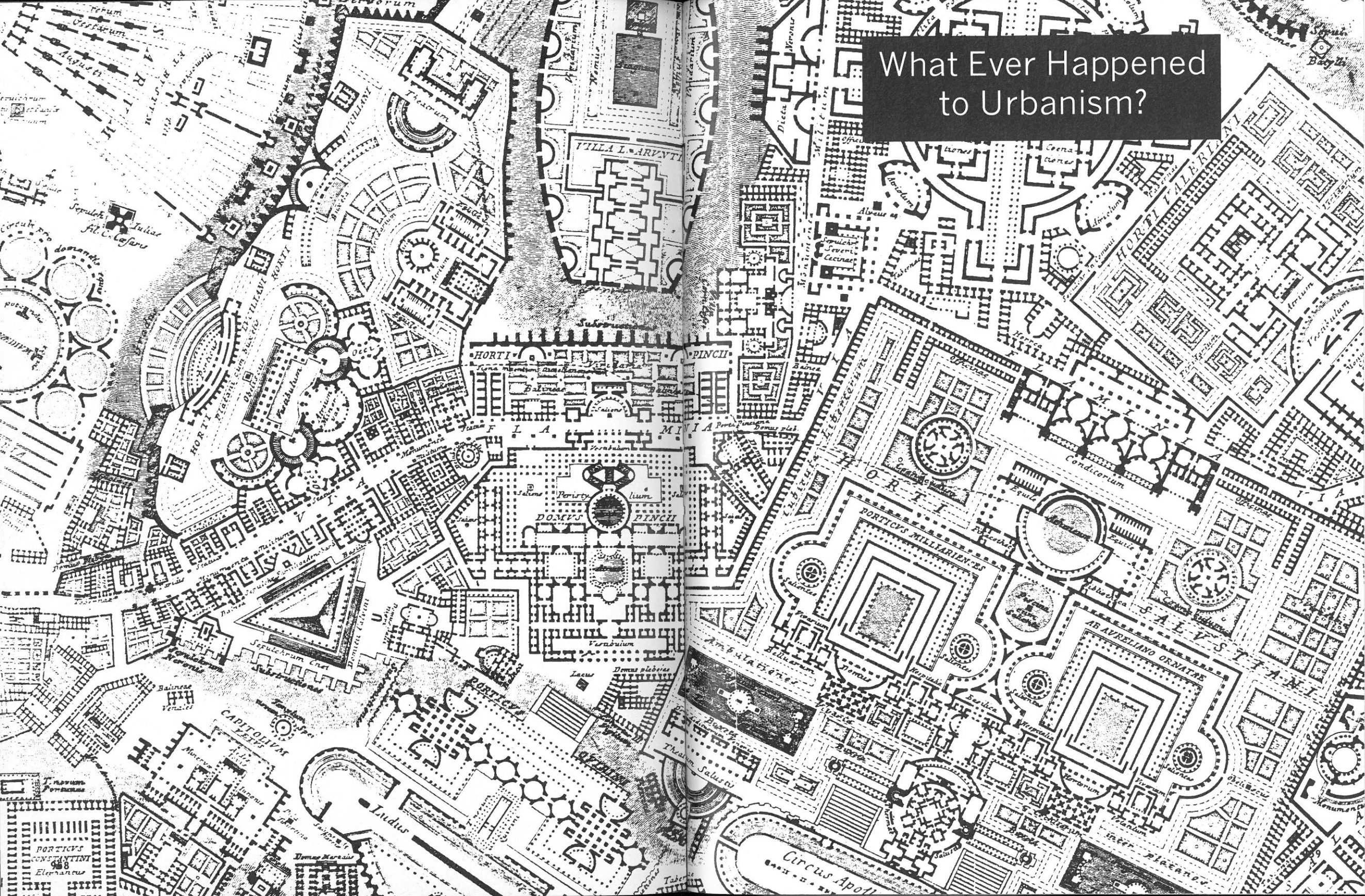


What Ever Happened to Urbanism?



windingly float over the “no-man’s-land,” the wall, and the “death strip,” a foreshadow of the angels Daniel and Cassiel, who walk between the layers of the wall in Wim Wenders’ latest film, *Wings of Desire*.

NAME¹

They called me Lilly, Lil, Lillian, but they didn’t want to accept Elvis, and that got on my nerves. Here I had paid perfectly good money — a whole \$70 worth — to have my name legally changed and nobody wanted to call me by it.

NAME²

And then there was Rose. Rose was her name and would she have been Rose if her name had not been Rose. She used to think and then she used to think again.

NAME³

PLEASE DON’T SEND LETTERS
IN MY NAME WITHOUT ME
KNOWING.

NAME⁴

The practice of identifying hurricanes by giving them individual names was initiated in Australia in the early 1900s by Clement Wragge. He took to naming anticyclones after people he liked and low-pressure systems after people, notably politicians, that he disliked.

NAME-DROP

Marvin, one of the richest men in the world, does not do things by halves, and to guest at the ball he had flown in some of the biggest names in films, TV and politics. Cary Grant, Lucille Ball, James Stewart, Raquel Welch, Lee Majors, Dolly Parton, Robert Wagner, Diana Ross, Merv Griffin, Stefanie Powers, Henry Kissinger and ex-president Gerald Ford were just some of the famous faces on the glittering dais, along with John, Linda, John, James, Kathleen Beller and Michael Nader (two new faces on “*Dynasty*”) and me.

NAMELESS¹

It is hard to tell you what it was precisely she wanted to wrest from me. Obviously it would be something very simple — the simplest impossibility in the world; as, for instance, the exact description of the form of a cloud.

She wanted an assurance, a statement, a promise, an explanation — I don’t know how to call it; the thing has no name.

This century has been a losing battle with the issue of quantity.

In spite of its early promise, its frequent bravery, urbanism has been unable to invent and implement at the scale demanded by its apocalyptic demographics. In 20 years, Lagos has grown from 2 to 7 to 12 to 15 million; Istanbul has doubled from 6 to 12. China prepares for even more staggering multiplications.

How to explain the paradox that urbanism, as a profession, has disappeared at the moment when urbanization everywhere — after decades of constant acceleration — is on its way to establishing a definitive, global “triumph” of the urban condition?

Modernism’s alchemistic promise — to transform quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition — has been a failure, a hoax: magic that didn’t work. Its ideas, aesthetics, strategies are finished. Together, all attempts to make a new beginning have only discredited the *idea* of a new beginning. A collective shame in the wake of this fiasco has left a massive crater in our understanding of modernity and modernization.

What makes this experience disconcerting and (for architects) humiliating is the city’s defiant persistence and apparent vigor, in spite of the collective failure of all agencies that act on it or try to influence it — creatively, logistically, politically.

The professionals of the city are like chess players who lose to computers. A perverse automatic pilot constantly

NAMELESS²

A name can evoke everything and nothing, but it's always a boulder that won't let you pass. I know. I'm a specialist. I want to keep you pure and her nameless.

NARCISSISM

In literature, indeed, even the great criminal and the humorist comply our interest by the narcissistic self importance with which they manage to keep at arm's length everything which would diminish the importance of their ego.

NATURAL

If, therefore, you wish to make one of your imaginary animals appear natural — let us suppose it to be a dragon — take for its head that of a mastiff or setter, for its eyes those of a cat, for its ears those of a porcupine, for its nose that of a greyhound, with eyebrows of a lion, the temples of an old cock, and the neck of a water tortoise.

NEEDLES

The Needles make up one long, horizontal image of strange phallic shapes, reaching up at the sky, irregular, asymmetrical, rugged, eerie, smooth. The outside and in have become interchangeable. The distance, the illegibility of the forms: look down someone's throat, it looks like a cave.

NERVE

Why do we have a mind, if not to get our own way?

NERVED

Our hearts pound with fresh blood and emotion and again we find ourselves standing there all nerved up in body and mind.

NEUTRAL

There is no neutral surface, no neutral discourse, no neutral theme, no neutral form.

NEUTRALITY

No part of the text should be delivered with any special emotion. No gestures either. Just the emotion aroused by the unveiling of the words.

NEW¹

How are we to see the problem of elevational treatments in the light of the new building materials?

NEW²

Can Cosmetic Surgery Help You?
Try your new nose today!
Try your new face today!
Send this coupon today!

outwits all attempts at capturing the city, exhausts all ambitions of its definition, ridicules the most passionate assertions of its present failure and future impossibility, steers it implacably further on its flight forward. Each disaster foretold is somehow absorbed under the infinite blanketing of the urban.

Even as the apotheosis of urbanization is glaringly obvious and mathematically inevitable, a chain of rear-guard, escapist actions and positions postpones the final moment of reckoning for the two professions formerly most implicated in making cities — architecture and urbanism. Pervasive urbanization has modified the urban condition itself beyond recognition. "The" city no longer exists. As the concept of city is distorted and stretched beyond precedent, each insistence on its primordial condition — in terms of images, rules, fabrication — irrevocably leads via nostalgia to irrelevance.

For urbanists, the belated rediscovery of the virtues of the classical city at the moment of their definitive impossibility may have been the point of no return, fatal moment of disconnection, disqualification. They are now specialists in phantom pain: doctors discussing the medical intricacies of an amputated limb.

The transition from a former position of power to a reduced station of relative humility is hard to perform. Dissatisfaction with the contemporary city has not led to the development of a credible alternative; it has, on the contrary, inspired only more refined ways of

NEW YORK¹

Ten years ago, I wrote a book about New York which was an investigation into another kind of modernity — not the European modernity of the twenties and thirties which consisted of a dream that was not realized. What fascinated me about New York was that in the twenties and thirties, buildings like Rockefeller Center were as revolutionary as the architecture in Europe, but built, realized, and maybe more important — popular. So New York's great virtue, in my eyes, is that it presents a modernity that is not alienated from the population but is in fact, populist.

NEW YORK²

The other areas of Manhattan such as Lower East Side and The Bowery offer discount bargains, unusual trendy restaurants, and great buys in lighting and kitchen equipment. However, it's best to avoid them at night. Northern parts of Manhattan, such as Harlem, are worth exploring with an organized tour.

NICE

This time I was nice, braked in time and moved out of his way. Next time I may not be so nice. Perhaps I may not be able to brake in time.

NICER

Buildings under construction look nicer than buildings finished.

NIGHTCAP

From the stairwell came the sound of rather beautiful singing. A Welsh guest, very drunk, was wishing everyone goodnight.

NIGHTMARES

"Grunder," "Fleerde," "Egeldonk" were the barbaric names of the nightmares to which architects, with hollow laughter, had here given shape.

NOMAD

I can't feel pity for you in Manhattan's grid: a good nomad carries his identity on his back, wherever he is, even in the Waldorf.

NON-CAPTIVE

Whoever you are, come out. You are free. The people who held you are captives themselves. We heard you crying and we came to deliver you. We have bound your enemies upstairs hand and foot. You are free.

NONSTOP

Ships are virtually floating resorts. Ships now have domed indoor/

articulating dissatisfaction. A profession persists in its fantasies, its ideology, its pretension, its illusions of involvement and control, and is therefore incapable of conceiving new modesties, partial interventions, strategic realignments, compromised positions that might influence, redirect, succeed in limited terms, regroup, begin from scratch even, but will never reestablish control. Because the generation of May '68 — the largest generation ever, caught in the "collective narcissism of a demographic bubble" — is now finally in power, it is tempting to think that it is responsible for the demise of urbanism — the state of affairs in which cities can no longer be made — paradoxically *because* it rediscovered and reinvented the city.

Sous le pavé, la plage (under the pavement, beach): initially, May '68 launched the idea of a new beginning for the city. Since then, we have been engaged in two parallel operations: documenting our overwhelming awe for the existing city, developing philosophies, projects, prototypes for a preserved *and* reconstituted city and, at the same time, laughing the professional field of urbanism out of existence, dismantling it in our contempt for those who planned (and made huge mistakes in planning) airports, New Towns, satellite cities, highways, high-rise buildings, infrastructures, and all the other fallout from modernization. After sabotaging urbanism, we have ridiculed it to the point where entire university departments are closed,

outdoor centers for nonstop entertainment, dining, and dancing, health facilities, spas, computer centers with instructors, and fitness programs.

NOODLES

The Japanese love noodles, especially instant noodles that can be heated and slurped down in minutes. They bought \$4 billion worth of them last year, and almost certainly will consume even more in the years ahead. Companies keep coming up with easier ways for hurried people to eat them. First came noodles in bags, then noodles in cups. Now the giant Nissin Food Products Co. has conceived of noodles in self-heating cans that can be taken anywhere; no cooking is necessary.

NORMAL

In this "normal" house, the couple never sit or sleep together. They quarrel standing up, and always leave the house separately. It is as if they want to say that they cannot go on living together, because their house is so normal, and therefore they have to look for lovers outside.

NOT

Le futur de l'architecture n'est pas architectural.

NOVELLA

It depends on how you perceive it; to some people, Soviet Power is not power, but a novella.

NUMBER

The pleasure of being in crowds is a mysterious expression of sensual joy in the multiplication of Number. All is Number. Number is in all. Number is in the individual. Ecstasy is a Number.



OBJECTLESSNESS

Thus when man, investigating, observing, ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve.

OBJECTS¹

Our plan is to drop a lot of odd objects onto your country from the air. And some of these objects will be useful. And some will just be ... odd.

offices bankrupted, bureaucracies fired or privatized. Our "sophistication" hides major symptoms of cowardice centered on the simple question of taking positions — maybe the most basic action in making the city. We are simultaneously dogmatic and evasive. Our amalgamated wisdom can be easily caricatured: according to Derrida we cannot be *Whole*, according to Baudrillard we cannot be *Real*, according to Virilio we cannot be *There*.

"Exiled to the Virtual World": plot for a horror movie. Our present relationship with the "crisis" of the city is deeply ambiguous: we still blame others for a situation for which both our incurable utopianism and our contempt are responsible. Through our hypocritical relationship with power — contemptuous yet covetous — we dismantled an entire discipline, cut ourselves off from the operational, and condemned whole populations to the impossibility of encoding civilizations on their territory — the subject of urbanism.

Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture. The neatness of architecture is its seduction; it defines, excludes, limits, separates from the "rest" — but it also consumes. It exploits and exhausts the potentials that can be generated finally only by urbanism, and that only the specific imagination of urbanism can invent and renew.

The death of urbanism — our refuge in the parasitic security of architecture — creates an immanent disaster: more and more substance is grafted on starving roots.

OBJECTS²

It's Daria's thirteenth birthday party. There are fifteen or twenty people in the room; I don't know most of them. Stash and I sit on the couch and watch her open her presents: the gift from us of a Godzilla lighter (flames shoot out of Godzilla's mouth); a record of Maria Callas singing "Norma"; a silk survival map of the Arctic Circle; a glue gun; a cassette tape of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks; a large black plastic object with a pink pyramid-shaped cover (possibly made by the Memphis Design Collective) which might be a breadbox or an ice bucket; a ten-pound bag of Eukanuba health food for dogs; a book about wrestling; and a Statue of Liberty hat—a spiky helmet of flexible foam. Daria puts it on.

OBLIGATION

What matters is not that people believe the rhetoric but that they feel obliged to repeat it.

OBLIGATIONS

For a long time I stayed away from the Acropolis. It daunted me, that somber rock. I preferred to wander in the modern city, imperfect, blaring. The weight and moment of those



In our more permissive moments, we have surrendered to the aesthetics of chaos — “our” chaos. But in the technical sense chaos is what happens when nothing happens, not something that can be engineered or embraced; it is something that infiltrates; it cannot be fabricated. The only legitimate relationship that architects can have with the subject of chaos is to take their rightful place in the army of those devoted to resist it, and fail.

If there is to be a “new urbanism” it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form; it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering unnameable hybrids; it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversifications, shortcuts and redistributions — the reinvention of psychological space. Since the urban is now pervasive, urbanism will never again be about the “new,” only about the “more” and the “modified.” It will not be about the civilized, but about underdevelopment. Since it is out of control, the urban is about to become a major vector of the imagination. Redefined, urbanism will

worked stones promised to make the business of seeing them a complicated one. So much converges there. It's what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion. There are obligations attached to such a visit.

OBLIVIOUS

What I like in Bataille's description of the Place de la Concorde is that he always insists on the fact that people drive their cars around it without noticing it.

OBSOLETE

No man wants to be told what they're wearing is obsolete next season. It's like making fun of them.

OBSTACLES

There are also many intervening obstacles built into townscapes by local authorities and developers. These include: rough pavements; poorly positioned street furniture; kerbs which are too steep or badly located; wind tunnels caused by the design and shape of buildings, making access across a public concourse impossible under certain weather conditions; poorly positioned car parks and parking spaces designated for the disabled; pedestrianisation schemes which do not allow disabled access; and one-way systems which take the traffic away from shops and city centres.

OCCUPATION¹

An elephant spends eighteen hours out of twenty-four in search of the three to five hundred pounds of vegetation and twenty-five to fifty gallons of water it requires daily.

OCCUPATION²

This is definitely a full-time occupation.

ODOR

The odor of "good taste" can often be dispelled by the introduction of "meaning," as long as meaning is retrieved from formerly unacceptable sources (the archaic, the moderne and streamlined, and the more domestic forms of the inept).

OLDER

They had taken out such a good insurance policy that when their house in the country burnt down, they were able to build another one older than the first.

OOH

Used to express amazement, joy or surprise.

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.

To survive, urbanism will have to imagine a new newness. Liberated from its atavistic duties, urbanism redefined as a way of operating on the inevitable will attack architecture, invade its trenches, drive it from its bastions, undermine its certainties, explode its limits, ridicule its preoccupations with matter and substance, destroy its traditions, smoke out its practitioners.

The seeming failure of the urban offers an exceptional opportunity, a pretext for Nietzschean frivolity. We have to imagine 1,001 other concepts of city; we have to take insane risks; we have to dare to be utterly uncritical; we have to swallow deeply and bestow forgiveness left and right. The certainty of failure has to be our laughing gas/oxygen; modernization our most potent drug. Since we are not responsible, we have to become irresponsible. In a landscape of increasing expediency and impermanence, urbanism no longer is or has to be the most solemn of our decisions; urbanism can lighten up, become a *Gay Science* — Lite Urbanism.

What if we simply declare that there *is* no crisis — redefine our relationship with the city not as its makers but as its mere subjects, as its supporters?

More than ever, the city is all we have.