DEANE SIMPSON

YOUNG-OLD

URBAN UTOPIAS OF AN AGING SOCIETY

LARS MÜLLER PUBLISHERS

AFTERWORD

Marc Angélil and Cary Siress

TERRITORIAL PHOTOSYNTHESIS

Since time immemorial, humankind has dreamed of forever remaining young. From this dream legends were born, irrespective of cultural differences. The collective desire to elude the spoils of aging has repeatedly given rise to myths of a magical place, a terrestrial paradise capable of restoring youth.[1] The very prospect that the conquest of mortality could be linked to a specific site led to legendary expeditions in search of just such a place. Most notable is the story of Juan Ponce de León and his obsessive search for the Fountain of Youth. As conquistador and explorer for the Spanish court in the sixteenth century, he was commissioned to chart new trade routes, annex territories, and bring back resources from the New World. Rumor of a spring with fabulous properties threw him off course, sending him and his crew on an unexpected journey to locate the reputed fountain, and leading him to discover by accident what is today known as Florida. Here, the Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park in the town of St. Augustine pays tribute to this alleged history, still banking on the allure of defeating age.

One of the most famous depictions of this utopia of rejuvenation is by Lucas Cranach the Elder, painter to the court of Saxony, which shows a pool in an Arcadian setting filled with women bathing [C.2.01].[2] The scene is one of a machinelike processor based on a clear logic of input and output—a kind of before-and-after device that welcomes carts full of people rolled to the fountain by the hordes. The painting, as a matter of fact, works as a diagram, a reverse timeline of sorts where, when read from left to right, one gets younger rather than older. You enter old and decrepit from the left and exit renewed and youthful to the right. Having always been invested with therapeutic power, water returns potency and vitality. Before entering the pool, subjects are inspected by a physician or clerk who appears to be compiling data in a book of records. Implied in the transformation, furthermore, is a shift in social status, whereby being young is equated with prosperity and a change of rank, not to mention newfound beauty and sexual vigor.[3]
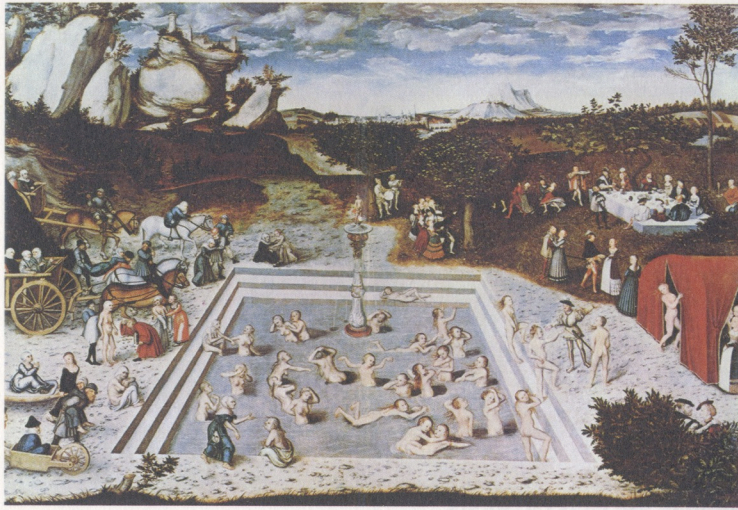
C.2.01 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Fountain of Youth,* 1546. Source: Gemäldegallerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Little seems to have changed, for today, as so pointedly examined by Deane Simpson; this dream has spawned entire industries devoted to marketing the bounties of youth, and has been deployed to open new circuits for capital and thereby accelerate rates of consumption. Whether in the medical, entertainment, or cosmetic industry, new mass-market segments have emerged, all aiming to satisfy the needs and desires of those wanting to remain young at all costs.[4] Here again, place plays an important role in capitalizing on this dream, be it in tourism or with real estate. And of course, the majority of modern-day "fountains of youth" are located in the sun. As a result, "sun cities" that exclusively cater to the old have sprung up all over the world wherever the climate is favorable, whether in Florida, on the coast of Spain, or southern Japan. Although marketed as unique environments to a select clientele of like consumers, these destinations are actually conceived and constructed as standardized products. This has given rise to a new age of urbanism premised on a steady stream of retirees wanting to spend their golden years in what has become a global sunbelt. The ensuing mass migration to sunny regions has set off a veritable "urban-photosynthesis" that, strangely enough, is based on a dream from long ago, but shows no signs of getting old [C.2.02].[5]

No discourse on aging can avoid data. Demography is written out in a language of numbers that in turn translates statistical information into graphs, all bearing on the changing course of populations. Everyone is getting old. Given a steady decrease in child mortality and dramatic increase in life expectancy, the number of elderly people is notably on the rise. Considering the proverbial wisdom that numbers do not lie, we are faced with a demographic imperative that weighs heavily on the fate of humankind.

And it is precisely this imperative that serves as the point of departure for Simpson, who picks up on established methods of charting the demographic

C.2.02 Women standing by a swimming pool at Sun City, Phoenix, Arizona, 2012.
Source: Darrell Lecorre, Courtesy of Master File Corporation

turn, while twisting, if not tweaking them, into portraits of current conditions that common modes of representation fail to address. In effect, his work insightfully updates Cranach's historical depiction of the "project" of youth, and in the process paints a new landscape of aging in our urban age.

In so many demographic surveys graphic representations are given a premium. They show developments in time plotted along curves within an apparently neutral Cartesian coordinate system that are captivating by sheer virtue of their objective elegance. Invested with the power of factual truth, they remain uniquely authoritative in their summary of whatever study is at hand. From the Chicago School of Sociology and research on the elderly undertaken by Ernest Burgess in the 1940s, to Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical history of aging written in the 1960s, to those United Nations action plans begun in the early 1990s aiming to build a society for all ages, each relied on a legion of numbers to make their case.[6]

The art of translating statistics into legible images has reached such a degree of perfection that there is now a growing taxonomy of graphs with corresponding names and properties. There is the conventional "xy graph" charting trends concerning the percentage of the aged in the world on upward-moving curves. There is the classic "pyramid" clearly separating men from women, as well as its more recent spinoffs, some of which bulge, some top-heavy, and others fat at the bottom. There is the seemingly paradoxical "rectangular survival curve" showing longevity pushed to such an extent as to flatten the earlier arc toward death into a sustained plateau of life. While all of them plot the past to understand status quo conditions, they turn toward the future in speculating on prospective developments. For in the end, demography is destiny.

When it comes to the use of statistical representation to reflect on the course of demographic trends, the field of urbanism is no exception. Take Le Corbusier, for example, who devotes a chapter in *The City of To-Morrow* to the theme of statistics. He refers to them as "the Pegasus of the town planner," borrowing a mythical figure symbolizing wisdom to transform the admittedly "meticulous, passionless, and impassive" act of data collection into a well-grounded springboard for speculative leaps "into the future and the unknown."[7] He insists: "Statistics help to formulate the problem."[8] Though Le Corbusier did not directly address aging, he was obsessed with the impact of population growth on the form of cities. Also, his curves are going up, offering him the grounds for dealing with urban masses, whether in the visionary project for *Une ville contemporaine pour trois millions d'habitants* or the *Plan Voisin.*

Later generations of architects and urban designers have followed suit. Rem Koolhaas's *Project on the City,* for instance, is founded on endless data, carefully compiled and beautifully represented as a photogenic emblem of research-based design. This is also the case with MVRDV's studies on contemporary urban conditions that essentially transform the city into "datascapes" and "datatowns." One case in particular that touches on the topic of age-driven concentrations of people in specific locations is MVRDV's study on the coastal regions of Spain—another emergent sunbelt on the map, a "leisure zone" where "huge numbers of elderly retired people escape their cold and probably unhealthy mother countries" to quickly rejuvenate.[9] Pensioners take the coast by storm, giving rise to a never-ending spread of cheap urbanization.[10] The added value of data collection here is that statistics are given a third dimension to become spatial topographies of interacting demographic tendencies.

Such examples spell out the lineage of *Young-Old.* But "old age is not a mere statistical fact."[11] Reframing aging as a new field of urban research, Simpson's book goes beyond the lure of data, searching for potential in social and physical mutations while avoiding the trap of moral judgment. Urban innovations that respond to the needs and desires of newly ascendant elderly populations serve as timely case studies to trace present entanglements of demography and territory. In doing so, he lays bare an entire repertoire of unexpected urban emergences that mirror deep-seated changes in the makeup of both people and place. Examples ranging from new infrastructure for golf cart cities, to commercial strips transformed into strings of roadside medical amenities, to instant cities formed by migratory RV communities, all serve to identify new strategies of spatial production, giving rise to "gerontopias" formed by the alliance of age and idyllic place. What these and other examples covered by Simpson present is an amended inventory of managed lifestyle products aimed at literally "teleporting" elderly cohorts—as with Cranach's painting—out of the everyday grind of getting old to modern-day utopias of rejuvenation and a world forever young.

NOTES

1   Gerald J. Gruman, "A History of Ideas About the Prolongation of Life: The Evolution of Prolongevity Hypotheses to 1800," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 56, part 9 (1966), pp. 24–27.

2   See Jeffrey Chipps Smith, "Cranach und die Kunst der Renaissance unter den Hohenzollern. Kirche, Hof und Stadtkultur," *Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 5 (2010), pp. 742–50.

3   Ibid., p. 746.

4   Wendell R. Smith, "Product Differentiation and Market Segmentation as Alternative Marketing Strategies," *Journal of Marketing* 21, no. 1 (July 1956), pp. 3–8. Deane Simpson makes reference to Smith's essay in "Deep Slice Urbanism," in "The Urban Conspiracy," ed. Jeffrey Inaba, *Volume* 29 (November 2011), pp. 75–77.

5   For the use of the term *urban-photosynthesis,* see Juan Palop-Casado and Christina Suárez, Laboratory for Planning and Architecture (LPA), *Urban-Photosynthesis: Projects and Works by Laboratory for Planning and Architecture, 2002–2009,* Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2009, p. 9.

6   See, for example, Ernest W. Burgess, ed., *Aging in Western Societies,* Chicago, 1960; and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (1970), trans. Patrick O'Brian, New York, 1996. See also the Madrid International Plan of Action, published in the report *Second World Assembly on Ageing,* New York, 2002.

7   Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning* (1925), trans. Frederick Etchells, New York, 1987, p. 107.

8   Ibid., p. 105.

9   MVRDV, *Costa Iberica: Upbeat to the Leisure City,* Barcelona, 1998, pp. 54–56.

10   Ibid., p. 112.

11   de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age,* p. 11.

Young-Old examines contemporary architectural and urban mutations that have emerged as a consequence of one of the key demographic transformations of our time: aging populations. Distinguishing between different phases of old age, this book identifies the group known as the 'Young-Old' as a remarkable petri dish for experiments in subjectivity, collectivity, and environment. In investigating this field of latent urban and architectural novelty, *Young-Old* asserts both the escapist and emancipatory dimensions of these practices.

Richly illustrated with drawings, maps, and photographs, this volume documents phenomena ranging from the continuous, golf-cart-accessible urban landscapes of the world's largest retirement community in Florida and the mono-national urbanizaciones of "the retirement home of Europe" on the Costa del Sol, to the Dutch-themed residential community at Huis Ten Bosch in southern Japan, and the senior RV community in the US.