Fulcrum
THE AA'S WEEKLY FREE SHEET

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BEDFORD SQUARE.

unplanned obsolescence.

m.campbell

Although my knowledge of macroeconomics is relatively limited, I gather from reading Paul Krugman's column in the New York Times and watching *Newsnight* that the world's economy is — to use the technical term — fucked.

Ironically, one of the first indicators of this state of fuckedness — the collapse of the US sub-prime mortgage market — stemmed from an oversupply of architecture (coupled with the economics of defaulted repayments), which is evident in the newly abandoned houses that lie rotting & unoccupied in the American suburbs. Often recently built and never lived in, these tract houses are both the products of a refined process of mass production (in which the construction & real estate industries facilitate one another), and a kind of by-product — an unwanted residue — of that foreclosed process of supply and demand.

In his forthcoming *Manifest Destiny — A Guide to the Essential Indifference of American Suburban Housing*, Jason Griffiths notes how a sense of profound emptiness has always been a seminal characteristic of the American suburb. However, that sense of a world sequestered behind fake shuttered windows has been further exacerbated by the literal emptiness of these vacant buildings. And it seems to me that these tract houses not only exemplify a form of architectural redundancy, but also illustrate how we, as architects, are entering a period in which architecture is subject to an unplanned obsolescence.

In industrial design terms, the notion of planned obsolescence refers to the deliberate process of conceiving, designing and manufacturing a product with a limited lifespan, over which it becomes increasingly obsolete until it is entirely useless. With this progressive loss of functionality not only stimulating consumer demand through the desire for functional or stylistic renewal, but also resulting in the 80mb hard drives and wheezing vacuum cleaners that illustrate our need for more storage space.

In architectural terms, however, the problem lies with the fact most architects adhere to the frankly quaint notion that buildings should be built to last. (Or, at least, outlive the egos of their designers.) And, in a sense, this belief in longevity is not entirely removed from John Ruskin's admonition in the *Stones of Venice* that architecture should 'connect forgotten and following ages' and bear 'lasting witness' to the progress of society.

Thankfully the blank adherence to such a notion of progress and the assurance of architecture is about as fucked as the economy. And the inability to plan for the unplanned obsolescence of architecture does allow a certain abandonment of architectural convention, suggesting an architecture that is less speculative (in terms of being based on the satisfaction of economic risk and developmental returns), than propositional and polemic. And open-ended.

The challenge then is not to become the architectural equivalent of Jean-Paul Belmundo's titular character in *Pierrot le fou*, who — after deciding to kill himself by wrapping his head with dynamite — changes his mind, only to find he is unable to extinguish the burning fuse.

Mark Campbell is Inter 1 tutor & Director of the Paradise Lost cluster. His research interests include 60's & 70's America, paranoia, cultural exhaustion & dreams.

BAR ITALIA.

the end of neo-liberalism.

p.mason
interviewed by fulcrum

When I talk about the end of Neo-Liberalism what I'm talking about is the end of an era, and a system. What happened in the decade 2000-2008 was that all the benign aspects of free-market capitalism — globalisation, the rapid unleashing of technological innovation, the freeing up of the labour market — turned into negatives. They did a flip and turned into credit-fuelled expansion with consumerism totally dominating the productive side of the economy. The poor were effectively offered a route out of poverty that was solely credit-driven. That's how you see absolutely poverty-stricken families in America with two cars, borrowing money to spend it on nail jobs. It's crazy. That's what ended in 2008, and trying to carry on in the old way hasn't produced a sustainable recovery. Just today I had a report from Goldman Sachs talking about a ten-year stagnation in the West. It's not likely to be similar to the decade of stagnation seen, for example, in 1990s Japan. There they adopted fiscal stimulus, it didn't work, and finally adopted QE (Quantitative Easing) and it did work. But Japan's uniqueness comes from the closed system of its saving system, so it's able to fund its own deficit out of its own savings. It's got, as it were, financial autarchy but global industrialisation. The problem we've got in the Anglo-Saxon world is that we have financial globalisation but industrial decline. And while the stagnant Japanese decade was a stable decade, a stagnant decade for the Anglo-Saxons will not be stable. Above all because — without being culturally stereotypical — the Japanese people have put up with a lot of uncertainty. Their culture is one of 'take the pain internally', our culture is one... well, we've seen this summer how it goes to the streets.

When the state can't take the strain pressed upon it by financial crisis, the next thing that takes the strain is relationships — between countries & between classes. Now while America is trying to pass off the cost of the debt onto the BRICs [Brazil Russia India China], Greece can't pass off the debt anywhere, so what you get is immediate class struggle. And it is multiplex, the unions, the youth, even the middle-class. There's a lot of anger, and social friction. There's hostility to migrants, etc. What social theorists in Greece are worried about is 'anomie': the disappearance of socio-ethical norms. The English riots were an interesting example of anomie. But even as the riots took place you also had this highly networked middle-class clean-up response I've never seen before, certainly not in the 1981 riots. This time the riots were far more criminally-inspired, far more nihilistic, but the community response has been far more liberal — whatever you think about the actual sentencing.

British politics faces a big challenge with Europe right now, and its interesting the way politicians have chosen to be involved. What is emerging from the Conservatives is a strategy that says, 'the more solidified Europe is, the less we need to be part of it'. There's almost nobody in British politics arguing for a stronger liason, and I can see a moment arising when Britain potentially takes back some of its sovereignty, overtly, possibly over migration.

Either the Eurozone survives as a much more coherent fiscal and political union, or it doesn't survive. I'm not predicting the future, nor saying what I think should happen, but its remarkable how unanimous the proponents & opponents of the Euro basically are on this issue now.

However, the problem is we're in a real world of crisis, and any wholesale secession by south Europe from the Euro is going to lead to another cataclysmic collapse.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF...

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THE ECONOMIC CLIMATE:
FINE WEATHER FOR DUCKS*

THE SOVEREIGN CRISIS

Historically, the *sovereign* was a supreme ruler exercising absolute authority over their state. This figure might have been a monarch, or a tyrant — or maybe not one person at all, but a cohort of oligarchs.

They asserted their power judicially, that is to say, they wrote the laws and carried the swords.

Of course, in a democracy the people's will (such that it is) acts as sovereign, manifest in their elected agent (president, prime minister, etc). But in reality, it's not so simple to allocate power. After all, where does the queen fit in? And what about the 'invisible hand' of the free-markets? Proverbially, "not even the queen is above the law", but is the same true for financial institutions?

In order to exercise *sovereignty* the ruler/s have to be in complete control of their territory. But globalisation has forced the state to give up a good deal of its independence. When the UK propsed a banking tax the financial sector threatened to move overseas, thus revealing that modern economies no longer operate in territorial terms. So who's running the show? Banks or states? Because in Britain we know the queen isn't calling any shots.

In 1950 the London County Council Architects Department was the world's largest practise, shaping the capital with a kind of optimistic paternalism: building schools, public housing, and thinking progressivly about planning and modernisation. Today the largest firm is Skimore Owings & Merill, whose greatest contribution to mankind is the world's tallest tower — the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. I wont moralise, but the difference in aspirations is terrifying.

In a way, architecture is the precipitation formed when a society's political & economic models collide. The contrast between LCC & SOM only highlights how much power relationships between state & market have changed in the last six decades. Now those forces are in flux, & it is practically impossible to foresee how they will settle again, or what the architecture of that new society might be like. This doesn't mean that as architects we twiddle our thumbs till the crisis of sovereignty sorts itself out. We must propose, through persuasive speech and fantastic drawings, the type of C21st-century state in which we want to live & work. ***J.Self.***

FROM FRONT...

Fulcrum: Is this the decline of the West?

This is certainly the decline of America. America is the biggest debtor country in the world. That was once a symbol of its power, now it's a symbol of its powerlessness, seen in the breakdown of political consensus. The paralysis of political institutions is very worrying in America, and the most worrying thing is that Americans don't see it. It's such an internally focussed country economically, politically, and media-wise. They drive along those freeways, thinking that they're driving through modernity, whereas someone from Singapore turns up and it looks like a museum of the twentieth century. A lot of Americans don't realise how archaic their infrastructure, their architecture, their city planning seems. They don't realise they're living in the absence of hypermodernity. There is a way out of this decline though, and I think we'll see this in the next phase of the crisis: macro-economically the world will be reordered, similarly to what happened when the Gold Standard broke up.

That is, by the mid-30s very clear currency & trading blocs were established, & they only traded with each other (because they were not yet at war). The ways out for America, if it wants to revitalise its industry, are probably to try and reorder its own part of the world, say a New Deal with Central and South America, a new division of labour within the Americas. Canada's quite an effective country, its one of the weirdest things about the current situation, Canada is a really successful country. I don't know how they do it, but you could take a leaf out of their book. I don't think America is doomed, I just think there's an unrecognised decline.

Paul Mason is the BBC's Newsnight Economics Editor. His most recent book is 'Meltdown: The End of the Age of Greed'.

Above: abandoned model homes at a failed development. CA.

Correction: In Will Self's article (#22) the looters acted as 'cat's paws' not 'tack claws'. Apologies.

Every term fulcrum attaches a new bird to its masthead (as well as making other aesthetic alterations). Say hello to the Mallard.