

The Death of Urbanism

Transitions through five stages of grief

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Preface

Figure 1: 'Great Guitar Street in 3D! – perspective view', detailed 3D streetscape point-cloud of Nguyễn Thiện Thuật, Phường 2, Quận 3, Hồ Chí Minh, Vietnam, 2019. HCMC produces 1/100th the CO₂ per capita of Atlanta (Kenworthy 2003).



In this book we examine key historical city design approaches and 'procedures', along with recent urban design paradigms and some of their pitfalls. We conclude with more optimistic suggestions for advancing design responses for more equitable, healthy, sustainable and beautiful future cities. We balance this serious urban design research with a little dry and slightly black humour to help us light the way as we work through some dark and challenging, but critical urban issues.

The book is written for students and practitioners in architecture and urban design and related disciplines, as well as academics and non-academics with a keen interest in the built environment and the future of cities.

We would like to acknowledge the help of Tianyi Yang for her tireless contributions to image sourcing and production; Professor Mark Burry for his ongoing encouragement; Francis and Aster, for their sympathetic understanding whilst enduring 'half-parenting' for the past few months, who instead of acting out, put their energies into reading, practicing complex origami and creating truly spectacular craft projects, and finally, the AARD Curatorial Editor, Professor Rochus Urban Hinkel, who has been incredibly supportive of the authors.

Both authors have recently experienced the death of close family members. We have ourselves both gone through the various stages of grief. We have

found the researching and writing of this book therapeutic and have both come to understand the importance of maintaining both hope and humour through difficult times – be they due to the loss of a loved one, the declining quality of the built environment, or the fears associated with bringing children into a pretty scary world where our politicians march towards the far right, and after decades of corruption, greed, and complacent inaction, climate change now threatens their future.

We would like to dedicate this book to the recently departed:

Mary Burke

and

Peter White

On death and dying urbanism

Back in black

Why do architects wear black? Is it because they are trying to disguise sedentary lifestyles, where black is used for its slimming properties just as they would use black to 'paint out' elements of buildings they wish were slimmer or weren't there? Probably not. Though most architects may have 'AutoCAD arms', they do seem to come in all shapes and sizes, including those who are as slender as Sejima columns.

Is it because of the architect's inner bogan*? Are architects secretly fans of heavy metal, the musical movement synonymous with wearing black, but due to a desire to maintain a professional appearance, are unable to proudly sport their favourite black band t-shirts? This may be true for some, (including the authors of this book) but the abysmal sales of our 'Architecture – not just for wankers' T-Shirt series would suggest otherwise [Figure 2 and Figure 3].

Is it because architects are all-powerful 'urban puppeteers' looming behind the scenes controlling the built environment and dictating people's lives? Hardly. Quantity surveyors and traffic engineers now have far more control over shaping the built

* 'Bogan' is Australian and New Zealand slang term for describing a person whose speech, behaviour and appearance are considered uncouth or unsophisticated, often dedicated fans of 1980s heavy metal bands such as Mötley Crüe or AC/DC who epitomise the 'boganesque'.

environment than any architect. If anything, the black clothing is more likely to represent mourning over a complete loss of control over the urban environment and the decline of cities. In Rem Koolhaas's book with Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, he pronounced that "*urbanism is dead*" (1995) and that the uncontrollable generic city has taken over.

[...] The role of the architect in this phenomenon (manipulation of the urban landscape) is almost negligible. The only thing architects can do from time to time is to create within those circumstances, more or less masterful buildings (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995).

Koolhaas describes the unfettered development within cities throughout the world with low-quality buildings designed in generic, non-descript architectural styles, built with little thought given to overall urban cohesion, connections, place, composition or much of anything other than to respond to market forces.

Cities are becoming or already have become manifestations of globalisation and 'genericness' like shopping malls or airports. In almost every international airport, one can either stare out onto the desolate expanse of tarmac covered in fossil fuel-guzzling vehicles, just like the endlessly sprawling



Figure 2: 'ArchitectyA : None More Black' from the 'Architecture – not just for wankers' T-Shirt series shows what architects are wearing on the inside, a modified Metallica t-shirt from the 'Black Album' (1991) replacing Hetfield, Ulrich, Hammett and Newsted with Hadid, Gehry, Koolhaas and Nouvel. www.zazzle.com.au/architectya

car-dominated landscapes of the suburbs, or wade through the anonymous no-placeness of the airport shopping mall with its H&M, Zara, and Gap, Duty-free perfume, cigarettes and liquor stores, Starbucks and Gloria Jean's coffee shops, Subway and



Figure 3: 'ArchitectyA : Plaster of Muppets' from the 'Architecture – not just for wankers' T-Shirt series, a modified Metallica from the 'Master of Puppets' album (1986) replacing field of military cross headstones with Le Corbusier's 1964 Ville Radieuse cruciform towers (note master of puppets pulling strings replaced with collaged hands from the famous photo of Le Corbusier pointing to the physical model of said scheme).

McDonalds fast-food restaurants. If not paying attention to subtle differences, it is difficult to discern where you are in the world. If not for the receipt from the over-priced burger you just ordered saying AUD and that the Burger King logo subtly swapped out for Hungry Jacks[†], it would be very easy to believe

[†] *The Burger King business name was already trademarked by a take-away food shop in Adelaide when the franchise was first being established in Australia and was consequently renamed Hungry Jacks.*

yourself to be anywhere, Mexico, Brazil, Hong Kong, Germany or North America.

Even older cities, once beyond the tightly controlled ‘historic quarter’ or old ‘down-town’ inner area, begin to blur into one another, with a scaled-up version of the airport’s retail, topped with monotonous curtain walled commercial office towers or tightly packed housing towers with façade articulated by balconies sized to fit split system air conditioner condenser units.

As you travel beyond the central business district, the denser urban form fades towards lower density, single-use zoned suburbia. Again, the repetitive urban fabric is almost indistinguishable to the non-discerning eye – are you in Altadena on the outskirts of Los Angeles? Are you in Rueil-Malmaison on the edge of Paris? Or Tarneit in Melbourne’s outer west? If you have ever travelled to Tarneit, it can be hard to not at least question the health of urbanism. For those readers who are not familiar with the term urbanism, it is both an abstract and concrete noun used to describe the conceptual and physical characteristics of a town or city. It is derived from urban which in turn comes from the Latin origin *urbanus*, from *urbs* ‘city’. Ildefons Cerdà coined the term urbanism in his 1867 manifesto *Teoría General de la Urbanización* [General Theory of Urbanization] (Rippon, 2005) referring to the focus of the work done by an urban designer, who in terms of scale, works

somewhere between that of a regional planner and that of an architect.

In 1859 Ildefons Cerdà produced plans for the extension 'Eixample' to Barcelona. Cerdà proscribed building heights, a carefully considered spatial structure and urban character with a direct relationship between streets and buildings, delicately balanced pedestrian and vehicular movement systems with in-ground and above ground services, and rigorous rules to ensure the protection of urban amenities such as light and air.

We will come back to Cerdà later, but for now, it is worth contemplating the level of careful consideration employed by Cerdà in the 1800s in contrast to the kind of globalised urban chaos described by Koolhaas or the monotonous, treeless, sidewalkless urban wasteland of Tarneit in Melbourne.

Urban decomposition

The death of urbanism is manifested in the slow death of many cities that are occurring around the world. We can find apparent evidence of the death of cities if we take an anthropomorphic approach and compare the human body to the city – a popular analogy with architects from Vitruvius, da Vinci, through to Le Corbusier. The death of urbanism might be confirmed if we think about the posthumous human body decomposition. The decomposition of the hu-

man body occurs in three phases. Firstly, *autolysis* (self-digestion), which begins immediately after death and involves circulatory systems consisting of cardiovascular (heart), pulmonary (lungs), systemic (arteries, veins, and vessels). The human body begins to eat itself – membranes in cells rupture and release enzymes that begin eating the cells from the inside out. If urbanism is indeed dead, we might think about the way many cities' transport systems have ground to a halt. Despite having undergone numerous 'urban surgery' attempts to prolong the life of most major cities via procedures such as freeway bypasses (coronary bypass) and road widenings (stents), commute times in many cities have increased well beyond the 'inflection point' of a 45 minute commute time limit.

The next phase of decay is *bloat*. Leaked enzymes from the first phase produce gasses that de-densifies the corpse leading to the body to double in size. Clear examples of cities that are very much in the bloat phase of decomposition can be found in North America including Atlanta, Boston, St Louis, Orlando and Houston, and in Australia Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne spring to mind.

Finally, active *decay and skeletonisation*, where the liquefied internal organs are released from the body as it begins skeletal decomposition. For examples of how this plays out in urban form, see post-industrial European cities such as Turin and Frankfurt,

more extreme cases in the rust belt cities in North America such as Detroit or, even more extreme, Katamatite in Australia which has about as much life-blood flowing through it as Guillermo del Toro's portrayal of Karl Ruprecht Kroenen in the movie Hell Boy.

Good grief

Urban design and urbanism have struggled to come to terms with the aforementioned losses, while also struggling with a myriad of other perceived or impending losses including the loss of environmental stability, loss of affordable housing options, loss of design control or influence, and a loss of urban amenity.

In this book, we will explore various key urban design paradigms transitioning through a (mis)appropriation of Swiss-born psychiatrist, Kübler-Ross' 'five stages of grief' from her seminal book, *On Death and Dying – What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy & their own families* (1973). The book is based on her research with terminal patients, dealing with loss in the post-modern world. In her book, Kübler-Ross explores multiple different types of emotional state, complex and dynamic types of grief, and coping mechanisms of people with incurable conditions. She touches on patients grieving past losses of health, mobility and independence,

past losses of family members who had died, whilst also looking at losses and worries for their families, as well as the future loss and fear of death. She also traverses various emotional responses from patient's families as they try to make sense of and cope with their imminent loss. Kübler-Ross' book tackles these complex and mixed elements of past, present and future losses and a multitude of players by formulating the well-known concept of 'five stages of grief'. In our book, we will use these five stages as a loosely fitting construct to traverse recent urban design paradigms and responses to the aforementioned urban losses.

Our analogy of applying the 'stages of grief' to urban design paradigms, is used in part as a narrative device, structuring our review of paradigms and design approaches, and partially as an attempt to give a new insight into the complex, pessimistic world of post-optimistic urban design.

The topic of urbanism cannot be tackled in a traditional 'pure research' manner, is not necessarily singular or elegant and needs to take on board many facets and juxtapose many seemingly ill-fitting ideas. Just as Kübler-Ross' stages were not supposed to represent a formulaic linear progression, as Ira Byock M.D points out in the 2013 anniversary edition preface, our five stages are not strictly chronological nor mutually exclusive. And we will not strictly adhere to the death metaphor and will at

times foray into pseudoscience and philosophy, design technology analysis, and popular culture.

Of course, this is not the first book that uses the themes surrounding death and grief to explore cities. In the early 1960s Jane Jacobs, (or 'gentrification Jane' as she is known in many unaffordable inner-urban suburbs where historic neighbourhood preservation quickly translated into pricing out low-income populations), wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), in which she critiques the planning and architecture of the 1950s leading to the 'death' of traditional North American cities. This book was highly influential throughout the 60s and 70s being treated with bible-like reverence and in some places, still haunts university syllabus presented as a contemporary theory even today. There are quite a few critical themes, including densification and land-use diversity in Jacob's book related to urban grief that we will be returning to throughout the latter chapters of this book.

The five stages of grief are: '*denial*'; '*anger*'; '*bargaining*'; '*depression*' and '*acceptance*'. These five stages are used as chapter headings, under which we symptomatically categorise design paradigms into the particular stages of grief. We will discuss key concepts of urban 'loss' that inform each of these paradigms and the design approaches and procedures used by each.