

## Up in the Air

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*Up in the Air* 2009

"Nothingness may be the last subject of plausible certainties."

– Rem Koolhaas

If you believe in nothing, honey, it believes in you.

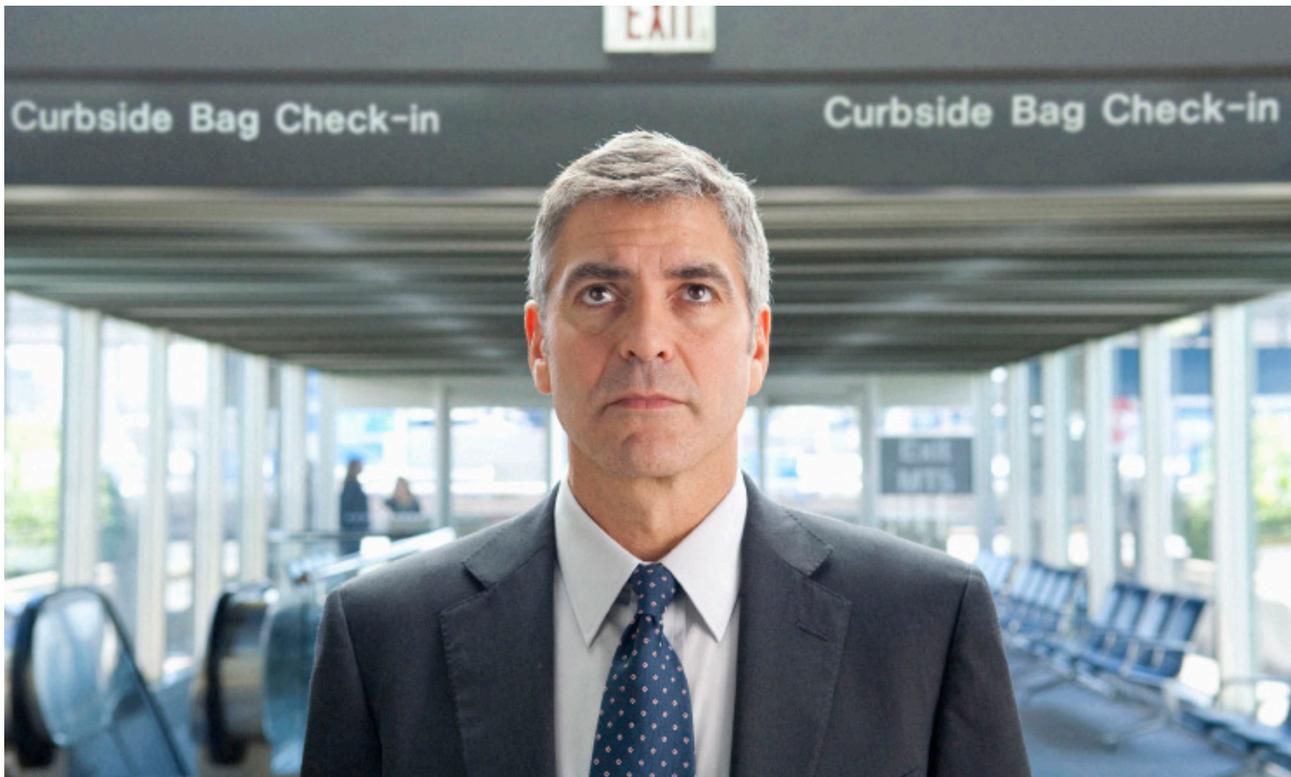
– Robyn Hitchcock, "Ye Sleeping Knights of Jesus"

"How much does your life weigh? Imagine for a second that you're carrying a backpack. I want you to pack it with all the stuff that you have in your life... *All those negotiations and arguments and secrets, the compromises.* The slower we move the faster we die. Make no mistake, moving is living.

Some animals were meant to carry each other to live symbiotically over a lifetime. Star crossed lovers, monogamous swans. We are not swans. We are sharks."

– "Up in the Air," 2009

Previously I've examined rule-based, temporal architecture and algorithms for generating urban form from San Gimignano to Brooklyn. But this research on negotiated systems fails to deal with two broad concerns I confront in practice. First, due to



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scale and situation, the vast majority of built form is subject to very little significant negotiation that leads anywhere. Negotiated systems, though compelling, countenance capital's inherent violence, They tend to privilege the fine-grained articulations of discrete, privatized spaces as syncopated urbanisms of resolved conflict rather than the bold formal collisions that urban theory once sought.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps densely contested legalities like Hong Kong, and New York, city's that give a face to capitalism are negotiated urbanisms. But the paradigm fails when dealing with Soviet Magnitogorsk, Houston, Denver's suburbs, Asian start ups, or third world metropolis's where rules are limited and when growth is instantaneous and brutal.

Second, when an economy is limited or obsolete there is no "room for negotiation." Negotiated urbanism can appear as a fetish that maintains architecture as a sufficient representation of discretionary forms of power, but its presumptions ring false in a world of privatization and a future where The Public transforms into its countervailing, Koolhaas's "Junk Space." What if there is no negotiation? What

if the traditional city, the locus of urban discourse is no longer operative? What if the City no longer exists? What if we refuse to negotiate?

2009's film "Up in the Air" circles these broad cultural issues, pitting Ryan Bingham, played by George Clooney's character, against the backdrop of economic recession. Bingham, a self-proclaimed "mutation, a new species" a "spaceman" with immaterial goals moves through the "margins of itineraries" - airports, hotels and conference rooms - making 'fast friends', floating unencumbered by the baggage that anchors his more terrestrial relations. Their alternative universe over which he levitates is a miasma of unplowed parking lots, dimly lit restaurants and cheap, theme roomed lodging.

The choice between the itinerant rules and schedules of a slick, comfortable modernism and timeless down-home tradition is exposed to be symbiotic. The shark infested architecture of first class is beginning to show its scuffed skin and tradition is composed of broken promises and dysfunction. Wichita, Miami, St. Louis and Detroit are the Shark's

feeding grounds. But the Shark must smooth over his predatory instincts through those small creature comforts that make his life bearable.

The viewer's dilemma is that neither Bingham's disembodied lifestyle nor his Wisconsin past is particularly appealing. Two 'third ways' are provisionally injected into that impasse. The first depicted by his future in-law, Jim, is a version of Glenn Beck's America (or is it Obama's?):

"Turnkey everything. Seamless traditionalism yet with all the perks."  
 "It's a great country," Bingham retorts.  
 "We all need a place to call our own," Jim answers,  
 "It's what we were promised."  
 "It's a nice touch"  
 "What?"  
 "The part about the promise."

The second ideology is embodied by the energetic, corporate idealism of recent Cornell graduate, Natalie Keener. Her theory: 'glocalism.'<sup>2</sup> "Everything global must become local." The meeting of modernism and traditionalism produces a "fauxmy" [faux and homey] sheen but direct contact also portends minor catastrophe: a 'flat Stanley' won't fit in the suitcase, a shampoo bottle is grotesquely super-sized, a cocktail waitress might call back, an affair comes knocking at a Chicago front door, a career ends. Similarly Bingham's fauxmy, frequent-flyer perks are all that makes his life choices bearable. The glocal future is in an entropic battery of terminal<sup>3</sup> architectures<sup>4</sup> - piles and pits; crushing baggage and weightless suspension; clichés and disembodied abstractions; diminished life and lifestyle; inadequate simulations of the 'real,' and the kitsch of 'fantasy.' Instead of a new age of artisanal Vermont cheese farmer's and French chefs, glocalism's collision of worlds - when affairs become commitments, when corporate death angels come bearing bad news - is catastrophic.

Natalie's *Weltanschauung* might have been hatched in some Ithaca seminar. Her wish for corporate success with homey values bears resemblance to the Cornell's school's suspect marriage of avant-garde techniques with traditional language whose bastard Upstate-Tuscan child became the characteristic conventions of Urban Design. Architectural 'glocalism,' is a "gentleman's agreement," a developer's bargain for marginal formal and cultural coherence in the absence of control of both the City and its

Subject. Urban Design, negotiating the real, found its champion's agents in the real estate, property law, the community groups and preservationist.<sup>5</sup> Desiring the promising semiotic ambiguity to be both Duck and Rabbit, it instead was co-opted. It became a study in compromise and deal making, negotiating a bargain to disguise the corporate control of our cities.



'Lights Out Please' Robert Adams

The third way wants it all, the career and the family, tradition and all the mod cons, the morale and the last word; mostly it surrenders. Between corporate fast talk and cold-footed commitment we dive for the radical center. How would we go on without negotiation? Grounding modernism - bringing it back to Omaha<sup>6</sup>, feathering the nest with IKEA, injecting airborne aspirations with the bottom line - has been successful careerism, but at the cost at suspending architecture's formal invention, planning's social aspirations and critical potential. Our cities have become, as Roberto Ungers noted, the "means of equipping individuals with practical and cultural equipment with which to define and execute their life projects"<sup>7</sup> airports, casinos and theme parks. Our identities remain in doubt: our spaces oversaturated with information and clichés, prompting violence from those excluded from its systems. Bingham is simply a soft landing for the inevitable crash - a twinkle-eyed fantasy that will fade into dusk.

Negotiation and compromise – the discourse of neo-liberal politics – limits our ability to project any future.<sup>8</sup> Instead of wanting it all – what if architecture promised Nothing? Among the City's broken promises – its damaged civic orders, its creaking productivity, its muddled discourses are alternatives: Hejduk silent, theatrical economy of perpetual negotiation never resolved and Koolhaas's

delirious Metropolis of lawless disorder come to mind. Hejduk claimed to have the 20<sup>th</sup> century's only urban idea; Koolhaas in a moment of humility credited Wright<sup>9</sup>, though he might have equally cited the Soviet disurbanists. During the Big Depression, Wright, suspicious of the city's hording logic, refused to compromise the agrarian, American ideal.<sup>10</sup> Broadacre offers no space of negotiation.



'Untitled' Robert Adams

It is so attenuated that it can only be nominally governed and is a perverse source for the cataclysmic voids of La Villette, Melun Senart, and la Defense schemes. While Wright's romantic individualism seems anachronistic and a little too Ayn Rand, alternatives suggested that some mutation of the city is the locus for negotiated identities,<sup>11</sup> Hejduk and Koolhaas take the maxim "You can't negotiate with a madman," as both a threat and promise. When you got nothing, there's nothing left to lose.

What is a No- Thing; a Non-Concept City to replace our bankrupt Idea of the City? Roberto Ungers' offered three alternatives to post-modern interiorized styling and modernism's "diminished idea of personality" were a visionary naturalism, a pluralistic communitarianism, and a program committed to a "mobilizational democracy." Of the three, the first two are compromised by an ethical and predictable new 'naturalism' of Landscape urbanism and a lifeless populism that survive beyond all post-humanist critique. A plastic political forms for a future architecture would be blank, stripping architecture of its motivated semiotic obligations, vast, and pointing (outside of this world like a cathedral), but take on the incongruous and incoherent tendencies of modernist aesthetics. Ungers demands that we imagine a less fauxmy alternative one that is both abstract and saturated.

This is hinted at in , the two most erotic spaces in the film. The first is the curved hallway of the airport hotel that the director described as endless – here the modern corridor folds back upon itself, losing its functionality, its legible order and its perspectival and limiting spatial logic. In the second, the church basement is offered as a riotous, colorful, even kitschy support to the sacred space above, eradicating the motivated symbolism and hierarchy of the church. If the upper realm is 'pointing' the basement is both vague and incongruous – full of potential.

"Up in the Air's" eponymous ending strips us of any fauxmy choices. Between an existential and solitary freedom or a shabby sense of commitment we recognize the end of neo-liberalism.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, in negotiation, nothing is certain; the alternative is Nothing. Thinking Nothing can "Flip the Field" As another calamitous, vortex-summoning, anti-hero of America's adolescent capitalism Bartleby the Scrivener might say, "Negotiate?" "I prefer not to."

Imagine waking up tomorrow with nothing," Bingham intones, "exhilarating isn't it?"

## ENDNOTES

1 "Collision City" in *Collage City*, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, 1978.

2 The term comes originally from Japanese business practices and was introduced as a concept by Roland Robertson in *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, 1992.

3 Natalie tries to get the employees of GoalQuest XX to be called 'terminators' but finds that it is causing problems in legal.

4 I borrow the term from Robert Smithson's article "Entropy And The New Monuments." "But for many of today's artists this "desert" is a "City of the Future" made of null structures and surfaces. This "City" performs no natural function, it simply exists between mind and matter, detached from both, representing neither. It is, in fact, devoid of all classical ideals of space and process. It is brought into focus by a strict condition of perception, rather than by any expressive or emotive means."

5 Architectural post modernism neatly coincides with this disciplinary birth - the product of linguistic "Complexity and Contradiction" and the profession opportunism of Mayor Lindsay's 1966 Task Force for Urban Design. The mid-1960's ended the rigid rhetoric and entrenched rules of late modernism.

6 As a side it should be noted that the "Sage of Omaha" Warren Buffett may well share the aspirations of Bingham but with less directly destructive and far more lucrative results. "The way I see it is that my money represents an enormous number of claim checks on society. It's like I have these little pieces of paper that I can turn into consumption. If I wanted to, I could hire 10,000 people to do nothing but paint my picture every day for the rest of my life. And the GDP would go up. But the utility of the product would be zilch, and I would be keeping those 10,000 people from doing AIDS research, or teaching, or nursing. I don't do that though. I don't use very many of those claim checks. There's nothing material I want very much." Janet Lowe, *Warren Buffett Speaks: Wit and Wisdom from the World's Greatest Investor*, (Wiley).

7 Roberto Ungers, "The Better Futures of Architecture" *Anyone*, 31.

8 Albert Pope suggests that the open grid space of modernism, in his example, that of Mies and Hilberseimer and Houston, Texas is also an urbanism but one in which we do not yet know how to operate as citizens. "We are All Bridge and Tunnel People," *Log 16*.

9 Wright also advocated a form of free money issues to every single citizen whose value would decrease by 5% a year to discourage the hoarding of wealth and resources that he felt the city exemplified.

10 Wright also wrote letters in praise of the Soviet architectural experiments. Just as Koolhaas saw the Constructivist swimming pool as a metaphor for the meeting of Soviet idealism and American practicality, Wright seemed to see a link between his own liberated individualism and communist collectivism.

11 While Hejduk's world is nearly medieval in scale, a village of assumed and monstrous identities

– to allude back to the film, a kind of icy Wisconsin/Vladivostok of fantastic schizoid masquerades; Koolhaas's thermodynamic modernism of cool and hot spatial differentials is colossal, monstrous and endless if not infinite – hotel of desire.

12 The ending is all about limits. And we must watch to see when the characters get visibly trapped – Bingham in his apartment hallway, in a hotel window, Jim in a child's chair ... On a more positive note the film two location hint at an erotics of space. They are places of seduction: the church basement, full of riotous color, drinking and new promise and the airport hotel hallway at the start of the film that the director notes is curved "so that it would seem like an endless space."