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Shrinkage, cramp, narrow-mindedness

Shrinkage is no longer a side-effect of growth, but instead is seen by many to be an overpowering reality/fact. When human history and society has traditionally been focused on growth, Archis asks whether it is possible to design for shrinkage.

We cannot state it more succinctly. This is the sequence that generally determines the cultural agenda. It starts with the assessment that the end of growth is in sight, that there are signs of recession or retrogression; then, peoples' minds start filling with fear as the rhetoric of doom spreads, until, finally, sweeping measures are enacted everywhere - restructurings, evasions, budgetary cutbacks and cancellations. Above all, a mentality develops in which the new, the strange, the different, in short the surprising, is no longer held in esteem, but rather is perceived as a threat. Protectionism, xenophobia, conservatism and frugality become the primary forces. What started out as a narrow-minded aberration, ascribed to extremism, suddenly becomes bon ton.

People cannot accept shrinkage. Since the beginning of human history, all our thoughts, every cell in our bodies, have been focused on growth, expansion, renewal, innovation. Living standards, labour productivity, consumer spending, investments, cultural agendas, assortments, scientific knowledge... where would they be without the dynamics of growth? This goes beyond the capitalistic structure as the chosen model for society. This has to do with the human condition, with wanting to live and not to die, with progressing and not degenerating. Growth is a sign of youth.

The realities/facts of today are different, however. Despite all the banging of drums, universal shrinkage is noticeable. Human populations age, and thus energy levels decrease. Money devaluates. Natural resources are drained. Economies stagnate. Rainforests and polar icecaps are getting smaller. Budgets get tighter, the workforce shrinks. Farmland is vacated/abandoned. Architecture itself becomes more modest. And all this is starting to attract quite some attention. Shrinkage is no longer a deniable side-effect of growth, but instead is seen by many people to be an overpowering reality/fact. Shrinkage becomes a cramp. Now, all we can do is wait for the narrow-mindedness that is usually the answer to this.

Or not? Can an answer to shrinkage be found that is not inspired by conservatism, fear or short-sightedness, but rather sees the greatest of challenges in shrinkage? This is the question being asked in this issue of Archis. Or, more precisely, is it possible to design for shrinkage rather than for growth?

Maybe it is necessary to perform a mental pirouette. Because, in fact, no human activity is more estranged from shrinkage than design. In particular, architecture has so identified itself with growth-scenarios in the past hundred years that the idea that the opposite process can also use design is regarded as blasphemy. Consider: population growth, the growth of prosperity, hygiene and production, the growth of velocity and experience, everything had to be accommodated for and stimulated by architecture. Nothing other than this could satisfy any artistic and intellectual ambition. Above all: there is money in growth, but not in shrinkage; therefore, growth is much more attractive.

A change, then, begins to become apparent in this simple opposition. The small, the minituarised, the refined, the modest, the slow, they all come to be viewed in a different light. More than that, they begin to acquire something exclusive, a privilege, a quality. The small nestles itself in the aesthetic of things. It returns as a 'clever solutions'. It is itself seen as a new scientific paradigm (nanotechnology). In addition, more recently, there is a growing realisation that more study must be done of the shrinkage process as perhaps not being by definition opposed to growth, but rather, shrinkage being an aspect of the same growth. In a network society, growth has the tendency to concentrate at junctions, in areas with a high density of people and capital.

This means that density is also reduced. Sometimes this is nothing more than a classic case of degeneration. But also, especially with a good design, the interaction can be a knife that cuts both ways, delivering a double blow in quality. The relevant question here is: Is this an insight into shrinkage as something other than the harbinger of cramp and narrow-mindedness, which is converted into action: into policy, into vision and above all into design. Is shrinkage a domain where there is not only something to be lost, but also precisely something to be gained? Is it a subject in which talent can be better utilised than in the worn-out cliché of growth, the extrapolations and big is beautiful?