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## Architects on the Edge

*The French architecture critic and consultant Valéry Didelon says it is time for architects to reclaim the border territories and invade suburbia – but under new terms of engagement.*

In today's world where urbanisation reigns supreme, the town centre has paradoxically slipped from the spot-light. Around the globe, people, wealth and knowledge are concentrated in major urban areas – metropolisation – but their forms and functions are spreading ever further into suburbia – suburbanisation. This process of centralisation and decentralisation began in the U.S. in the 1920s before advancing across Europe in the 1950s and 60s and then continuing to spread worldwide. New York City now has only 30 percent of the population in its inner city, Paris barely over 20 percent and the cities of Germany's Ruhr region under 6 percent.<sup>1</sup> The traditional city as well as pristine natural areas, have become isolated islands in a sea of suburbia extending to the horizon. In 1964, Melvin M. Webber dubbed this phenomenon the "Nonplace Urban Realm".

Although the edge condition is increasingly documented and debated these days, the architect's place in the blueprint is little discussed, probably because it is so limited. Suburban structures seem better described as construction than as architecture. Quality is poor, and few spend the resources to actually build. Buildings are often purely functional, designed with little care and lacking durability. Residential developments set themselves apart by their mediocrity and homogeneity, factories and offices are blindingly unimpressive and commercial buildings are borderline shoddy structures. One common thread in the suburban development process is that it all generally occurs without input from architects, who have been relegated to the sidelines.

However, this was not always the case. After World War II, the leaders of the modernist movement had their chance. Areas on the fringe were a blank canvas for their experiments, as illustrated by France's massive housing projects. This was but a brief moment of glory, as architects fled the suburbs amidst jeers, victims of their own arrogance. In response, they abandoned these frontiers. In the 1970s and 80s, as suburbanisation spread in Europe, architects championed the postmodern *retour à la ville* movement in Italy, France and Belgium. They were so unwilling to acknowledge the spread of progress to the suburbs that it escaped them altogether. Instead, they seemed to link their fate to that of the historic city, and embellishing and improving city centres and the surrounding neighborhoods became the only legitimate focus of their profession. The architect's territory was thus limited to the "downtown area" where even today, most continue to base their offices.

But here at the start of the 21st century it is no longer possible to ignore the issue of the suburbia as it infringes upon the historic city. City-dwellers' lifestyles are increasingly similar to those of suburban residents, peripheral architecture is creeping toward city centres and suburban developments are becoming the model for shaping downtown areas of old. With each passing day, architects are more confronted with the edge condition.

The triumph of suburbia, the fall of the traditional city, and the decline of the traditional values of order and harmony arise, along with a major crisis in the architectural profession.

What position should architects take with regard to this interloper that has relegated them to the sidelines and challenged their legitimacy? Upon first glance, it seems that they must choose between two evils: One is to fight against suburbia, holding tight to their values and even counter-attacking, with the movement to “urbanise suburbia”, as has been recently heard in France.<sup>2</sup> However, in doing so they miss what is going on in the outskirts, they stay detached from their development. The second is to embrace suburbia, incorporating its mode of propagation, accommodating its aesthetic and participating in its expansion, but with this choice they run the risk of watering down their art and struggling to justify their contribution. Will architects be forced to choose between resisting and fading into extinction or acquiescing and perishing in the sea of banality?

Not necessarily, if we take a historical look at how they were able to conquer worlds that escaped them. At the end of the 19th century, development of big-city industrial landscapes – coal yards and steel mills, ports and warehouses – was presided over by engineers. These filthy realms were eschewed by architects, who focused instead on embellishing bourgeois urban centres. Architects snubbed this new reality and buried their heads in the sand of the declining Beaux-Arts culture. The revival was thus led by avant-garde thinkers who took interest in the urban fringe. In 1913, the pioneer Walter Gropius made use of grain silos seen in North America,<sup>3</sup> and was imitated by Le Corbusier in 1923 in *Vers une architecture*. Following in their footsteps, many modern architects undertook to outfit raw industrial areas in the fabrics of their art. In the late 1960s, a similar process occurred when intellectuals like Reyner Banham and architects like Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi left the beaten path to explore the commercial realm so disdained by their contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> Here, they discovered a “low culture” full of vitality with the ability to breathe new life into their aging “high culture”. They learned from this vernacular landscape, not reproducing it, but rather introducing it into the academic culture. By reconnecting with the city as it *is*, rather than how it *should* be, they wanted to restore the legitimacy compromised by the profession’s elitist attitude. Like their predecessors, it is only by venturing outside of the city and away from the architectural culture that the Venturis managed to strengthen their art.

However, none of these innovators actually transformed iron into gold. Although they may have brought new vitality to their art, they did not completely succeed in reforming their profession and never gained a permanent foothold in these areas. They remain foreigners to the edge condition. They are spectators rather than participants and seem resigned to their impotence, as illustrated by Rem Koolhaas’ statement: “Urbanism will not only, or mostly, be a profession, but a way of thinking, an ideology: to accept what exists. We were making sand castles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away.”<sup>5</sup> Architects and urbanists are now like sailors set adrift without a helm. As Denise Scott Brown suggests, they’d best change their strategy: “The sailor may occasionally turn surfer, [and] ride the waves as they break.”<sup>6</sup>

How can they accept and participate in this suburban phenomenon that has spread out of

control? In matters of city planning, this requires the admission that “the city no longer exists” and that the new reality requires abandoning the “twin fantasies of order and omnipotence” to embrace “staging of uncertainty”.<sup>7</sup> Architects must let go of grand visions as it is too humiliating for them to set the goal of an ideal city only to witness its inevitable decomposition under all of the existing constraints.

When one has little or no control, it is better to see form as a destination rather than a starting point. In the suburbs of Utrecht in the Netherlands, the Maxwan firm had a similar experience:

“Leidsche Rijn is an urbanism of negotiation, and proud of it. The negotiations were not done in order to get the design realised; the design was made to negotiate with, to get the city built. The most important ingredient of this story is that the urban designers ... had no real power at all. They did not even have a strong and stable power base to operate from. ... Having no power themselves, their freedom of movement was not defined by the limits of their mandate.”<sup>8</sup>

For architecture, the same applies. Rather than fighting against all odds to impose refined construction that partners are unable or unwilling to build, it might be preferable to develop a specific architecture from the edge condition. Consider the example of limited budget: Instead of a stifling factor, it can be a source of creativity, as regularly shown by Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal. Similarly, mass-production of building components is not such a tragedy if one is inspired and makes them a central feature in the design like Jacques Ferrier. And there are a thousand other ways to incorporate the edge condition into the very heart of the design process.

The nature of buildings and cities is dependent upon the social, technical and cultural context surrounding those who design them. In today’s world, the architect’s place is on the edge. That is, the architect no longer has a central place in society, and architecture is no longer the focal point in the urbanised field. The collectivity has other priorities. Still, our environment changes daily and architects and urbanists remain major players in this process. We can only hope that, from the edge, they will capture the spirit of their time as unwelcoming as it may be, creating their own unique and noteworthy interpretation.

V.D.

1 F. Moriconi-Ebrard, *De Babylone à Tokyo*, Ed. Ophrys, Paris, 2000, p. 317.

2 During the unrest in France in autumn 2005, architects and politicians agreed on the necessity of “civilizing the youth” and “urbanizing suburbia”, Renzo Piano.

3 Walter Gropius, “Die Entwicklung moderner Industrie- baukunst”, *Jahrbuch, Deutscher Werkbund*, 1913.

4 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1972.

5 Rem Koolhaas, “What Ever Happened to Urbanism” *SMLXL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995.

6 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems: For a Mannerist Time*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, 2004.

7 Rem Koolhaas, *ibid*.

8 Crimson Architectural Historians, “Orgware”, *Big Soft Orange*.