

Book Review: Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture by Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs

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*Buildings are often assumed to have “life”. But what of the “death” of buildings? What of the decay, deterioration, and destruction to which they are inevitably subject? In **Buildings Must Die**, **Stephen Cairns** and **Jane M. Jacobs** aim to examine spalling concrete and creeping rust, and pick through the rubble of earthquake-shattered churches, imploded housing projects, and demolished Brutalist office buildings. **Richard Jones** finds this a strikingly original and provocative book which deserves a wide readership across the social sciences.*



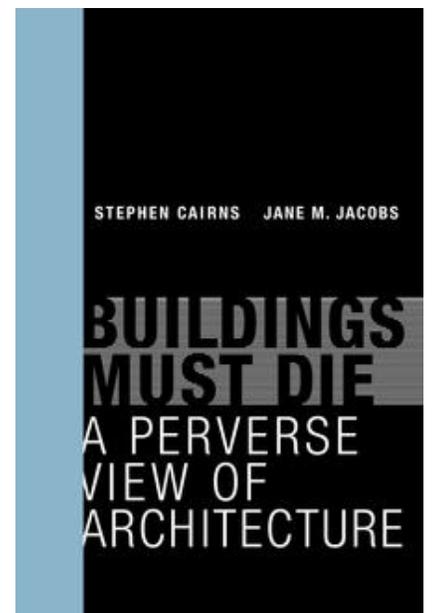
Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture. Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs. MIT Press. May 2014.

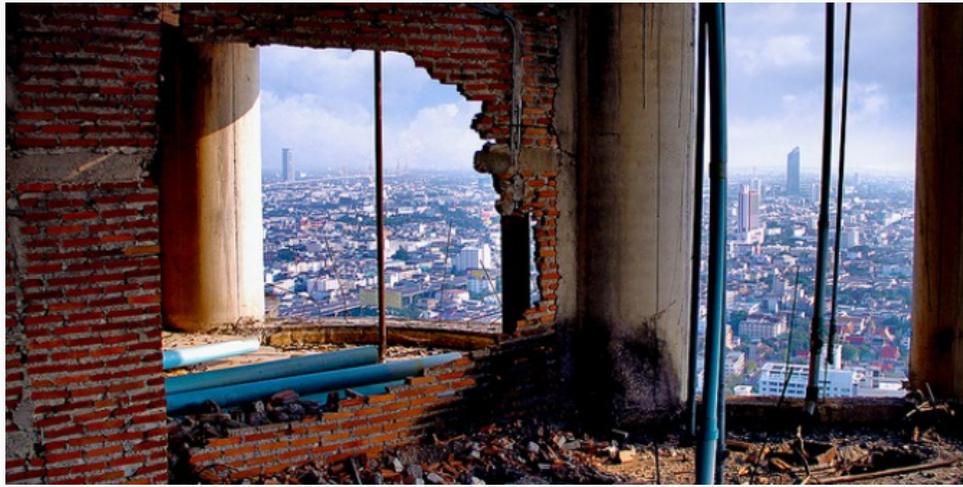
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Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs have written an original and provocative book, offering a ‘perverse’ thesis that a major strand of architecture’s agency and the discipline’s capacity to shape civilisation can be explored through the ‘death’ of buildings. The book does this by examining a range of routine and totemic building “deaths”: ‘spectacular demolitions and collapses as well as more minor instances of water staining, spalling, and mouldering. We dwell on these deforming and devaluing conditions not to say “we told you so” or this ends too soon”, but to allow architecture to better be with the inevitable fate of its creations’. (p. 5)

Anthropomorphic metaphors are far from uncommon in architecture, and can be traced back at least as far as Vitruvius likening parts of the building to human form some 2000 years ago. Cairns and Jacobs upend this, and make a convincing case in explaining how important the ‘death’ of buildings is, and in how reluctant most architectural authors are to continue the bodily frame of reference in exploring this idea.

Architects from at least Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier have attributed ‘spirit’ to architecture, and from John Ruskin onwards the idea has existed that buildings possessed ‘memory’. This book explains how buildings are inorganic, and yet within the discipline, are often said to exist like actual organisms. ‘Architecture deploys a range of metaphorical conventions to invest buildings with life. Building structures are referred to as “sinews” and “bones”; walls are likened to biological “membranes” or “skins” that may even “breathe”; windows and doors are understood as sensory apertures that “see”, “smell”, and “hear”...the conception of spaces that facilitate movement – corridors, staircases, vestibules as “circulation” is so engrained in architectural thinking that its derivation from human physiology, and not the circulation of bodily fluids, is long forgotten’ (p.11).





47th floor in the abandoned skyscraper Sathorn Unique Building, Bangkok. Credit: [Just One Way Ticket](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

One of several literary references (opening up one of the most striking ideas contained within this book) is the reference made to Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame*, which explains how an archdeacon:

'gazed at the gigantic edifice for some time in silence, then extending his right hand, with a sigh, towards the printed book which lay open on the table, and his left towards Notre-Dame, and turning a sad glance from the book to the church – "Alas, this will kill that". The idea here is that architecture was being superseded in its role as the "great handwriting of the human race" and as the "great book of humanity" in the face of actual books being able to be produced more quickly and more inexpensively than ever before after the advent of the Gutenberg press. This phenomena was especially pronounced in the case of cathedrals, which had long enjoyed a particular place in the popular imagination with their vaulting spaces, stained-glass and sheer presence. Umberto Eco went so far as to compare medieval cathedrals as 'a sort of permanent and unchangeable TV program that was supposed to tell people everything indispensable for their everyday lives as well as for their eternal salvation' (p.33).

This idea – that architecture's currency as an expressive and communicative medium was devalued after the advent of the printing press – renders the metaphor less about the death of a single building and more about the demise of architecture itself. In the same way that the section on architectural suicide is approached through an example drawn from *Atlas Shrugged* – of Howard Roark preferring to see his buildings blasted out of existence than missed or misunderstood – this literary turn is interesting, but the underlying ideas go far beyond the metaphors deployed.

Some of the strongest analysis in embedding the 'decay' of buildings into wider economic and cultural difficulties comes in the fifth chapter, and considers Bangkok at the end of the 1990s. Following the Asian financial crisis, by 1998 '1,000 businesses were closing each month in Bangkok, and the national economy contracted by 10 percent. An estimated 2-3million people lost their jobs, many of whom returned to the rural towns and villages of their origin, leaving Bangkok depopulated. The city fabric itself was transformed' (p.90). The authors go on to discuss the "cadaver scape" that was formed when construction stopped on the speculative buildings projects across the city. What makes this chapter so compelling isn't just that economic and social dynamics of a financial crash are used to disaggregate theories of the waste and value of the built-environment, but that the changes brought about by the financial crisis are used to explore architecture's sense of self. This relationship is reflexive, and an important and powerful driver of urban growth – particularly in the way in which architects and their master plans interact with the people and the agencies in the public and private sectors which pay of them.

Other chapters – including ‘Decay’, ‘Obsolescence’, ‘Disaster’, ‘Demolition’, and ‘Ecological Horizons’ – which serves as a concluding chapter) draw on diverse sources and examples across wide geographic and chronological spreads – and the work of many leading contemporary architects – to explore the depth of architectural notions of creation, durability, and sense of value. These explorations reconsider architecture’s creative purpose and impact on communities around the world, and specifically how architectural ‘death’ feeds into wider urban beginnings. The book is bound between tactile covers, and adopts a visually-striking page layout. However accurately these features express the character of architectural theory, academic readers – particularly from other disciplines – may find them off-putting. This is still a strikingly original and provocative book which deserves a wide readership across the social sciences.

Richard Jones is writing a PhD thesis on the economic, financial, and public-policy decisions made around the supply of gas and water in major British cities at the turn of the twentieth century. In 2011, he co-founded the Urban History Workshop in the Cambridge University Faculty of History. [Read more reviews by Richard.](#)

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