What Ever Happened to Urbanism?
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
NAMELESS
A name can evoke everything and nothing, but it's always a bolder 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, ragged, cleft, 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 served 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.

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

NEW?
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 rearguard, 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 YORK

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 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 YORK

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

"Grundel," "Fleerds," "Eveldonk" 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/
outdoor centers for nonstop entertain-ment, 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, encounters 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.

OBJECTS?
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.
OBJECTS?
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 “Nunna” (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 Stance 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...
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 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.