, thus reproducing an ongoing state of precarity via what may often be a false discourse of aspiration. While Street Feast pride themselves on transforming 'derelict and disused spaces into buzzing day and night street food markets',⁷ their ascendance has occurred against the backdrop of ongoing racialised and classed struggles to save historic local markets, such as Ridley Road in Dalston or the Latin Village in Seven Sisters. In the Elephant and Castle area of South London, Mercato Metropolitano provides customers with the opportunity to 'discover flavours from Italy to Japan, Colombia to Germany, Vietnam to Argentina, and many more', while the local shopping centre – a key community hub for the area's Latin American communities – was shut down in 2020 to make room for a large-scale regeneration project to the sum of more than £1 billion (Hancox 2020). Such pop-up logics prioritize the short-term appearance of authenticity over the production of more sustainable urban living and working conditions – what Sharon Zukin characterizes as 'the right to inhabit a space, not just to consume it as an experience' (2010, 6).

The rapid reinvention of nightclubs during the pandemic may be understood as the acceleration of existent tendencies, in which a wide-ranging diversity of London's shared social and leisure spaces – including pubs, clubs and other nightlife venues, as well as some of the more ambiguously defined swathes of so-called 'pseudo public space' (Shenker 2017) – were already increasingly flattened into forms of homogenized, indistinguishable, and often temporary, architecture. Such destinations produce safe and regulated projections of urban vibrancy – what John Hannigan described as 'riskless risk' (1998). As of summer 2021, there were already signs that some of the COVID-related changes to nightlife spaces were morphing to inhabit longer-lasting trajectories, as numerous venues maintained their expanded outdoor hospitality offerings, even once indoor club spaces were permitted to resume normal service. Paradoxically, even as these temporary measures gained the appearance of greater permanence, they masked what was in fact a longer lasting and intensifying state of precarity. The Cause and E1

London continued to develop and update their new outdoor spaces throughout the course of 2021, despite both clubs facing the enduring prospect of imminent closure due to extensive redevelopment plans on their respective sites.⁸ In this sense, it is important to note the ways in which less evident forms of temporary urbanism already played a key role in sustaining London's nightlife prior to the pandemic, relegating nightclubs to a permanent 'space of temporariness' (Ferreri 2015, 187).

While unparalleled in its particularities, the context of COVID-19 exposed and emphasized the latent precarity of London's nightlife spaces. As was widely identified around 2015, London club culture has experienced an ongoing period of spatialized decline over the last two decades, related to factors including rising property prices and restrictive licensing legislation (Garcia 2017; Sadoux 2021). Despite the inauguration of Amy Lamé as the city's first Night Czar in 2016 and the renewed municipal championing of London as a '24-hour city', the pandemic has underscored many nightclubs' continued struggles for genuine cultural recognition, as they remain grouped together within the restrictive and generalizing framework of the 'night time economy'. This lack of acknowledgement was borne out in the UK's COVID-19 Cultural Recovery Fund, in which less than 20 nightclubs were awarded government support (Lavin 2021).

In this context, particular formations of temporary urbanism have emerged not only as part of London nightlife's key survival strategies during a continued state of crisis, but further, they have come to define a much broader imaginary as to what kinds of night time spaces are permissible within an increasingly homogenized vision of the city. Where nightclubs were required to restrict part of their core identity as social and sonic spaces during the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, this disruption fits comfortably into a broader history, in which London primarily appears to tolerate the kinds of entertainment Luis-Manuel Garcia characterized in 2016 as 'convenient and unchallenging and profitable' (2016). Caught between a series of interconnected economic, spatial and regulatory pressures – as well as the heightened state of the pandemic – many clubs and venues were forced to reinvent themselves as augmented spaces of consumption, ensuring that any available space is efficiently utilized to generate income. Such pressures limit nightlife spaces to the short term management of financial precarity, leaving little time nor energy for the more complex, longer term processes of building communities around music, culture and physical space. The responsibilities for this situation lay not only with the Night Czar and local government, but also with nightlife communities' own failures to organize and find ways to communicate notions of public value that move beyond economic justifications. Where the Night Time Industries Association has done much to represent the combined interests of clubs, bars, restaurants and other hospitality venues, electronic dance music communities could do more to promote the value of their own social and cultural particularities, in a way that would encompass the full ecology of different dance music spaces as well as their associated stakeholders. Such a shift requires not only collective organizing to look beyond the short-term logics of temporary urbanism, but also a recognition of the ways in which gentrification works simultaneously 'with and against nightlife' (Hae 2012, 8). As Marie Thompson has argued, this necessitates the positioning of campaigns for music venues and clubs in close relation to broader anti-gentrification struggles, understanding the dynamics which render many musical and cultural spaces 'complicit in their own demise' (2017, 7).

Notes

1. <https://www.costadelotttenham.co.uk/>
2. <https://www.lovepubandgrub.com>
3. <https://brixton-courtyard.designmynight.com>
4. <https://www.streetfeast.com>
5. <https://www.venuegroup.com/about>
6. Street food platform Kerb Food offer a three-stage business development programme in which traders progress from 'Inkerbators' to become fully fledged 'Kerbanists', before eventually graduating as 'Alumni'. See <https://www.kerbfood.com/traders/>
7. <https://www.streetfeast.com>
8. E1 London will be affected by a proposed redevelopment plan in Wapping, although there are promises to 're-provide a night time venue and studio space' (<https://thehighway.communityuk.live/>). The Cause has always been a 'meanwhile use' space, situated on the site of the planned Ashley House and Cannon Factory regeneration project (<https://www.bptw.co.uk/projects/ashley-house-and-cannon-factory/>). The Cause shut down in early January 2022.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Ben Assiter is a PhD student in the music department at Goldsmiths, University of London. His thesis focuses on London's electronic dance music scenes and spaces, exploring their relationship to contested notions of the nighttime as cultural territory, economic category and site of urban governance. Ben is active in these scenes as a DJ and producer and performs internationally as live touring drummer with James Blake.

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