

# Learning from Adjectival Urbanisms: The Pluralistic Urbanism

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## NO THEORETICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF CITIES SINCE 1978?

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## PROLIFERATION OF ADJECTIVAL URBANISMS

Some of the recent adjectival urbanisms include, Bicycle Urbanism (c. 2013), Tactical Urbanism (c. 2012), Combinatory Urbanism (2011), Fast-Forward Urbanism (2011), Post-Traumatic Urbanism (2010), Radical Urbanism (2009), Stereoscopic Urbanism (2009), Ecological Urbanism (2008), Parametric Urbanism (2008), Networked Urbanism (2008), Sustainable Urbanism (2007), Trans-Border Urbanism (2006), Recombinant Urbanism (2005), Micro Urbanism (2005), Paid Urbanism (2004), Dialectical Urbanism (2002), Splintering Urbanism (2001), Green Urbanism (2000), Everyday Urbanism (1999), Landscape Urbanism (1997), New Urbanism (1993), etc. Most of these urbanisms are manifested through publications that carry their titles and often are promulgated through academic or professional conferences and exhibitions. Journals such as *Magazine on Urbanism (MONU)* that dedicate its content on diverse topics on urbanism—which started in 2004—is another evidence of this phenomenon. See Figure 2. for an expanded view.

The extent of this proliferation has reached a point where Jonathan Barnett a Professor at University of Pennsylvania went on to write, *A Short Guide to 60 of*

*the Newest Urbanisms: And there could be more*, in *Planning*, for the American Planning Association Journal in 2011. There is even a blog entry by Yuri Artibise titled *101 Urbanisms* dedicated to 101 adjectival urbanisms. He states, “amazingly, even this lengthy list is by no means exhaustive” and “it is only a small sample” (Artibise 2010).

Barnett’s article presents this recent emerging phenomenon by listing the sixty newest urbanisms and categorizing them into six categories—Systems Urbanisms, Green Urbanisms, Traditional Urbanisms, Community Urbanisms, Sociopolitical Urbanisms, and Headline Urbanisms—and briefly describes what they are about. Barnett concludes the article by asking, “Why so many urbanisms?” and states “If every discernable characteristic of cities is given its own category, the process negates itself” and that “most urbanisms are actually about preserving the environment, traditional city design, urban systems, community participation, or the politics of urban change. But these categories are not mutually exclusive” (Barnett 2011, 21). Nevertheless, this view tends to coalesce and homogenize the vastly diverse urbanisms into one univocal overlapping form of urbanism. How can we read this phenomenon in a different way that reveal the fundamental nature of the contemporary urbanism, which should be about celebrating pluralism engendered by rich collisions of diversity?

### **IN SEARCH OF VALUE IN ADJECTIVAL URBANISMS: A FLAVOR OF THE MONTH?**

One way to achieve this reading is to first understand the forces and circumstances that engender such proliferations of adjectives that qualify, describe, and modify the noun, “urbanism.” Following this explication of the circumstances on how these signifier adjectives operate in adding specificity to the signified term, “urbanism,” it can additionally reveal the value and necessity of such adjectives in enriching the ongoing urbanism discourses that is about how cities perform, and how it should perform. Moreover, by understanding how the proliferation of adjectival urbanisms emerge, and how they operate, it could further provide clues for architects in writing new theories for cities in a period of what Koolhaas refers as “huge tsunami of unknown urban substance” (Koolhaas 2007, 320).

Koolhaas urges architects to at least find new terminologies if we are not able to produce new theory. This recent proliferation of adjectival urbanism can be seen as a manifestation of this thinking and endeavor, an attempt to reach out to the demands of the rapidly changing society. Koolhaas further advocates for new words in describing the city,

“If we cannot produce new theory—and it is undeniably not an easy task—we could at least find new words. I noticed how Saskia Sassen introduced the word ‘citiness’ and how that word, even if it is pretty ungainly, has immediately been picked up. This show there is a huge eagerness and a huge need for new words.” (Koolhaas 2007, 320)

### **UNDERSTANDING ADJECTIVAL URBANISMS THROUGH LANDSCAPE URBANISM’S EMERGENCE AND OPERATIONS**

Discerning the sixty newest urbanisms that Barnett mentioned and other emerging urbanisms, it is obvious that not all are equal in its seriousness, depth nor its theoretical robustness. This paper specifically examines Landscape Urbanism as a case study that emerged in the late 1990s, which has significantly been debated, matured, and evolved in the North American context over the last decade or



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Figure 1. *The widely televised demolition sequence of Pruitt-Igoe, widely seen as the end of Modernism. This can be understood as a form of ‘creative destruction.’* by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 1972. (Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pruitt-igoe\\_collapse-series.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pruitt-igoe_collapse-series.jpg)).

so. The explication of Landscape Urbanism’s genealogy, its engendering socio-economic structure, how it evolved, and how it operates—specifically as a form of adjectival urbanism—will reveal some of the core values and roles adjectival urbanism holds that can assist architects to theorize, thus equipping them with new conceptual tools to rigorously understand the city.

### CRITIQUING THE PREDECESSOR AND EXISTING CONDITIONS

Firstly, the idea of deploying “landscape” as an adjective to modify urbanism that critique preceding conceptual framework on cities, and offering an alternative is what Landscape Urbanism is essentially about. Charles Waldheim, a leading proponent of the term states,

“landscape urbanism offers an implicit critique of architecture and urban design’s inability to offer coherent, competent, and convincing explanations of contemporary urban conditions. In this context, the discourse surrounding landscape urbanism can be read as a disciplinary realignment in which landscape supplants architecture’s historical role as the basic building block of urban design.” (Waldheim 2006, 37)

The bottom part of Figure 2 illustrates the critiquing genealogy of Landscape Urbanism within the U.S. context mainly through the establishment of academic programs as an indicator of a discourse taking hold. It elucidates how Landscape Urbanism was a critique of Urban Design and New Urbanism; how New Urbanism was a critique of Urban Design and suburban sprawl; how Urban Design critiqued Urban Planning that was preoccupied with sociology, which lost contact with its spatial dimensions; how Urban Planning was a critique of Landscape Architecture of the time that stepped aside from its original civic aspirations; and how Landscape Architecture mainly grew out of a strong critique and reaction to the death inducing polluted industrial cities of the time. This demonstrates that new ideas are generated out of critical observations of the existing conditions that aspire for better alternatives.

‘Fast-Forward Urbanism’ is another example of adjectives being manifested as a form of critique. Dana Cuff and Roger Sherman critiques current modes of urbanisms and suggest an alternative with a new adjective, ‘Fast-Forward,’ they state,

“Fast-Forward Urbanism was born out of frustration that—in response to the resistance encountered by the top-down to bottom-up norms and practices—architects has, to a large extent, abandoned the city. Not only is its intelligentsia fond of seeing urbanism as extradisciplinary, but the city’s principal players—be they developers or policy-makers—have come to see architecture as irrelevant.” (Cuff and Sherman 2011, 15)

Many urbanism-modifying adjectives are fundamentally about this critique, a process of explication that foster new ideas to emerge. The adjective’s role is to clearly differentiate the new theory and its position from its preceding ideas on cities. This process of critiquing and replacing the preceding theory is an essential part of producing new innovative ideas. This process further draws affinity to Joseph Schumpeter’s notion of “creative destruction,” a cyclical process in capitalism where constant new innovations replace, and outdate the existing. In a similar vein, David Harvey states, “how could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before? You simply cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, as a whole line of modernist thinkers from Goethe to Mao have noted” (Harvey 1989, 16). See Figure 1. This reinforces the

postulation that these adjectives in urbanisms are not only a critique but also manifestations of innovations that are similar to the creative destruction process. This then suggests that the recent proliferation of adjectival urbanism is also an indication of acceleration of innovations in urban theories. Or these series of collective innovations can be seen as them amounting up to a rupture that could potentially transfigure into a paradigm shift in urban thinking, potentially even giving birth to a new discipline.

### **EVOLVING URBANISM, EVOLVING ADJECTIVES: BEING ZEITGEIST**

Secondly, following the notion that modifying adjectives are indication of existing urbanism being critiqued, it is also an evidence of evolving and expanding theories in urbanism. For example, Waldheim notes that Ecological Urbanism is a form of critique and evolution of Landscape Urbanism that satisfy the needs of the contemporary city. He states, Ecological Urbanism is,

“simultaneously a critique of and a continuation by other terms of the discourse around landscape urbanism....as a critique of the landscape urbanist discourse, ecological urbanism promises to render that decade old discourse more specific to ecological, economic, and social conditions of the contemporary city.” (Waldheim 2010, 22)

Landscape Urbanism perhaps has reached its maturity, when we observe Dana Cuff and Roger Sherman starting to critique it and suggest evolutionary alternatives with a new adjective, they state,

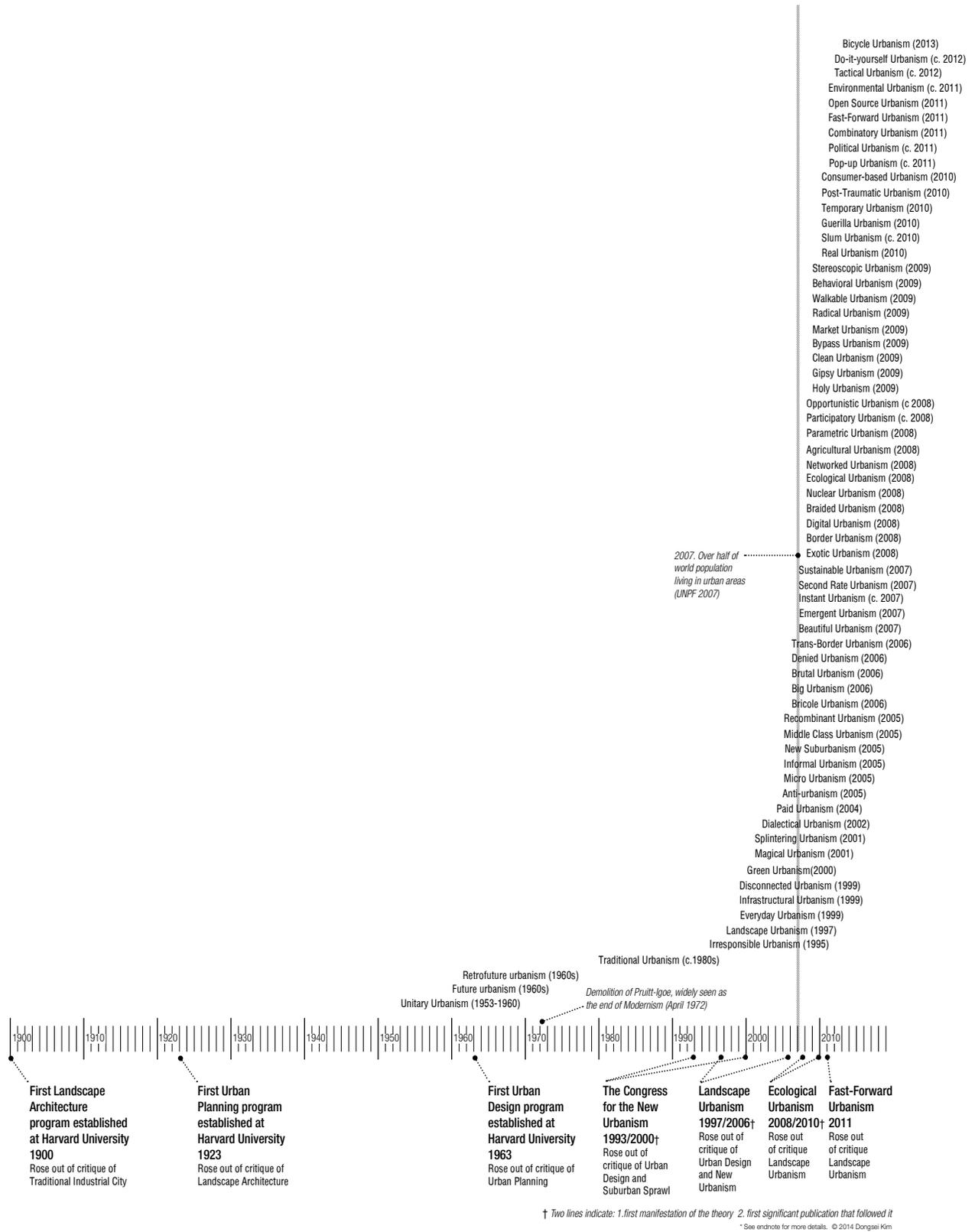
“landscape urbanism, thus far, has been more successful at providing solutions to landscape rather than urban problems, making it perhaps not the strongest foundation for new urban theory. Nevertheless, we suggest this volume [*Fast-Forward Urbanism*] represents the next evolutionary state of landscape urbanism, one that embeds architecture into its theory and practice. That adaptation fundamentally alters landscape urbanism, while retaining some of its core elements.” (Cuff and Sherman 2011, 24)

Nevertheless, there are others like Barnett who view Landscape Urbanism and Ecological Urbanism as more of a territorial claim. He states, “like Landscape Urbanism, it is a territorial claim, but made on behalf of all the disciplines taught at the Harvard School of Design” (Barnett 2011, 20). Leon Neyfakh also writes, “but to skeptics, Waldheim and his cohort are merely riding to fame and fortune on a skillfully promoted brand name, environmentalist rhetoric, and a lot of obscure theory” (Neyfakh 2011).

As previously noted, Landscape Urbanism according to Waldheim specifically emerged as an “implicit critique of architecture and urban design.” However, this process of critiquing is also reinforced, informed and engendered by zeitgeist, the spirit of the time in which the theory relates to, operates, and evolves with time. Landscape Urbanism’s relative success and relevancy is an attestation to this fact.

James Corner, another proponent of landscape urbanism comments on the timeliness, and relevancy and how it has proven itself to be highly successful in strategically addressing sites of capital abandonment, especially in North America. Corner elucidates,

“The reappearance of landscape in the larger cultural imagination is due, in part to the remarkable rise of environmentalism and a global ecological awareness, to the growth of tourism and the associated needs of regions



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Figure 2. Emergence of Adjectival Urbanism and Genealogy of Critiquing Landscape Urbanism by author, 2014.

to retain a sense of unique identity, and to the impacts upon rural areas by massive urban growth.” (Corner 2006, 23)

He further suggests that Landscape Urbanism embodies this aspiration and the necessity of “landscape” and “city (urbanism)” amalgamating into a new framework to be able to understand the contemporary city, he states,

“The more traditional ways in which we speak about landscape and cities have been conditioned through the nineteenth-century lens of difference and opposition. In this view, cities are seen to be busy with the technology of high density building, transportation, infrastructure, and revenue-producing development, the undesirable effects of which include congestion, pollution, and various forms of social stress; where as landscape, in the form of parks, greenways, street trees, esplanades, and gardens, is generally seen to provide both salve and respite from the deleterious effects of urbanization.” (Corner 2006, 24)

Waldheim supports Corner’s view on this timeliness by stating, “over the past decade the subject of landscape has enjoyed a renaissance within design culture” (Waldheim 2008, 6). He further explains “...landscape has a new found relevance, offering a multivalent and manifold medium for the making of urban form, and in particular, in the context of complex natural environments, post-industrial sites, and public infrastructure” (Waldheim 2008, 15).

Kenneth Frampton also puts forward a strong case for landscape in playing a critical role in mediating the negative impacts of the increasing rapid flows and fluctuations of capitalism, which Landscape Urbanism’s early theoretical foundation is built upon. Frampton states, “I would submit that instead we need to conceive of a remedial landscape that is capable of playing a critical and compensatory role in relation to the ongoing, destructive commodification of the man-made world.” He further asserts that, “landscaped form as the fundamental material of a fragmentary urbanism is of greater consequence than the freestanding aestheticized object” (Frampton 1995, 92).

Beyond the “landscape” adjective meeting the desires and needs of the time, Waldheim reiterates the eminence of landscape over other mediums that resonate with contemporary disciplinary concerns, “landscape urbanism offers both model and medium for the renewal of urban design as a relevant concern over the coming half century” (Waldheim 2009, 235). On top of this timeliness of the landscape as a medium to rethink urban design, he also unfurls the emerging contemporary disciplinary debates through the “landscape” adjective. Waldheim suggests that landscape can help frame “superdisciplinary,” a way for disciplines to critique urban design. He states, “this recommends a reading of urban design as a superdisciplinary superego for subjects otherwise sublimated within the design professions” (Waldheim 2009, 231).

Evolving urbanism engenders evolving adjectives that modify the urbanism itself, especially in order to maintain its currency and instrumental potency. Adding to this evolutionary role the constant renewing adjectives bring to urbanism, Richard Sennett’s “*Open City*” description that borrows Darwin’s evolutionary theory, succinctly puts forward a framework that describe the imperatives of ideas needing to continually grow, evolve, and diversify over time. Sennett states,

“he [Darwin] emphasized the process of growth as a continual struggle between equilibrium and disequilibrium; an environment rigid in form and

static in programme is doomed; biodiversity instead gives the natural world the resource to change.” (Sennett 2007, 296)

Koolhaas adds to this observation when he states that generating new theory is not an easy task but one that requires our constant attention and praxis. Koolhaas further states the necessity of constant evolution, by stating “If we find new words there is a hope of producing a framework of understanding. Without a framework any means of instrumentality are futile” (Koolhaas, 2007, 320). Anna Klingmann also acknowledges this keeping up with the ongoing dynamic changes in urbanism is no easy task, but argues its necessity in order to keep afloat the intellectual autonomy of the design profession. Klingmann quoting Benjamin, suggests the following,

“According to German Marxist literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, criticism in any era is a matter of correct distancing in order to regain a transformative autonomy of intellectual practice. This is never a static process; on the contrary, strategies must be constantly refined, questioned, and developed in order to navigate changing conditions, formulate critical positions, anticipate future changes, and redefine direction.” (Klingmann 2007, 8)

These ideas combined make us acutely aware that as cities continually, and more rapidly evolve, instruments to describe and represent them must equally evolve. Furthermore, out of the many adjectives that surface, some will grow to become substantial movements and some will vanish over time.

#### **PLURALISTIC URBANISMS: CRITICAL DEBATES AND INNOVATIONS**

This brings us to my third point of what these adjectives bring to the larger discourses in urbanism. It has to do with pluralism inherent in the notion of urbanism and the provocations catalyzed by these adjectives that engender theoretical innovations and refinements. Returning back to Landscape Urbanism, there has been a long feud between them and the New Urbanism camp. This rather marginal discussion amongst small number of academics and practitioners spread like wild fire in 2009, right after Charles Waldheim was appointed as the Chair of the Landscape Architecture Department at Harvard University, Graduate School of Design. These tensions and debates were even covered in mass media through articles such as “Green Building” in *The Boston Globe* in January 2011. This article describes the battle between the “61-year-old Andres Duany, a leader in the movement known as New Urbanism” and “Charles Waldheim, the intensely confident, spiky haired leader of the landscape urbanism movement” (Neyfakh 2011).

Fast-forward two years, Andres Duany and Emily Talen launched a book titled “Landscape Urbanism and its Discontents: Dissimulating the Sustainable City” in January 2013 that aggressively criticize Landscape Urbanism (Duany & Talen 2013). Again, this could be read as nothing more than squabble over an intra-disciplinary territorial claim that will ensure their dominance. However, Neyfakh’s article also describes how Landscape Urbanists and New Urbanists have actively debated each other on various topics such as density, mobility, sustainability, and ecology surrounding North American urbanism. The article also quotes Andreas Duany, the leader of New Urbanism stating that they will “systematically ‘assimilate’ the language and strategies that have made his opponents [*Landscape Urbanists*] such a white-hot brand. ‘We’re trying to upgrade ourselves’ (Neyfakh 2011). This demonstrates that these competing adjectives equally can generate critical discussions and productive debates among opposing ideas that encourage each other to refine and sharpen their arguments.

Of course this is only one example of many adjectival urbanisms out there, however this phenomenon illustrates how adjectives can become productive catalyst in conceptualizing, describing, mobilizing new and innovative alternatives in urbanism. The interplay between these multiple adjectives also demonstrate there exists a set of pluralism in the very definition of urbanism. This recognizes the multiplicity of legitimate interests and positions that can co-exist, and suggest that urbanism is not about a singular truth. With this, we can point to a more productive utilization of these adjectives that can promote relational multiplicities as opposed to an absolute precept in urbanism. This also means that different ideas fueled by these adjectives—rather than competing for the same turf—can engender constructive criticism for each other and generate synergistic collective intelligence.

Another example is Ecological Urbanism. It was an attempt to create tension and interrogate the possibility of overcoming the deep dichotomy between the conventional notion embedded in the terms ‘ecology’ and ‘urbanism.’ By combining the two terms side by side, it seeks symbiosis, synergy, and hybridity, but at the same time more importantly it accentuates the tension between the seemingly opposing terms to generate new creative ways of thinking about the environmental crisis we are confronting. Furthermore, the multiplicities of urbanism manifested through variety of adjectives unravel and amplify latent tensions in urbanisms that embody society’s hegemony. They also catalyze change and transformation when they aggregate as a set of ongoing collective work. In expanding this hypothesis, David Harvey through Foucault’s work suggests that this process and the praxis of struggle against repression or hegemony are more important than the change itself. Harvey states,

“Foucault’s work with homosexuals and prisoners was not aimed at producing reforms in state practices, but dedicated to the cultivation and enhancement of localized resistance to the institutions, techniques, and discourses of organized repression.” (Harvey 1989, 46)

Moreover, according to Harvey, Foucault believed that, “only through such a multifaceted and pluralistic attack upon localized practices of repression that any global challenge to capitalism might be mounted without replicating all the multiple repressions of capitalism in a new form” (Harvey 1989, 47).

This view helps us to comprehend the recent proliferation of new adjectives as multiple forms of specific and localized resistances to variety of hegemonies in urbanism. However difficult or complex the task might be, the recent proliferation of these adjectives in qualifying urbanism can be seen as a reflection of a society’s desire and struggle for change. A society that hopes for something new, better, just, and sustainable that could activate transformations in the deep structure that run beneath the foundation of our society. As designers who are often looked up for envisioning utopias, we need to, and can do more by deploying these adjectives to the full extent, which should critique, evolve, and provoke conventional modes of urbanisms, which reaches for the essence of pluralistic urbanism.

## **CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM ADJECTIVAL URBANISMS**

Over the past decade, we have observed an explosion of adjectives that modify the term urbanism. Partially it is due to the term urbanism gaining popularity and its use expanding. We can point to many reasons for this phenomenon. One of the main reason has to do with the media, hence our preoccupation with the 2007 statistical fact found in the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) report

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## NOTES

Figure 2. The list of adjectival urbanisms in the timeline is mainly based on Barnett's list of urbanisms from "A Short Guide to 60 of the Newest Urbanisms: And there could be more." However, additional urbanisms the author has recently been exposed to were included, Bicycle Urbanism (2013), Tactical Urbanism (2012), Combinatory Urbanism (2011), and Splintering Urbanism (2001) are some and they attempt to provide an expanded context. The years in the timeline are based on the earliest known dates researched by the author based on their exhibitions, conferences, articles, books, etc. and may not be precise in some cases. The purpose of the timeline is to expose the proliferation and trends of the recent adjectival urbanism as opposed to precisely dating them.

that stated "for the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas. By 2030, this is expected to swell to almost 5 billion" (UNPF 2007). See Figure 2. Irrespective of this number, we also witness this rapid urbanization process on a daily basis, from the exploding Chinese cities to the ever Disneyfying Gulf cities that amplify our passion and infatuation in urbanism.

However inclusive the term might be as Barnett suggests, "in the U.S. we use the terms Urban Planning, Urban Design, Urban Studies, Urban History, Urban Sociology. In Europe and to some extent in the U.K., these separate disciplines are all considered parts of Urbanism," (Barnett 2011, 19) these specific adjectives become indispensable for urbanism to be significantly specific and potent for the period, locality, constituents, and stakeholders it operates for. This phenomenon can also be read as a symptom of the dominant *post-Fordism* or what Harvey refers to as *flexible accumulation* that we operate within (Harvey 1989, 147). The constant renewal, creative destruction process, endless customization, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovations are some of the characteristics of *post-Fordism* and *flexible accumulation*, that seems to have been assimilated and integrated into the adjectival efforts in urbanism.

Furthermore, it is obvious postmodernism also had an impact on this phenomenon, if we comprehend Harvey's review of Ihab Hassan's viewpoint that see modernism as conjunctive, totalized centrality, achieved through selection, which is opposed by postmodernism that is disjunctive, deconstructed dispersal realized through combinations, (Harvey 1989, 43) the constant and instantaneous generation of new customized adjectival urbanisms make all the sense.

The paper examined how some of the fundamental values of adjectival urbanisms contribute to the larger urbanism discourse, through the specific Landscape Urbanism case study. First, these adjectives provide a framework that help critique current urban conditions and existing conceptual framework that lead to new alternatives and theoretical innovations. Second, they are a good representation of a healthy evolution of thoughts in the larger discourse of urbanism that makes itself relevant and potent for the period and stakeholder they operate for. This reiterates the imperatives of adjectives enabling urbanism to constantly refine, question, and develop itself to understand and operate in the dynamically evolving society. Third has to do with the pluralism inherent in the notion of urbanism and the provocations generated by these adjectives that engender theoretical innovations and refinements. This view additionally helps us to comprehend the recent proliferation of new adjectives as multiple forms of specific and localized resistances to variety of hegemonies in urbanism. These points together illustrate how adjectives can become productive catalyst in conceptualizing, describing, mobilizing new and innovative alternatives in urbanism.

Lastly, as Rem Koolhaas suggested we need to constantly reinvent the very notion of urbanism through inventing new adjectives that will assist us in comprehending and navigating the growing "huge tsunami of unknown urban substance," and urbanism-modifying adjectives can equip us to do so.