

# GLOBAL CITY

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DANIEL SOLOMON

# GLOBAL CITY BLUES

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# Introduction

The technologies of the last century—the automobile, the air conditioner, television, and the computer—have each in different ways transformed human settlements, habitation, and work. In just the last fifty years, we have invented ways of living that alter our experience fundamentally. We replace direct and spontaneous interactions among people with indirect and selective ones. We build in ways that sever us from weather, seasons, and the passage of time. We obliterate the distinctiveness of places and create new forms of geographic confusion.

For a long time, many have embraced these and all other forms of modernity as the inevitable workings of history. For more than fifty years, people trained in architecture, town planning, or branches of civil engineering that are part of town building were drugged with a sneaky form of Hegelian dialectics. Through our schooling and through the writings of a cadre of theorists, practitioners, and critics, a whole generation of architects and planners came to believe that we were the agents of history, bringing to an awaiting world the good news of the inevitable. The inevitable included the dominance of the private automobile and the infrastructure and town forms that support it. More recently, it has come to include much more—the globalization of the world economy and of world culture, from architecture to music to food.

This ethos of modernity has dominated city building and architecture worldwide for half a century. For many people, many architects

among them, modernist aesthetics are as compelling at the beginning of the twenty-first century as they were in the middle of the twentieth century. There is no denying the seductiveness of the spatial complexities, the technological materials, the inventiveness and the dazzle of the best modern buildings. Modern architecture brought with it, however, an ideology about city planning that should by now be as thoroughly discredited by fifty calamitous years of city building as any ideas in history. Such is not the case, however, and much contention and confusion remains. Disentangling architectural invention and enjoyment of new technologies from the dogmas and practices of modernist city planning has proved to be a complicated matter.

While modernity and modernist town planning in its various forms have come to dominate the world, some have fled the hegemony of the global city, have fought it, or have created new tribalisms, sometimes violent or crazy ones, bent on the recapture of some earlier time, real or imagined, that was spiritually more congenial. The rage of Mohammed Atta, the gentle-appearing young man who, on September 11, 2001, piloted American Airlines Flight 11 into the World Trade Center, was, as far as we know, at least partially a reaction to his training and experience as a town planner and his close view of world tourism's assault on ancient agrarian villages of the Nile.

One does not have to be a terrorist capable of monstrous acts to feel a deep sense of something terribly amiss with many new places we see being built. We know instinctively that something is wrong with a whole series of daily experiences that have become commonplace in towns and parts of towns we have built in the last fifty years but that were not everyday occurrences before then. We know that something is wrong when our desk is seventy-five feet from a window that doesn't open and that transmits only 15 percent of the light of the day. We know that something is wrong when every day at lunch, everybody looks like us, is the same age, and does the same kind of work. We know that something is wrong with tasteless food that comes from the steam table. Streets with no people on them, and places where we rarely see people poorer or richer or older than ourselves, are somehow troubling.

On our vacations, we go to where the food tastes better, to places where people who are interesting to look at gather in cafés, and where we

can walk around and do things. Except for compulsive gamblers, most of us never spend our discretionary time in places where you cannot tell the time of day. Primates in the social environment of monkey island at the zoo look like they are doing all right, jumping around outside with their friends. But primates isolated in cages in research labs look terrible; you can see the sadness and desperation in their eyes. We are no different; when our environment does not suit our genetic makeup, bad things happen to our health and our spirits.

This is a book about the making of cities and the buildings that compose them. It is about the conditions under which an architect engaged in those activities now works, how those conditions evolved, and why they are changing. It is about the qualities of life threatened by the ways cities are built at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and it is about intelligent response to those threats. It is about why the city planning ideas and the cultural Cuisinart that came in the box with modern architecture are a lingering menace.

As a foot soldier in the making of the world, an architect has a particularly grubby and intimate view of what is happening to the way we live. In his daily routine, he may not confront the grand strategies of macroeconomics, but each day the architect plunges into a nether world of codes, laws, technologies, products, business practices, and ideologies, tacit and overt, that shape the common experience of almost everyone on earth. Like a sausage maker or a gynecologist, an architect cannot help knowing more than most people want to know about certain subjects. This book is written in the hope that an architect's view from the foxhole can contribute to the quest to keep the qualities of our lives from being eternally diminished by all the things and procedures that human beings invent so cleverly and relentlessly.

*Global City Blues* accepts the inevitability of technological change with neither celebration nor despair. It is in part about the dogged and occasionally successful struggle of many to work in the conditions of the present to create places that satisfy the deepest longings that people have for the places they live. This struggle is by no means the first reform movement directed at architecture and town planning in the last two hundred years of rapid technological change, population growth, and urbanization. But unlike earlier reform movements, this one is directed at

particular conditions and threats presented by the dominant economics and technologies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It involves the efforts of all sorts of people, from farmers, grocers, and cooks to politicians and bureaucrats. Architects and town planners have their own role in all this—and not a small one.

The book contains reflections about the movement called New Urbanism, which several colleagues and I helped launch a decade ago and of which we continue to be a part. Its proponents see New Urbanism as a broad, embracing set of ideas about the future of our cities and city-regions, as a reversal of some aspects of orthodox modern architecture, but more particularly of modernist town planning.

The planning ideologies that so radically altered the man-made world after World War II were born of a unique historical moment that bred forms of hubris, optimism, and contempt for the past that the world had never seen before. In many arenas, the failure of those ideas and the prescriptions that emanated from them are clear, and have been clear for a long time. There are no remaining apologists for the American urban renewal, public housing, and urban highway programs of the 1950s and 1960s. And though, in some settings, the marketplace still seems to support suburban sprawl and the decanting of life from older urban centers, dissatisfaction with those building conventions is also widespread, growing, and passionate. Nonetheless, the juggernaut of auto-dominated global suburbia rolls on.

New Urbanism is a broadly formulated alternative, intended to redirect town building so that the common experience of people is richer than the soul-numbing environments of business parks, freeway commuting, and walled residential enclaves where everybody is the same age, color, and tax bracket. New Urbanism is a synthesis of ideas that have been brewing in the minds of urban critics, environmentalists, and some architectural thinkers since the 1960s. It clarifies the inherent linkages between the policies that have produced the catastrophe of suburban sprawl and the abandonment of older urban centers. It argues for a reconstitution of architecture's traditional and essential role in shaping the public space of towns. The policies and specific prescriptions of New Urbanism have been addressed in other settings and other books. *Global City Blues* is about why those policies and prescriptions are elements of

something that is so very important. In many of its manifestations, the global city is a fundamental assault on simple pleasures, appetites, and needs that are part of our biology. New Urbanism belongs to a healthy, necessary culture of resistance to that assault.

The book is a series of linked essays, some of which were written at different times. Each is independent, but together they examine and develop recurrent themes. They follow the path from my own indoctrination into the set of beliefs that gave shape to cities, towns, and our life experience after World War II to the evolution of a new set of beliefs born of reaction to that experience and confrontation with what lies ahead.



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# GLOBAL CITY BLUES

## PART 1

*Will we arrive thereby within the essence of the  
nearness that, in thinging the thing, brings worlds near?  
Will we dwell at home in nearness, so that we will  
belong primally within the fourfold of sky and earth,  
mortals and divinities?*

—MARTIN HEIDEGGER, “THE TURNING”

# NEARNESS

In the evolutionary history of humans, the period of modernist town planning and the technologies that support it are not even a blip on the chart. The genetic codes that direct our most basic impulses were written long, long ago by our Paleolithic and Neolithic ancestors, whose survival depended upon their sociability and the subtlety of their understanding of the world around them, first as hunter/gatherers and later as farmers but always in defense against their enemies. In a few short years, we cannot simply erase the physical and cognitive tracks along which we have traveled with brilliant biological success for scores of millennia. Our species succeeds because we are alert, observant, and sociable creatures; a major part of what we demand from our habitat is regular exercise of these fundamental parts of our humanity.

In many ways, our recent patterns of making buildings and towns tend to deny us this life-sustaining exercise, and we now routinely experience the condition that philosopher Martin Heidegger referred to as “loss of nearness.” The central concept of Heidegger’s writings—“being in the world”—establishes a fundamental relationship between our consciousness and the context of our lives. It is from this relationship that the idea of nearness emerged. He considered its loss to be a deep spiritual and cultural malaise that infiltrates experience at almost every moment of our lives.

The first task in addressing this malaise is to recognize its occurrence—to know when some aspect of the way we are living interferes with our preferred ways of interacting with other people and the world around us. When we achieve this recognition, the physical design of buildings, towns, and the ways we move about takes on a new significance. With this recognition, we become part of a collective struggle to reconfigure our daily world so that it is more like the places we seek out when we have the chance, and less like the places that we know deep in our genes do not satisfy everything we long for. This struggle is to construct a world of “nearness” in all its dimensions when, for many complex reasons, it is no longer easy to do so.

The four essays of Part 1 describe the experience of nearness in daily life and its several common antonyms: the indirect, the indistinct, the virtual, and the isolating. They provide a framework for what recent reforms in town planning and architecture hope to achieve and what they must overcome.



# Measure the Night with Bells

Imagine a raging river that spills over its banks and tears through lowlands dotted with oaks. Large trees that become uprooted add to the water's rage and sweep smaller objects with them. The larger and more magnificent the uprooted tree, the more damage it does. Some large trees remain rooted, and they slow the torrent and make their own little dams from the detritus swept along by the flood. If you think of the cascade of events of the last half century as a flood, then one could say that the stoutest and most firmly rooted oak tree, the one that has stood the longest and resisted the swirling torrent where it is most furious, is Professor Wu Liangyong, former director of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

Over the course of his long life, Professor Wu has witnessed the displacement of feudalism by Republican China, the Japanese occupation, the Communist Revolution, and later the terrible upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. He saw the rebirth of Chinese mercantilism—slow at first, but accelerating like a rocket—and he saw the disintegration of the bamboo curtain, and then the massive arrival of global capitalism and world tourism. He saw most of the graceful city of his childhood destroyed, stone by stone. He saw what was built in the name of socialism following Soviet models, and he has seen later generations of construction that look more like Las Vegas, in which the linkage to socialism is much harder to discern. He has seen the population of his city quadruple, and he has witnessed the transition from a populace that moved about

almost exclusively by bicycle, silently, to one that drives millions of cars and trucks every day.

Through all of this, Professor Wu has been one of the very few who have systematically preserved the record of the dismantled city and the memory of its beauty. He is the most important architect to attempt to adapt that ancient grace to the torrents of change that have swirled around him all of his life. His Ju'er Hutong is the only major housing project of recent vintage in Beijing that attempts to address new conditions based on an understanding and love for Beijing's magnificent heritage of courtyard housing. The Ju'er Hutong has the light, air, and living accommodation of modern housing, the density demanded by modern development pressure, and all the civic virtues of traditional courtyard housing. Given the tumult he has lived through, Professor Wu could not fail to understand that radical upheavals are inevitable, but he has resolutely refused to accept the idea that change necessarily carries with it the eradication of history and the diminution of the pleasures of city life. Now, in his eighties, bright-eyed and intensely active, many others have begun to see what his lonely, stubborn, resourceful quest has been about, and that a contradiction does not necessarily exist between rootedness and the embrace of change.

The spirit that roots Professor Wu, that endows him with his quiet serenity and his recent influence, is the inverse of the spirit that has been celebrated, lionized, and rewarded in the hermetic, self-perpetuating culture of the architectural world for most of the last seventy-five years.

If Wu Liangyong is the embodiment of a rooted tree, then consider the case of a very large uprooted tree, one that crashes through all sorts of things that the waters alone would not have swept away. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas is what one might call an uprooted tree of just this sort. In the year 2000, the architectural profession marked the turning of the millennium by awarding Koolhaas its highest honor, the Pritzker Prize. The millennial new year was a moment for large-scale pyrotechnics around the world, the celebrating of new beginnings and the severing of old ways. There were good reasons for the 2000 Pritzker selection, for Rem Koolhaas is the champion of new beginnings and probably the world's most provocative apologist for new forms of the human condition.

People interested in town planning and architecture should be



aware, however, that their own man of that special hour has some odd preferences, in addition to his obvious gifts. The Pritzker laureate at the dawn of the millennium is also the poet laureate of airline food, endless shopping malls, and the new Chinese cities where thousands of identical high-rises are built from the same brief, simple, and rapidly produced set of computer drawings. He embraces foul air, adores porn shops, and laments their disappearance from Times Square. What constitutes dystopia for most are kinky thrills for the 2000 Pritzker winner. He celebrates an image of schoolgirls strolling past a bloated corpse in Lagos as part of “a paradigmatic case study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity.” He considers himself one of philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s “kinetic elite,” those who live in airports, places “with the added attraction of being hermetic systems from which there is no escape—except to another airport.” What is good in the world, he recently announced, “is not a category that interests me.”

The Pritzker jury did their part to launch the next chapter of the human story from a new confluence of high culture, consumer capitalism, and nihilist chic. Perhaps this should only be troubling to people who choose to be troubled by it. Most of us don’t like global warming, do like good food, consider fresh air to be salutary, and—philistine though it may be—take pleasure in the places we live. We can say that Koolhaas engages us by shocking us, in the way that blood-soaked punk bands or Benneton ads with AIDS patients engage us—as audacious, half-ironic manipulations of media culture. We can feel free to ignore it all and go unfretfully about our sane little lives, away from the cutting edge.

But Koolhaas is a student of another polemical architect from modernity’s original incarnation, that other brilliant writer and media maven *par excellence*, Le Corbusier, whose influence was not exactly negligible. Koolhaas’s way of being in the world, of shocking, of anticipating the new, of resisting convention, his very conception of the space of the city, are appropriated from Le Corbusier. This should be a little unnerving, because we might not now be tearing down whole districts of uninhabitable public housing towers or struggling to find the money to remove the elevated highways that tore our cities apart if Le Corbusier had not so completely seduced an earlier generation of architectural teachers and students, just as Koolhaas has done. Le Corbusier’s polemical exhibitions