

designing out of the crisis.

n.brenner

Fulcrum: *Neoliberalism might not be a familiar topic to many architecture students. It's complex, but perhaps we could start with its basic tenets.*

Neil Brenner: The particular way I grapple with neoliberalism is defined by the work I do as an urbanist, which entails trying to understand processes of regulatory restructuring at various spatial scales. Neoliberalism is connected to a broader philosophical doctrine, which posits that markets are the best, most efficient, basis for allocating social resources. It's a radically anti-Statist ideology, which insists that public and common institutions of any kind are inefficient, and should therefore be dismantled. A lot more could be said of course, there are many other nuances in different contexts, and variations also flow from what regulatory goals the particular advocates of the neoliberal position are trying to promote. However, instead of understanding neoliberalism as a doctrine or worldview that is implemented in some pure form, it's probably better to think of it as the ideological expression of a process of market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring—a process, in short, of *neoliberalisation*. In other words, neoliberalisation entails the constant attempt to promote a commodified, marketised, regulatory order.

F: *Fulcrum #23 proposed the death of neoliberalism. You wouldn't agree?*

NB: The question of whether neoliberalism is dead depends on what you mean by 'neoliberalism'. David Harvey made that point several years ago.

Nik Theodore, Jamie Peck and myself [authors of *Bedford Press' Afterlives of Neoliberalism*] would argue it also depends what you mean by 'dead'. The question of defining these categories has major implications for how you interpret what's going on around us, in the wake of the '07/8/9 Global Financial Crisis (which is, in some ways, ongoing). When the crisis first started to ricochet around the world economy it provoked a lot of speculation that neoliberalism was over. From our point of view, those positions hinge upon an untenably

monolithic concept of neoliberalism.

If you think of neoliberalism as a total system, as a singular ideology, then a crisis like that, in which state institutions at both global and national scales have been aggressively mobilised to reconstitute markets, and to deal (albeit selectively) with serious market failures, then it obviously contradicts the neoliberal ideology. From that point of view, we've surpassed this moment of orthodoxy.

But from our point of view that's an extremely simplistic, even naïve, idealisation of the past, present and future. Neoliberalisation has never occurred in a pure form, and thus its crisis is also not likely to take the form of a 'big bang' style collapse. What was implemented in Pinochet's Chile was totally different from Thatcher's Britain, or Reagan's USA, post-socialist Poland, post-reform China, post-Katrina New Orleans, or post-Saddam Iraq ... Even if you start with a tenet with global provenance like 'free-markets, less state', which is in some ways the essence of neoliberalism, when it collides with an inherited institutional landscape (whether of Keynesianism, developmentalism, state socialism, or otherwise), the outcomes are necessarily conditioned by specific contexts, institutional legacies and struggles.

Another important question relates to the timing and consequences of crisis. Neoliberalisation projects are deeply contradictory. They may aspire to unleash markets, to promote unrestrained economic growth. And sometimes they actually do this. For example, the South-East of England under Thatcher, for a little while, boomed. There was an incredible boom in the property markets due to liberalisation policies. The problem, however, is that the strategy that was mobilised was not sustainable — the very strategy that produced the boom also produced a crisis.

Neoliberalism can unleash quasi-volcanic bursts of growth, but those growth spurts are not sustainable because the marketisation strategies of neoliberalism do not create or sustain institutional infrastructure to promote a stabilised formation of growth.

Essentially you have a crisis—manifested in housing market polarisation and a speculative bubble that soon burst—almost immediately after the property market boom. One could make a similar argument regarding the speculative strategies that underpinned the more recent US sub-prime lending crisis. Then the question is, what does one do with that particular situation of crisis? Does one continue to mobilise a neoliberal strategy, or do you abandon it? Interestingly, the dominant strategy in response to the post-2007 crisis has been to intensify and recalibrate neoliberalisation strategies, not to abandon them.

F: *How does the built environment factor into your thinking and teaching?*

NB: In a lecture I gave yesterday at the GSD we were talking about the notion of design. What does it mean to design? All of us, whether we're writers, drawers, thinkers, we're designers. As designers, we may be experts at thinking about very specific things, interiors/exterior, or larger scales up to the city, region, megalopolis and territory. But, as designers, we are equipped in our intellectual practise to think about the basic meaning of design, which is essentially the question: how do we organise life, and how do we organise the world? I encourage people who are interested in that question to scale it up to the very structures that govern the planet, and in that respect:

the world economy is a design problem.

For me, the starting point of design is the proposition that things could be otherwise. In other words, if you believe in design, you believe that things can be changed, and are changeable. Neoliberalism is a design principal that insists that markets are the basic principle that should organise design—it promotes a kind of design monoculture misrepresented at once as free choice and irresistible necessity.

F: *For students at, or just finishing, school, what are the possibilities for change within these conditions? Presuming that in articulating these things, the intention is to resist them...*

NB: For starters, we should debate this very question — a lot. Just by posing that question you've already opened up the possibility for thinking

otherwise about what is and what could be. Whatever our role in the design world, we too often assume we have to work within certain narrowly defined, market-based parameters. And yet, around the world, architects and designers have long been viewed as visionary creators with an ability to produce extraordinary interventions into the built environment that may even point towards a different form of society. Surely it's possible for students of design today to build upon that projective legacy in ways that destabilise and counteract the destructive and socially regressive forces of market fundamentalism.

As Henri Lefebvre recognised long

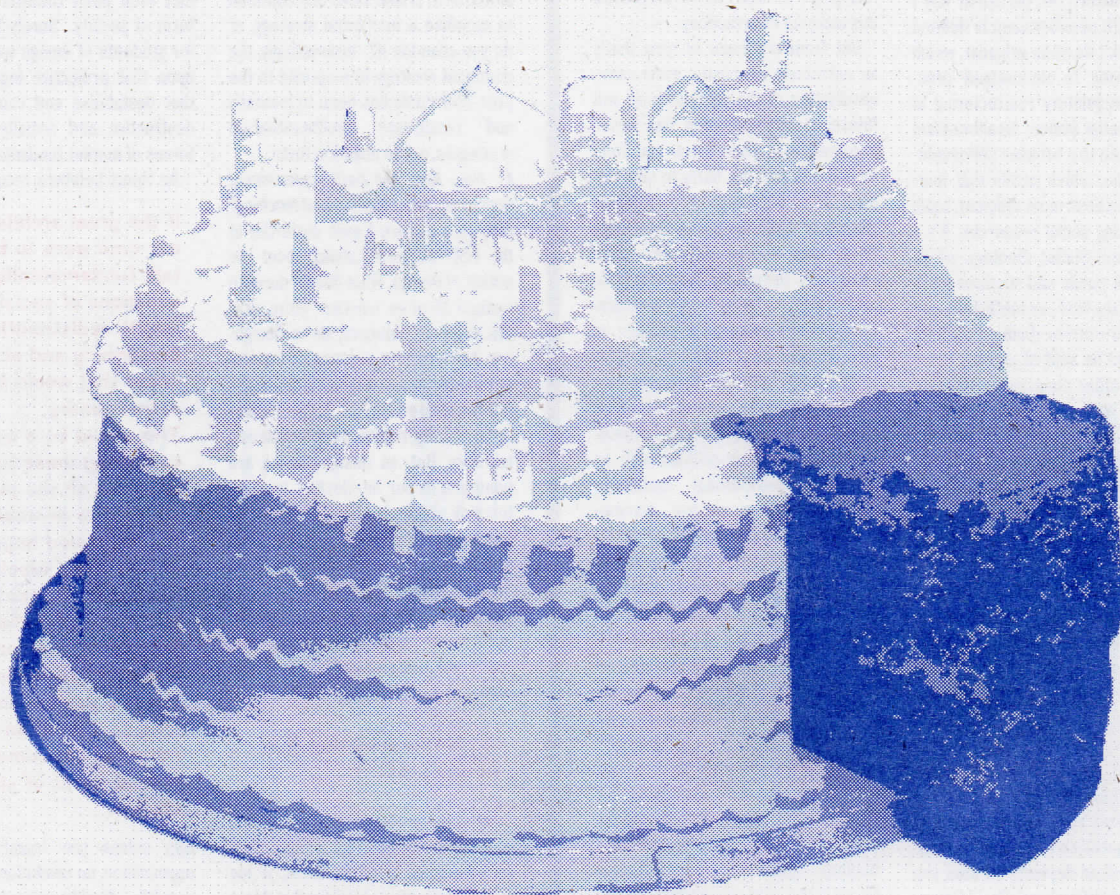
If the great architects of our time were to begin to talk fundamentally about questions of social justice, wealth redistribution, democracy and ecological crisis, that would be extraordinary. This would be a contribution to putting these types of issues on the public agenda, to destabilising the continued hegemony of neoliberal ideology and market fundamentalism in the public domain. For young architects, it's important to realise that this is a profession that has long contained an untapped potential to promote quite radical forms of social change.

ago, unless you transform spatial organisation, no revolution can ever be possible. Neoliberalism has certainly transformed the space of the world in quite revolutionary ways during the last thirty years. Surely architects and designers can and must contribute to envisioning a very different form of the built environment, at every spatial scale, based on social needs, democratic empowerment and social justice rather than the unfettered rule of the commodity form.

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