

**Anti-spectacle**  
- a discussion paper -

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I

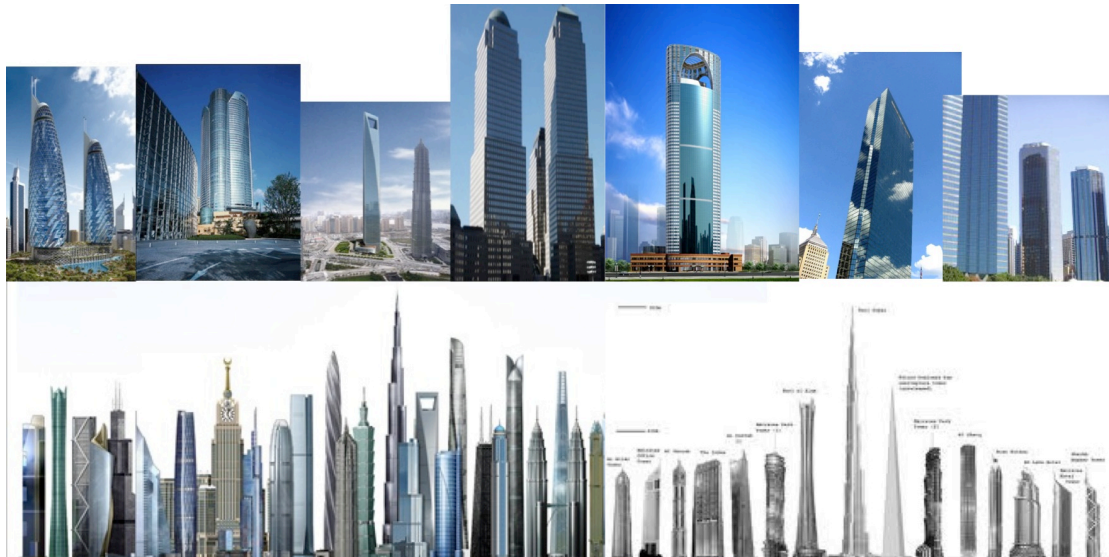
We want to open this discussion by repeating an earlier argument (Radovic 2008b) that there is a need to revisit World City Hypothesis (Friedmann, 1986). We see that as important in the context of the Conference on Degrowth, Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, as the idea of “world city” implies a certain (kind of) quality, and the concept of degrowth and the idea(l) of sustainable development are both about a necessity to redefine the very criteria which frame our understanding of progress. Cities offer an important arena for all developments related to sustainable future.

The World City Hypothesis was formulated by John Friedmann, as - a *hypothesis* The economism of Friedman’s thought perfectly suited an emerging Thatcherite-Reaganist worldview. The research question posed by Friedmann had, first found strong support in particular academic circles, then to be elevated into a powerful tool for ordering urban development. Various tools for evaluation and, importantly, measuring urban quality were advised, and helping direct the vision of urban futures in a particular direction. That was the direction of a kind of globalisation which was promoted by the big capital and which, since then, became our global reality.

That has lead to all sorts of distortions in parallel aspects of development over the last several decades, including a number of the caricatural ones. Cities were, and they still are, evaluated “in terms of the significant presence of major firms providing services in accountancy, advertising, banking/finance, and law” (Gugler, 2004) and various command functions and ranked according to the of their strength stock-markets, number of international flights and even (sic!) presence of the US dollar billionaires. The power behind the dogma of the “world class” made the consequences of the promotion of these criteria graphically obvious.

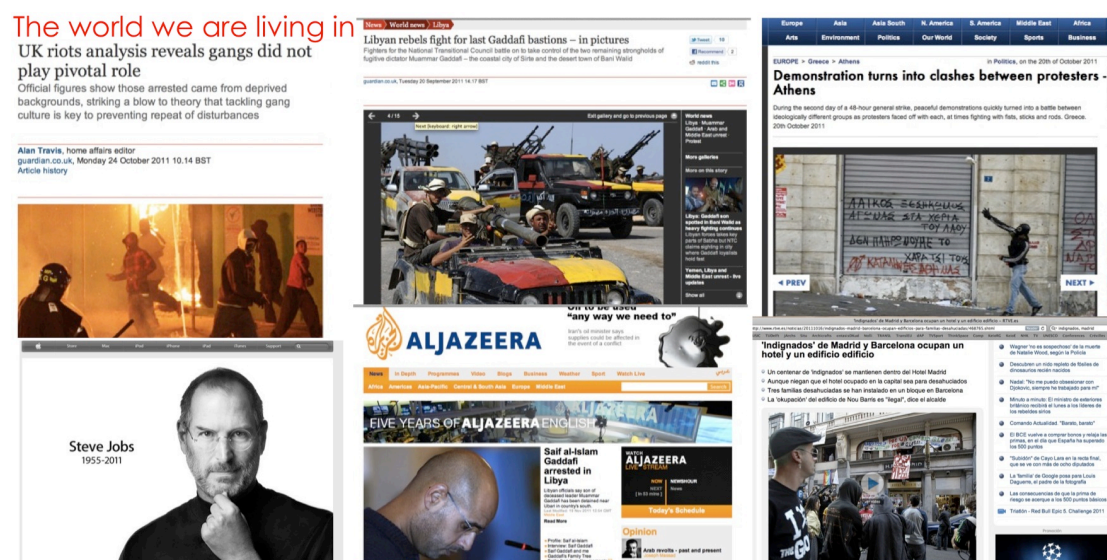
II

First part of the Lefebvre’s famous tripartite definition of *the urban* (Lefebvre, 2003) opens with a clear statement that the city is “a *projection of society on the ground* ... “ That explains the reality of the homogenised urban landscapes all around the world. The same (kind or) power could not find any projection into space other than one of gigantism and fetishized bigness.



1. indistinguishable skylines, dominated by the buildings which emanate sameness, and a diagram of structures competing for the prestigious title of The Tallest Building in the World

Such cities, of central parts of larger metropolitan areas for which the power of the “World Class” dogma has shown interest are, thus, veritable spatial projections of what Guy Debord prophetically identified as Spectacle (1998). Over the last thirty years, such developments were incessantly fueled by the unquestionable neo-liberal ideology of economic growth, ensuring that the spectacle indeed “spreads itself to the point where it now permeates all reality. It was easy to predict in theory what has been quickly and universally demonstrated by practical experience of economic reasons’ relentless accomplishments: that *the globalisation of the false was also the falsification of the globe*” (ibid.; our italics).



2. snapshots from the world of spectacle we are living in

The examples of cities where everyday reality testifies the falsification of the globe show cultural loss which equals the tragic loss of biodiversity in eco-systems. At the same time, the disastrous impact of those gigantic developments is not only local. The concentration of wealth and over-development in some parts of the world results in dramatic underdevelopment in other areas. The growth of the “World Class” is mirrored by desperation and ultimate poverty of the underclass, in global spread of slums and all associated problems.

### III

Impacts of the dominant kind of globalisation are, thus, well represented in major urban developments around the world. Capital always recognised the importance of cities as generators of activity, creativity and inventiveness. That is why the neo-liberal city can be seen both as an inevitable and deliberate assault at urbanity. By changing definition of development, and reducing it to its financial and monetary side and material wealth only, the ruling ideology needed to redefine *the urban*. As the consequence of an attempt to universalize one particular value system, the cities under assault - as accurate projections of such power - fail to meet the expectations arising from other two parts of Lefebvre's definition – the one which sees the city as “the ensemble of differences between cities” and a supplementary “definition, of plurality, coexistence and simultaneity in the urban of *patterns*, ways of living urban life” (ibid.).



#### 3. The ubiquitous sameness: where is ... Jakarta? Which one is ... Tokyo?

That reduction in the character of one city to finances and wealth often causes anti-urban reactions. Such sentiments have strong historic roots, and can be exemplified by a number of examples from various crises when the cities – rather than the societies whose values embodied – were vilified. Even the present idea of *degrowth*, as well as drive towards ecologically sustainable development, can get such undercurrent, and seek distancing from *the urban*.

That is unfortunate and needs to be resisted.

Cities, by the fact that they provide the proximities, densities and resulting intensities of human encounter and interaction, are the nodes of productive energy. Only cities have a critical intellectual mass to comprehend, frame and address the problem we are facing. The cities are at the centre of any initiative towards development which would be geared towards radically different development than the one we have described above.

Urban resistance to unsustainable social practices includes, but does not end with, the idea of degrowth. Those multiple resistances have the capacity to generate a new kind of growth, inner growth, a creative implosion with a capacity to correct the suicidal trajectory of our (now, in many aspects, truly global, and profoundly wrong) societal path. Growth needs to be carefully qualified and ethically considered. The idea of anti-spectacle, which is in the very title of this



discussion paper, stands against the *tabula rasa* and, in Lefebvrian sense, wants to celebrate the uniqueness (and the right to uniqueness) of each and every city, and its indigenous, bottom up authentic creativities which are capable to reframe and redefine local resources.

(As part of recognising such latent energies, we also need consider development of a positive terminology. At the moment, the terminology we use to describe the move towards different and better world is plagued by prefixes (which we also use at this conference), thus strengthening a sense of inferiority, and an inability to define a positive focus: *anti*-spectacle; *de*-growth, *non*-measurable...)

#### IV

As the background for discussion of the necessity for different ways of urban development, this paper offers several fragments of our research and design-research in cities as diverse as Tokyo, Bangkok, Singapore (Boontharm, 2010) and Melbourne. Those examples show critical loss of cultural diversity and the resulting sameness.



4. Bangkok, Tokyo, Singapore; various places and practices of local resistance amidst their increasingly homogenised skylines, and

Our research, which intersects in the major project at Keio University, entitled *Measuring the non-measurable* (2011-13), explores both existing urban places and practices and their hints towards the possibility of (or, at least, a better understanding of) the better world, and design-research practice and production of spaces which *are* different. We claim that both the knowledge to plan and design, and the experiences to live cities which are radically different from those glorified by unsustainable values of “World Class”, although severely suppressed, exist within all established urban cultures.

Here, we want to move the emphasis of the discussion to several such realities and projects. They are various in scale, ranging from large urban areas to small architectural projects, and exemplify our guiding concepts of *Creative Reuse Urbanism* (Boontharm) and *Radical Realism* (Radovic). Those approaches are based on our shared belief that neither the path of ecological nor that of cultural sustainability can be undertaken separately, and that there is no viable future without their harmonious synthesis.



5. Spatial expressions of bottom-up creativities in Tokyo (Boontharm, 2010)

An investigation into bottom-up spatial practices and local creativities in Tokyo, Bangkok and Singapore (Boontharm, 2010), shows a number of resilient practices which combat the onslaught of globalism, which simultaneously changes those metropolis. The examples from rooted urbanities of Tokyo and Bangkok offer potent alternatives to be considered in definition of autochthonous urbanisms for those two cities. Even when commercially driven, the money involved is small, which closes its loops locally – fuelling some decidedly local creativities. At the same time, those examples show a fascinating awareness of global situation and trends in their areas of work, with appropriation which can be likened to interpretation and inspiration, rather than banal transfer of knowledge and translation of meanings.



6. Examples of resilience and creative requalification of spaces in Chatuchak Market and Siam Square, Bangkok (Boontharm, 2010)

The places and practices of urban resistance in Singapore are proving to be less resilient than those in the Thai or Japanese capital, but that does not make them any less remarkable. In the city which has found its global relevance exactly in the times and on the wings of the above-criticised ideology, alternative urban developments are of particular significance.



The hope is that this remarkably energetic South-East Asian city-state is reaching a level of maturity which could see a significant shift from domination of the quantitative to recognition of the importance of qualitative, locally qualified and differentiated growth.



7. Haji Lane, an example of urban resilience, and its fall to gentrifying processes in Singapore (Boontharm, 2010)

We believe that in the case these three cities the quality and the character of everyday life, together with spatial expressions of ordinary activities are going to be the measure of success or failure on the road towards sustainable development (Radovic, 2012).



8. Nezu and Yanaka, the precinct of Tokyo where the rituals and urban practices are proving to be the best guardians of local authenticity (Radovic, 2008a; Radovic, Boontharm, 2012)

V

Planning and design of cities of the future need to be able to facilitate another kind of growth, inner development and local creative bursts and implosions. In that sense, a lot can be learned from better understanding of those local resistances. We believe in the importance of concrete

examples, of material thinking and production. That is why in this discussion paper we present three recent and current design-research projects conducted in co+labo Radovic at Keio University. Those projects all seek creative subversion.

Sorted by scale, as S (small) – The Barn (Centaur) House (The Next Generation Sustainable House), Hokkaido, Japan; L (large) – Urban Development Strategy for Maribyrnong (Designing Sustainable Lifestyles), Melbourne, Australia, and XL (extra large) – Towards a Mature Docklands, Melbourne, Australia, they will be presented by the key words and concepts which (should) open them to discussion. That should be not a discussion of (only) proposed design solutions of concrete situations, but also of the guiding socio-cultural values, as those are open to generalisation and may contain certain hints of value for future (re)direction of the professions involved in production of space.

## S

The Barn (Centaur) House for a researcher of climate of Hokkaido, 2012 (Shinkenchiku, 2012)  
co+labo team (alphabetically): Hashida Wataru, Kanemaru Mayumi, Kato Yoshiaki, Kobayashi Kosuke, Komatsu Katsuhito, Milica Muminovic, Darko and Vuk Radovic, Shinohara Masato, Sasamura Yoshihiro, with Saikawa Takumi (KKAA) and Sano Satoshi (Eureka)



## 9. The winning competition entry

This project was developed from the winning scheme at an international student design competition for the Next Generation Sustainable House. The building is currently under construction at Memu Meadows, in Taiki-cho, Hokkaido, and will be officially opened 17 November 2012.

Key points for discussion:

- the competition was organized, design development and construction of the building were funded by the major Japanese producer of construction materials and appliances, Tostem. That is a rare example where a powerful industrial player leads in a direction of radical environmental awareness;
- the competition brief emphasised energy performance and bioclimatic contextualism. The co+labo team has shifted the emphasis from the obvious (by satisfying those requirements as the *conditio sine qua non* of any environmentally responsive and



- responsible design), towards integration of the future building into the complex network of energies that constitute a concrete *place* for which the building was commissioned;
- the competition entry included a clear statement: There is no “sustainable architecture”. There are only environmentally and culturally *responsible* architecture, and practice which continues to treat our environment *irresponsibly*;
  - the Barn (Centaur) House reached beyond usual practice by proposing an extraordinary lifestyle for the resident researcher, everyday life which overlaps with that of an emblematic animal of Taiki-cho - horse. Horses and researchers co-inhabit the Barn House, and the proximity of the radical *other* creates a lifestyle which educates, by reminding of interdependence and the importance of *the Other*;
  - besides the symbolism and educational quality of the Centaur House, the project opens a number of unconventional strategies for ecological sustainability, manifold integration into local ecological cycles. Horses will, thus, give an essential contribution to sustaining human lives by adding to the energy balance of the interior. The manure gets used for composting, thus contributing to heating, nurturing plants and creating one of those eco-cycles that define this house; the locally produced charcoal is utilized to reduce the smell of the barn, to melt the snow and fertilize the soil, etc.
  - the Barn House utilizes local material and engages local crafts.

#### L Sustainable Lifestyles, Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Australia (2010-11)

co+labo team (alphabetically): Marta Alonso, Darko and Vuk Radovic, Takei Takashi, Yokose Hirotaka)



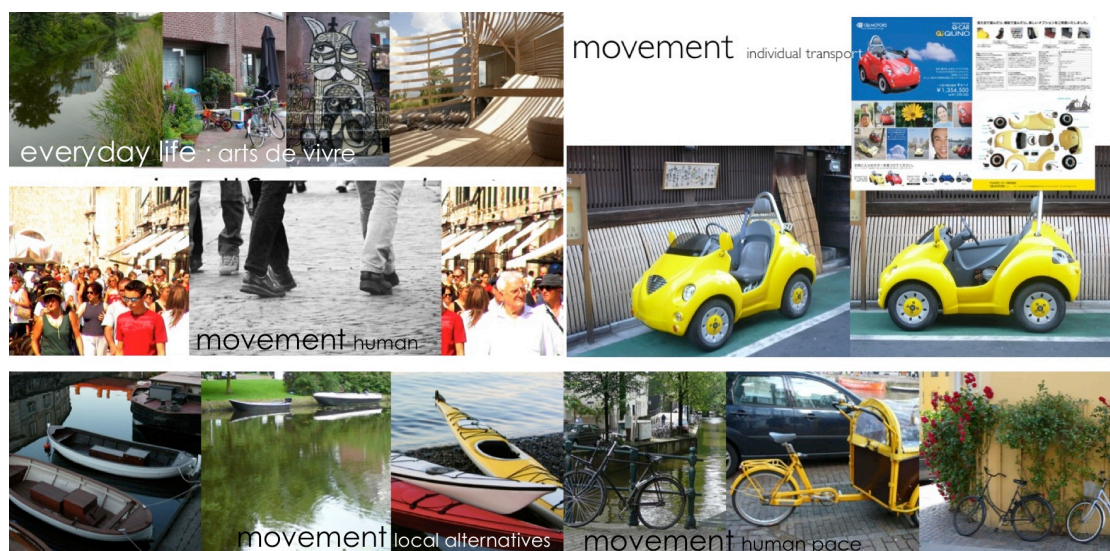
#### 10. Conceptual sketches for the Maribyrnong project (2010-11)

This urban design-research project was a multidisciplinary investigation into the potential for radically different, ecologically and culturally responsive and responsible living in an inner suburban location of Melbourne. The site was never available to public. Its recent availability and proximity to central urban areas offers an enormous potential to influence the character of other future developments in Melbourne. Although this project does represent an example of growth, the project focuses at requalified simple, qualitative growth, inner containment, maximal (re)use of the significant building stock on the site, and multiple engagement of local resources into the mainly local cycles.



### Key points for discussion:

- the Maribyrnong project was made possible and facilitated by the key planning body of the State Government, with their strong and explicit support to the ideas that seek radical improvement of environmental and socio-cultural condition. Such support, which go beyond verbalism, is still rare, and they offer a significant hope that the change of desired scope and direction is possible;
- the key position of the project was to facilitate development of strong local pride, based on new lifestyles which would be verifiably responsible, in both environmental and cultural terms. The key themes were Jane Jacob's dictum that "cities have capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody" (...), and Giedion's old, but insufficiently used suggestion that "instead of definite general project, as was the practice at beginning of this century, city development needs elastic "general programme" capable of taking into account changes over time" (...)
- the guiding ideas were based on a strict implementation of resource approach, directed towards all natural energies, stocks and inheritances available on and in the immediate vicinity of the site. Those included bioclimatic design, concern for efficient lifetime building management, concern for embodied energy, conservation of water resources; possible rain-water collection, effective use of vegetation and soil, high quality thermal, acoustic, visual, air-quality environment, integration of greenery etc., all the way to an active search for spatial and formal expression of sustainability
- the key spatial quality has emerged from strict inclusion of productive, edible landscapes at various scales; innovative urbo-architectural forms which enable simultaneous use of land for both urban agriculture and living, and the provision for local modes of transport that utilise primarily human energy - walking (distances), biking, rowing, and renewable energies;



### 11. An emphasis on forgotten normality: human body, human pace, human energy and implementation of the latest in sustainable movement technology

- a guiding design position was (as mentioned above) that the quality and the character of everyday life, together with spatial expressions of ordinary activities are going to be the measure of success or failure on the road towards sustainable development;
- architectural and urban design definition of spaces for the proposed lifestyles were developed on the basis of detailed investigation of concrete places; the proposed

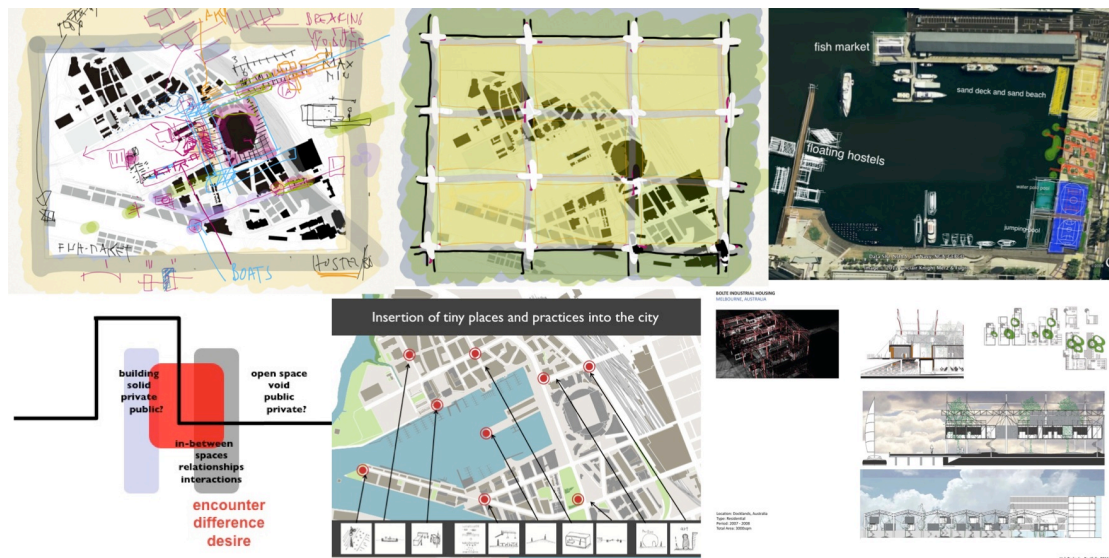
environmentally and culturally responsible lifestyles included: living on the water, living on the wetlands, living small, living in the transformed spaces, living that integrates work, creative requalification of spaces and spatial practices;

- the Maribyrnong project has formed the basis for selection of an multidisciplinary design team; the ideas from this project there are being built into the Master Plan (due 2013)

XL Towards Mature Docklands, Melbourne Australia (2012, current)

co+labo team (alphabetically): Akatsuka Ken, Davisi Boontharm, Ishikawa Ayako, Iwase Ryoko, Kato Yoshiaki, Kozono Saki, Wataru Minegishi, Natsumeda Kumiko, Darko and Vuk Radovic, Suzuki Moe, with Sano Satoshi (Eureka)

This project addresses one of the key issues of relevance for sustainable urban future – transformation of places created as part of the ‘spectacle’ and their socio-cultural requalification into livable communities. The project builds upon the work conducted within the major planning agency of the State Government, for the second decade of the Melbourne Docklands. A body of the well-established urban design theories (broadly framed by theories of urbanity, place, urban and cultural sustainability, consumption theory and creativity) and urban practices (examples from the places and cultures with rich experience in producing and living small, dense and intense) are applied to a number of places and situations in Docklands. An ultimate aim of the project is to initiate urban practices that will lead to continuous, self-perpetuating urban regeneration of healthy, locally defined and globally relevant urbanity.



## 12. Conceptual sketches for design-research which is currently in progress

Key points for discussion:

- as in the case of Maribyrnong, behind this project is an enlightened local planning and management agency. In a strange twist, project like this can, with their convincing quality, support those people in local planning agencies who are brave enough to commission design-research that confronts unsustainable practices and offers radically different (and hopefully better) solutions;
- the Docklands project identifies places, locations and activities within the area and advises guidelines for a number of pilot projects of various scales and typologies (ranging from generic to highly specific, those with an established quality and unsuccessful non-places and defines pilot projects which can act as triggers of processes of urban regeneration);



- design-research explorations are based on development and assessment of various “what-if” urban design strategies, concrete spatial alternatives for places and activities which may capture dormant bottom-up energies and open process of urban regeneration; placing and design of the future creativity hubs;
- together with local planning authority, the project identify workable generic and concrete implementation strategies.

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These three examples, along with similar efforts by many to question the dominant worldview by imagining and *making* new realities, offers basis for theorising of the emergent urbanities which (may) have the capacity to radically undermine the spectacle and offer hope for different futures. These projects, as they are urban and design projects, are not necessarily explicitly about *de-growth*, but rather about qualified growth, growth ethically considered.

A single most important aspect which brings these divers project together is in the fact that they are all made for real clients, that they are all public and, in various ways, and to a various degree being implemented – thus affecting the existing condition and helping produce those new (hopefully – better) realities.

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