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AFTER Growth

RETHINKING the NARRATIVE of MODERNIZATION

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HAPPENINGS
Design-Minded Events in the Northwest
Donald Olsen: Architect of Habitable Abstractions

**Reviewed by JM Cava**

Although his house designs are deeply indebted to the established Gropius-Breuer American paradigm—Bauhaus meets New England colonial—Olsen’s homes are subtly adapted to regional characteristics: wood finishes and construction (and steel), sloped topographies, warmer climates and California’s notoriously casual lifestyle.

Donald Olsen: Architect of Habitable Abstractions

*By Pierluigi Serraino*

Introduction by John Winter

William Stout Publishers, 2013

In 1948, Donald Olsen, an architect in the Bay Area, was nearly thirty years-old, recently married with a young child and had nothing much to do. Alight with the fire of modernism from his time at Harvard with Gropius, Breuer and Giedion, and after brief unsatisfying stints with Saarinen, Wurster, Anshen, Kump and SOM, there was little work overall. So he created his own and thus found himself driving to Los Angeles, with a model and drawings in the back of his car, en route to the influential publisher of *Arts and Architecture*, John Entenza.

In the Bay Area, Olsen was an architectural outlander in territory ruled by Wurster and Mumford’s regionalism, famously dismissed by Breuer as nothing more than “... redwood all over the place.” Yet despite the region’s indifference to and even disdain for the aesthetic of the first machine age, Olsen’s entire career never strayed from his self-described inspirational wellspring, “... European modern architecture of the 1920s and 30s ...”

Yet everyone exists within a context that imprints their work, and Olsen was no exception—particularly so in that he was (and presumably still is) an articulate, charming and talented architect who cherished an exchange of ideas, remaining lifelong friends with architectural colleagues around the world. Although his house designs are deeply indebted to the established Gropius-Breuer American paradigm—Bauhaus meets New England colonial—Olsen’s homes are subtly adapted to regional characteristics: wood finishes and construction (and steel), sloped topographies, warmer climates and California’s notoriously casual lifestyle.

This is nowhere more cogent and expressive than in the 1948 project Olsen presented to Entenza: a hypothetical residence he named “Contraspatial House,” published in *Arts and Architecture* the same year. This is an architecture filled with ideas, gracefully assembled and beautifully rendered. In its complex interweaving of interior and exterior space, it is, within the modernist trajectory, an accomplished extension of Le Corbusier’s famous sketch of his progressive house form explorations. Gropius’s final approach—the Villa Savoye—was pronounced perfect, its internal complexity neatly wrapped in an envelope of Platonic purity. Olsen’s sophisticated plan moves beyond that, integrating several diverse architectural ideas of his time, among them the pinwheel plans of Neutra; multiple-courtyard/atrium houses of Mies, Sert, Rainer and Rudolfsky; mat-buildings from the Smithsons and CIAM; and Alexander and Chermayeff’s *Community and Privacy*, wherein multiple courtyard houses are a critique of the ubiquitous suburban home of the 1960s. Oddly enough, this early project of Olsen’s—one of his richest in texture and content—was designed as low-cost housing in the post-World War II environment.
No doubt Entenza’s publication of this house was influenced by Olsen’s masterful drawing skill. The crisp black and white renderings in Donald Olsen: Architect of Habitable Abstractions—congruent with the architecture they portray—are powerful vignettes of idealized mid-century suburban life with an almost visceral graphic immediacy. Like Le Corbusier, Olsen understood the ultimate purpose of his compositions was to house people and, like the Swiss master, his renderings are populated with delightful scenes of families engaged in the routine of daily life. These figures affirm the intimacy and geniality of scale that Olsen’s homes possess, no matter how abstract their composition or demeanor.

And abstract they are. The geometric rigor of these buildings—mostly homes—in plan and in volume is close in spirit to the Southern California structures of Soriano and Ellwood, yet Olsen is no acolyte to any regimented doctrine. His buildings have a level of comfort and freedom that Miesian houses lack. A comparison of interest is Olsen’s marvelous Ruth House II in Berkeley from 1968, set alongside Richard Meier’s Smith House in Connecticut of nearly the same year. Both are “white” architects using wood-frame construction mixed with steel, each seeking a reinterpretation of the International Style villa. The two buildings employ a similar abstract syntax, but Olsen’s has both greater intimacy and deeper connection to the earth and its landscape.

As an artifact, this is a wonderful book for architects, with none of those irritatingly tiny floor plans or magazine color photos taken at dusk or sunrise. Here are the architect’s original drawings, easy to follow and read, with Olsen’s personality infused into their making. The sumptuous renderings are printed large enough that you want to crawl right inside them. The book’s paper is the perfect size, weight and balance between gloss and matte for optimum reading of both photos and text. The prints—mostly by Rondal Partridge—have the crystalline clarity of old daguerreotypes, and the narrative by Pierluigi Serraino is refreshingly lucid and enlightening. Rumor has it this is the final publication from William Stout, the renowned bookseller and bibliophile. If so, this is a memorable and delightful final act.

JM Cava is an architect in Portland, where he teaches, writes and designs buildings and gardens.

All drawings are from the Donald Olsen Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. All images courtesy of William Stout Publishers.
Last fall, BUILD sat down with architect and Columbia professor Laurie Hawkinson in the Manhattan offices of Smith-Miller + Hawkinson (SMH+U), which she runs with her husband, Henry Smith-Miller. They discussed SMH+U’s advancement into public projects, working with different types of clients and the education of an architect.

BUILD: SMH+U’s work spans everything from furniture and houses to museums and transportation terminals. Do you consider yourselves specialists at any particular types of projects?

Laurie Hawkinson: We started out doing a lot of residential work. Since you start with the project types that are coming in the door, we first developed a vocabulary of details for lofts. However, I was very interested in working in the public realm, and at a certain point, we decided that was the work we really wanted to do—of course, you can decide that, but then you actually need to do it. This was at a time when public work was available, so we started putting feelers out. As we took on more public work, we deliberately took on less residential. Our public projects—such as the EMS station in the Bronx, which is currently in construction—have been some of the most interesting to us. We’ve also completed a couple of GSA (General Services Administration) port of entry projects, and we remain interested in that infrastructure.

How long did it take to get into public work?

Serendipitously, one thing has always led to another. Early on, we were approached by a firm that was working for Continental Airlines. They came to us because we had done all of these interior projects, and they wanted us to help design the interior package in conjunction with the new branding that they were rolling out for Continental. Carpet and surfaces turned into new ticket counters for a terminal at La Guardia, which turned into a canopy to shade the sun—the project ultimately became a design strategy for the whole environment.

After that we submitted an RFP for the ferry terminal here in New York City, and because of the Continental project, we were seen as transportation experts. We got the job, which was an important turning point in our portfolio of public work. Shortly thereafter, Corning Glass approached us because of our innovative use of glass and Kevlar on the canopy design for Continental. They were interested in having us design an exhibit, which established a good relationship between us, and when the Corning Museum of Glass came along, they gave us the project. We had never done anything of that scale, and the project was a significant milestone for us.

It’s about getting a foot in the door and not letting it close.

Through the Lens of Architecture

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURIE HAWKINSON, SMH+U ARCHITECTS

BUILD LLC
He was actually trained as an architect and then became a historian, and his wife is also an artist. Given their backgrounds and knowledge about architecture, the design process was a collaborative conversation with the clients. It was a challenging project because of a strict budget, a minimum required footprint on the property, and because none of the local builders had ever built anything like it. Because of the constraints, part of the conversation was about how we got one big design move, which became lifting the house up.

The resurgence of housing construction in New York is apparent in most neighborhoods. Would you consider it good growth? Luxury condos are being built everywhere in Manhattan, which is very different from housing in neighborhoods like SOHO, it’s second and third homes for owners who don’t live in New York.

We need more density in Manhattan, more housing. New York has made some good decisions with the 2030 zoning changes under the direction of the former Mayor Bloomberg and Amanda Burden, but now we need the policy to back it up.

In 1993, SMH+U designed a weekend house for Kenneth Frampton, maybe the most knowledgeable architectural historian alive. How did the design process differ from other projects?
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The fallibility of cities is best observed in the fallen—in bankrupt municipalities, politically strangled and cheated towns and physically destroyed landscapes. Found in these wasted cityscapes—after the media and markets have rejected their bids for economic survival, left them for dead—is something unexpected: a moment of possibility and catalytic potential. Not all places find the necessary ingredients to create new growth, but when the right elements ignite, like a forest fire that rages through the hills, there is a specific chemistry, topography and pattern to regeneration, vibrancy and later resiliency.

Today, the best lessons about urban resiliency appear to be found in Berlin and Detroit. These cities, both formerly wealthy manufacturing centers, have undergone economic ruin, population decimation and, now, phases of creative and economic re-emergence, fueled by grassroots community movements and entrepreneurial new arrivals.

Several months ago, I traveled to these cities as a member of the UW Runstad Fellows, a small group of academics and land-use professionals. We were in pursuit of clues about how to design the kinds of places that people both desperately seek and that also foster commercial success—i.e., place capital. We sought to observe and document fractured instances of human connection and commerce, challenge commonplace thinking and status quo solutions, and find patterns of urban success, namely in civic resiliency.

Of course, no definitive lessons should be preached by a few urbanists traveling to Detroit and Berlin for a couple of weeks. Cities are dynamic, constantly changing, living structures. But with that said, we feel confident stating the following: If cities are to continue to be places for humanity to excel, they must provide support and inspiration that stirs the soul. The following observations from the 2013 Fellows are intended to engage the curious city-maker in us all.

Build Dynamic, Co-Created Plans and Stir the Soul

**Urban Resiliency in Detroit and Berlin**

Lisa Picard

No matter the talent, the lone designer or the isolated developer will never create the most dynamic spaces.

AirBnB accommodations in the middle of Detroit’s vacated neighborhoods; gardens grow in the spaces between. PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA PICARD EXCEPT WHERE NOTED.
Our economy is driven largely by consumption—of the stuff we make, ideas we trademark and things we buy (whether we need them or not). It’s a system that seems to grow as the only path to value. The financialization of everything over the past thirty years certainly accelerated our income inequality and financial crises. Finance was the biggest industry over the last fifteen years, representing more than twenty percent of the S&P 500, just before it sucked the global economy into a black hole.

At the same time, the idea of community and commerce is in flux. People are craving human interaction—wanting authentic experiences, local food, meaningful work, honest relationships, and seeking experiences beyond just collecting things. However, we have prioritized the development of personal, private spaces beyond communal public environments, walking off people in subdivisions, office parks and strip malls to avoid the messy, unpredictable nature of urban life.

Detroit illustrated the foundation for its demise, taking a suburban approach to its economy and populace, which isolated and buffered people from meaningful interactions and co-creation. In Detroit—a city in decline since the 1950s, the eerie streets and vacant spaces between homes seemed to further isolate and divide people. However, as new residents arrived, vegetable gardens sprouted, and as nature takes back neglected lots, a mix of new people, spaces and activities are reconnecting social functions within these neighborhoods. Fostering a more co-creative urban landscape within these neighborhoods is critical for a diverse mix of people and places plants seeds for new resilient growth.

DIVERSITY + RESILIENCE
Inviting diversity, and more importantly its sibling, inclusion, provides resilience in economy, people and place. Berlin, with its many vacant spaces, soft rules and flexibility when it comes to ownership, is a magnet for young people, artists, entrepreneurs and visitors from around the globe, making the city a place of positive change and increasing diversity. This openness to outsiders is likely cultural, yet a city that offers such a reception, without first facing destruction, is a gift. In Berlin, locals say that no one owns Berlin, therefore everyone does. This openness fosters an invitation for further diversity. In the neighborhoods of Detroit, I talked to several fifty-year residents who told me they weren’t originally from the city but places like Pittsburgh and Atlanta. Ultimately, the invitation for diversity and inclusion comes from realizing we are all visitors, even if born on the soil we stand on.

SPACES TO PAUSE
There is value in city spaces that allow people to pause, to break out of routine, to be vulnerable and engage strangers. The busyness of everyday life in many cities finds nearly everyone staring at devices, avoiding the present moment, disconnected from what is happening around them. Just watch couples in a restaurant or people waiting for a bus. Fostering places comprised of everything analog, where a shut-down is not required but desired, allows us to access the very creative, emotional parts of our brains over the neocortex. Cities with places to pause might just be some of the most creative, prosperous and healthy landscapes of the future.

In Berlin, Prinzessinnengarten offers the perfect pause, a respite in the middle of bustling Kreuzberg. Where the Berlin Wall once stood, a disused piece of land was transformed into a garden inviting anyone to participate in harvesting, learning, picking. It is a place to sit at rustic tables, conversing with others, eating meals of food from the garden.

SHARE IDEAS
Creativity and innovation (today’s currency) come from great spaces that allow us to share ideas with people who aren’t like us. In Berlin and Detroit, we observed inherent openness and idea sharing. There was no commoditization of the creative product and the encouragement of thievery, as sharing has the potential to make work better.

In Berlin and Detroit, we observed inherent openness and idea sharing. There was no commoditization of the creative product and no thought of thievery, as sharing has the potential to make work better.

The co-working houses in Berlin were examples of fearless, shared, moving economies. At Betahaus, many creative designers shared their content with others in open forums, at pin-up sessions, one-on-one and through digital swapping to challenge assumptions and make their work better. Many Betahaus workers acknowledged the best input came from those outside the industry.

Cities are always going to rise and fall, shine and disappoint, thrive and barely survive. Some cities will have great art and green spaces, places rigidly determined, and others are full of possibilities still to be written. And cities have always provided connection, commerce and protection and will do so into the far future. Fundamentally, the 2013 Runstad Fellows learned that we are the city, on what ever part of the globe that might be, writing the urban narrative, public and private, every day of our lives. We all create the city.
I was born by the river in a little tent
Oh and just like the river I’ve been running ever since
It’s been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will
It’s been too hard living but I’m afraid to die
‘Cause I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky
It’s been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will
—Sam Cooke

LaToya Ruby Frazier, the recipient of Seattle Art Museum’s (SAM) 2013 Gwen-dolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize, investigates issues of propaganda, politics and the importance of subjectivity with an emphasis on postmodern conditions, class and capitalism in her new solo exhibition, LaToya Ruby Frazier: Born by a River. Frazier is a photographer and media artist whose practice is informed by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modes of representation. Her work is an intimate look at her family, connecting their experiences to the history of her hometown, Braddock, Pennsylvania, and its drastic decline from one of America’s first steel-mill towns to the distressed municipality it is today. This exhibition at SAM includes photographs from two ever-growing bodies of work—those taken at the street level (The Notion of Family) and those taken from the sky above Braddock.

LaToya Ruby Frazier: Born by a River is on view at SAM through 22 June 2014. seattleartmuseum.org

LaToya Ruby Frazier
BORN BY A RIVER
SANDRA JACKSON-DUMONT

LaToya Ruby Frazier
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER
Sandra Jackson-Dumont is the Kayla Skinner deputy director for education and public programs and adjunct curator of the Modern & Contemporary Art Department for Seattle Art Museum.

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RETHINKING THE NARRATIVE OF MODERNIZATION

CHARLES MUDEDE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIA WILCOX

Growth

AFTER
The deepening global environmental crisis and recent research revealing the limits, and even dangers, of Western-style consumerism has turned the whole narrative of development completely upside down.

But even around the time that Bogotá was investing in bikeways, a number of rich cities in the West were beginning to transition from a traffic system that privileged the congestion problems of automobile transportation to one that seriously considered bike transportation a better and more rational mode of urban mobility. Copenhagen, a wealthy Scandinavian city (it has a GDP of around $100 billion—but one-tenth of Bogotá’s population) was one, and possibly the most recognizable, of these rich cities. Following World War II, Copenhagen, like many post-war Western European cities, equated modernization with an urban transportation platform that could only envision the automobile-centric city. However, the city began reverting to bikes after the fuel crisis of 1973. By the 1980s, around the time my father was in China, planners were thinking about returning the space given to cars back to pedestrians and bikes.

“A further point and quality to emphasize (about Copenhagen) is the bicycle,” says the avuncular Danish architect, urban theorist and leading proponent of human-scale planning, Jan Gehl, in an Ecotopia interview (Gehl was also featured in Hustwit’s popular Urbanized). We have had the bicycle around for a good 100 years now, and in certain countries and cultures, bicycles are a widespread form of transportation. This goes for places like Holland and Denmark. Due to a welcoming infrastructure, the number of cyclists has increased tremendously in Denmark, for example. In Copenhagen, bicycling accounts for 36% of all commuting to and from work. (Italics are mine)

And so a simple technology that was in Copenhagen’s past, and in Bogotá’s present (where 15 percent of people currently use bikes as their main mode of transportation), proves to be more efficient and even more advanced than the newer and complex technology that has been powerfully associated with the future of urbanism, with the progress of a society since Futurama, a 1995 science fiction spectacle manufactured for the New York World’s Fair by the “master builder” Robert Moses and the giant corporation General Motors. The world we have entered should be seen as the “World [after] Tomorrow,” a world where complexity is no longer the mark of modernity, a world where an old invention might be better and more effective than a new one.

What Copenhagen and Bogotá show is that privilege the congestion problems of automobile transportation to one that seriously considered bike transportation a better and more rational mode of urban mobility.

SMART DECLINE AND HORIZONTAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the many ways that the development of high-income cities has been theorized is “smart decline,” which the civil engineers and planners Deborah and Frank Popper basically describe as a retreat from the mad vision of unlimited growth and a sober commitment to an urbanism that concentrates humans in functioning cores, returning dysfunctional sprawl to farms and wilderness.

The situation of poor cities, however, is recognized but not properly theorized. For example, blogger Adam Davies on Urbanomics writes at the opening of “African Cities are Walking Cities, But Are They Walkable?” If you’ve ever been in an East African city during rush hour, then you’ll know that African cities are walking cities. In the

Around the time that Bogotá was investing in bikeways, a number of rich cities in the West were beginning to transition from a traffic system that privileged the congestion problems of automobile transportation to one that seriously considered bike transportation a better and more rational mode of urban mobility.
WHY CAPITALISM IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH A SOCIETY THAT CONSUMES LESS, DRIVES LESS, RECYCLERS MORE AND SHARES MORE

In 1930, a year after the Stock Market Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, the most influential economist of the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes (Keynesianism dominated economic thinking in the West between 1945 and 1977), wrote a very short and very curious essay called “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren.” In this essay (which is also a work of science fiction), Keynes speculated that when the world’s scarcity problem is resolved in a hundred years (2030), the new problem for society will be this. What will people do with their free time? Keynes:

Thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.

The stern economic purposes money-makers may carry all of us along with them into the lap of economic abundance. But it will be those peoples, who can keep alive, and cultivate into a fuller perfection, the art of life itself and do not sell themselves for the means of life, who will be able to enjoy the abundance when it comes.

It can be argued that the US achieved this “freedom from pressing economic cares” by the late 60s or early 70s, right around the time that the environmental movement was born and many in the West felt the need for a radical rethinking of progress and growth. But thirty years later, and sixteen years before Keynes wrote his essay, we live in a society that only recognizes and acts upon one kind of crisis: the economic. But the economic crisis in our society is never one of scarcity (an actual shortage of something real) but a reaction to slow or no growth. We have the “plenty and abundance” yet compound growth (and usually at 2 percent) is the only game in town. If our society is above 2 percent annual growth (and again, this is compound interest), be happy—but if it is below, feel the pain. Read the financial papers—this is presented daily as the one possible order of things.

Now we speak of reducing consumption, sharing, cutting dependences on the largest energy corporations in the world, but it’s never explained how such practices and values, which clearly encourage economic contraction, would work in a system that immediately collapses in the absence of robust expansion. The sad truth is that a real green movement needs an alternative to capitalism. This isn’t simply a socialist dreaming about the death of market ideology or preaching the fall of the 1 percent, it is a socialism that soberly understands that capitalism’s great wonders (or, as they say in China, miracles) owe everything to its monstrous vision of unlimited and unchecked growth.

In the past, development was about growing vertically, moving up to what was coddled as a Western standard of living: home ownership, car ownership, high wages, low unemployment, crass consumerism, meat-rich diets and so on. But now that mode of life is proving to be problematic.

He later writes:

So walking is popular in Africa, but this isn’t because urban African streets are walking-friendly. In fact quite the opposite: 65% of streets in Addis Ababa lack any pavements or sidewalks and crossings are rare. Africans walk despite the un-walkable urban environment, not because of it. Walking isn’t only difficult it’s also very dangerous with 67% of road accidents involving pedestrians in Ethiopia’s capital.

What’s missing in this post is a theory I will call horizontal development. In the past, development was about growing vertically, moving up to what was coddled as a Western standard of living: home ownership, car ownership, high wages, low unemployment, crass consumerism, meat-rich diets and so on. But now that mode of life is proving to be problematic. For one, it is environmentally unsustainable, according to a 2012 infographic by blogger and journalist Tim De Chant, if all humans lived like Indians, we would need less than one earth, but if everyone lived like US Americans, we would need over four. And two, it is profoundly unhealthy (read Howard Frumkin, Lawrence Frank and Richard Jackson’s Urban Sprawl and Public Health). The vertical model is no longer realistic or desirable. But what can replace it? Horizontal development, a model that does not climb but enhances, improves what’s already available. Writes the blogger at Walkonomics, stumbling into this idea without seeing it: “The United Nations have recently pumped over $55 million into a project to kick-start sustainable transport in three African capital cities.”

Horizontal development should not only be about simply funding sidewalks but funding world-class sidewalks.

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uses and cars stream from the affluent coastal neighborhoods of Salvador, Brazil’s third largest city, to Shopping Iguatemi, one of the biggest and newest malls in town. Crawling through traffic, we pass through an area my friends call “Americatown”: a Walmart-owned megastore and a pizza joint all situated near the junction of three major crosstown highways. Just a kilometer or so further down, I enter the mall to buy a $10 plastic smartphone at Lojas Americanas (literally “American Stores”), which is basically Target. The customer service is quick and polite. There is no haggling over the sale. I brandish my Wells Fargo debit card with few worries. This is not really the commonly held vision of life in northeastern Brazil—it is neither the sleepy, tropical paradise nor the chaotic and dangerous mega-city. But this economic landscape is already and increasingly the norm. The number of shopping malls in Brazil doubled between 2008 and 2013. As Brazilian cities upgrade and modernize—mostly in preparation for upcoming mega-events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup—it’s worth asking what they’re aspiring toward. Development

The Limits of Favela Chic

LISA STURDIVANT

The Safeway at Seattle’s 32nd Rainer Avenue South—but in human-scale operations like Fou Lee Market on Beacon Hill, which is dense, compact, uses space efficiently and represents a way toward smart decline. In the same way, the inhabitants in poor cities must see walking, and even density, not only as a responsible, virtuous form of civic behavior, but as beautiful. (In Harare, townships or slums were politely coded as high-density and suburbs as low-density—the implication being that one must aspire to the latter, not the former.)

In New York, the bike lanes were seen as elitist, in Bogotá, as democratic. Expect more of this kind of cultural confusion as the cities of our world collide.

That said, meaning that said in the whole of this introduction, there are certainly aspects of low-income cities that shouldn’t be adopted by high-income ones, such as the absence of a centralized and reliable public power grid. The inhabitants of Lagos, for example, have a wildly unpredictable power grid and so depend on gas-powered generators for electricity. This solution is, of course, terribly inefficient and would have catastrophic results if adopted by the West. As the physicist and urban theorist Geoffrey West has pointed out again and again, scale is important. At the cellular level, a big elephant is actually more efficient than a mouse. Individual generators, like cars, are a bad idea in terms of energy efficiency. It’s much better for all to share a common grid.

Though, there is a story out there that four Nigerian schoolgirls recently invented an electric generator that runs on urine—“Their invention ensures that 1 liter of urine gives you 6 hours of electricity,” claimed the newspaper Red Pepper. If this is indeed true, and the technology is commercialized (which sadly is unlikely)—as Robert Neuworth points out in his book Stealth of Nations, Lagossians can’t manufacture anything precisely because the city does not have a reliable source of power. We in the overdeveloped West may have something to learn from one of the poorest cities on earth.

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In other ways, Salvador fits the more stereotypical image of the Bra- zilian city. Cars park on the sidewalks and pedestrians walk in the street. There are no bus maps, though it doesn’t take long to learn which architectural exotica or other indoor public space Streetparking is paid to locals who help drivers angle in and hopefully ensure the safety of their vehicles while they’re away. Citywide recycling does not exist, but littering is a common way for aluminum cans to make their way to private facilities. Terminally unemployed collectors scroung the streets and parks, a practice described by Argentine novelist César Aira in his short novel Skhairywte as “such a practical arrangement it might have been set up deliberately.”

A local architecture professor remarked to me that the difference between American and Brazilian cities is that the former are planned, and so are the architectural styles of their urban planning; while the Brazilian consumption of urban sensibilities and definitions of “quality of life” underlie the genuinely psychological appeal of favela chic. The attraction to these “minor architectures,” as they are known, is in fact, and in image, chaotic. Spaghetti-strung streets, unplanned development and the type of every type springing up wherever the opportunity presents itself. While the scale of the formal design may not be human, that has little to do with how people actually use the city. Ultimately, Brazilian cities are not known for the monuments of Le Corbusier, CIAM or even Oscar Niemeyer. They’re known for the favelas—squatter settlements and shantytowns, swaths of informal neighborhoods that occupy every unused space, often illegally, and often as the only option for the very poor. That image, like the reality of the Brazilian city, has its own logic.

This logic has been increasingly valued by planners and designers each is a method of individualizing one’s residence, to singularize, or to quote Felix Guattari, “to attempt to achieve an authentic existence . . . against the wall of capitalist subjectivity.” [10] With through an aesthetic sensibility, by changing life on a macro level (Molecular Revolution in Brazil). There is a perceived freedom in actively creating spaces, providing one’s own services. Perhaps there is also an attraction to the Third World because the First has become simply too sad—homogeneous landscapes, recession, the obsolence of the public sphere and so on. American planning narratives have gradually shifted to encompass the truly operating processes of globalization than those of its North American neighbors. And perhaps puxedinho, hybridization and appropriation are in fact intelligent logics used to navigate this post-urban sensibilities and definitions of “quality of life” underlie the genuinely psychological appeal of favela chic. The attraction to these “minor architectures,” as they are known, is in fact, and in image, chaotic. Spaghetti-strung streets, unplanned development and the type of every type springing up wherever the opportunity presents itself. While the scale of the formal design may not be human, that has little to do with how people actually use the city. Ultimately, Brazilian cities are not known for the monuments of Le Corbusier, CIAM or even Oscar Niemeyer. They’re known for the favelas—squatter settlements and shantytowns, swaths of informal neighborhoods that occupy every unused space, often illegally, and often as the only option for the very poor. That image, like the reality of the Brazilian city, has its own logic.

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Food Forest in the City

SEATTLE’S BEACON HILL BEGINS A RADICAL EXPERIMENT WITH COMMON SPACE

MADELINE REDDINGTON

Early this summer, Seattle’s Beacon Food Forest (BFF) will hold an official opening ceremony for what may become the country’s largest public space for gardening and foraging. Currently two acres, the permaculture project is designed to grow into a self-sustaining forest, but it will take some care and a whole lot of volunteer hours to get there. If this “test run” of the two-acre development is successful, the forest will expand to fill a seven-acre stretch on Beacon Hill between 15th Avenue and the golf course, where foragers can pick fruit, berries, nuts, vegetables and herbs at will—for free.

Urban farms are not new; they are appearing in several cities across the US, like Detroit, whose residents were abandoned by capitalism in much the same way Havanans were cut off from across the US, like Detroit, whose residents were abandoned by herbs at will—for free.

Many Detroit residents have responded to the city’s economic crisis by bringing people back in touch with growing food—creating community gardens of all sizes, using organic planting strategies and creating Common Space.

EXPERIMENT WITH

BEGINS A RADICAL

Seattle’s Beacon Hill

City

Forest

Food

Urban farms are not new; they are appearing in several cities across the US, like Detroit, whose residents were abandoned by capitalism in much the same way Havanans were cut off from communism chemical agriculture supplies and fossil fuel in the ’90s. Many Detroit residents have responded to the city’s economic crisis by bringing people back in touch with growing food—creating community gardens of all sizes, using organic planting strategies and sharing what they’ve learned. Similar movements are helping other urban families and neighborhoods devastated by the recent economic crash. And as Leigh Gallagher points out in her book The End of the Suburbs, there are even gardens appearing in abandoned malls. But the food forest on Beacon Hill is original in that, one, it is not a response to a disaster, and two, it will be a common space open to all. The BFF is in the middle of a major and rich American city, yet it is much like those unregulated spaces that often surround the cores of cities in developing countries.

But the BFF isn’t just for high-income dabblers fetishizing what is for many in poor cities, suburbs or countries a necessity—a source of free food outside of the system. This is a project that’s engaging the diverse and savvy network of people that make up Seattle’s urban populace and who have deep concern for the future of our cities and way of life. Though there is something ancient about the Beacon Food Forest, it is in essence futuristic.

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Learning from Bogotá

HOW A CITY WITH FEW RESOURCES AND LOTS OF BIKES BECAME AN EXAMPLE OF A DEMOCRATIC CITY

GUIDO C. SEOANES PERLA

“When Peñalosa ran for the mayor’s seat back in 1997, he refused to make the promises doled out by so many politicians. He was not going to make everyone richer. Forget the dream of becoming as wealthy as Americans: it would take generations to catch up to the gringos, even if the urban economy caught fire and burned blue for a century. The dream of riches, Peñalosa complained, served only to make Bogotans feel bad.”

—Charles Montgomery, Happy City

I began dreaming of an ideal world where pedestrians and bicycles were, perhaps, valued above automobiles. But then I realized this place is real: Bogotá, Colombia.
CICLOVÍAS

“If we’re going to talk about transport, I would say that the great city is not the one that has highways but one where a child on a tricycle or bicycle can go safely everywhere.”

—Enrique Peñalosa, Urbanized

It must be noted that long before this era of positive change, in 1976, Bogotá was the first city in the world to start a Sunday biking program called Ciclovías (bike path). In the ’90s, Peñalosa made the Ciclovías safer and added permanent Ciclorutas (bicycle routes) all over the city. The Ciclovías is now an event that happens every Sunday and holidays in Bogotá and in other cities in Colombia, such as Medellín and Cali, where the main streets are blocked off to all automobiles. In Bogotá, nearly 2.5 million citizens, which is about 30 percent of the population, take advantage of the 120 kilometers of Ciclovías inside the automobile-free city. The Ciclovías is a unifying force.

BICYCLE CULTURE

“A protected bicycle way is a symbol of democracy. It shows that a citizen on a $30 bicycle is just as important as a citizen in a $30,000 car.”

—Enrique Peñalosa, Urbanized

Bicycle culture in Bogotá is not limited to the activities of the Ciclovías or Ciclorutas. For many street vendors, the bicycle supports their entrepreneurship, which plays a major role in the local economies of Colombian cities. For example, in Barranquilla, my hometown, the national postal service and some private postal companies still deliver mail by deploying bicyclists in many areas of the city. Colombian culture has placed bicycles at the center of everyday life. It’s true that many cities around the world have used the bicycle as a main source of transportation for generations, but the new bicycle revolution, which impacted the physical fabric of cities, began in Colombia.

If a nation like Colombia, once a failing state, can become a rising star in Latin America, and do so with very few resources, imagine the possibilities for the United States if it chooses to follow Colombia’s lead.

Globalizing the Pirate Taxi

WHERE HARARE IS BEGINNING TO MEET SEATTLE

CHARLES MUDEDE

In 1976, Bogotá was the first city in the world to start a Sunday biking program called Ciclovías (bike path).
top of the corporate world (e.g., Hertz 24/7; Zipcar, by the way, was swallowed by the rental-industry leader Avis in 2013).

The essential concept of car sharing is simple enough: Instead of owning a vehicle, a user rents one for a block of time. This kind of sharing, however, can only make economic sense in a big, dense city. In that environment, lots of people can easily share a tight concentration of cars, and as a result, reduce the overall number of cars in a city and the amount of time those cars spend sitting around doing nothing—occupying much-needed spaces. (Most people in transportation focus on the 5 percent of the time that cars are moving. But the average car is parked 95 percent of the time.) I think there’s a lot to learn from that 95 percent.”—Donald Shoup, The High Cost of Free Parking

I though it’s best and greenest to place public transportation at the top of all modes of urban motility, car sharing is still far better than individual car ownership. Also, the costs of maintaining a car (the insurance, the gas, the sitting around doing nothing almost all day) are not cheap, even for those in the middle class of high-income societies.

But here is the interesting thing: People in a low-income African city like Harare (the capital of Zimbabwe, a country with a GDP that’s one twenty-third of Seattle’s, which is around $230 billion), would instantly recognize the American car-sharing business as what they call “pirate taxis.”

The citizens of Harare or Gaborone or Maputo should know that the citizens in rich cities are tearing down their expressways and developing an ethic and economy of sharing. This economy already exists in African cities and so all that’s needed is to complement it with a supporting ethic. At the moment, pirate taxis, as the name indicates, have a very low status. Although many middle-class Africans open their doors to strangers for a quick buck, the practice carries a stigma—a car is meant just for you, you own it, only you should be in it, what a shame it is to pack it with a bunch of strangers, what a failure you are. But anyone in Seattle who has used, say, SideCar or Lyft (another app-based sharing community that also began in San Francisco—a city whose GDP is $350 billion, ten times that of Kenya), finds not a hint of stigma but, instead, drivers filled with pride that they are making a little extra something on the side while helping the city move in a direction that’s greener.

In short: Pirate taxis should not be treated as a lowly practice that exists in African cities and so all that’s needed is to complement it with a supporting ethic. At the moment, pirate taxis, as the name indicates, have a very low status. Although many middle-class Africans open their doors to strangers for a quick buck, the practice carries a stigma—a car is meant just for you, you own it, only you should be in it, what a shame it is to pack it with a bunch of strangers, what a failure you are. But anyone in Seattle who has used, say, SideCar or Lyft (another app-based sharing community that also began in San Francisco—a city whose GDP is $350 billion, ten times that of Kenya), finds not a hint of stigma but, instead, drivers filled with pride that they are making a little extra something on the side while helping the city move in a direction that’s greener.

People in a low-income African city like Harare would instantly recognize the American car-sharing business as what they call “pirate taxis.”

As this issue went to press, the Seattle City Council approved regulations that will limit the number of rideshare drivers a given company can deploy, and will eventually overhaul the city’s rideshare rules. Look for an update to this article when it’s released online at arcadenw.org.

Charles Modede is a filmmaker, associate editor of The Stranger and former lecturer in post-colonial literature at Pacific Lutheran University. He is also a member of ARCADE’s editorial committee.
we left behind, we drank Coke from bottles that we had to return to the factory for rebot-
tling. Now, Cairenes want to consume like the worst of Westerners, consume as if there actually is a thing as nothingness, a void into which waste vanishes forever.

But do not get me wrong. I’m not inter-
ested in the classic narrative that says the world was good and now is bad, a trick that chronicles nostalgia or declares defeat. Yet as far as Cairo goes, such a narrative captures a form of truth in terms of the dynamics of consumption. With the influx of American soap operas, movies and capital came the explo-
sive growth of the Egyptian nouveau riche, a group that has nothing to do with supporting the arts, sciences or the environment. They have one vocation to consume. And the middle class, a growing con-
servative body, aims to join the nouveau riche in their consumption. Indeed, it is not the Western rules of urban planning that fucked things up for Cairo, it is late capitalism—Egyptian and global capi-
tal—that turned the city into a chaotic nightmare, which the upper middle-class has begun escaping by moving to an American-style suburbanization.

To understand the brutal absurdity the city of Cairo has become, go to a Foul and Falafel shop and order a few sandwiches. Each costs about a quarter and will be individually wrapped in a plastic bag; all of your wrapped sandwiches will then be placed in a larger plastic bag. In the past, the same shop would have wrapped the sandwiches together in an old newspaper and sold you a plastic bag only if you absolutely wanted it.

Globalization—which brought with it a barrage of images of consumption—reconstructed Cairo.

Over the years, I have learned that moral arguments are problematic, maybe because we are all at fault of violating them. Aesthetic judgments seem to be equally problematic, but at least engaging in them is more inter-
esting. My problem with the Egyptian mid-
dle-class and how they distorted Cairo is that their form of life—which is a bad simulacrum of American middle-class life—can’t produce anything but ugliness. The old city of Cairo was a difficult place to live in; the new city of Cairo is an impossible place to live in.

The 2011 Egyptian revolution came as a statement not so much against a dictator but against the nouveau riche and the authorities that protect and serve their ugly and wasteful way of life. The revolu-
tion was a statement against what the city of Cairo had become, which left its inhabitants devoid of agency and miracles—attributes of the older city. The revolution came to reclaim a space and a history, but as I write, this same revolution that hosted the largest number of self-organizing demonstrations in history is taking a downturn. The ugly city is winning. Yes, one more victory for nihilism. ❦

Globalization—which brought with it a barrage of images of consumption—reconstructed Cairo.

Maged Zaher is the author of Thank You for the Window Office: The Revolution Happened and You Didn’t Call Me and Portrait of the Poet as an Engineer. His translations of contemporary Egyptian poetry have appeared in Jacket Magazine, Bumapest and Denver Quarterly. He performed his work at Subtext, Bumbershoot, the Kootney School of Writing, St. Marks Project, Evergreen State College and The American University in Cairo. Maged is the recipient of the 2013 Genius Award in Literature from The Stranger.
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A select few homes are truly extraordinary. This is why we formed Holyoke Pine Homes in the early 1990s. Remarkable architecture requires a renaissance approach to building, with passion for both precise craftsmanship and technical construction.
In the September 2013 issue of ARCADE, John Parman reviewed influential designer, artist and writer Barbara Stauffacher Solomon’s new memoir, *why? why not?*, and the companion *utopia myopia*, a collection of thirty-six plays in précis form with accompanying drawings. Barbara writes of her studies with Armin Hoffman in Switzerland, the groundbreaking “supergraphics” she designed for The Sea Ranch, her work as an artist and writer, and much else in addition and beyond.

Below is Stauffacher Solomon’s response to Parman’s review—a mere fragment of her musings on how everything is related to everything.

**IS UTOPIA IN THE SEARCH FOR UTOPIA?**

My book *utopia myopia* is the search for utopia on 36 plays on a page. The setting for each play is a piece of paper, 8½ by 11. The characters are listed. Scenes are drawn on the top half of the page. Five columns of lines of type, newspaper style, are set below. The dialogue is minimal, shorthand determined by the number of letter-forms per line, text-messages for today’s limited attention span. The book is fantasy, foolishness and fact. Lines, lies and landscapes.

**IS UTOPIA IN ARCHITECTS’ DRAWINGS?**

Architects were always drawing utopias. In the 1930s, modern movement architects on fire with nostalgic ideas and revolutionary expectations believed there were myths to be made and they would and could make them. They delighted in drawing up cities of the future. Le Corbusier drew Paris as an English garden estate carpeted with grand green lawns and elegant white machines. The drawing was to be a Radiant City of sun. Frank Lloyd Wright drew his Edenic, futurist Broadacre City and believed any American lucky enough to live in his “prairie houses” would bask in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Everything looked perfect on paper. On paper, writers wrote words promising an ideal life to the people who’d live in these “built utopias,” but I think everyone imagined they’d be living in the drawings.

**IS THE CITY AN “URBAN UTOPIA”?**

As I said, architects always draw utopias (deny it or not). The problem is building them. To get the drawings built, utopian romantics (architects and landscape architects) have to work for urban realists (developers). It’s green gardens versus greenbacks. Parks versus parking lots. Greed usually wins. Corbu’s and Wright’s most delicious utopias were never constructed and the plans their followers managed to get built (housing projects and the burbs) didn’t work out too well.

When people weren’t content imprisoned in the reality of built walls, not happy for the privilege of paying the rent or mortgage, and no longer inspired by their new stoves and refrigerators, they went to the movies.

**WHERE DO WE SEE UTOPIA?**

We see utopia in landscape paintings, architectural drawings, movies and other squared away illusions. Utopia always seems framed squarely
within a rectangle: on pages, canvases and rectangular sheets of paper; inside picture-frame stage sets as in utopia myopia; in rectangular building blocks, city blocks, surveyors’ grids and square-deals; in walking through rectangular doorways, in driving by rectangular highway signs announcing off ramps to invisible utopias, in rectangular glass store windows promising paradise in shiny commodities; on rectangular TV, computer and movie screens.

IS UTOPIA IN MAKING THINGS?
Those who might have called themselves architects now call themselves industrial designers. Unlike architects, industrial designers really took over producing things. Things made on the production line, the assembly line.

Industrial designers rejoice in producing not a few big things like cities that please a few people and that a few people can own, but lots of small things that please lots of people and that everyone hopes to own. Beautiful, shiny, black and white or brightly colored toys.

I doubt that utopia is making things on an assembly line for the workers there. However, an assembly line means lots of people making lots of little pieces into lots of shiny things. People fall in love with these things and buy them. Things became commodities and the workers become consumers.

IS UTOPIA IN OWNING AND USING THINGS?
Steve Jobs loved his lines of beautiful iApples: Apples for everybody. And everybody seems extremely happy to consume them, all the time, everywhere. Is it that the big consumers have found utopia? As I type this line on October 20, 2013, CNN reports: “Chinese couple sells babies for iPhones and shoes . . . .”

Is utopia in having and playing with things like personal computers, iPhones, iPads and Instamatics? Fascinated with ourselves, we carry computer screens, as our doubles, smart specters to give us information, self-augmentation, self-preservation and the ability to shoot selfies. Most of us have no knowledge of how they work. Who cares? We can buy them. We point them at anything, everything and they take pictures not of what we’re looking at but what they see. The “truth” as they see it. News or nonsense. Amazingly, they have become an extension of everyone’s hands.

Breaking news is that new art form in which every event is seen by someone, recorded on their smartphone, instantly sent to a TV station, and, if newsy, nosey or nosey, artfully cut and pasted by someone else and immediately broadcast to every screen, everywhere, for everybody else to see.

Breaking news is the modern movement’s dream of utopian life: art moved out of private, white rooms and onto public streets, where everyone is the artist, the actor and the audience. Never mind the scenes not seen. Did they really happen?

IS UTOPIA THE INVISIBLE?
I used to want to return to the philosophy department at UC Berkeley to do a PhD on the invisible. Instead, I sat in my white tower on Telegraph Hill, typing and drawing lines on pieces of white paper, 8½ by 11. Moviemakers like to see “the wind in the trees”; I like to see the white spaces between the lines. Now, I realize, I was doing my PhD on the invisible after all.

Barbara Stauffacher Solomon trained first as a dancer in her native San Francisco before studying graphic design under Armin Hofmann in Switzerland where she fully absorbed his hard line modernist doctrine; when she returned to America to work as a designer, she doggedly stuck to the rigors of Swiss design at a time when, as she notes, psychedelic squiggles were the norm. She is best known for the super graphics she designed in the 1960s for The Sea Ranch in Northern California—a radical graphic statement.
I first read about the DC-based Miller brothers in The Atlantic Cities in an article titled “The Real Estate Deal That Could Change the Future of Everything.” Last summer, I used my shaky ARCADE press credentials to meet them.

Unlike me, brothers Ben and Dan Miller (aged thirty-seven and twenty-six) are sons of a successful urban-infill developer in Washington, DC. They hail not from the suburbs but from an upscale enclave in the northwest quarter of the District, near Georgetown University. Prodigies of the real estate business, they worked their way up through their father’s company, then started an investment fund of their own. Then a company. Then three companies. All of which are changing the future of everything.

Standing in the back lot of a small two-story building being actively gutted and rebuilt by carpenters and electricians, I stammer my way through an interview with the Millers. They have arrived by taxi, bringing with them a woman in heels who is evidently on a job interview. I am trying to sound smart and failing.

They wear sport coats and leather shoes, speak with practiced articulation, exude prep school educations. The day is overcast and I’m not finding camera angles.

Part of the problem is the smallness of the yard, which might be something close to the size of a suburban Virginia living room and has a giant hole filling half of it. The address is 1351 H Street NE, the demonstration pilot project for the Millers’ everything-changing company. Fundrise, which uses a crowd-sourcing model to fund real-estate endeavors, could be considered the “Kickstarter of real estate,” but that would diminish the gravity of the historic occasion of its existence. Kickstarter is a platform for donating to other people’s labors of love in exchange for hugs and presents; Fundrise is like a kinder, gentler take on The Wolf of Wall Street. Two years ago, protestors occupied Wall Street. This year, Wall Street domination begins to crumble at the hand of publicly crowd-sourced capital, invested online and coordinated by companies like Fundrise.

Crowdfunded real estate is new only for this

CAPITAL / CAPITOL

CROWDFUNDED REAL ESTATE IS HERE

ADRIAN MACDONALD

Left: 1351 H Street NE (center) in July 2013. After the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the neighborhood fell into disrepair and didn’t start to recover until the early 2000s. DC’s population (607,772) is currently the same as Seattle’s (634,535), but the city limits are about half the size, making it twice as dense.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN MACDONALD

Creativity amok in a hip ramen restaurant on H Street NE in November 2012. This spring, the same chef will unveil Maketto, a new restaurant concept with multiple vendors based on an Asian night market, in the Millers’ first demonstration property at 1351 H Street NE. The market will also double as a retail store for local street fashion label Durkl.

Katlin Jackson, Fundrise’s vice president of real estate, Pacific Northwest in February 2014. Her office is the co-working space at The Hub in Pioneer Square.

Dan and Ben Miller (left to right) with Seattle-based Katlin Jackson, who is interviewing successfully for the position of vice president of real estate, Pacific Northwest in July 2013, at the site of Fundrise’s first demonstration property, 1351 H Street NE in DC.
reason: When the US Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) established its current invest-
ment rules and regulations in 1933, it required
that commercial real estate developers sell equity
shares in prospective projects only to “accredited
investors.” In the interest of protecting the gen-
eral public from being snared into high-risk undi-
versified investments,
only those making
more than $200,000
per year, or those with
a net worth of at least
$1 million, can become
accredited. As a result,
the vast majority of
the public is excluded
from such deals and
can only access them
through faceless
institutional vehicles
like REITs (real estate
investment trusts) that buy and sell shares of
properties all over the country.

Several players have entered
the crowdfunding real estate
market, but so far none plan
to target the unaccredited
investor—Fundrise is alone in
its dedication to democratizing
real estate investing for all,
not just for the rich.

Fundrise’s first insight was to notice a
loophole in the SEC rule, allowing shares to
be offered to unaccredited investors through
a complicated approval process at both the fed-
eral and state level. Ambitiously, the Millers
dove into this process for over a year and were
finally able to bring through the 1351 H Street NE
property. In 2012, they sold shares in the project
to 175 unaccredited investors living in DC and
Virginia at a price of $100 per share and a rate of
return of 8.4 percent, raising some $325,000—
about 20 percent of the project cost.

For real estate, this could be considered a
Kitty Hawk moment, but it is only a small part
of the larger movement. Sometime this year,
the SEC will finalize
new rules and regu-
lations in response to
the JOBS Act signed
into law by President
Obama in 2012 with
bipartisan support.
Often paraphrased
as the “crowdfunding
bill,” the law lifts the
restrictions on invest-
ment offerings across
all industries, usher-
ing in a new era of
widespread access to capital for small entrepre-
neurs. Just as we can buy shares in companies
registered on the Stock Exchange, we will now
be able to buy shares in small startup businesses
through online portals, regulated by the SEC.

Over the last year, Fundrise has grown
quickly to position itself as one of these portals,
with virtually no other competition for the kind
of small, neighborhood-scale development proj-
ects they are doing in DC. Several players have
entered the crowdfunded real estate market,
but so far none plan to target the unaccredited
investor—Fundrise is alone in its dedication to
democratizing real estate investing for all, not
just for the rich.

As it turns out, the woman in heels at the
construction site, Seattle-based Katlin Jack-
son (age twenty-nine), got the job—she is now
Fundrise’s vice president of real estate, Pacific
Northwest, and works out of a co-working space
in Pioneer Square. Much of her work consists of
signing up local developers to establish profiles
on the Fundrise website, so that they can build
a network of interested investors when the time
comes to crowd fund a project.

Adrian MacDonald is the communications manager
for LMN Architects, a journalist and a former New York
City taxi driver. More of his writing, including more of
the Fundrise story, can be found at postoccupancy.com.
I was with my colleague Patricia Loheed at the fabulous Polesden Lacey National Trust Garden in Surrey, south of London. Pat gazed over the expanse of formal pathways, rich plantings, rose gardens, forest and field. She focused on the chalk hills across from the manicured property and exulted, “They designed this to be a borrowed landscape!” By incorporating, or “borrowing,” the scenery outside of the garden’s boundaries, the visual footprint of Polesden Lacey was enlarged, dramatized and made a good deal grander, a first break from the tight, strict formalism of earlier English garden designs. Pat’s enthusiasm was about getting a firsthand look at modern landscape architecture in the making. However, her comment got me thinking about a different kind of borrowed landscape, one that’s related to the evolution of form.

As a biologist, I’m aware that few characteristics in nature evolve more than once—for example, the appearance of the vertebrate body plan, photosynthesis and the fern-like unfolding of growing plants each arose at one time in history, globally, and never again. We can also uncover the relationships of “unrelated” species by looking at their DNA, and we humans share so much in common with the rest of the living world that our common ancestry with plants, insects, and even fungi and bacteria, is a moot point.

So what about landscape evolution? What do built landscapes have in common with one another? Are landscape forms inherited, borrowed, shared, stolen or have they arisen independently in many different places and times?

As an undergraduate anthropology student at Grinnell College, I read the enchanting book The Making of the English Landscape by W. G. Hoskins during a year abroad. That slim book shaped in me a profound curiosity that follows me wherever I travel. Recently, my interest in how landscapes develop brought me to Magul Maha Vihara, a nearly deserted forest monastery in a remote jungle corner of southeast Sri Lanka.
Sri Lanka. There I witnessed the contradictory
reminded me of a place I had seen in England.
The meditation pond at Magul Maha Vinhara
as I uploaded my pictures to Flickr, it struck me.
I had seen, someplace far away. A month later,
pond, which bore a similarity to someplace else
I was aware of the strange atmosphere of the
Pillars at Magul Maha Vinhara. The step pond at Magul Maha Vinhara.
certainly he never visited one. Yet the qualities
of a garden from Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), and
though it’s doubtful that he ever saw a depiction
was familiar with “Chinese” garden design,
through its history. Chief among its designers
innovation, aesthetics and science—how do
do reflecting ponds appear. Not until technology made it feasible,
reflecting ponds from the East, but the tech-
ology to make them, at least large ones, was
a recent “discovery” in Europe. Brown
enlarged Octagon Lake from a smaller
one started by a pre-
decessor. I am not a
garden historian, but
I have seen a few, and
from my observations
extensive reflecting ponds are absent from ear-
er formal gardens of Europe. Moats, yes. Foun-
tains, certainly. Large, naturalistic reflecting pools?
Not until technology made it feasible, and not until intensive contact with East Asia,
which affected Western culture and aesthetics, do reflecting ponds appear.

Did Magul Maha and places like it
represent a sort of prototypical “Eastern”
garden—similar to one that Capability Brown might have envisioned—or do we humans just like reflecting ponds?

Did Magul Maha
and places like it
represent a sort of prototypical “Eastern”
garden—similar to one that Capability Brown might have envisioned—or do we humans just like reflecting ponds?

My guess is that Brown was influenced by reflecting ponds from the East, but the tech-
ology to make them, at least large ones, was
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So, landscape form and evolution, tradition, innovation, aesthetics and science—how do they all come together?

Before reflecting pools, physic gardens were
an innovation of seventeenth-century Europe, places where beneficial plants known to the
Greeks and Romans could be cultivated for use
by healers. In the Sri Lankan world, a slew of
beneficial plants had been known since time immemorial, and they grew everywhere. They
were (and still are) part and parcel of the tradi-
tional Ayurvedic scheme of medicine.

We know that some Latin plant names were
borrowed from ancient Sinhalas—for example, Nelum (lotus) from the Sinhalese Nelum. We know that styles of sculpture and even architecture were shared between these two disparate parts of the world. We don’t know who started it all, though we have evidence of trade between the two worlds that reaches back at least 2,000 years.

We know that the reflecting tanks of Sri Lanka came out of an ages-old tradition of wovas, kulams and pokunas, water tanks that were used for irrigation and for meditation. Europeans couldn’t build huge reflecting pools like the wovas because they didn’t have the technology to do so until the eighteenth-century. While Renaissance Europeans were putting gardens into four-cornered patches, laying straight paths through lawns of pruned shrubbery and devel-
oping a symmetrical “physic” of useful plants, Buddhist monks and the simple farmers of Sri Lanka had long since learned the art and science of impounding water. Europe finally mastered engineering techniques that were old in Sri Lanka around the time of the Enlightenment.

Meanwhile, designers like Capability Brown sought to bring the grace of meditative land-
scape to the richest patrons of northwestern Europe. But beauty, harmony and peace were part of the everyday working agricultural land-
scape that was vernacular to East Asia.

Sam Hammer is a professor at Boston University where he teaches science to non-majors and undergraduates. He also teaches in the sustainability and landscape architecture programs at the Boston Architectural College.
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