Towards the End of Tourism:
Global Architecture, Fantasy and Void in the Age of Withdrawal

Alberto Altés Arlandis
ETSAV School of Architecture, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, UPC, Barcelona
Spain
alberto.altes@upc.edu

Abstract

The paper presents a reflection on the role of architecture in the age of global tourism and the post-political. It also examines the future of tourism in the face of a looming decline in the availability of cheap fossil fuels as a result of the so-called 'peak oil'. Beyond the postmodern understanding of a metaphorical end of tourism based on ideas of “de-differentiation” and the coming together of tourism, work and everyday life, the paper moves toward the consideration of the possibilities for new forms of leisure and free time that could incorporate another idea of cultural exchange after the end of tourism as we know it. Instead of spectacle, the paper explores dreams and speculations about new utopian mobilities and encounters with the other beyond mere departures.

Keywords: Global Architecture, Tourism, Peak-Oil, Dissensus

“Human circulation considered as something to be consumed - tourism - is a by-product of the circulation of commodities; basically, tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made trite. The economic management of travel to different places suffices in itself to ensure those places' interchangeability. The same modernization that has deprived travel of its temporal aspect has likewise deprived it of the reality of space.”

(Debord, 1967:120)

“My father rode a camel. I drive a car. My son flies a jet airplane. His son will ride a camel.”

(Saudi saying, 2001)
Introduction

Some announced, perhaps optimistically soon, the collapse of global ‘starchitecture’ as symbolically marked by the fire that destroyed the TVCC building in Beijing in 2009. The collapse of architecture in general can only be avoided if the profession decides to go beyond a mere facilitating the arrival of the new while washing its hands regarding everything else, and engages actively and firmly in the transformation of reality in order to make it better, fairer and more habitable. The collapse of tourism as we know it is inevitable.

Tourism and Peak Oil

International tourist arrivals have been increasing at a fast rate since the introduction of the successful Boeing 707 in the early 1950s. Arrivals had steadily grown nine-fold from 100 million around the year 1965 - when tourism started becoming a mass phenomenon – to roughly 900 million in 2008, when the global financial crisis, economic recession and other uncertainty-related factors caused the first serious drop down to 850 million in 2009. (UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2011 Edition)

Although the growth came back the following year, and the prospects for 2011 indicate that there will be again an increase in the number of arrivals, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) admits that “the evolution of tourism over recent years has been irregular”. (UNWTO, 2011:11). In spite of this irregularity, and the growing international evidence (and consensus to assess the impact of such evidence as significantly dramatic) on the fact that peak-oil has either been reached already or is about to happen, the UNWTO “for the moment, has maintained its long-term forecast”. A forecast that, very optimistically, announces an even faster rate of growth that would almost double the number of arrivals from 900 million in 2010 to 1.6 billion in 2020. Ill dreams.

An increasing number of researchers and scientists as well as some organizations, less blinded by oily and monetary fantasies, are starting to question the viability, not only of such growing curves, but also of the very idea of tourism as we know it. Instead, “we may be moving beyond Peak Oil – into and era of scarce supplies of energy and much more expensive energy. This will have profound effects on all human activity, in all the arenas of economy, politics, geopolitics and society. These developments will change many of our behaviors, including of course, the nature and extent of travel and touristic activity.” (Leigh, 2011)

Since the 1970s when the original prediction of Dr. Hubbert that the US would reach Peak Oil in 1970 was proven correct, many other countries have also reached the peak, and the world’s crude production seems to have arrived to a plateau at around 85 millions of barrels per day. At the same time, the demand of crude oil keeps on growing due to the fast development of countries like China and India and a sustained high demand from already developed economies.
The leading educator and one of the visible heads of the “Post Carbon Institute”, Richard Heinberg already warned in his book “The Party’s Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies” about the consequences of peak oil for tourism, announcing a drastic reduction in scale and function of the airline industry—that can exclusively operate on the basis of a constant and massive supply of oil. Tourism, according to him, “will languish in the decades ahead”. (Heinberg, 2005:193)

Some international organizations such as the Word Travel and Tourism Council have also recognized their fears and concerns in relation to the availability of cheap fossil fuels, admitting that the long-term implications of peak oil are extremely serious. “(I)n the next few years the travel and tourism industry may find that higher fuel prices could lead to operational price increases and corresponding decreases in the number of travellers in this price-sensitive market” (Leigh, 2011)

Tourism does inherently depend on oil, mostly because of the fuel-powered means of transportation that make possible today’s astonishing mobility patterns but also because of the other comforts associated to such postmodern ‘mobilities’; food, heating, cooling, transportation of goods, etc. that result in a consumption ratio somewhere between 1 and 24 barrels per holiday per tourist.

Tourism thus, seems to be growing in a paradoxical and self-destructive spiral in spite of the evidence of a looming decline in the availability of cheap fossil fuels and energy as a result of the so-called ‘peak-oil’.

**The postmodern tourist**

"Wherever we happen to be at the moment, we cannot help knowing that we could be elsewhere, so there is less and less reason to be anywhere in particular. Spiritually at least, we are all travellers." (Bauman, 2000:13)

Tourists keep on wandering across the globe in search of manufactured, extreme or tamed, illusory experiences that allow them to escape their frustrating, alienating, or, simply, known and familiar everyday lives.

People move in search of new experiences, new environments, and new encounters. They want to know about things they did not know before, see things they had not seen before. We are all eager to find and consume the ultimate relax experience, to take the ultimate break, to escape from the high levels of stress built into our work environments and ‘regular’, average, postmodern everyday lives. Our relationship to time has changed. Distance has also changed. Space compressed. A privileged few, those inhabiting the developed north or belonging to the affluent ‘others’, can move at their will through the globe, fast, without encountering any major obstacles, as if there were no ‘natural’ borders. As if it were through the web. It can be all bought in a package.

The globalization of tourism, thanks to the development of transportation and communication technologies along with unprecedented economic growth, has brought long-distance travel down to an everyday routine for the masses in developed countries. It has also “brought the remote, the exotic and the ‘Other’ closer to home, evidenced by the way in which fashion, architecture and other features of our immediate environment increasingly reflect distant places and ages.” (Gale, 2009)

The content of the package, though, is not as fulfilling as expected. Nothing more than a mere substitute, a real that cannot be reached: “a substitute satisfaction of a genuine need – that could otherwise prove creative and deeply ethical: the need to top up the proximity of otherness with recognition of shared humanity and enrichment of its contents.” (Bauman, 2003:214)

Instead, the tourist - moored into the relative security and comfort of welfare and commodities – feels the need to escape. Tourism becoming then a pleasurable attempt at losing control under ‘controlled forms’. A search for risk in which the risk factor is reduced but absolutely necessary. “Isolated from the host environment and the local people, the mass tourist travels in guided groups and finds pleasure in inauthentic contrived attractions, gullibly enjoying ‘pseudo-events’ and disregarding the ‘real’ world outside.” (Urry, 2002:7)
A second, less excited look reveals the unwanted, even worse: the package is empty. Disorganized capitalism has made tourism less special and everyday life less mundane. As many postmodern thinkers have already put it, these are times of “de-differentiation”, when previously well-demarcated boundaries between different activities or realms are increasingly blurred or even eliminated. Obviously the ones around tourism, leisure and recreation, but also and increasingly, those between work, leisure and everyday life.

The tourist and the non-tourist become more and more similar and the lack of distinction between here and there prevails, yet the emptiness of destinations is cynically denied in order to maintain an ill consensus that preserves the privileges of enhanced mobility; the flights, the hotels, the resorts and the fake escapist illusions. Such a blurring of distinctions does not amount to more than a metaphorical ending of tourism; the dissolving of tourism’s specificity within liquid modernity is a change, a transformation of the ways in which we work, live and travel. Another trait of the postmodern condition.

The real end is however coming. Material constraints will make denial no longer possible: it will be the end of tourism as we know it. And hopefully, also, the surge of new utopian mobilities and encounters beyond mere departures.

_I ordered my horse to be brought from the stables. The servant did not understand my orders. So I went to the stables myself, saddled my horse, and mounted. In the distance I heard the sound of a trumpet, and I asked the servant what it meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me and asked: "Where is the master going?" "I don't know," I said, "just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it's the only way I can reach my goal." "So you know your goal?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, "I've just told you. Out of here--that's my goal."_ (The Departure, Kafka, 1920)

The architects and planners of illusion, fantasy and spatial voids

Meanwhile, the wheels of tourism keep on turning. Fake places are produced and marketed as spectacle. Fantasy reconstituted into wish-prompting objects, pointing out to elaborated travel experiences. Places are no longer discovered but invented. Architects and planners make theme possible by fulfilling the ill visions of those who imagine and promote the hotels, resorts, zones and other poisoned spatial cocktails that successfully provide the drug-like experiences demanded by the contemporary traveller.

Contemporary architecture is another form of production within cultural capitalism. Architectural products, almost alien to constructive, cultural and local traditions, quote on international and global markets, where values are money, image and power. Architecture today produces disengaged static objects-image. Expensive objects that materialize self-worshipping visions and power yearnings of
cunning capitalist architects; and empty immobile images that aspire to become the next milestone, built or projected “shoutings”, expression of the dumb blindness of an illiterate, oil-drunk society.

Architectural images today, by the hand of new representation and construction technologies, and thanks to the enormous accumulation of political and economic capital, forget the inherent limitations of representation and dilute the difference between what is represented and what is built, restricting, almost eliminating the possibility of interpretation. The most fantastic and impossible drawings ever imagined are literally built, suddenly appearing in the middle of the desert; complete islands are conceived, materialized and urbanized in a few months or years.

The rhetorics of void and wrapping are camouflaged underneath surfaces and skins, and articulated through fantasy, deception and magic. All at the service of “classic intentions to accumulate wealth” (Easterling, 2005:6) mobilized as part of what the Dutch architect, critic and photographer Roemer van Toorn has very accurately named “fresh conservatism”, a game of opportunistic and selective participation and withdrawal that embraces the worst kind of a-political cynicism, avoids being polemic and getting “dirty hands” and is “producing nothing but advanced entertainment”. (van Toorn, 2006)

Figure 03: Tourist resort, Cancun (México)

The age of Withdrawal

While individuals withdraw from reality in order to obtain their pleasure-fantasy dose, architects and planners withdraw from their real task by engaging in cold uncritical practices that carry out whatever client or developer demands, to then deny responsibility for the real (social, spatial, political, environmental) consequences and implications of their designs. The results are disconnected, out of context, bizarre enclaves of oblivion; lawless examples of a kind of spatial withdrawal that allows and co-produces exception states, banal fantasies and exotic lies.
Dubai City is a staggering example of such a non-place, one that has become the very icon of lavish extravaganza in tourism, and at the same time one of the world’s fastest growing cities. The United Arab Emirates are expected to have 11 million inhabitants in 2015, most of them in Dubai, although the native population represents only an astonishing 10%; a new breed of “tourists” and “slaves” make the numbers complete. By 2012, Dubai will have more than 30 skyscrapers with a height of above 300 meters and will be the home of the world’s highest building, the world’s 3 highest hotels, the world’s largest shopping centre and the biggest amount of artificial land ever constructed in the ocean. It is run much more like a business - a profit-producing urban and financial resort – than as a city: no real citizens, no social investments, only informational and economic flows.

“Abu Dhabi itself is spread over Abu Dhabi Island and the adjacent mainland, while the Saadiyat Cultural District is sited remotely, on the coast of the nearby but completely undeveloped Saadiyat Island. This adjunct to the city offers no response to city interests or demands, but is wholly directed instead toward the global cultural tourist. Premier cultural institutions, as well as leisure and retail, are embedded within the system in order to attract tourist flow, and thereby extract rent.” (Hornsby, 2009)

Similarly, in other fast growing areas of Asia and in different, scattered locations around the globe, other spatial products surge and flourish, tests and variations, tourist oriented versions of the free zone. These places take advantage of relaxed regulations and tax reductions, and their very existence as tourist enclaves depends on the availability of cheap oil and the constant flow of visitors that make up the remaining part of the population. The collapse of energy availability will transform these and similar fake-voids into ghost-like holes. The empty fantasies will suddenly turn into painfully real but equally empty remnants.

“The architecture of warfare […] is similar to our own familiar offshore real estate cocktails, with their devices for security and territorial conquest. Like any camp or zone of conflict, the next free trade zone, data haven, tax shelter, or residential golf development seeks immunity as an exceptional condition, a legal lacuna or island entitled to special sovereignty and exemption form law” (Easterling, 2009:4)
Touristscapes of Post-Oil Void and Architecture after Tourism

Architecture might have a last chance for redemption in those empty remnants. The real voids resulting from oil depletion and the abandonment of tourist enclaves and resorts will require a great deal of re-thinking and imagination. On the face of an imminent rise in energy prices and a consequent decline of mass-tourism, shouldn’t architects and planners start conceiving the recycling, retrofitting and transformation of those mono-functional tourist voids?

Can we foresee innovative ways of re-inhabiting those resorts, colonizing them with mixed used strategies that could turn them into useful enclaves? Will they become the locus of subtle interventions that will program their decay and controlled invasion through the combined powers of nature and the passing of time? Or will they be the new slow factories of building materials as they undergo literal deconstruction, dismantling, processing and recycling of their components and parts?

And in the meantime, shouldn’t spatial practices foster an upgrading of everyday life conditions that reduced the need of such empty fantasies by collaborating in the construction of a sustainable habitat at all scales?

Figure 06: Abandoned Hotel, Kolmanskop, Karas, Namibia. (2006)
New Tourism: Utopian Dreams vs. Spectacular Fantasies

“Progressive dreams, and the spectacles that give them tangible form, will look different than those conjured up by the Bush administration or the commercial directors of [...] Life, the Movie. [...] Instead, our spectacles will be participatory: dreams the public can mold and shape themselves. They will be active: spectacles that work only if people help create them. They will be open-ended: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silences to formulate answers. And they will be transparent [...] Finally, the spectacles we create will not cover over or replace reality and truth but perform and amplify it. Illusion may be a necessary part of political life, but delusion need not be. (Duncombe, 2007)

The end of cheap oil and the end of tourism-as-we-know-it will also precipitate dramatic cut downs in the production of spectacle in its travel-related forms. Fake fantasies will be finally and happily replaced with “real” dreams and shared worlds.

The reduced availability of energy will force us back into a more real understanding and experiencing of distance, allowing, thus, a shift from the current tendency to step out of reality, to various, collective, and polemical forms of reality-making.

New tourism, leisure and free-time will be, in fact, vacations from spectacle. A necessary rest away from fake illusions, exhausting mobilities and ubiquitous availability. Perhaps an increased appreciation of lived spaces and homes? Staycation? A rest from global citizenship. A break from entertainment, tourism and noise.

Warnings of a rapidly approaching peak oil have led many individuals and communities to rethinking the way they eat, move and work (downshifting, slow-food and so on) and perhaps to realizing the absurdity of an ever increasing stress culture and its faults. Improving life might be possible through a re-thinking of time. The new luxury. Travelling shorter distances, occasionally longer times.

Travelling less. Not travelling. Sharing travel times. Restructuring our lives on the basis of a reduced need to escape induced by the positive effects of a new situation. Dreams of life mobility strategies might relegate annual vacation plans. Other types of dreams, progressive, beyond the spectacle, beyond tourism, might come with the end of black gold. Let us dream again. Dream on.

“...[I]ndividuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer just of their labour, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic journey will be restored to us, along with authentic life understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.” (Debord, 1967:126)
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