Crisis Spins
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Tweaking the worn dictum, “green is the new black,” let us consider that “crisis is the new sustainability.” This is not to say that the current economic crisis has any connection with the recent surge of environmental initiatives in green technologies, recycling practices, or renewable energy. If anything, the almost-global economic downturn was on the contrary caused by totally unsustainable economic models; and certainly, the profit-maximizing recklessness of bankers that instigated this crisis in many countries is as distant as it could possibly be from any ethical aspirations to a “common good,” which most environmental practices claim.

And of course, one cannot equate the semantics of the two terms because contrary to “sustainability,” which has had generally positive connotations in popular opinion, the current uses of the term “crisis” signal the economic Armageddon experienced in many nations since 2008 and create, instead, shivers about austerity measures, soaring joblessness, daunting income disparities, violent land dispossession, and, in many urban centers, intensified politics of racism and xenophobia.

The above qualifications granted, the current widespread alarm with the economic crisis could be likened to the pervasive concerns with sustainability in the sense that both have taken a firm hold in global society’s imagination. Both the environmental crisis and the economic crisis are evoked by disparate lines of cultural production and cultural consumption, and their meanings are constantly produced and contested in the arena of popular culture. Just as concerns with environmental degradation became so popularized that they stopped being confined to green party politics or vegan activism, but they are also championed by Hollywood stars and Walmart, so too the realities of the...
economic downturn are not debated only in the US Congress or European Parliament, nor are they only cited in Marxist critiques of capitalism. As the current economic crisis has become ubiquitous, collapsing the space between global economics and personal reality, contemplations and reactions to this crisis are advanced simultaneously by grassroots activists, economists, policy makers, urban developers, and corporations alike. This is creating a culture of crisis being evoked by disparate social practices.1 We are witnessing phenomena as diverse as the collapse of many small businesses along with the market success of discount stores, or the increase of “foreclosures” of homes along with a sustained emphasis on investing in the built environment. It seems crucial to closely scrutinize the incongruity of these responses to crisis, and to highlight the ambiguities, contradictions, and antagonisms of the current culture of crisis, because it permeates the domain of architecture as well, shaping pedagogical and professional directions, sometimes insidiously.

Analogies are often risky, yet it seems that the workings of the culture of crisis can indeed be elucidated by the critical analyses that have already exposed the potentials as well as the dangers of “sustainability culture.” To consider this particular analogy, let us first draw attention to the historical trajectory of sustainability whose ironies and politics have particular resonance to the current situation.

If one thinks back to the time before the popularization of environmentalism (before such events as the “Earth Day” of 1970, or the oil crisis of 1973), one sees that the earlier 1960s environmental concerns had emerged as a form of social critique in favor of “small is beautiful” arguments, no-growth campaigns, or earth movements, all of which posed vigorous ethical challenges to dominant forms of production and consumption. By the 1970s, however, when environment came to be appropriated by the mechanisms of international development and its productivist/acumen ethic, environmentalism, as W. Sachs points out, was “sanitized of its radical content and reshaped as expert neutral knowledge” to become a “knowledge of domination.”1 We witnessed this vividly in architecture, through the profession’s valorization of expert neutral knowledge that (still) favors environmental assessment calculations and energy conservation techniques over social sustainability and ethical questions on resource access. In other realms of praxis, environmentalism was appropriated by the drive to growth and was itself channeled toward evoking a new era of development—qualified this time as “sustainable”—that nonetheless maintained an emphasis on economistic criteria.2 With the advent of sustainability in the 1990s, environmental concerns became even more in tune with dominant forms of production and consumption. Even if global society’s responsibilities to environmental degradation had come to the forefront more than ever, and even if this had constructive effects in sensitizing public opinion worldwide, environmental concerns were also appropriated by corporate culture. The result was, ironically, that what appeared to be an ethical imperative for sustainability did not necessarily challenge the dominant profit-making ethic but rather facilitated a refashioning of the status quo and its reincarnation in more palatable, “green” versions.3 This meant, at best, that environmental strategies (e.g., green patents in building materials) were subsumed by a process that turned them into profitable commodities.4 At worst, this meant that corporations attempted “to ride the wave of the sustainability culture,” as Adrian Parr pointed out, with the aim “to offset the perception of corporate excess by promoting an image of corporate responsibility.”5 This is why we came to witness appropriations of sustainability culture even by those mechanisms that are in fact considered responsible for environmental degradation. Examples of this abound, such as an oil company like BP professing a commitment to a green future even as it was proving responsible for a great ecological catastrophe such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010.6

The above account of the politics of environmental crisis and the workings of sustainability culture, brief as they may be here, can be instructive in understanding the current politics of the culture of crisis. Economic crisis too can be appropriated to serve incongruous ends. Even if it may present another opportunity for productive critique, it also runs the risk of being sanitized to bypass more radical modes of self-reflection. It too, can evidently be spun to support, rather than challenge, business as usual. The workings of the culture of crisis also threaten to skew the goals of architectural pedagogy and advance false priorities for the profession, and for this reason, it seems crucial to consider these phenomena more closely to set some markers of vigilance for the architectural profession.

Ambiguous Evocations of “Crisis”

The emergent culture of crisis has had, admittedly, a silver lining: the widespread manifestations of economic hardship instigated new forms of collective self-reflection and heartening expressions of social solidarity. The proliferation of food kitchens, for example, demonstrates a renewed sense of social responsibility. Also promising is the way in which European public opinion has become more intolerant of state corruption, just as American public opinion grew more skeptical about wholesale deregulation of business and finance. In the domain of the architectural profession, there are equally promising tendencies, as architects reconsider modes of creativity and invention in the phase of adversity.7 The physical landscapes of crisis—the downtown shops with “to let” signs, or the indefinitely postponed construction projects—bring to the foreground the ways in which the profession has been implicit in the boom that preceded the bust (Figure 1).8 What are the responsibilities of an architecture that focused more on celebrating
capital accumulation? What is the new role of architectural production in saturated built environments in need of less (not more) building? Such tough questions show that the task for architects is not simply to stick out the slump of the building industry, until the next boom. Some recognize a greater need to “think outside of the ‘iconic’ box.” Others begin imagining that there may be again room for “public” architecture or need for new media, while others are reviving a new wave of self-built projects.

Crisis may indeed have constructive possibilities such as the above, but the culture of crisis we are experiencing today is largely evoked for ends that are less critical. Today’s crisis is also being instrumentalized as a source of legitimacy. How else can one explain the way in which big corporations are using the economic crisis as an excuse for exploiting cheap labor? Then there are less discernible ironies, such as mega supermarket chains pushing poverty recipes. Such appropriations of crisis also impact the built environment. Consider the current corporate emphasis on real estate reinvestment in downtown Athens, for example. Even in the face of national default and the 50% salary slashes in that country, the perception of urban land as speculative commodity not only remains intact but even becomes normalized as an ethical imperative to “create jobs” and “rejuvenate the economy.” Or consider how a private investment fund has taken control of much of the area of the old port of Barcelona “to turn the Marina Port Vell into the Mediterranean’s prime home for superyachts.” If these are Spain’s and Greece’s ways out of crisis, then we need to ask, what kind of crisis are they trying to overcome, and what other kinds of crisis are they creating, when such gestures are likely to exacerbate the economic disequilibrium, and erode even further the view of the city as a public space for democratic processes?

This “lack of imagination” in proposed solutions to economic crisis is what has been termed “false choice urbanism” elsewhere, which, as Tom Slater explains, thrives on the idea that more and more economic growth (represented by the mirage of reinvestment) is the answer to a crisis that was created by such greed, and thus deflects attention away from the systemic failures and policy blunders that create, widen, and reinforce urban inequalities.

The emphasis on land investment as a way out of crisis of course conceals some shrewd tactics of land concentration. We now see appropriations of land as commodity for local and international speculative capital everywhere—and not only in South American or Asian countries, which have long been notorious for immense disparities in land ownership and wealth: from Eastern European countries, where there is “a new elite group of speculators/investors ... capturing vast tracts of land”; to France, where ever-greater areas of agricultural land is lost to urban growth; to Spain, where tourist prototypes are “grabbing vast areas of cultivable land and water resources”; all the way to Germany and Austria, where there are also unprecedented rates of land concentration. For agricultural land, such practices of “land grabbing” mean a hit to local communities’ potential to produce food and an erosion of the capacity of small farmers to respond to the economic crisis; for urban land, this ultimately increases the attacks on the city’s public space, exacerbates sociospatial inequalities in wealth and opportunity, and eliminates resistances and multiplicity of voices. This one-track-minded emphasis on more and more economic growth poses the question: Is not crisis evoked less to instigate collective self-reflection, and more to generate economic value?

No Crisis in Business as Usual
The greatest irony in the widespread and incongruous evocations of crisis is that crisis is even evoked by modes of practice that created it. Consider how initially, at the onset of this economic downturn, deregulation of business and finance were widely recognized as the main causes of current woes. Some even proclaimed an end to neoliberalism, as having proven to fail again in its proud promise to bring an optimal distribution of recourses. And yet, what followed within the span of just a handful of years was not a demise of the free market orthodoxy but its refashioning, so that Europe is today witnessing a large-scale transfer of power from the public to the private sphere, with the selling of land and infrastructure assets to corporations, without much debate on long-term consequences either in terms of public safety or in terms of the public interest. Similarly, we see widespread emphasis on reinvestment and gentrification as the answer to the economic crisis, even though it was “this kind of thinking that produced the largest credit bubble ever seen.”

The parallels to sustainability culture are striking. The dominant responses to the current crisis do not point to a substantial rethinking, but rather a refashioning of the status quo in more palatable terms. Let us bring these paradoxes closer to architecture and urban life. Should not the burst of the real estate bubble also challenge the trends of overinvestment in the built environment, and should not investors (and their architects) radically rethink their zeal on attracting mobile capital to cities and regions through waterfront developments, the gentrification of cities, and the Disneyfication of landscapes? What do we see instead? In southern Europe (where almost every corner of seafront was until recently packaged as a hot tourist development commodity and was selling for outlandish real estate prices) and where “the right to the city” was, pretty much a developers’ right to the city, as David Harvey identified it, we don’t see a substantial reevaluation but rather a refashioning of dominant trends. One of the most advertised government gestures in Cyprus has been the agreement it signed with the British government to allow construction development on British military-base land on the island; this is accompanied by new
legislation to attract foreign capital and large-scale tourist projects, and the loosening of restrictions for developers; all these are promoted as governments’ efforts to overcome the crisis—even if the urban landscapes are filled with signs stating with distress, “for sale or rent.” Is this not an appropriation of crisis that disguises the commitment to business as usual? The only difference now is that the hijacking of this (economic) crisis is happening at record speed.

Crisis and the Tyrannies of Emergency
As crisis is co-opted by investment capital and state apparatuses, it can also be used to advance new “tyrannies of emergency.” We can see this in the way crisis is evoked in order to call for the public’s tolerance of emergency measures, expressed in economic austerity policies or various forms of securitization that end up eroding citizens’ rights. Tyrannies of emergency are codified in space, too. States in fiscal crisis that are hungry for foreign investments and that sell off land for mining, or golf courses, luxury hotels, or marinas, do so with “fast-track regimes” and limited regulations or controls, and even with government subsidies. In Greece, the bypassing of regulations even happened with archaeologically and environmentally protected lands, which are sold to foreign investors for a ludicrously low price. In Italy, policies have allowed “the rush to privatize the common public lands still available,” and (quite interestingly for this essay) this even happened with “green grabs”—that is, “land grabbing” by big investment companies under the pretext of energy production.

Might the tactics emerging in the name of economic crisis become another “knowledge of domination” that would justify managerial interventions in local economies, the lives of citizens, or built and natural environments? As this seems to already be happening, the urgent question would be, what are the responsibilities of the architecture profession as well as education, under such a daunting trend? What is architecture’s response when land ownership is dispossessed and reconfigured? Or when the planning of resorts on fragile coasts are even rendered with an ethical aura of helping a country out of crisis? What should architectural educators’ response be when architectural education is skewed toward instrumental training as a way to maximize students’ job-finding potential, when past experience shows that the bypassing of historical, theoretical, and forms of humanities training brings severe, if apparently hidden, losses in terms of shaping critical professionals? Our disciplinary terrain has often undergone self-reflection, turning crisis into critique, and opportunities for reform and change. The above warnings about the ways in which social critiques can be instrumentalized or sanitized, spun or hijacked, is not to deny the productive possibilities of this crisis, but rather to draw attention to the dangers in derailing them.

Author Biography
Panayiota Pyla is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Architecture at the University of Cyprus. She previously served on the architecture faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She holds a PhD in the History and Theory of Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Among her works are the edited volume, Landscapes of Development: The Impact of Modernization Discourses on the Physical Environment of the Eastern Mediterranean (Harvard University Aga Khan Program, 2013); the Guest Editor for Design and Culture of the special issue, “Sustainability’s Prehistories” (2012); and her article “Hassan Fathy Revisited,” which received the Journal of Architectural Education best article award (2007).

Notes
2 For an analysis of “sustainability culture” see Adrian Parr, Hijacking Sustainability (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
7 Parr, Hijacking Sustainability (note 2), 4.
8 The ironies behind BP’s marketing tactics have notably been exposed by Parr in Hijacking Sustainability (note 2), even before that 2010 incident.
11 Charley, “The Shadow of Economic History” (note 10), 357.
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19 For very interesting studies, especially for the case of Athens, see the proceedings of the conference “Crisis-Scapes” in Athens in Crisis Scapes: Athens and Beyond, http://issuu.com/crisis-scape/docs/crisisscapesconferencebookweb. <AQ: Provide year of publication for note 19.>


21 Slater, “Unraveling False Choice Urbanism” (note 17), 136.


27 Ibid.

28 Franco and Borras, “Land Concentration” (note 18), 20.