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Glossy Urban Dystopias

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Decolonize this Dystopia! Wealth Pollution on the Hudson River

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<https://urbanac.city/fisher>

Introduction

Pier 52 along New York's Hudson River doesn't exist. Yet, it has a phantasmic presence in the form of David Hammons' art installation *Day's End*—a skeletal recreation of the pier's former dimensions that haunts the luxuryscape along the river. The piece is hardly noticeable and probably appears to most passersby as an infrastructural relic of an earlier economic regime. The installation contrasts sharply with the ostentatious and hypervisible Little Island a block to the north. Little Island is a cutting-edge futurepark rising out of the river on mushrooming concrete stems—the hallucination of billionaire brand mogul Barry Diller. Little Island exemplifies the contemporary urban economy premised on the ocular capture of pre-designed experiences. This essay frames such architecture as a breed of wealth pollution that has enclosed the city in glossy Instagram panoramas and ushered in a dystopic paralysis of imagination.

The High Line, a much lauded above-ground park laid atop former rail lines, serves as a spine connecting Little Island at 14th street to the Hudson Yards at 34th. At the center of the Hudson Yards is the Vessel sculpture tower, the shimmering apogee of neoliberal asphyxiation. This stretch of New York's west side is a contiguous rubbish bin of excess wealth; the result of billionaires attempting to build a parallel dimension of immaculate visual inoculation. This High Line corridor exemplifies current ways of seeing predicated on making the future unimaginable. "[T]he only future is intensification of the present" (Colebrook 2020, 358). The future cannot be imagined because it has already invaded the present. The future is no longer a possibility, but an actuality. And it's actually quite depressing.

Wealth Pollution

"Matter out of place," the famous definition of pollution by Mary Douglas, suggests that wealth pollution is wealth in the wrong place; wealth that is poorly, toxically, or dangerously distributed. Wealth pollution has become official policy in New York, beginning subtly in the 1980s and accelerating in the past two decades. The goal has been "to create a city that relied almost exclusively on finance, insurance, and real estate" (Checker 2020, 93). The city is sustained by the wealth leaking out of billionaires. Thus, the city is increasingly designed for leaky billionaires.

While what is considered "out of place" or "in place" from one society to the next is highly variable, wealth pollution often entails "turning everyone's [public] space into someone's profit" (Stein 2019, 14). Some might think that stacking \$200 million worth of shiny steel in the middle of the Hudson Yards (i.e., the Vessel) is an appropriate place for excess wealth. However, if the four people who jumped off the contraption to their deaths (in one year) are any indication, this matter is disturbingly

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out of place.

Often pollution is conceived as scattered litter, overflowing landfills, or spilled contaminants. Pollution is matter inconsiderately strewn about. Objects like the Vessel or Little Island would seem to represent the opposite—the coalescing of resources into a singular meticulous design. Such well-ordered places are often venerated as cultural achievements, the mastery of humanity over the unrelenting tide of entropic disintegration. On Manhattan's west side, however, the architectural flamboyance is quite precisely the leakage of wealth—i.e., wealth inconsiderately oozing out from the botoxified pores of billionaires.

The perverse inequality inherent to capitalization should be shielded from public view by the immense shame of those drowning in excessive wealth. As garbage cans for the unnecessary and useless wealth generated by unending economic growth, billionaires should be embarrassed by their filth. You'd think the rich would be too humiliated to flaunt the planet's obscene excess waste. Rather than shamed into seclusion, though, billionaires today parade around cities leaving distasteful trails of unwanted wealth in urban spaces.

While the aesthetic of this pollution varies, it usually induces despair and dejection (as evidence by the high suicide rate among those exposed to the Hudson Yards). Not only are monuments like Little Island or the Vessel much more ecologically damaging than the scattered coffee cups and candy wrappers that litter actually lived-in parts of a city, they are also psychologically devastating. As is well-documented (Pickett & Wilkinson 2010), greater inequality correlates with greater unhappiness. Those in urban centers, then, who are surrounded by the fiscal obesity of dilapidated billionaires are constantly reminded that something is amiss in their society. While one almost pities the superrich for absorbing all the world's unnecessary extra money, their reckless suicide machines and floating eco-malls remind us of their degeneracy.

This carelessness makes cities increasingly expensive, to the point that many of those less soiled with wealth are forced to leave. The High Line makes surrounding spaces uninhabitable. Samuel Stein discusses this transformation of "urban high-rises from 'machines for living in' to machines for money laundering. . . cities have seen their housing prices balloon over 50 percent in the past five years" (2019, 35). Cities are being transformed into holograms—two-dimensional illusions of cities. The reduction of the city to a backdrop for amateur photoshoots suffocates the serendipity of urban life. Researchers of complexity suggest that the confluence of diverse historical trajectories is what generates vibrancy and life. Coating cities in an epoxy of wealth kills the vagrant bacterial histories that breed a city's organic novelties.

Decolonize this Dystopia

In *L'Arrière-pays* (The Hinterlands), Yves Bonnefoy equates utopia with bountiful possibility. This suggests that dystopia is the elimination of possibility. Possibilities are imaginary (i.e., not actual). A world without possibilities is a world without imagination. This is the character of the micro-dystopia on Manhattan's west side. It is a city's gaps and cracks that incubate imagination, but the narrow linear High Line has no cracks. The High Line imposes a teleological imagination, an inability to imagine a world outside the curated path of the park's future (leading straight to the Vessel). There are no crevices (physical or metaphorical) into which the imagination can sneak, (im)possibilities can foment. This is modernity's predicament—not just the addiction to progress, but the inability to conceive of a future (or any time) outside the narrative of progress. Dystopia is a collision with the end of ideas.

Violence often accompanies the dystopian inability to think outside a narrow trajectory. Indeed, this is what Hannah Arendt's banality of evil suggests. For Arendt, what had become banal was "the failure

to think" (Butler 2011, 280). What is evil is not the normalization of mass-murder, but the normalization of unthinking. Dystopia is the suppression of imagination through normalization. This normalization induces a violent unseeing. The wealth pollution of Manhattan's west side impedes cognitive wandering. It can only be looked at. It cannot be thought about. Thinking about the toxic spatial configurations at the Hudson Yards induces self-destructive urges. Violence is wrought upon thought. In this dystopia, it hurts to think.

Dystopias common to science-fiction can be misleading. They depict jarring ruptures from the current world—the barren hellscape of *Mad Max*, the cyber-slime of *The Matrix*, the gluttony of *Wall-E*. These worlds are sufficiently distanced from present conditions that we're aware we don't reside in them. But dystopia is slow. Less common in dystopian imagery is the normalization of dystopic conditions. The inhabitants of *Mad Max* may not even know they reside in a dystopia. Their dystopia has been normalized. Advertisers are always capable of selling worse scenarios.

If we've slipped into a dystopia, how would we know? To 19th century transcendental-romantics is today's glossy ecocidal architecture dystopic? Dystopias are often written from the present to describe a future that laments how good things were in a past. And usually that past is our present. Thus, can dystopias only be placed in the non-present? Is Manhattan's west side dystopian precisely because it is not present—a plasticated post-card from the future? The Hudson Yards has exceeded the present and already resides in the end of the world (Schwartz 2022)?

One should always ask, "whose dystopia?" As many writers have pointed out, for most the world's inhabitants the world already ended with colonialism, "for the native people of the Americas, the end of the world already happened—five centuries ago" (Viveiros de Castro & Danowski 2018, 191). If utopia is considered a world without exploitation and indignity, colonialism seems precisely engineered to realize dystopia, pursuing maximal exploitation and indignity.

Glassy and Ghostly

Between the post-war industrial bustle and today's selfie-economy, the Hudson River served as a place of errantry (Glissant 1990) where city-dwellers could flee (or at least momentarily hide from) the churn of colonial capitalism. The piers were the cracks and crevices that generate new ways of seeing and thinking. Whether the voids opened up by Gordon Matta-Clark's anarchitectural displacements (see the original 1975 *Day's End*) or the gaping photography of Alvin Baltrop, those traversing such spaces are forced to think, forced to see different worlds, as opposed to the teleological imagination enforced on today's west side. In discussing the work of Baltrop, Jack Halberstam has championed architecture as an organic process (2022). Conversely, the timelessness of the Vessel makes it abiotic, unable to age, decay, or learn.

Errant spaces have increasingly been foreclosed in global cities over the past two decades. Today, there is no place to get lost. There is no place to get in trouble. As Melissa Checker documents, abandoned lots in New York's East Village during the 1980s were transformed into vibrant community gardens. "[L]ow-income New Yorkers reclaimed [lots]—as encampments, as sites of protest and of celebration, and as DIY gardens" (2020, 206). Frustratingly, this non-commercial vitality ultimately contributed to making such areas increasingly valuable, and thus unaffordable for those that vitalized them.

As can be read into the absent Pier 52 and its ghost, *Day's End*, there's always remorse for what will not exist. But it's important not to over-romanticize a past which held us as its future. The virtue of cities is that every generation gets to live them their own way. Places you like might disappear, but only dead things last forever. The inorganic future being constructed on the west side is an effort by wealth polluters to impose eternal lifelessness on the city. This architecture is desperately lacking in

“aesthetic empathy” (Rizvi 2015). As we have seen, this lack of empathy induces self-harm and feelings of despair, as though the future doesn’t want you.

Glossy and Ghastly

Crucial for normalizing luxury despair is the marketing–industrial–complex. The trick is to make the public think it wants to live in dystopia, to induce enough anxiety about the trajectory of the future that the derangement of the present seems amenable. To accomplish this in New York, wealth pollution has adopted the language of sustainability, beautification, and the “greening” of the city. Luxury colonization is conducted in the vernacular of environmental paternalism. But wealth pollution isn’t clean or beautiful, it’s simply an aesthetic that looks good in an investment portfolio. To borrow Achille Mbembe’s phrase, it’s an “aesthetics of vulgarity.”

The less living that takes place in these dystopian spaces the less their property value declines. Sadly, living is inseparable from aging and decay, but abiotic holograms don’t age (i.e., decline in property value). To this end, “The High Line’s major donors . . . wanted the park to retain an air of sophistication, so they made sure its design did not include spaces for children to play” (Checker 2020, 75). The stochastic wiggles of children could threaten the homeostasis of forever wealth.

Is the glossy sheen of today’s ecocide meant to distract us with its sparkle? Does Little Island serve as a kind of photocall roll-drop (those branded backgrounds that celebrities pose in front of when photographed on the red carpet)? There’s no future beyond the photoshoot? The ocular temporality of paparazzi cameras is compressed into a shiny surface that makes it impossible to see around capitalism’s future. Much like posing celebrities, this dystopia is designed to be looked at but not seen.

Rather than protest this wealth pollution, all we seem to do is take its picture. Contemporary cities are designed for social media posts—looks, likes, and rapid scrolling. Architecture like the Vessel captures and incarcerates the eye, preventing observers from seeing any future outside the glow of perpetual wealth accumulation. How can we look away? In Manhattan’s holographic screenscape it’s awkward to be caught looking at nothing. But there’s nothing to see here. It’s a dystopia of looking; a seamless veneer of omnidirectional glances. Exiting this end of the world requires closing the lens and seeing through the nothing. From this optical hollow, imagination can be rewired to see derailed possibilities that are out of line . . . the High Line, specifically.

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