

Dean's Roundup

Friday, 6 June, 2014

Roundup: *Ceiling function*, the mathematical operation of rounding a number up to the next higher integer.

Roundup: a term in American English referring to the process of gathering animals into an area, known as a "Muster" in Australia.

Rounding up: when a helmsman cannot control a boat and it heads into the wind

Roundup: the plan for an invasion of northern France by Allied forces during World War II (Wikipedia)

Dean's Roundup: part blog, part bulletin; part honour roll, part curatorial [**cu·ra·to·ri·al** (kyŭōr'ē-tōr'ē-əl, -tōr'-) *n.* nounised by the Dean from curator + editorial]

Dear all,

As the current teaching year draws towards a close, I would like to thank Nasrine Seraji for her input this semester. She has contributed in a number of ways, centrally, linking up with Eunice Seng to run a very interesting studio on open spaces on the south side of Victoria harbour from Sheung Wan to North Point. I appreciated having Nasrine around and enjoyed the lively and creative exchanges we had over student work and other ideas.

I visited the opening of Nasrine and Eunice's exhibition at the G7 Centre, Wing Lee Street, Sheung Wan and had some high quality discussions with students about their schemes. One had designed a market garden on the roof of one of the area's wet-markets. The physical design and background were well done and I asked the student what I always ask in these circumstances: given that it is clearly possible to design a roof-top garden, why is this space not already occupied with one?

I remember raising this question in a very early Dean's Roundup and posing two fundamental answers: technological and institutional. It may be that the roof cannot structurally support a garden; that it cannot be effectively waterproofed; that it is too shaded; or that there is no suitable access, for example. On the other hand, it may be that residents of a condominium or public housing block all eagerly want to become roof gardeners but that no laws exist to adequately organize the various collective action problems that have to be overcome to realize this dream.

Another reason, which I had not thought of before, emerged in my discussion with Nasrine and Eunice's student. It is a challenging mixture of design and economics.

I have a friend in the north of England who farms cucumbers under glass using advanced hydroponic soil-less technology. Although his glasshouses can't be covering much more than two hectares, he supplies about 1% of the UK market (there are 120 hectares of commercial cucumber glasshouses in the UK). Some years ago the plot next to his came up for sale and I remarked that he would obviously be thinking of buying it to expand his business. His answer gave a profound insight into the economics of land use. What we typically think of simplistically is actually quite complex. He would not be buying his neighbour's plot (actually his uncle's and offered at discount) because his current 2 hectare business could not easily scale up.

This seemed unlikely to me but he was adamant. The problem was one of *knowledge*. The technical and business process of optimizing output from 2 hectares had been learned over 50 years and two generations and was site and building specific. His knowledge as a 'grower', as they call them in North-east England, was so specific and so nuanced that he could not

guarantee to replicate the long standing performance of his business in a new facility, albeit on the adjacent plot of land. When he powers up his laptop over breakfast each morning to monitor temperature in 100 different locations around the glasshouses and adjust vents and hydroponics by fractions of a degree, he is doing it from years of experience; and small adjustment errors eat perilously into the very miniscule profit margins created by the UK's big-supermarket cartel. If this was true for him, it was doubly true for his farm manager and for the handful of workers employed. Multiply the risk of getting it wrong at each level of farm production knowledge and of those compounding with each other; and the expansion project was too risky – for him and for his bank manager.

What does this have to do with design and green rooves? It means that there is a third constraint to realizing a green urban canopy, especially a production-oriented one and that is green-roof farming knowledge. A Residential design scheme will not get to market unless the owner/financier is pretty certain that every part of the scheme works economically. Such knowledge is tried and tested and infrequently do schemes arise when there is a very real question about whether a particular piece of land or space within a building is suitable for living.

When British house designers were forced to produce bespoke schemes for brown-field sites in the 1980s due to tough new government regulations on the green field mass house building that had dominated the post War period, there was a lot of learning to do. And the knowledge gap left many potentially usable sites in cities undeveloped and still does; more so, the trickier are the technical and institutional (property rights) issues. This is the subject of so called terrain vague, interstitial sites and residual spaces – another topic of my conversations with Nasrine and Eunices' students.

So a speculative architect wanting to make waves (or fields), needs not only to work on a physical design but an agricultural economic one too. Potential roof garden developers, investors, organisers and land owners need to be convinced about the economics of the scheme; whether those are the collective production economics of community urban farming or high-tech small and dense commercial growing economics. I suspect that there is a major contribution to be made to green urbanism by architects and landscape architects sitting down with high-tech, high density growers like my friend from the north of England and working out what can and cannot be grown in various types of roof spaces; taking into account plot size, crop mix, micro-climate, air quality and so on. This clearly requires collaboration with horticulturalists. It is equivalent to working on template designs of housing. It could even be subject to parametric design!

Many years ago, my own PhD research (which started off looking at regional economics and planning in the Mekong Basin water catchment area), eventually (as happens) focused right down, in one section, to the economics of alternative crop patterns on small subsistence farms in the north-east Thai section of the Mekong basin. I used a non-spatial economic optimization model to look at the credit absorption capacity of the typical farms in this region. If I were designing growing programmes on a roof in Sheung Wan, I would also want to model alternative *spatial* crop patterns – in space and time. In the context of a roof garden, this requires landscape and architectural design.

So architect/ landscape architect meets agricultural economist = new knowledge about how to turn roof spaces green for food and profit. This will create rental values for rooves and before long you will have a green roof market. Someone in the Faculty should take this on. Another nice example of how one has to cross disciplinary boundaries these days to tackle 'grand challenge' research questions.

Congratulations to colleagues for the achievements summarized below.

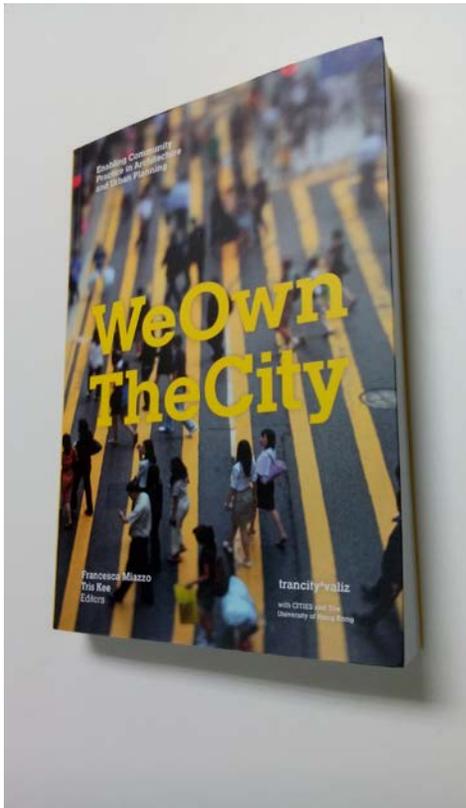
Chris

Department of Architecture

1. Ms. Tris Kee

- published a book with details as below:

Tris Kee, Francesca Miazzo (2014), "WE OWN THE CITY - Enabling Community Practice in Architecture and Urban Planning", Trancity Valiz Publishing Limited, ISBN: 9789078088912 Pages: 295



Publisher's page: <http://www.ideabooks.nl/9789078088912-we-own-the-city-enabling-community-practice-in-architecture-and-urban-planning>

E-Book version : <http://issuu.com/citiesthemagazine/docs/weown-issuu>

<http://amsterdamsmartcity.com/news/detail/id/204/slug/book-launch-we-own-the-city>

The book received the Creative Industries Fund NL

- was invited to lecture at the Centre for Urban Studies of the University of Amsterdam on 26 May 2014.
<http://urbanstudies.uva.nl/events/content/lectures/2014/05/guest-lecture-by-tris-kee.html>

2. Mr. Tom Verebes

- delivered a lecture, titled *“Urbanism and the Indeterminacy of its Formation”*, at the closing event of a Joint Thesis Show for Feng Chia University and National Taiwan University, at the Songshan Culture and Creative Park in Taipei, Taiwan.
- served as a Peer Reviewer for the ACADIA 2014 Conference at University of Southern California USC, reviewing papers for an ACADIA Conference book publication, to be edited by Alvin Huang and Mariana Ibanez.

Division of Landscape Architecture

1. Scott Jennings Melbourne

- conducted an on record interview with Peter Walker in Berkeley, California as part of an ongoing study of the renowned landscape architect’s projects and design strategies.

Department of Real Estate and Construction

1. Professor Lawrence W C Lai

- has a journal paper accepted for publication. Details are as follows:

Lawrence W. C. Lai, *“As planning is everything, it is good for something!” A Coasian economic taxonomy of modes of planning, Planning Theory*. This paper is scheduled to appear in the forthcoming issue of the journal

Abstract: Against two extreme forms of thinking, which have influenced planning theory, this paper argues, in the context of a looming amount of literature generated in a movement for private planning, that the distinction between private planning and public planning is a valid one, but one in need of tweaking. However, the plan-market dichotomy (i.e., the assumption that state and private planning is mutually exclusive), is fallacious. Informed by the neo-institutional economic assumption of rational decisions and the stance of contractual solutions, it rides on the surge in private planning by proposing a taxonomy of planning that combines two modes of planning with two types of planning agent and discusses their possible interrelationships using some neo-institutional economic reasoning informed by the ideas of Coase. Some pedagogical and theoretical implications are also discussed.

This paper was developed on the basis of a presentation (**Lai 2013**) to the Symposium: Institutions of Land Rights and Sustainable Asian Urbanization, held at the Global Asia Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS) on 19 November 2013. The Symposium was jointly organized by Ronald Coase CPRR and NUS.

Department of Urban Planning and Design

1. Professor Jimmy Leung and Dr. Kenneth Tang

- have been awarded research grant from the Public Policy Research (PPR) Funding Scheme of the Central Policy Unit (CPU) to carry out the project "Industrial Land Use Changes in Response to Economic Restructuring in Hong Kong". This project will commence on 1 August 2014 for a period of one year.

2. Mr. Muhammad Adeel (a PhD candidate)

- visited College of Urban and Environmental Sciences at Peking University from 19 to 31 May 2014 under the HKU-China 1000 Exchange Programme. There, he presented his research at the Time Geography research group headed by Professor Chai Yenwei of the department of Urban and Regional Planning. The stay provided opportunity for stimulus discussions and constructive feedback to his ongoing studies of travel behaviour and time use.

