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REVERSAL OF FORTUNE: WHEN THE LOPSIDED CITY FALLS (OVER)

In: Dialogues in Urban Research

ABSTRACT

In this extended meditation, I want to build on a key insight from my provocations around the lopsided city: that for all of its forward momentum, the lopsided city remains prone to falling over, of over-reach. This connects to an older interest in faded grandeur, entropy, cracks in the city, and ruins, but being careful to avoiding wallowing in purely dystopian representations.

Geoffrey DeVerteuil
Reader of Social Geography
School of Geography and Planning
Cardiff University
Glamorgan Building
Cardiff
CF10 W3A
Phone: +44 (0)29 2087 6089
Email: deverteuilg@cardiff.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

2024 is the 30th anniversary of the video game *Doom*, which beyond its revolutionary 3D gameplay also captured a certain dread that suffused American urban culture back in 1994. Indeed, the early 1990s presented a certain highwater mark in the production of dystopian urban representations in the United States, through movies (e.g. *Natural Born Killers*, *The Bad Lieutenant*, *Menace II Society*, *Philadelphia*, etc.), music (e.g. grunge, gangsta rap) and, perhaps not surprisingly, urban studies (Davis, 1990; Beauregard, 1993; Smith, 1996). This dystopian *zeitgeist* was perhaps best captured by the movie *Falling Down* (1993), where the protagonist's (Michael Douglas) moral decline and eventual demise parallels the city's own decline through a somewhat cartoonish representation of dystopic Los Angeles. The sense that crime and urban strife, already high, were only going to get worse in the near future permeates the movie. This dread was certainly real in the wake of the 1992 unrest, a massive recession and with the 1994 Northridge earthquake and 1995 'Trial of the Century' still to come.

Those familiar with my work are well aware that I have long critiqued dystopian tendencies in urban studies. My own provocation in *Dialogues in Urban Research* (2023) castigated the dystopian takes on the city in the 1990s, especially for their lurid and narrow representations that necessarily foreclose any alternative futures. However, one can reject dystopian representations but still acknowledge that even highly successful cities are prone to entropy, decline and ruination, and that this is inherent to the urban condition (and perhaps to the human one as well). This connects to a concluding observation in my 2023 article that I wish to develop further in this meditation: "something that is too lopsided will inevitably fall over... Entropy and failure are always built-in" (268). This can occur for cities as a whole, but also at the intra-urban scale where various once-powerful urban fabrics can become *faded grandeur*, falling from grace and marooned.

I want to use this extended meditation to explore what happens when certain fabrics of lopsided cities fall over, especially the powerful ones that make cities so lopsided in the first place. More specifically, I am interested when powerful fabrics lose their backing and their luster. This paper investigates, using a largely visual approach and focused on particular urban fabrics (see DeVerteuil, 2023) the *reversal of fortune* that is inherent to lopsided cities. I stress two in particular: the post-socialist and the fate of early twentieth-century theaters. More so than in the 2023 piece, I have designed the meditation to be a photo essay. Still an under-utilized format within urban studies research, and as a foil to the dominance of the text (DeVerteuil, 2022, DeVerteuil, 2024), the photo essay can be an important step in the creation of "competent visual researchers" (Pauwels, 2011: 14). Visual methods are an experiential, close-up version of the city, seeking to avoid myopic, lurid, detached or distanced, an extension of traditional participant observation. But any visual cue must be framed by some basic concepts around urban decline, the subject of the next section. Without these concepts, visualizing faded grandeur becomes an empty exercise in visual indulgence, a sort of Ozymandian 'ruin porn' (see below).

FADED GRANDEUR, RUINS, ENTROPY, AND 'CRACKS IN THE CITY'

Here I want to frame once-powerful city fabrics that have fallen into desuetude, their original intentions severed from present-day uses. Simone (2022: 32) talks about "anachronistic" places where "authority, privilege and money have moved on". This dwindling patina goes against the one-way lop-siding processes of the 21st-century city in favor of powerful urban fabrics, and acts as a reminder of the long period of decline in many cities from the 1960s

onwards in the Global North, creating left-behind urban fabrics. These materialities are not everyday ruins, but the formerly powerful, and speak to how power can be fleeting and never permanently possessed.

The idea of faded grandeur gives a sense that once-powerful city fabrics are well past their prime, but also that certain cities remain in a sort of twilight state. As Edensor (2005, 116) noted, “things become detached from their use, their class and category as they stand in odd assemblage or in isolation”. These crepuscular places include relics from previous systems (e.g. Soviet), hubristic developments (e.g. overly-ambitious Olympic sites), and extravagant materialities at risk of abandonment (e.g. department stores, theaters). But to focus on decline always runs the risk of what some have called ‘ruin porn’. As John Patrick Leary (in Garrett, 2013: 181) stated in 2011, “ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city”. In other words, ruin porn never acknowledges, much less points the finger at, the structural inequalities that created abandonment and dilapidation in the first place. Rather, it exploits and aestheticizes the economic downfall of places like Detroit, ignoring the racial and class-based restructuring behind its downfall. In this photo essay, I favored aesthetically-neutral pictures that give a clear message, over aesthetically-pleasing ones that say nothing about the (declining) city fabrics, or worse, make them look pretty.

The lopsided city can therefore never be seen as an endpoint, but rather part of an ongoing process that is subject to *entropy*. Edensor (2005: 98) suggested that as “the condition of objects in ruins makes most evident, these networks and their material ordering need to be constantly maintained to retain a regulated social order, for under modern conditions they are liable to disintegrate. Modern capitalism destroys as much as it creates, and this Schumpeterian creative destruction is inherent to the process of forgetting and renewal”. Entropy is inherent to the global system of competitive urbanism, with winners and losers that vary over time and across space. But it also captures the disintegration of formerly settled fabrics that made cities lop-sided to begin with, whose very disintegration could drag entire cities with them (e.g. Detroit). Finally, reversal of fortunes can be thought of as ‘cracks in the city’ (Moyersoen & Swyngedouw, 2013; DeVerteuil et al, 2022). For instance, the lopsided twenty-first-century city is marked by both the apparent ascendancy of a neoliberal governance model and an increasing number of unruly “cracks in the city” that directly or indirectly challenge this model (Moyersoen and Swyngedouw 2013). Neoliberalism never entirely displaces, replaces, or appropriates everything in its path; it is always and inherently incomplete and leaves open the possibility for counterspaces or spaces beyond (DeVerteuil 2015).

EXAMPLE 1: POST-SOCIALIST RELICS

I begin with Soviet relics, which is an academic cottage industry unto itself (e.g. Herfort, 2021). The 70 years of Soviet architecture and planning left an enormous and sometimes controversial legacy in cities across the former socialist world, and continues to exert influence to this day, a sort of “socialist scaffold” (Zarecor, 2018) that creates important lags in the materiality of post-socialist cities long after their relationship to socialism was (abruptly) severed. And so “even after a city’s relationship to socialism is severed, and its institutions dismantled, the built environment endures” (Zarecor, 2018: 96). Socialist cities

were doubly excluded from urban theorization pre-1991 and post-1991, though certainly not immune to inequality. DM Smith's (1994: 201) noted that even a highly controlled urbanization without private accumulation and a "planning process driven by egalitarian ideals" could not erase inequality in socialist cities. As such, it is worth examining the once powerful fabrics of what could have been considered lop-sided cities of the socialist world, which invariably meant the capital city.

Of course, socialist fabrics were themselves thrust upon existing built environments. When Benjamin visited 1920s Moscow, he saw a city in the midst of massive upheaval, "manifest in the juxtaposition of a new monumental architecture against the mats and boxes laid out on pavements by the city's thousands of hawkers trying to sell whatever they can" (Gilloch, 2002: 10). The historian Schlögel's (2012) telescoped power over Moscow's fabric into just one fateful year – 1937. Not unlike Harvey (2003) for Paris or Schorske (1980) for Vienna, Schlögel championed a totalizing, materialistic view of one city, in line with the Annales School's penchant for the total history of a single place. His method of investigation involved a "stereoscopic all-around view is designed to bring events together: It is better suited to the disparate nature of the world than is a strenuous, concentrated tunnel vision" (2012: 3), of Communist power straining over the everyday fabrics of Moscow. Schlögel focused on the monumental reconfiguration of the capital city, a sort of hyper-urbanization whose provenance was socialistic rather than capitalistic. Through this form of authoritarian urbanism, Moscow was transformed "into one great building site" via an "orgy of destruction and demolition" (2012: 46).

One-hundred years later, post-socialist relics remain part of the city fabric in terms of useful infrastructure (mass-produced post-war social housing; public transit) but also displaced infrastructure, including industrial landscapes and landscapes of memory that have suffered a massive reversal of fortune. In 2018, I visited the flayed buildings of the former ZIL car factory in southern Moscow. Evoking Morrow's shot of the ruins of Kaiser Steel in Fontana (Davis, 1990: 419), this industrial complex was the epitome of Soviet manufacturing, and a prominent symbol of the Five-Year Plans which produced a surfeit of industrial sites.

FIGURE 1 HERE, FULL PAGE

FIGURE 2 HERE, FULL PAGE

In Yerevan (Armenia), the southern manufacturing district is equally marked by industrial dereliction on a very large scale, with chemical plants that were abandoned after the transition to capitalism:

FIGURE 3 HERE, FULL PAGE

Soviet war memorials are still very common across the formerly socialist world. In St Petersburg, reminders of the 900-day siege (1941-1944) are everywhere. But even at the Piskaryovskoe Memorial Cemetery, a Soviet centerpiece deliberately built as a powerful city fabric, there is a Marie Céleste quality to the place. It feels somewhat forgotten, left to its own devices. The mass graves and pictures of lost relatives belong to another time, fading from living memory and thereby becoming an entropic everyday fabric.

FIGURE 4 HERE, FULL PAGE

Finally, in Berlin I photographed the doomed Palace of the Republic in 2003, a decidedly unloved Soviet relic that would be demolished between 2006-2008 and rebuilt in a modern style without obvious reference to the former fabric, save for a similar footprint:

FIGURE 5 HERE, FULL PAGE

In all these cases, certain powerful socialistic fabrics became unwanted relics from a different age, but that also sometimes stood in the way of new development.

EXAMPLE 2: GRAND THEATERS

Grand buildings are frequently the first to suffer reversals of fortune when a city's fortunes shift, including mansions, train station, banks, and theaters (Vergara, 1995). This can include the once ostentatious movie theatre reduced to a Christian mission, furniture store or wholesaler along Mission Boulevard in San Francisco, as pictured in 2000:

INSERT FIGURES 6, 7 AND 8, SIDE BY SIDE

Early 20th century theaters are especially vulnerable to abandonment, usually on once-prestigious arteries. These 1920s-1940s theaters have all been torn down:

INSERT FIGURES 9 AND 10 HERE, SIDE BY SIDE

INSERT FIGURES 11 AND 12, SIDE BY SIDE

Using a more detailed transect, I photographed all of the early 20th-century theatres along Broadway in Downtown Los Angeles in the early 2000s as part of a larger project on gentrification. Like Downtown Detroit, another trove of faded grandeur, Downtown Los Angeles was the last major transit-oriented downtown to be built in the United States. It was also the largest theater district outside of Times Square, and featured many premieres in the 1920s. Like many American downtowns, it suffered a reversal of fortune by the 1960s, and many of the theaters were abandoned or converted – although none demolished, which greatly facilitated my re-takings in the early 21st century.

INSERT FIGURE 13 HERE

In August 2002, I systematically photographed ten theaters in total: the Globe; the Palace; The Million Dollar; the Rialto; the Orpheum; the Los Angeles; the Tower; the State; United Artists; and the Arcade. Most were in poor shape, the results of 40 years of disinvestment. Many had been converted to other uses, much like those theaters on Mission Boulevard in San Francisco. In March 2019 and March 2022,

I retook the same images within a context of a incrementally-gentrifying Downtown Los Angeles. Some theaters showed revitalization as gentrification slowly made its way onto the southern portion of Broadway (e.g. the Rialto is an Urban Outfitters, United Artists as a working theater again, the regeneration of the Globe, and the Tower, now an Apple Store, see Figure 14), while the middle part of the street remains stagnant, with some theaters (Million Dollar, the State, the Palace) dilapidated. This speaks to the uneven re-integration into powerful city fabrics, while some remain faded grandeur.

INSERT FIGURE 14 HERE

The fickle nature of city fabrics was on display using this 20-year gap in image taking. Just like powerful cities, powerful fabrics are subject to entropy and reversals of fortune, and their standing must be backed up and bolstered on a continuous basis.

CONCLUSIONS

Like ‘Dracula urbanism’ (Wyly & Wilson, 2023), there remains more to flesh out the contours of the lopsided city. Legend has it that the likeness of Dracula himself could *never* be accurately portrayed – any picture or painting (and presumably photograph, but not reflection of course) would always look different from the real representation. This extended meditation goes some ways in fleshing out of the lopsided city, but it will always remain incomplete and open to further scrutiny.

Beyond visualizing the reversal of fortunes that can inevitably impact even the most lopsided cities (e.g. Los Angeles, Moscow, San Francisco), this extended meditation underlines how the lopsided city and its defining (powerful) fabrics must be continuously bolstered. If entropy is indeed the default setting, then powerful city fabrics can only remain so as long as they are backed up by resources and authority. If not, they are at risk of decline, particularly older fabrics from a disinherited time (e.g. socialism). This creates an uneven set of fabrics within any one city, with newer fabrics taking up the spaces cleared by entropy, filling in the cracks. This Schumpeterian rebirth counters the dystopian sense of perpetual or terminal decline, signaling an eventual reversal to the reversal of fortune. And so entropy, faded grandeur and reversal of fortunes are not necessarily dystopian, but rather part of the inevitable ups-and-downs of urbanization.

Finally, the photo essay at the heart of this meditation can be thought as an experiment towards visually-driven urban theory. By that, I mean how photo essays can show entropy, reversals of fortune and the inevitable ‘cracks in the city’ in ways that a text-driven analysis cannot, at least not with the same visceral impact. This sets a visual approach apart from statistics, economic data and pure theory – the visual has agentic qualities, it hits hard, it is immediate, it is close enough to know what was had for breakfast. Material manifestations do not tell the whole story, but they certainly tell a largely neglected story.

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