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Businessweek + CityLab

THE CITIES ISSUE

9 SMART WAYS TO MAKE CITIES BETTER

Cities have problems. Here are some solutions.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAY DANIEL WRIGHT

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A principle of urban life is that cities don't stay fixed. Managing these complex municipal machines is a never-ending battle against entropy, the elements, human error and the unpredictable exigencies of life on Earth in 2023. But public officials, community leaders and experts in various fields can be remarkably creative at patching up, adapting and (occasionally) planning ahead. An innovation may take the form of a novel technology, a new policy approach or an architectural trend. It might be crafted for a local problem and might not hold forever. But cities everywhere are taking on pressing issues, and there's much to learn from them.

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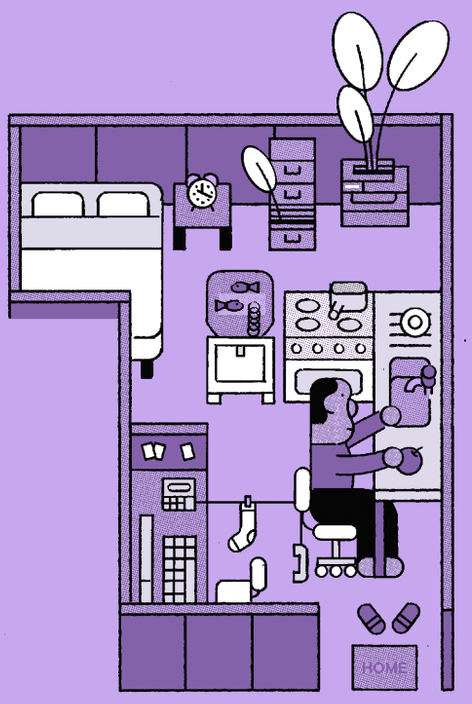
01. CONVERT OFFICES ON THE CHEAP

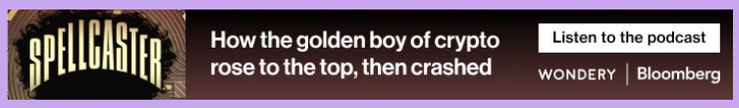
An office suite about 20 miles north of San Francisco may hint at a revolution in American real estate. Earlier this year, the owner of the 1,000-square-foot space in a commercial building near downtown San Rafael listed the space for sale as an apartment. Such conversions have been getting a lot of attention in recent years, but this one distinguished itself by forgoing niceties like walls, listing the space as-is—industrial carpeting and lighting included. Some people found this depressing. ("Here's another look at your bosses' office, I mean your bedroom," quipped a TikTok account called @Zillowtastrophes.) But the apartment also looked like a screaming bargain: the asking price was $480,000, making it one of a handful of homes in the city of 60,000 listed for less than $500,000.



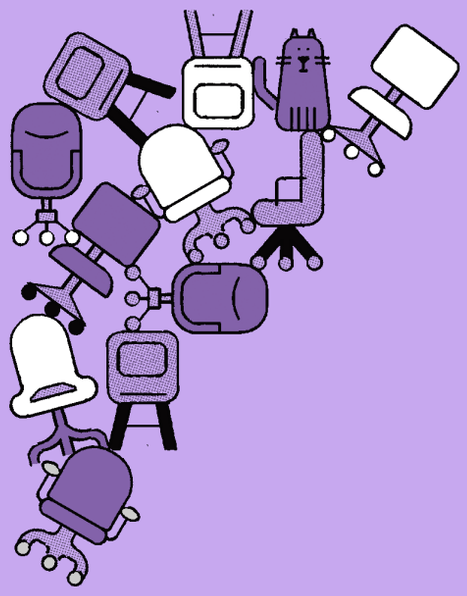
No one has bought the unit yet, but the listing is an indication that some people are thinking about what to do with the US's glut of office space in a radically different way. What if these conversions looked less like traditional apartments and more like cubicle farms with beds?

Most everyone agrees the US has too much office space. The idea of conversion is even more tantalizing once you consider that the cities with the biggest gluts are also the ones facing particularly dire housing shortages. But the cost and complication of converting an office into a usable residential space are real barriers, driving up the rents a developer would need to charge to break even.

Ben Miller, chief executive officer of property company Fundrise, offers as an example an office building that trades for $100 per square foot—a rock-bottom price for commercial real estate in top-tier office markets. Typically, the developer would spend money to wipe out existing floor plans and reconfigure the space into traditional apartments with kitchens and windows and bedroom walls. Miller figures he'd have to rent a 1,000-square-foot unit for $4,000 a month to justify his investment with a 6% return. This makes conversions impractical in all but a few high-cost cities.



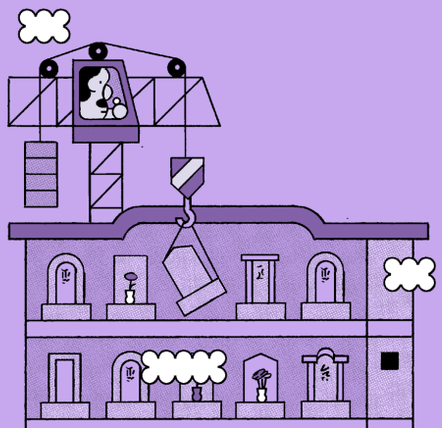
For contrast, Miller pictures a bare-bones conversion for a 3,000-square-foot suite with a mostly open-concept plan: The pantry becomes the kitchen. The conference room becomes a bedroom, as do two enclosed managerial offices. Tenants use communal bathrooms and showers. (Better still would be to find an unloved office tower with a ground-floor health club.) Miller says he could possibly generate an 8% return renting 1,000-foot "office lofts" for $1,500 a month, and he's hunting for properties where the idea could work.



Before proceeding with a proposal such as this, a developer would first have to find a local government willing to play along. The property in San Rafael has always been zoned for flexible use, according to the listing agent, Jeanette Cling Narlock. There are some new amenities, including a washer-dryer and shower, but the carpet is also still in place in case the buyer would prefer to use it as an office.

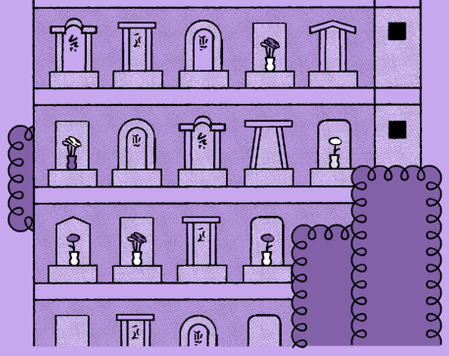
Then there's the question of whether you could persuade people to live in places that retain the distinctive feel of pre-pandemic office life. An optimist could point to a previous generation of conversions, such as the Lower Manhattan lofts where artists began squatting in the 1960s. Eventually the shortcomings of living in an abandoned sweatshop became fashion statements. If tastemakers decide that fluorescent lighting is today's exposed brick and drafty casement windows, maybe there's hope for downtowns, after all. — *Patrick Clark*

02. BUILD CEMETERIES AS SKYSCRAPERS



In an industrial area of Hong Kong, a sleek high-rise with a wavy facade and lush plants dangling from each floor stands out among the aging factories and warehouses. The tower is Hong Kong's first private vertical columbarium—a storage facility for cremated human remains. At 12 stories, it's also the tallest columbarium in the city.

The Shan Sum Institute of Eternal Life and Culture, which opened in June, stands as a reflection of how hard it is to secure real estate in one of the world's most expensive markets, whether you're alive or not. Most Hong Kong residents choose cremation, and



the government operates a dozen public facilities to store urns. But construction can't keep up with demand: Getting a spot in a government-run site can take months. So city authorities turned to the private sector in 2017, granting licenses to companies to open private columbaria.

Shan Group, the firm that owns Shan Sum and operates two other urn storage projects in Hong Kong, was one of the first applicants. The company paid the government HK$1.5 billion ($192 million) to convert its own land to the new use and spent an additional HK$1 billion developing the property into a high-rise columbarium.

"From a sustainability point of view, we have no choice but to densify more," says Ulrich Kirchhoff, the architect whose firm designed the Shan Sum tower. It's an efficient use of land to stack facilities such as columbaria or water treatment plants, says Kirchhoff, who moved to Hong Kong from Berlin two decades ago to focus on high-density environments.

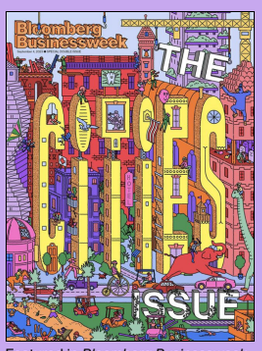


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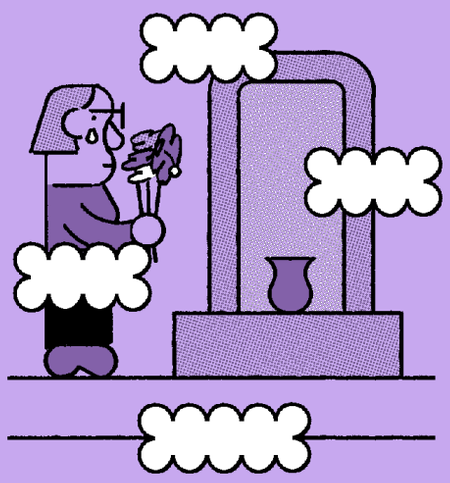
Illustration: Jim Stoten

Designed to evoke the area's mountainous landscape as well as the hillside cemeteries seen elsewhere in Hong Kong, the high-rise columbarium stands out not just with its modern style (other facilities go with a more traditional Chinese style), but also with its unusual height. The 148-foot-tall tower looks like a high-end apartment building, lined with balconies that allow family members and visitors to enjoy views of a nearby park. It could eventually hold 23,000 urns, with the standard compartments measuring about 10 inches tall and 13 inches wide.



A slot in a public columbarium has been relatively inexpensive, but private facilities, which offer more ornate environments, can be pricey. A single urn space in Lung Shan Temple, another private columbarium, can cost more than HK$2 million. At Shan Sun's tower, a two-person compartment is priced from HK$418,000 to HK$598,000, while a space for 10 people sells for almost HK$4 million.

For investors, the columbarium market has a particular draw. The buildings generate high revenue per square foot, because the price for a storage niche the size of a shoe box is about one-tenth that of a two-bedroom apartment in the city. Turbulence in the property market also has made home development less profitable in recent years, with some builders cutting prices as interest-rate hikes deter buyers.

Unlike other providers with Buddhist or Taoist influences, Shan Sum offers space for people of various religions, as well as for secular clients, according to Pan Tong, project director at Shan Group. The company was founded by his mother, Margaret Zee, who made her fortune with a jewelry business before expanding into real estate.

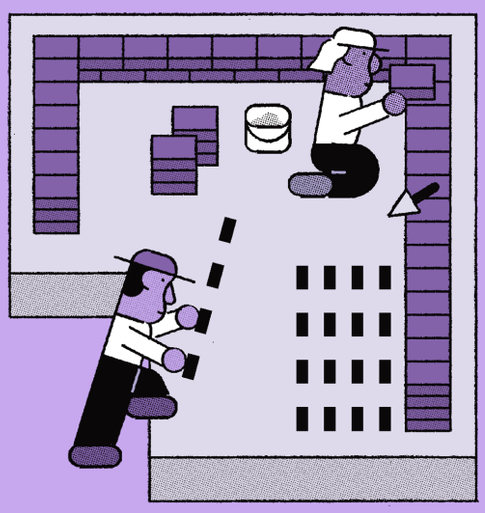
"The industry is changing fast," says Tong. "If we don't adapt, we will be phased out quickly." —*Shawna Kwan*

03. DESIGN WITH LOCAL MATERIALS

Q&A with Diébédo Francis Kéré

The architect Diébédo Francis Kéré says he sees a shift taking place both at home in his native Burkina Faso and in Berlin, where he keeps an architecture studio. In Africa, clients with means who've often looked to the West for inspiration are hiring him to design private homes using clay brick, a sustainable material that's a specialty for Kéré. Today clients in Europe are asking Kéré, the 2022 winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, sometimes referred to as the field's Nobel Prize, to lend his insights on projects of all kinds. "Private people are ready to invest in using local materials to create comfort," he says. "That is a twist."

Do people who ask you to design a project know what the sustainable building options are? Or are they looking to you for guidance?

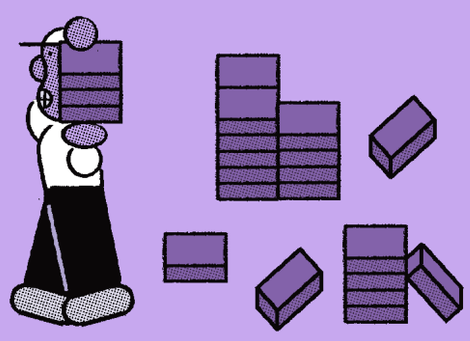


Sometimes they come to us with an idea. They will say, "We want to create a building using natural materials." They will say, "We want natural comfort and also well-being. Can you imagine applying clay bricks or techniques here?" Some will come with a broader idea about sustainability, and we will start to discuss. That is not just in Africa but in the Western world.

For former US military barracks in Mannheim, Germany, you proposed building a park that includes a bridge made of wood. Why wood?

It was a competition, and I decided to create a park through the site, as a way of giving back to the community. Through this green corridor, people can leave the city and reach a nearby forest, a very old forest. But to do so, we have to cross a highway. So I added a bridge. I designed at the beginning a huge bridge out of concrete, creating a landscape on top for people to gather.

We developed the master plan for this area, but there was not majority support for the bridge, so we switched to wood. Now there's a big majority to get it done, because it echoes with the city's own policy, to do things according to the requirements of sustainable architecture.



In recent years the US and especially Europe have come to embrace mass timber as a construction material. Do you see that as an encouraging sign?

Yes, if the material is abundant in place, if it exists in the place, if you think about growing the next trees as a resource. If you start to transport it from far away, it's a reason to be critical about it. Sometimes I talk about material opportunism. Think about planting, not just extracting. Think about healing the source of your materials.

It should not become the way that we cause another burden by pushing to get wood from too far away to mimic what is sustainable. If there is a place where brick can be produced in a cheaper way than wood, then you should use brick. I am not against concrete, if you can use concrete in a very smart way. We cannot do everything with one single material. *—Interview by Kriston Capps. Edited for clarity and length.*

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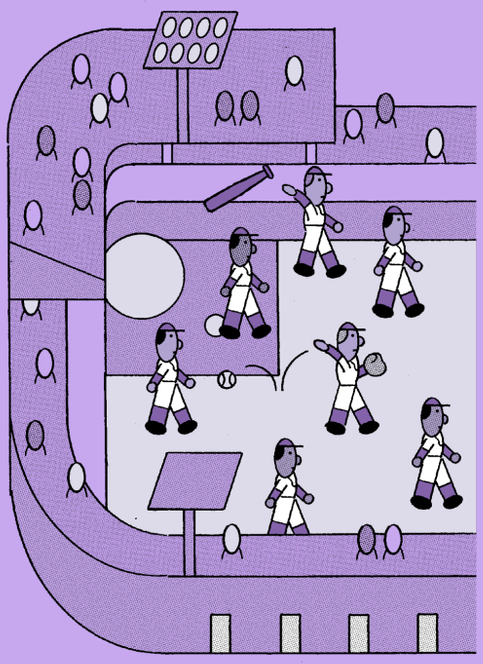
04. DON’T PLAY THE STADIUM GAME

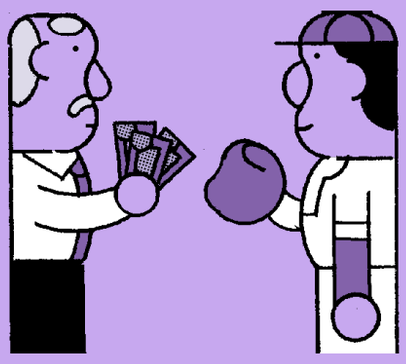


When it comes to negotiations between cities and professional sports teams over stadium financing, the teams have a big advantage. Generally the process starts with a request for subsidies or tax breaks for a new stadium development. The owner talks up the team’s deep connection with its hometown while simultaneously hinting—or explicitly threatening—that the team will move to another town if it doesn’t get what it wants. Faced with that choice, local governments tend to pay up.

One notable exception is Oakland, California, which has lost more teams in recent years than any other US city over a comparable period. The NBA’s Golden State Warriors left for San Francisco in 2019. The NFL’s Raiders (who’d abandoned the city once before) moved to Las Vegas in 2020. And in May, MLB’s Athletics surprised officials by announcing that they’d follow the Raiders there, after being promised $380 million in public funding toward the construction of a new domed stadium on the Strip.

It’s not as if Oakland didn’t want its teams. It created a special infrastructure financing district and promised financial incentives worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Still, if there were ever a test case for what losing sports teams does to a city, Oakland would be it.

On the face of it, Oakland is going through a rough patch. In 2022, 3.3 million visitors spent $590 million in the city, down from the 3.9 million who spent $700 million in 2018, the last full year the Warriors played in Oakland. Annual consumer spending has dropped roughly 1% since January 2020. Oakland’s office vacancy rate was 19% in the fourth quarter of 2022, up from 7% in the same period in 2019. Losing a third sports team would seem to be yet another blow. “If the A’s leave, you’re going to see a huge loss in collective spirit,” says Chris Dobbins, co-founder of the advocacy group Save Oakland Sports.



Of course, other factors weigh on the local economy, notably a slowdown in the tech industry. And though the pro sports exodus might upset sports fans, economists say it’s almost certainly not causing Oakland significant financial harm. “There’s no evidence that any city that’s lost a professional sports team any time over the last 40 years suffered economically,” says Brad Humphreys, a professor of economics at West Virginia University. “Oakland might be better off without them.”

Even setting aside the cost of the stadium subsidies, Humphreys says, a departure can have positive effects. Residential property values near arenas in Seattle and Charlotte increased after those cities lost their NBA teams, which Humphreys attributes to the easing of “congestion externalities” such as traffic and noise pollution. He also notes that cities that get new teams often increase their police budgets to deal with the crowds.

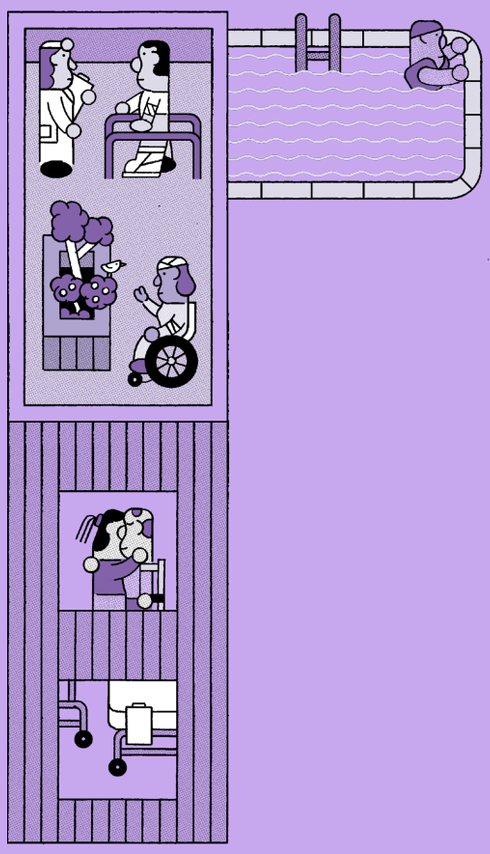
Still, the trauma of losing a team is real, pressuring officials to strike generous deals, says Paul Oyer, professor of economics at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business. Of course, he adds, there’s a way that local governments could help out one another. “If the cities all banded together and said, ‘We’re not gonna fund pro stadiums,’ then Oakland wouldn’t be in the situation," he says. —*Maxwell Adler*

05. CREATE A SANCTUARY FROM WAR

To explain the vision behind Unbroken, a project to create a national rehabilitation center in the Ukrainian city of Lviv, Anton Kolomietsev tells a story about the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein. After losing his right arm during World War I

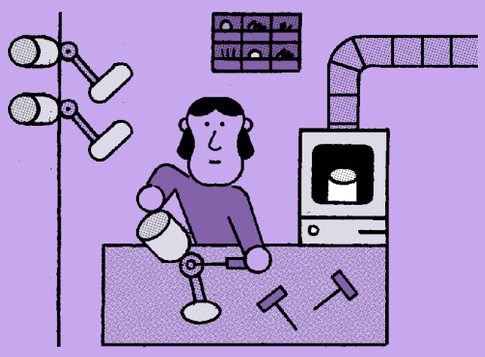
Wittgenstein. After losing his right arm during World War I, Wittgenstein asked the Ukrainian composer Sergiy Bortkiewicz for a special concerto that would require only the use of his left hand. “This phenomenal music opened up a new world of possibilities,” says Kolomietsev, who is Lviv’s chief architect. “We need the tragedy that happened to give people the opportunity to fulfill themselves to their fullest.”

Lviv’s location has spared it from the worst of the Russian invasion. This has transformed the city of about 720,000 near the Polish border, famed for the graceful architecture of its Unesco-listed historic center, into a humanitarian hub for displaced people from across Ukraine.



At the center of this vision is Unbroken, a district envisioned as a kind of nexus of national healing for a country experiencing appalling levels of violence. Plans mix rehabilitation facilities with a prosthetics manufacturing center and public housing, connected to the heart of the city by a tram line and cycle tracks. Its planners hope Unbroken can serve as a model for postwar Ukraine to use urban design to tackle the enormous challenges of recovery.

Parts of the complex are already operating: A national rehabilitation center, set up within the buildings of a former Soviet polyclinic, opened in June and has treated more than 11,000 patients so far. The center includes a swimming pool and occupational therapy facilities; a planned roof terrace will offer more secluded training for people relearning how to navigate the outdoors. Oleksandr Kobzarev of the Unbroken Foundation, the initiative’s charitable arm, estimates that 30,000 veterans will return to Lviv. “We want to create a network to give them the opportunity to get help: psychological, legal, educational or with employment,” he says. Soon to come is a surgical building and facilities for the manufacturing of prostheses that will allow Ukrainian patients to stay in the country throughout the process of fitting and replacing prosthetic limbs that are primarily made elsewhere.



The Unbroken campus will also include nearby public housing, a residential type that became uncommon in Ukraine after Soviet-era apartments were transferred to tenants following independence. The architecture firm Drozdov & Partners has designed mid-rise apartment buildings laid out in a parklike setting that will be capable of housing 700 people around the rehab center. With units allocated to former patients, these homes will be linked to the rest of Lviv via tram, bus lane and multiuse path, allowing people with limited mobility barrier-free access to the city center.

Instead of creating an isolated refuge for the nation’s wounded, the facilities that make up Unbroken will be closely connected to the greater community. Lviv hopes to be a kind of demonstration project for rapid post-conflict design. “What we have done in an extremely short time, cities in the east and the south will have to do even quicker,” says Kolomietsev. “They won’t have the time to reinvent the wheel.” *—Taras Kaidan*

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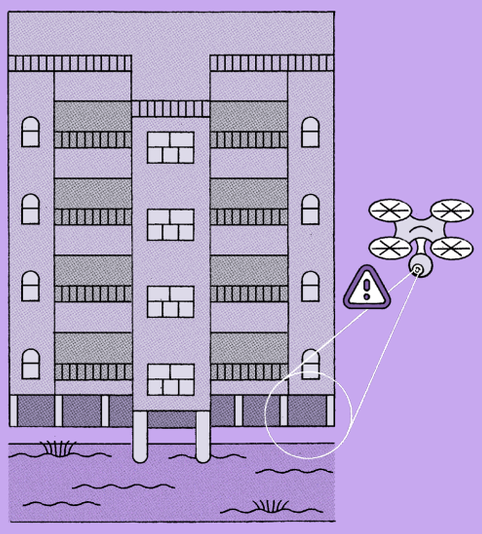
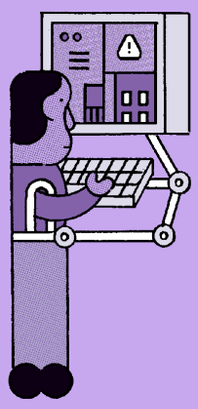
06. USE AI TO KEEP BUILDINGS FROM COLLAPSING



The risk of building collapse—sudden, catastrophic and seemingly impossible to predict—was put on horrifying display by a series of earthquakes in Syria and Turkey in February. Entire districts in towns and cities across those nations were leveled, with more than 160,000 buildings in Turkey alone destroyed or severely damaged. Older structures fell alongside new ones that were built to stringent modern engineering standards. Building collapses are a particular risk in poorer countries, because of lax scrutiny, municipal corruption and informal construction economies. But rich countries aren't immune, either, as the deadly failure of a Miami high-rise in 2021 shows.

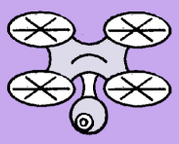
A new generation of building inspection technology is emerging that promises to detect dangerous defects before disaster strikes. It relies on drones to shoot video at angles impossible for humans to capture and on software that scours the footage for incipient cracks or other damage. Startups such as DroneDeploy and Qii. AI are focusing on the large commercial and transportation infrastructure markets; a company called SmartRoof AI flies drones over residential neighborhoods and runs software analysis on the footage to check roof integrity.

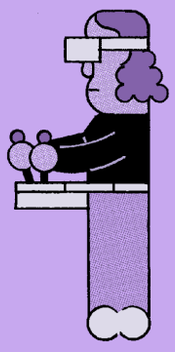


After a trio of firefighters died falling through a dilapidated roof in Baltimore last year, the city enlisted an artificial intelligence system, devised by Carnegie Mellon University, to study local aerial images and housing inspection notes, then flag vacant structures at the highest risk of collapse. Even feeding existing security camera footage through the right AI model can work, says Ian Kelk, a global product manager at Clarifai, a computer vision platform.

The catch with these approaches is that waiting for cracks to appear can be akin to getting a diagnosis of late-stage cancer, says Barry LePatner, a real estate lawyer and construction expert. A better approach, he says, is to analyze data and forecast potential failures before signs of trouble appear—something that's possible if proper materials and techniques are used, building performance is monitored and digital records are maintained.

In the UK, the Building Safety Act 2022 was a step toward achieving the necessary information infrastructure: It calls for storage of digital records for the lifetime of a building—a "golden thread" of data from a project's inception.





Barriers to using some of these new solutions remain, including a lack of expertise among architects and engineers, LePatner says. Poverty-wracked megacities such as Lagos, Nigeria, where hundreds of mostly residential structures have fallen in recent decades, may also struggle with the high cost of the collapse-prevention technology until it's widely used enough to bring down prices.

February's earthquakes also served as a reminder that corruption is one problem technology can't easily solve. "The big issue in Turkey was those buildings were supposed to be built with much higher standards, but contractors just lied and pocketed the money," says Raja Ghawi, a partner at investment firm Era Ventures. "AI is only as good as the data you feed it." *—Patrick Sisson*

07. RECYCLE WATER IN APARTMENT BUILDINGS

Every day, almost 40 billion gallons of water flow through US homes, schools, offices and gardens. Utilities treat all the water in specialized facilities to make it safe to drink, then deliver it across miles of leak-prone pipes. Most of the water is then flushed down the toilet or drain, rather than ending up in a drinking glass.

An increasingly popular alternative is a process known as on-site nonpotable reuse, which has offices, hotels and apartment buildings storing used water and recycling it for a range of purposes other than drinking. "In the midst of going from one drought to the next, why are we using fresh water from national parks to flush the toilets of tech employees?" asks Aaron Tartakovsky, chief executive officer and co-founder of Epic Cleantec, a startup in San Francisco that designs and operates on-site wastewater recycling systems.

On a recent Wednesday, Tartakovsky lifted the corrugated lid of a hatch in the floor of a janitor's closet deep in the bowels of a luxury tower in San Francisco's SoMa neighborhood. Below bubbled an 8,000-gallon tank full of water from showers, laundry machines and dishwashers from the 40 floors of residential units above. The slightly acrid-smelling liquid, known as greywater, was awaiting its journey through a membrane bioreactor, which uses microorganisms to chew through organic solids, then forces the liquid through an ultrafiltration membrane and disinfects it with ultraviolet light and chlorine. The result is clear, clean, odor-free water that's safe to use in toilets and irrigation. (Technically, Tartakovsky says, it would even be fine to drink, but more on that later.)

Utilities and some buildings have been recycling wastewater for decades, in some cases for potable uses. Epic Cleantec is trying to get more developers and building owners to recycle by combining existing technology with an easy user experience. Its main product, the OneWater, looks like a giant commercial refrigerator with a touchpad screen. Tartakovsky calls it the "iPod of water reuse systems."

The building in SoMa, which uses a precursor to the OneWater, saves about 2.5 million gallons of water per year that would otherwise have to be purchased.

In 2015, San Francisco passed an ordinance requiring new buildings larger than 250,000 square feet to have on-site, nonpotable water recycling. The mandate was expanded to buildings bigger than 100,000 square feet in 2021. Today, at least 66 of these decentralized systems have permits or are under development across the city.

Epic Cleantec, one of a handful of businesses in the market, is looking to expand to other cities and to persuade other places to write codes similar to San Francisco's. Since 2016, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Minnesota and Washington have adopted policies to encourage hyperlocal reuse, though none have legislation as extensive as that in San Francisco.

The most logical targets for these startups are developers of new construction. Tartakovsky says it's also possible to retrofit existing buildings. Another logical expansion of the process is to start recycling water for people to actually drink, but that would come with added regulatory hurdles and could make residents or office workers uneasy. For now, it's much more cost-effective to source drinking water from centralized systems. And Tartakovsky says he sees the on-site approach taking off for all types of uses: "The train has left the station." *—Laura Bliss*

08. MAKE CITIES MORE ABSORBENT

Q&A with Kotchakorn Voraakhom

Kotchakorn Voraakhom is the founder and CEO of Landprocess, a landscape architecture company in Bangkok whose designs incorporate nature-inspired parks and gardens that absorb and direct rain. As flood-prone coastal nations such as her native Thailand peer into a much wetter future, Voraakhom says softer, more porous materials are needed in addition to concrete dams and channels.

One of your signature projects is Chulalongkorn University Centenary Park in Bangkok, a project completed in 2017. The garden is tilted 3 degrees, sending water into a retention pond where visitors can aerate the water riding stationary bicycles. Where did the idea come from?

It's a concept, known as the monkey's cheek, from the previous king, Bhumibol Adulyadej. Monkeys store their food within their cheeks. We can mimic nature to store the water as the monkey stores food, finding pockets of water to hold and release when it's needed. In such a swampy, wetland city like Bangkok, you let the water be part of the design.

Every development should think about runoff on its own. Bangkok is so dense. We're a city of 11 million people, and it's such a small city. We have to find innovation and collaboration in building with the urban fabric. How can the buildings and the development become more able to incorporate water, like a rainwater tank, retention pond or even a garden on a public street?

What is the Porous City Network?

When I was a student at Harvard's Graduate School of Design in the early 2000s, I was questioning what I could do as a landscape architect: Do I have to serve only clients who have money to pay a designer? In the majority of the world, people don't use architects —they just build themselves. When I came back home to Thailand, I saw how people in coastal areas were moving their houses already.

We created the Porous City Network in 2017 to work with those communities, to compromise with governments so they're not displaced, or at least get displaced with integrity. In Hat Lek, a fishing community built on stilts in the ocean that was having conflicts with the government, we came up with a solution to create a mangrove barrier so they could stay in their homes. It wasn't about innovative design. It was about creating the right direction for bigger-picture developments.

Is landscape architecture as a profession shifting to respond to climate change?

I think I'm shifting it, and I want to shift the narrative about the developing world and about delta cities. Climate change should be a leverage point that we use to create change. What are we going to do with a city that's been built and a density that's still increasing? There is so much work on urban infrastructure that we did wrong. We need to work with land and shift it so we can survive —and make everything beautiful. *—Interview by Laura Bliss. Edited for clarity and length.*

09. APPOINT A BIKE MAYOR

Amsterdam has about 880,000 residents and more than 1 million bicycles. Bikes account for 60% of trips in the center, and the city has 850 kilometers (530 miles) of dedicated bike lanes, equivalent to the distance from Cleveland to Atlanta. But ask Melanie van der Horst how Amsterdam might improve life for its citizens, and she's got a simple answer: more bikes.

Van der Horst is a deputy mayor who oversees a 40-person team focused on cycling policies and helps direct hundreds of other municipal workers who police reckless riders, redesign streets and build parking areas to accommodate the city's fastest-growing mode of transport. And while she doesn't want more bikes without corresponding infrastructure to allow citizens to ride and park with ease, she says the solution is to get people out of the driver's seat and into the saddle. "Amsterdam is not very big, and it's very dense," she says. "We need to make more space, and you make space with more bikes and less cars."

She has helped reshape transport policies to consider the needs of pedestrians and cyclists before those of drivers. "If we don't act more radically, then we will just have traffic jams everywhere, all the time, and it will be a lot less safe," she says. "It's a new way of thinking, where the bicycle always has a very important role."

Since taking the job last summer, she has cut the number of car lanes while creating more low-speed and cycle-only streets. In the past four years, the city has increased the price of parking and removed spaces for more than 5,000 cars—making way for playgrounds, charging points, recycling hubs and spots for more than 10,000 bicycles. There's a new underground garage for 7,000 bikes near the central railway station. And to control the chaos, dozens of people patrol the streets, removing hundreds of bikes each week that are parked illegally or left for too long.

Speed limits in most of the center have been reduced from 50km per hour (31 mph) to 30km. Van der Horst's colleagues have redesigned some bike crossings to increase capacity, reprogrammed certain traffic signals to give bikes a head start and lengthened signal intervals to give cyclists priority—a bike-centric approach that's inspired change from Montreal to Melbourne. Her team can also redesign troublesome intersections; after a fatal crash this spring, the city rebuilt an entire junction in less than three months.

Van der Horst says the rise of e-bikes poses a new challenge, frightening older or more vulnerable cyclists and discouraging them from biking. After years of improvement, injury and death rates have begun to creep up, according to the local arm of the national cycling union, which is calling for more stringent speed limits, even for bikes, with increased focus on education and enforcement. Those concerns have placed e-bikes at the top of Van der Horst's agenda. "The next problem we have," she says, are

"very, very fast bicycles." —*Willem Marx*

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