



Special issue: *Socio-Urban Critiques and a New Normal*

Editorial

The 'Before/After' Effect

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The 'Before/After' Effect

It is virtually impossible to embark on a brief summary of articles either written directly preceding or born out of the events of 2020 without at least mentioning the extraordinary circumstances in which we were forced to prevail. Therefore, I will go straight to the heart of the matter. Although fortune has hardly anything in common with the 'year of the plague', it would be hard to imagine more savage factors to put the shock-resistance capabilities of capitalism to the test, thus validating a wide range of recent predictions about the future in regard to architecture, urban planning and service-based economy.

Despite their critical engagement with this emergent reality, not all of the four articles collected in this issue of *Architecture_MPS* were written during the first lockdown (although this prolonged period gave the authors opportunity to revise and/or update them in the light of events). Therefore, it is even more astounding how accurate and ingenious the articles' diagnoses are, either giving firsthand accounts of resilience in disaster management or identifying symptoms of the crises at large (including those that preceded the pandemic). By mapping these territories, each of the contributors deconstructs a nascent and popular (if not populist) discourse prevalent in contemporary urbanism and architectural practice, on the surface addressing important issues such as sustainability, climate change, gentrification, tourism or the role of cultural capital, while allowing these problems gestate.

Opening the issue is Igea Troiani and Tonia Carless's article, which sheds light on neoliberalist policies propelling the transformation of university campuses, yet representing this makeover as a facadist manoeuvre, benefiting from gentrification while promoting elitism and academic tourism. In their project, described in the article, they address Gordon Matta-Clark's concept of *anarchitecture*, repurposed as a cinematic methodology for dismantling political agendas behind building practice. In a manner akin to Matta-Clark's *Office Baroque* architectural filmic essay (completed after his death by Eric Convents and Roger Steylaerts),¹ which documents literal, if still symbolic, cutaways through derelict structures in a post-mortem rendition of an architectural survey, Troiani and Carless inspect the metamorphoses of campuses in their ongoing film project, *The Death and Life of UK Universities*, inspired by Jane Jacobs's seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.²

The New Urbanist advocacy for cities that are not only viable but liveable makes Jacobs a patron saint of another study that calls upon her ideas of bottom-up urbanism, revealing how these are being hijacked and subverted by entrepreneurs and urban strategists. The deluge of 'handbooks' promoting cities as self-organizing schemes, while picturing them as inherently 'sustainable', raises problems labelled as 'greenwashing' (or, in futurist jargon, 'smartwashing'), thus falling within the scope of May Ee Wong's interests, critically reassessing such claims for actual merit. After all, the COVID-19 state of emergency has proved that cities can only be as efficient catalysts of creativity as the infrastructure of hotspots and the bandwidth for online conferencing that they provide.

Does this mean that architects will now be obliged to switch from designing spaces for events to preparing blueprints for home offices, in which familial interferences could be thoroughly soundproofed? Which market forces will be contracted to visualize the new normal? Inna Arzumanova's article explores the foundations of these insecurities, presenting another side of the capitalist fairy tale, reimagined for us by the luxury design industry. In her study, health and safety are rendered as yet another set of googlable terms, turning the fearful permalancer over to the experts on delivering work-at-home adjustment services. Arzumanova reveals nothing short of a dark side looming behind the market's response to the pandemic, which employs the language of segregation and urban zoning to sell 'a racialized and class-based organization of urban space'.

The conclusion to this review of forms of institutionalized abuse comes with a critique of glocalization in appropriating Western models of commercial tourism, recognized by El Mehdi Ait Oukhame as the force driving spatial metamorphoses in the Arab Gulf region. Commissioning starchitects to design world exhibition-type settings for indigenous cultural artefacts gives rise to nothing more inspiring than *simulacra*, consequently disguising the museum as a shopping mall. Jean Nouvel's lifelong flirtation with cinematic illusionism can be seen as a signpost to this practice. What alternatives are there? – we should probably ask, especially after experiencing global tourism driven to near extinction.

Although the prime suspects of these texts have been running rampant for a few decades, taken together the latter mount a diagnostic perspective on the most recent developments. I would like to encourage readers to revisit these articles at some point, when vaccinated immunity will have brought us cognitive clarity – this time, trying to discern universal patterns from the developments described by the authors, following a ‘road [that is] just a road’³ of that Blakean year, as yet another case study in Naomi Klein’s ‘disaster capitalism’:

Shock tactics follow a clear pattern: wait for a crisis ..., declare a moment of what is sometimes called ‘extraordinary politics’, suspend some or all democratic norms – and then ram the corporate wish list through as quickly as possible. ... Amid hyperinflation or a banking collapse, for instance, the country’s governing elites were frequently able to sell a panicked population on the necessity for attacks on social protections ... – because the alternative, they claimed, was outright economic apocalypse.⁴

Read either in the shadow of an ‘economic apocalypse’, or against the wallpaper of daily reports on infringements of democracy, these articles challenge a number of emergent post-truths, along with those we had to face while in lockdown. Allow them to germinate in your mind.

Declarations and Conflict of Interests

The author is Guest Editor of the journal’s special issue *Socio-Urban Critiques and a New Normal* this article is included in. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

¹Convents and Steylaerts, *Office Baroque*.

²Jacobs, *The Death and Life*.

³Smith, *Collected Lyrics*, 73.

⁴Klein, ‘Naomi Klein’.

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