

Architecture of Demography

on a Collective Suicide

/ By Ole Bouman

If this article were only to focus on how architecture is affected by the large demographical shifts sweeping the world today, than the article's content would grapple with the question of how architecture can respond to changing patterns of populations, and how architects can develop new typologies, new urban forms of organization, and new systems of representation to appeal to new audiences. These audiences, be they older or younger, foreign or domestic, en masse or in small groups, are all new demographic realities that impose themselves on every single aspect of culture, including architecture.

Architecture is particularly eager to respond to demographic shifts, especially when they imply new opportunities for design innovation and the expansion of commission portfolios. In the age of globalization, it can even be said that architectural practice and its discourse, just like any (intellectual) capital, shift attention exactly to regions where potential gains are the highest, either in terms of return on investment, or in terms of fame and respect. Architecture capitalizes on its demographic awareness, swiftly sensing emerging markets, adjusting its argumentative and rhetorical forces to a fresh customer base and creating new social networks for itself. In architectural research, we have seen the rapid development of all kinds of novel theories about mass housing, urban planning, and most of all about new forms and styles, catering to the appetites of a new group of clients. If growth is to be found by capitalizing on a mature market for seniors, attention is shifted to the typical typologies that accommodate the life of older people, particularly the life of wealthy elderly individuals: leisure resorts, golf courses, care centers, cultural institutions etcetera.

In those cases where demographic change is going in the opposite direction of growth – where populations are shrinking and economies are declining, we can see an opposite effect. Talent is fleeing, societies suffering from a steady brain drain, rendering architecture inert, with little energy for its own renewal.

This analysis acquires deeper significance when biologic components of the demographics of a population are combined with the historical demography of geopolitics and the emergence of the network society. There is not only a territorial dimension that governs individuals' fate, and where and within which generational pattern they live. Within similar national territories, one can also find major shifts secondary to a quest for economical opportunities. People begin to shift their geographic location from being a 'place', as the factor they are bound to, to seeking a 'node', as a location that is beneficial for them. Even if this leads to areas of concentrated density, this density having no special psychological meaning for those people congregating there, the commonality of space being based solely on a desire to seize opportunities. In sum, in contrast to previous dramatic demographical shifts, today the growth of populations does not necessarily lead to new forms of social organization or generational solidarity. Population shifts can easily remain a simple conglomeration and the physical proximity of like-minded, completely opportunistic individuals.

If we apply these observations to the field of architecture, it again is clear to what

extent the discipline is affected by demography. Instead of attempting to provide people with a sense of place, architecture focuses on providing icons to highlight the 'node'. The architecture of enclosure steps aside for the architecture of mobility. Likewise, the architecture of resorts or care centers, are no longer 'social condensers'. They do not produce collectivity. Instead, they cater to people's own individuality in an otherwise social environment.

But, as the reader will likely have expected, this article is not only about how architecture is 'affected' by demography. Architecture is by no means simply innocently responding to larger-than-life conditions. Demographic changes are based on active decisions, and as such, are subject to scrutiny. It may, for example, be true that the decline of native populations in western European countries is related to uncontrollable events such as the ageing of the post war baby boom or the introduction of the anticonception pill. Conversely, however, it is the Chinese Communist Party who has encouraged the migration of tens of millions of people to newly built cities defined by iconic architecture in their centers. It was Ariel Sharon who decided that the future of Israel can not be guaranteed if a majority of its population would be of Arab origin, thereby promoting a strong segregationist policy, containing non-Jewish people in their 'own' territories. It is the notion of individual radical Muslim clerics that Islam can only retain its long-term strength, if it stresses high fertility rates and a traditional role for the Muslim woman.

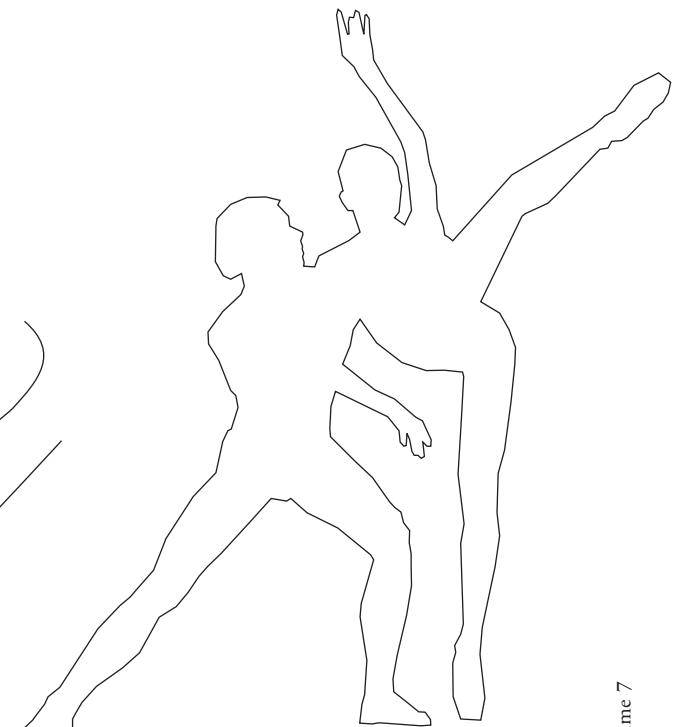
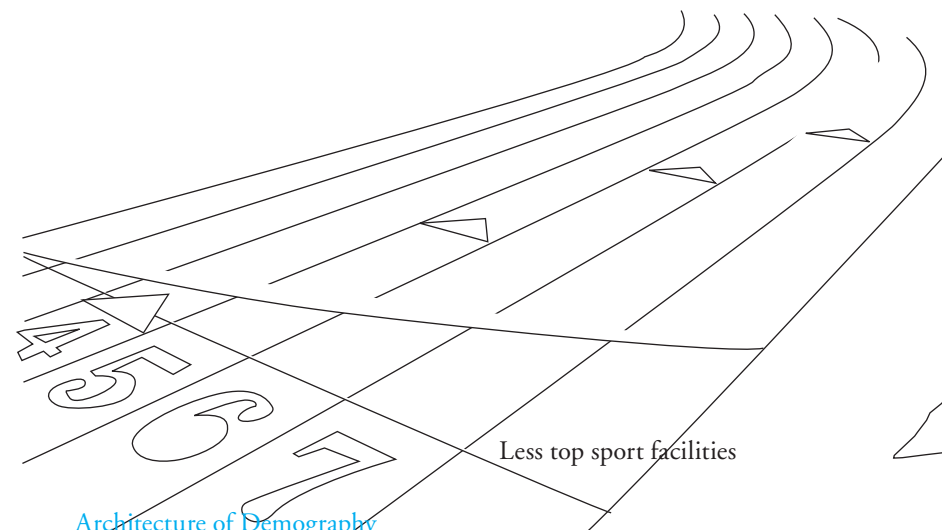
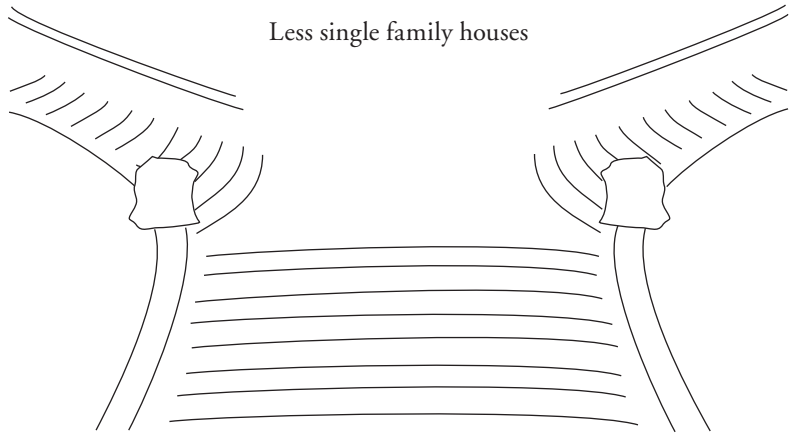
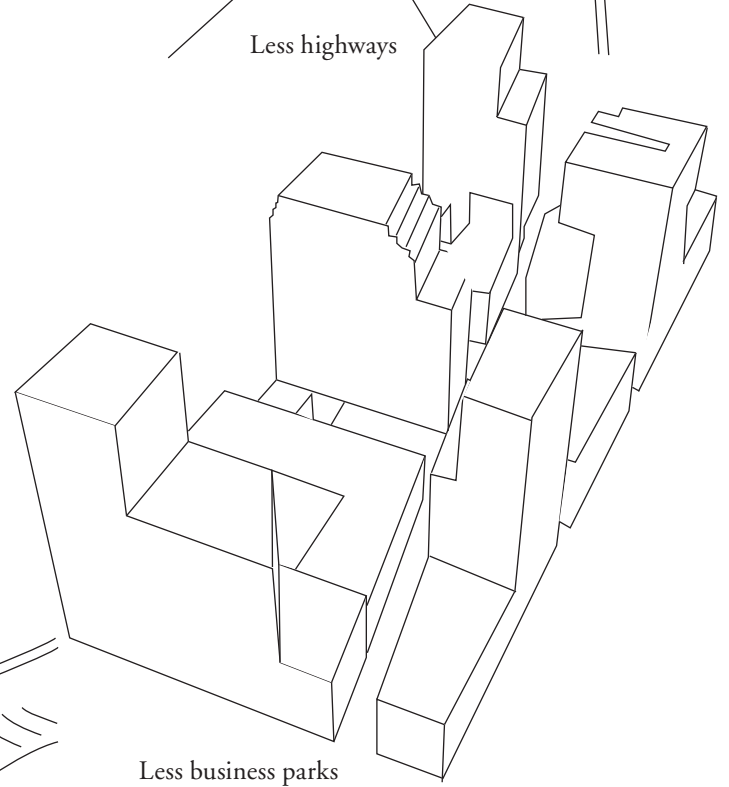
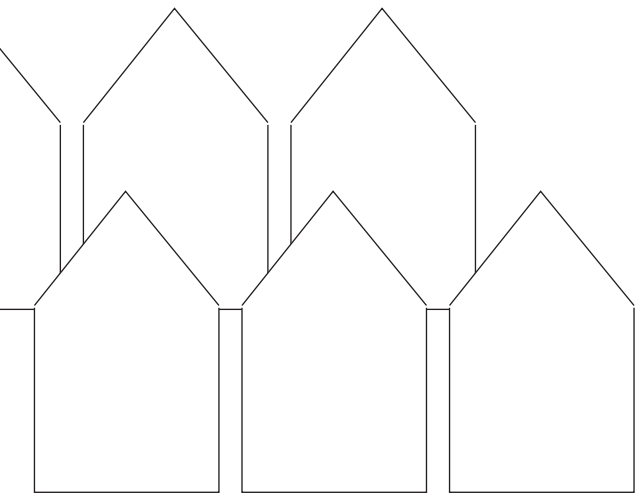
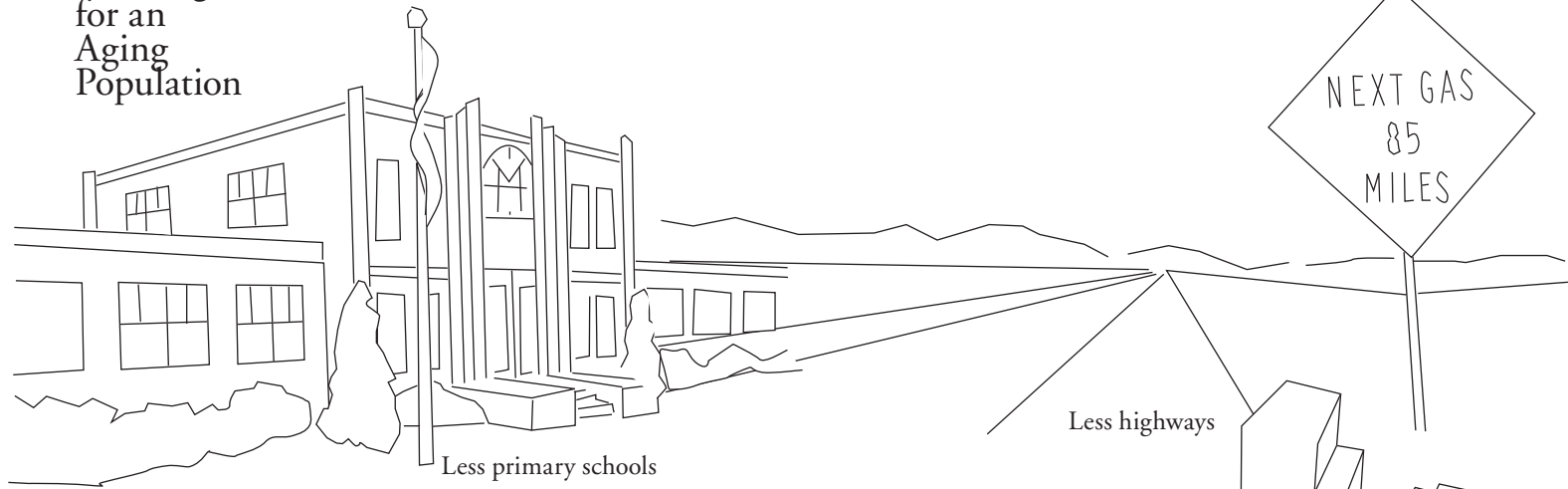
All these decisions do have a strong impact on architectural practice. Chinese authorities govern over rapid urban development and commission global architects to put their cities on the world map. Israeli architects do actively participate in the design of fences, settlements and infrastructure to ensure Israel's demographic policy. Muslims do build mosques everywhere to be used as places for gathering and symbols of their growing self-confidence or resilience. Demography means the exertion of power on a scale that not only affects architecture, but also needs the power of architecture. Civilizations are founded on this concept, and civilizations crumble underneath it.

Going back to the Western world, in this light its rather passive stance towards demography starts to become rather worrisome. As Hervé Juvin has pointed out in his *Avènement du corps*, an aging population is not only temporarily weakening the west's production base, it is pushing its whole value system towards one of profound individualism and secularism. This could be described as the ultimate sub-urbanization of an individual's life, a historical shift towards personal happiness. Today, the west can be viewed through a suburbanization of the mind, in which private life overshadows any collective vision, any plan larger than an individual's own life cycle. Under these circumstances, the adoption of any demographic policy is impossible, for no one could ever be convincing enough to mobilize forces bigger than us. For the west, it seems that demography as fact is too vast to account with, although its consequences will be bigger than anything the west is prepared to take into account.

Architecture, in these circumstances, has lost its mandate. It does not share in any sense of collective pride or solidarity; it supports no grand vision for society. According to Juvin, the west may have lost its capacity for suffering for any larger cause. It has lost its inner drive, which has always had architecture to support it, structure it and represent it. To make things worse, these individualists are living longer than ever before in history. Living as long as possible has become such an important value, that no architecture is necessary which helps to redeem the souls from a short and oblivious life. On the contrary, an architecture is needed that helps us to remain healthy for a very long time, to secure our many material assets, and to provide pleasure and leisure after retirement. With this architecture, you may be perfectly able to live your life, but it will never help you to win the next war...

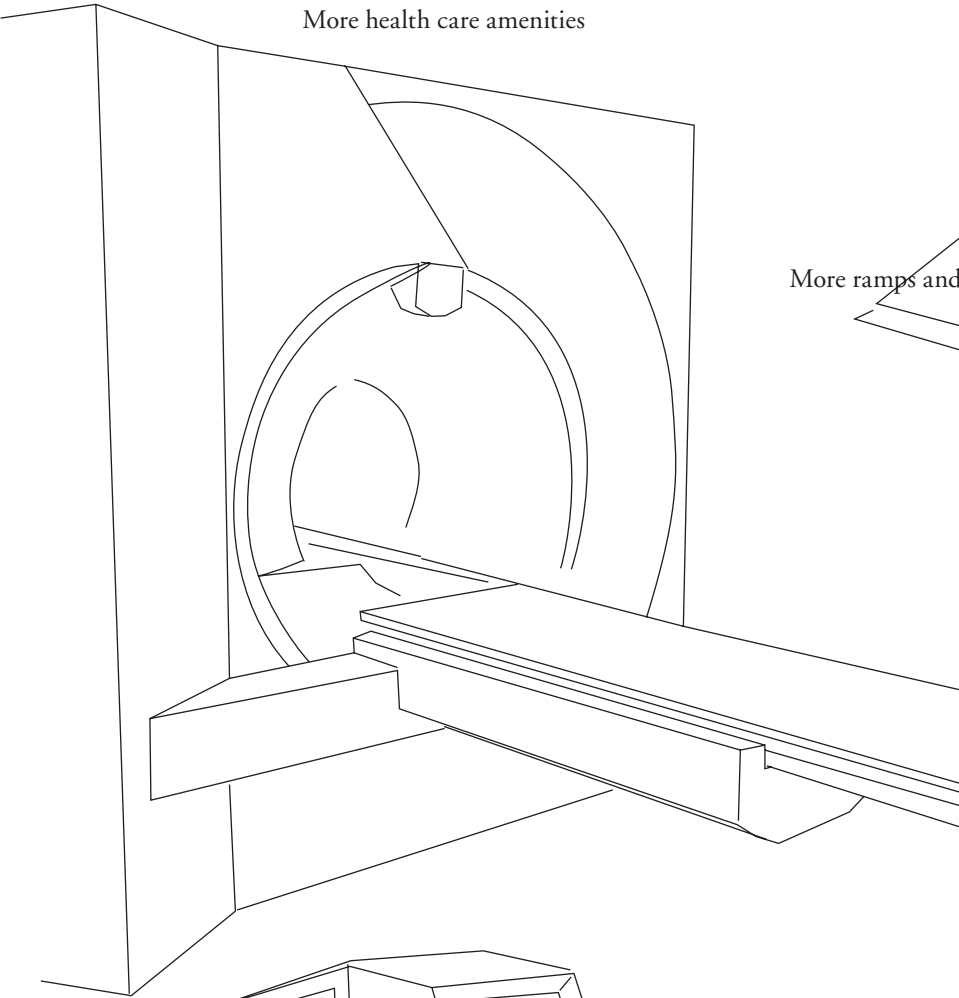
Western architecture today can be conceived of as a substantial component of a collective suicide. \

Less of This

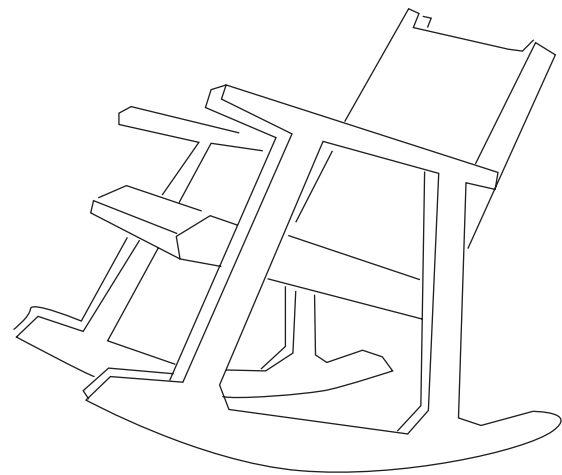
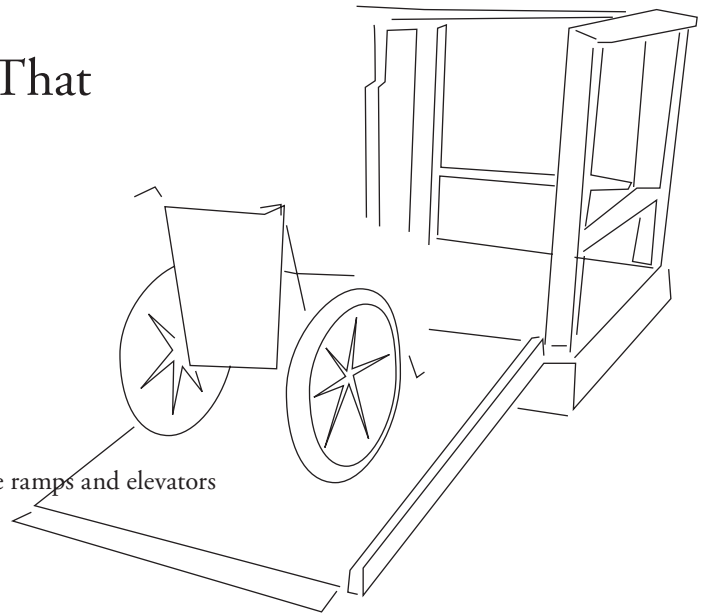


More of That

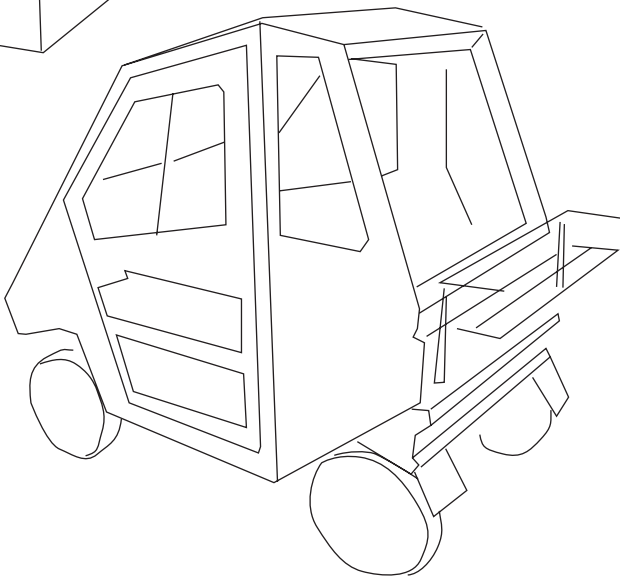
More health care amenities



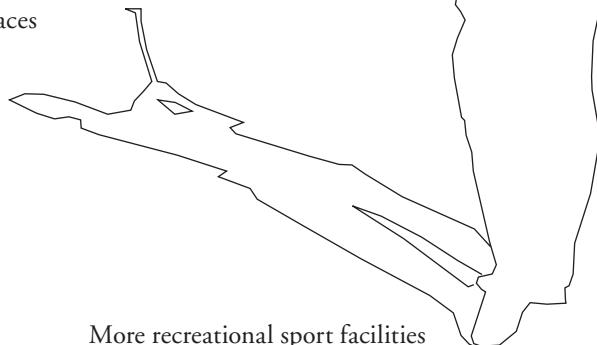
More ramps and elevators



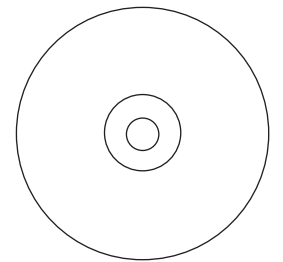
More elderly homes



More electrical vehicle parking places



More recreational sport facilities



More digital learning facilities



More elderly clubs



Party Leader at Home. Local Flemish party ‘Gemeentebelangen’ or ‘Gemebel’ (community interests) proposes the candidacy of the hundred and two year old Nathalie van Look. Nathalie intends to attack the problems that elderly people have to deal

with. This mother of four children of whom three already died, used to be a pub owner. She presents herself for the first time as a political candidate, and lives with her daughter Paula in the village of Keerbergen in Flemish Brabant.

