Revenge of the fragmented metropolis

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Abstract: The time seems ripe in architectural science for urban researchers to re-examine and further discuss the idea of the city. On the verge of Anthropocene change, architectural scholars seem not to have moved beyond their characterisation of the contemporary city as a fragmented metropolis. What comes next? Cities are likely to survive – as well as to thrive. This paper discusses the major features of contemporary cities and how they address survival and continue to thrive, selecting the urban components they share vis-à-vis urban society's stance towards contemporaneity. The paper ultimately points to the need to intensify the quest for a new diagram that can suitably represent the new conditions of contemporaneity in cities. If this diagram is inserted within the domains of architectural science, it might lead towards a more straightforward focus on the crucial elements of the city's future. Two emblematic metropolises are closely examined, revealing innovations towards containment of urbanized land to prevent unsustainable sprawl. There is also consideration of current uses typical of contemporary life and territorial discontinuities during the advance of the conurbation. Vague trends towards polycentrism are then considered, together with tendencies pointing towards containment of sprawl and the creation of new places that will somehow act in ‘gluing together’ the fractures. Architectural science is now challenged to outline a new diagram.

Keywords: anthropocene; urban contemporaneity; places.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early twenty-first century urbanisation presents urban-architectural scholarship with a particular ecological situation: the world we live in is an urbanised one (UN, 2017). Furthermore, what we once called ‘cities’ have now acquired numerous other terms from several authors (e.g.: Ascher 2004; Carmona 2014; Garreau 1992; Glaeser 2011; Hajer & Dassen 2014; Koolhaas 2004; Rybczynski 2010), such as mega-cities, global cities, fractured cities, edge cities, regional cities and even digital cities. However, despite the copious narratives employed to depict a contemporary urban environment, most of them fail to enunciate satisfactorily the patterns that best characterize a city today (Ruby 2002). This paper will explore some of these patterns, mainly those that have appeared more durable, and will focus especially towards the fragmented metropolis. The paper aims to raise assumptions that may help towards deeper understanding of the eventual factors that might engage architectural science in its quest for enhancing the fundamentals of urban design. The perceived trends of contemporaneity raise challenges towards the establishment of a corresponding new diagram for the city of the future.

Research studies grounded on environmental perception methodologies indicate a tendency towards a sort of drive of ‘revenge’ against the current fractured model of the metropolis. Indeed, it seems likely that the city of the Anthropocene will try to reverse and re-organize its current fragmentation.

1.1 The contemporaneity of the city

We are on the verge of Anthropocene change. The Anthropocene defines Earth’s most recent geological time period as being human-influenced, or anthropogenic, based on overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geological, hydrological, biospherical and other earth-system processes are now altered by humans. The time seems ripe in architectural science for urban researchers to re-examine and further discuss the idea of the city.

The city of the Anthropocene demands of Social Sciences researchers – like those of Architecture and Urbanism – an additional effort. Closer attention needs to be paid to the contemporaneity of cities in order to disclose alternatives for producing more positive results from urbanism schemes. Adding to the uncertainties typical of our current socio-spatial area of knowledge, social scientists need to address issues of a new universe of unknowns, introduced by the almost indecipherable conundrum of the Anthropocene. Among those issues, it seems imperative to try to address two of the most evident idiosyncrasies that will most surely affect the cities of the Anthropocene: to prevent their ever-increasing centrifugal expansion; and to stimulate the expansion of public spaces for social life. Architects say of this that cities should no longer expand their peripheries; whereas institutions such as the World Bank advocate the expansion of public spaces for social life, ascribing them the role of agents of prosperity in less developed cities.

We are billions of people in finite urban environments experiencing constant growth, a concern that poses initial crucial conditions: we need to prevent the excessive covering of natural soils by urban use (Rogers 1998; Castello 2011). There is also concern for the provision of spaces for the social interaction of billions of city dwellers: there is a need to arrange the creation of places (Castello 2010; 2005) where people will be able to enjoy urbanity (Castello 2011b), that urban quality...
that only cities can offer. In this light, two specific urban-architectural challenges for Anthropocene cities can already be anticipated: their governance will need to manage contemporary urbanism so as to design towards both urban development and environmental sustainability. Likewise, given the critical need to consider the influence of human behaviour on ecological issues, it will become highly advisable – if not imperative – to add a psychological bias to these two strands of research. Having set the likely set of references for the city of the Anthropocene, let us try to suggest diagrams that might represent it.

2. THE QUEST FOR A CONTEMPORARY DIAGRAM: THE FRAGMENTED METROPOLIS

Despite the numerous narratives employed to depict the contemporary urban environment, most fail to enunciate satisfactorily the patterns that best characterize a city today (Choay 1994). However, scholars of History and Theory seem to be fixed on the idea of fragmented metropolises as their most current image for best representing a city. It does not seem inappropriate to recall an old saying common among social scientists: there are no convictions in the applied Social Sciences. Even so, architectural science has bravely chosen to use diagrams, that is to say

(... simple visual statements that distil particular values, ideologies and policy agendas. A few have become iconic images, inspiring imitation, elaboration and critique. They are touchstones in the visual lexicon of urban planning and design (The Urbanist, 2012. https://www.spur.org/publications/urbanist-article/2012-11-09/grand-reductions-10-diagrams-changed-city-planning).

Many of the ideas influencing the design of cities have indeed been expressed through diagrams. One of the powers of a diagram is that it is reductionist, issuing a complex idea and conveying it through a visual message. Accordingly, diagrams representing the shape of our cities have been as multiple and varied as the ideas that originated them (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Examples of traditional city-region diagrams: Howard’s Garden City, Christaller’s Central Place (1933), and Gaston Bardet’s Cellular build-up of a city (1940) (Wall 2005:204).](image)

Which diagram would best represent a contemporary metropolis? Which would translate more accurately the patterns of urban contemporaneity, to the extent of ensuring the feasibility of realistic urbanistic proposals? And why attempt to establish such a diagram? These are some of the fundamental questions behind the arguments discussed in this paper.

2.1 The Fragmented Metropolis

Early mention of fragmented cities can be attributed to Jonathan Barnett (1996) whose The Fractured Metropolis, published in the late 20th century, was a comprehensive study of a conspicuous phenomenon affecting cities, mainly those in North America, and increasingly spreading over neighbouring territories as disturbing overspill.

Academic authors such as David Grahame Shane outline urban design models in the twentieth century. Shane points to four noteworthy patterns: the metropolis (which represents the features of the capital cities of nineteenth century global empires); the megalopolis (representing the huge agglomerates morphing the consolidated conurbations of global metropolitan regions); the fragmented metropolis (to be addressed below); and the global megacity (which includes unrecognized informal settlements interspersed in the metropolitan fabric, together with nuclei of urban agriculture).

Shane writes interestingly about the background of the fragmented metropolis, its economic and financial causes, together with hypotheses about the consequent new morphological urban-architectural settings. Perhaps the fragmented metropolis model is the most useful descriptor of the particularities to be included in a diagram of the Anthropocene city. As regards the economic and financial causes of fragmentation, Shane’s interpretation is quite consistent with the fluctuations of contemporary capitalism. He connects
urban fragmentation to the collapse of the modern financial system of Bretton Woods, based on nation-states, and its replacement with a new system for global profit-seeking corporations, which then face the problem of investing their profits in urban enclaves demonstrating reliability that they preserve these values (Shane, 2011:194).

He then adds background issues triggered by the success of new ventures in urban design, e.g., Battery Park City in New York (Stanton Eckstut and Alexander Cooper), many of which are accompanied by ‘special district’ policies, where, “in Mrs Thatcher’s Britain and in Ronald Reagan’s America, it became possible “to insert large urban fragments” (Shane, 2011:194). In addition, as regards the background issues associated with morphological concerns, he considers the decisive role of studies such as Collage City (Rowe & Koetter, 2001), proposing a new, more open urban configuration “[…] where multiple urban actors were free to build their fragmentary, utopian designs” (Shane, 2011:203). These ideas ended up endorsing libertarian views about the power of a fragmentary urban design, whose theoretical foundations had been established by pioneer architects such as Kevin Lynch and Gordon Cullen. The end of the twentieth century had brought about

 [...] the new norm of global development, along with independent state authorities able to aid development and finance (used, for instance, at Canary Wharf, London, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin or Pudong, Shanghai in the 1990s) […] (Shane, 2011:200).

Shanghai, Berlin or London are not the only examples of such instances: the creation of invented places offers a strategic contribution to architectural science. Invented places are conceived through **placemaking** and **placemarketing** practices, and come morphed in diverse layouts: shopping malls, restored historical areas, sports complexes, integrated museums, hybrid compounds, and multiplex cinemas. These represent the influence of society's current cultural behaviour on the shaping of the environment, and as such raise an interesting topic of investigation for environmental research (Castello 2010). Moreover, they establish grounds for the inclusion of stellar names in the field of Architecture to act as agents both of the envisioned placemaking and of placemarketing. Every global metropolis has starchitects as a marketing brand. Likewise, innovative interventions of urban planning and urban design in such an urban scenario can be expected to bring about important changes in the morphology of cities. The media is emphatic about this. One global newspaper states:

For the first time since the global economic downturn, there is a wave of expansion that is creating jobs, lifting fortunes and tempering fears of popular discontent (NY Times, 28/1/2018).

While a local newspaper publishes:

There was the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the prospect of a more cooperative and globalized world … A return to the regional, to the tribal, as pointed out by thinkers like Bauman (…) and return to things that before seemed less likely, as in the case of Catalonia and Brexit (Zero Hora, Porto Alegre, 14/1/2018).

Present times do indeed point to a future packed with uncertainties, though one thing seems guaranteed: the future of mankind is decisively urban. All in all, cities are likely to survive – as well as to thrive. Nonetheless, this will require the dawning of a thoroughly creative urban metabolism that simultaneously provides for both progress and sustainability. Hard times lie ahead for architectural researchers and practitioners. In other words, architectural science demands from us researchers and academics new directions for facing the challenges posed by the contemporary metropolis; not only to endorse global economic expansion but also to arrange for the booming of creative local places soundly imbued with urbanity.

### 2.2 Towards a diagram for the Anthropocene City

Once an insurgent view takes hold, its imagery often comes to represent a new orthodoxy, becoming the target of new critiques and new assertions (The Urbanist 2012).

Fortunately, some authors are focusing strongly on the re-examination of traditional research themes, setting the grounds for a rethinking of old paradigms. One unquestionable highpoint among them can be found in the early writings of the architecture and urbanism critic Deyan Sudjic. His reflections have been fundamental for recognising the most significant drivers of innovation that helped to establish deep changes in the patterns of contemporary cities.

It is always reassuring to follow Sudjic’s reflections, especially now, when in a recent publication he provides a revealing update on the advance of ideas of the city, leading his readers progressively towards new paradigmatic views that clearly demonstrate the progress of contemporary cities:

Centuries apart, if not always, our understanding of cities has been shaped by the traditional models of Rome and Florence, Paris and Vienna, London and Berlin (…). In the second half of the twentieth century a new generation of observers created their own reputations when confronted with shocking new city models.
Reyner Banham explored Los Angeles (...), Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown went to Las Vegas, and Rem Koolhaas discovered Lagos (Sudjic 2016: 189).

Their great merit is that they went to these cities not to judge their excesses but rather to understand what was happening with this new form of city. Sudjic obviously does not fail to reflect on city paradigms recorded in premodern times, recalling the narratives of Dickens and Zola, and Engels in particular, whose harsh accounts of Manchester’s urban degradation in the England of the Industrial Revolution shocked the educated world of the time and provoked the urban initiatives that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in the long domination of the guidelines of so-called Modernist Urbanism. Sudjic plainly implies that Los Angeles would now be regarded as “almost as much a horror as Manchester one day had been” (Sudjic 2016: 181).

Another characteristic that is clearly noticeable in the contemporaneity of the city is a marked tendency to expand urbanised land into its surroundings. The resulting urbanization process can thus be seen as a dispersion of the city fabric. The resultant pattern is an irregular morphological configuration that spreads over a large territory, leading some authors, such as François Ascher, to create new designations like métapolis. In this tendency, virgin land adjacent to the urbanized area is also assigned as urbanized, and in the wake of this expansion fragmentation are formed. Similarly, fragmentations may also arise within the inner limits of the city itself, resulting from the obsolescence of certain urban land uses, such as land that was destined for industrial production in the times of the old Fordism model.

It is not difficult to notice the attachment of one prevailing role to the particular concept of place. The concept of place in the area of Architecture-Urbanism allows for variations, one of the most expressive of which registers that the classic approach to the concept has broadened and become more comprehensive: it is now possible to recognize the classic conception of place as a social construction, and its understanding as an economic construction. That is, it is now possible to create new places and to incorporate them into the existing repertoire of places in cities, and it has become totally acceptable to add yet other places to the traditional places formed by the spontaneous social interaction of people, generated through the implementation of specific urbanistic projects – projects conceived within strategies known as placemaking, to which juxtaposed actions known as placemarketing can be applied. The former come from the area of architectural-urban design; the latter relate to areas of urban management and urban economy. The traditional places we call places of urbanity, and the designed ones places of cloning, since the latter are created with the intention of cloning the urbanity manifested spontaneously in traditional places (Castello 2010).

The hypothesis that place should be considered as a basis for urban innovation has acquired considerable consistency, which is already disseminated through the reflections of scholars from different geographical and disciplinary origins (Hambleton, 2015).

3. CURTAILMENT OF SPRAWL AND CREATION OF PLACES

To conclude – and at the same time venturing an educated guess – it appears that two interesting trends can be recognized in the research area of Architecture-Urbanism, at least in purely hypothetical terms: we stand at the threshold of a positive curtailment of urban sprawl; and we are experiencing the creation of new inventive places of collective social interaction.

How can these two trends be beneficial in obtaining positive outcomes for the stimulation of synergies in the areas of urban design and increase the condition of wellbeing in built environments?

One alternative might point towards redefinition of the regionally urbanised pattern, emphasizing achievement of a whole picture rather than scattered fragments. That is to say, planning for a consolidated urbanization. This seems to be the design suggested for the development of celebrated metropolises like Paris, for example, where an international consultation team discussing the future of the city (amc Le Moniteur Architecture 2009) proposed a diagram composed of a complex of centralities stimulating the growth of pre-existing ones (Figure 2). This diagram offers interesting suggestions for a diagram of the city of the Anthropocene, mentioned in section 2.2. The team understands ‘centrality’ as the capacity of a space to polarize nearby spaces, attract flows and appeal to people, and become crystallized as an urban centre characterized by maximization of density and the diversity of social realities grouped there, determining an urban intensity.
This could be the initial diagram for representing the new Anthropocene city. In other words, it would induce a ‘gluing together’ of the fractured metropolis, designing an orderly distribution of its elements. Likewise, the design of an urban structure moulded by juxtaposition of urban places consolidating the fragments of the metropolis into a single layout – and ultimately configuring the city as made of a network of places – could set the basis for another tentative diagram.

A glimpse of this tentative diagram could be outlined while examining the patterns of two of the most symptomatic global metropolises, like for example London and Los Angeles, appreciated in the light of the arguments drawn in this paper.

### 3.1 London

A simple glance at London’s features reveals many innovative urban projects. A few of London’s most interesting initiatives will illustrate some ideas previously discussed, as follows.

Study of the multiple situations experienced by an urban paradigm such as London, in its course towards becoming a legitimate representative of today’s model global metropolis, encourages some illuminating assumptions. London is indeed a wonderful urban environment, probably the closest mankind has come towards modelling a global city. It is therefore our duty as urban researchers to try to scrutinize the reasons. Which are the assets that make London so likely to become a paradigm of an Anthropocene global city? Could it be because it has managed to tame car traffic; or is it because its urban development paid due respect to revered traditional environments; or its urban design endorsed the pattern of creating multiple centralities; or the city’s urban governance endorsed the creation of new places of urbanity (including iconic ones)?

The usual components of urban contemporaneity (urban interventions that respond to contemporary trends such as Mega enterprises; Multifunctional centres; Redevelopment of brownfields; Theme parks; and the like) are well represented. It is our guess that all of these conditions were met as London grew, judging from specific documents such as London’s Towns. Shaping the Polycentric City, and Redefining London, published by NLA-New London Architecture, and more recently by The Composite City exhibition at the Museum of London (July 2017). According to the exhibitors, a contemporary city is composed of different types of components: gentrified city centres, housing estates in open countryside, shantytowns, central business districts, gated communities, shopping areas, industrial zones, residential suburbs, new towns and more.

This tends intrinsically to be a regular pattern within contemporary cities. Indeed, it is as if an urban template been employed throughout the entire world defining the patterns of the Global City – or of the Anthropocene city. In this view, London and Los Angeles, the two metropolises chosen as paradigmatic of twenty-first century urbanization, have surprising similarities, as revealed by the architecture critic Anthony Vidler (2000, in Banham 2009, xxxvii): “(…) indeed, London and Los Angeles had a lot in common, each a conglomeration of small villages, spread out in endless tracts of single-family houses, despite the vast apparent differences – car travel, freeways, climate, scale – between them”.

For many observers, residents and visitors, approval ratings for London are ever higher, despite the United Kingdom being on the verge of leaving the European Union. Metropolis magazine’s consideration of The World’s Best Design Cities 2017 (http://www.metropolismag.com/tag/best-of/), for example, states “London remains, for now, one of the capitals of the world, and large scale efforts are being made to make (...) creative niches more cohesively connected”, which can be read symbolically as ‘gluing together’ the fragmented metropolis through the creation of places. Even in the light of
serious aggression imposed by London’s new towers of commerce and services that break its once reserved skyline, it is possible to accept that some new policies of urban governance are meeting with success. Such policies are helping to achieve legitimate objectives, such as the possibilities for densification (Renzo Piano’s the Shard, for example – Figure 3), and offering incentives for containing the peripheral expansion of urbanized boundaries by reusing obsolete areas (the redevelopment of King’s Cross – Figure 4). At the same time, while redevelopment of ‘brownfield’ sites is growing, old idle functional areas acquire unexpected and distinctive centrality (the most genuine example being Herzog & de Meuron’s Tate Modern – Figure 5). It now seems that the city, having already reached peak maturity, is not afraid to be bold and even subversive in urban governance.

This can clearly be seen with the tactic of using ‘loose spaces’ in London. This recent trend in urban design, of using the so-called ‘loose spaces’ of a city for the creation of effective public places, can be found abundantly in London (Tate Modern again provides an illustrative example – the surrounding areas of the Museum display an exciting manifestation of urbanity – Figure 6).
The expression ‘loose space’ means a space apart from the fixed or primary use for which it was originally intended (Frank & Stevens 2007). The literature understands ‘places’ as areas in which people carry out their daily urban life experiences, in a way of attributing them meaning. Loose spaces that are found freely throughout the metropolitan fabric increase the possibilities for placemaking and prevent unsustainable urban sprawl. This shows a strong tendency towards a new planning rationale.

3.2 Los Angeles

(...) like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original (Banham 2009/1971:5).

A great many opinions have been issued about Los Angeles, some highly charged with corrosive criticism. Perhaps one of the least caustic simply reads the city of Los Angeles as a non-city. Indeed, when Los Angeles is examined, it looks like nothing more than an untidy regional agglomeration traversed by massive freeways and ‘spaghetti’ junctions, whose totality has been unable to morph into any really urban configuration. Ultimately, however, a closer and more attentive examination might reveal the chaotic agglomeration to be not that chaotic at all; it might in fact point to what may be the future diagram for representing an Anthropocene city. Reyner Banham’s passionate analysis of Los Angeles opened new ways into urban-architectural criticism when he patiently ‘learned to drive’ for better analysis of LA. An initial key for the best appreciation of the intriguing conundrum of the contemporary city might be to regard it in the framework of existing patterns of contemporaneity in the urbanized society of today. One does not need to regard LA with Pollyanna eyes to notice its contemporaneity. A glance at the overall renewal of Downtown LA, marked by Walt Disney Concert Hall, a place made by the city’s most famous ‘starchitect’, Canadian-born Frank Gehry (Figure 7), is sufficient to acknowledge the presence of contemporary features. It is also possible to identify clear manifestations of urbanity, though administered in small doses through the wonderful ‘islands of urbanity’ existing in the intimacy of many of the city’s suburbs and satellite towns (Figure 8); or even, more astonishingly, in the very ambience of the complex cloverleaf flyovers.

Generically, we have seen that a broad panorama of the present Anthropocene city is like a mosaic of socially and physically segregated environments, demonstrating the manifestation of spatial fragmentation. But what if this fragmentary form is merely reflecting the desires of contemporary society, offering the daily way of life aspired to by this society (consumerist, individualistic, connected, etc.)? With this thought, it seems that an older discussion needs to be raised again in architectural science: can cities be disciplined by an urban model, or should they be shaped by society? Should fragmentation not be a priority in our area of studies, since the area aims to be recognised as Science? All in all, is fragmentation a malevolent feature? Should it be organized? Does it need to be corrected? Can it be corrected?

However, if looked at a wider perspective, would it not be possible to consider that urbanity in Los Angeles is being inventively appreciated at a distinctive pace – a pace more compatible with the changing perceptions of contemporary society? Would this indicate we are facing a new and creative urban metabolism – a fresh metabolism – more akin with the Anthropocene phenomenon?
4. CONCLUSIONS

Today’s cities contain territorial fragmentations, in either extra-urban or intra-urban locations (the latter caused by the obsolescence of certain non-current uses in contemporary urban life); or territorial discontinuities found here and there throughout the advance of the conurbation.

In today’s cities, places of urbanity coexist with invented places, and both types offer opportunities to be enjoyed as spaces for socialising, thus contributing the growth of people’s quality of urban life.

Innovations towards containment of urbanised land to prevent unsustainable sprawl are being investigated. Vague trends towards polycentrism are being considered; and tendencies also point towards curtailment of sprawl and the creation of new places. This might somehow lead to a ‘gluing together’ of the fractures, suggesting some kind of ‘revenge of the fractured metropolis’.

References


Texts in which the author previously ventured on topics covered in the paper: