
WE ARE BLIND UNTIL WE SEE!

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Nature Magazine in December 2020 published a startling revelation. The weight of all the “stuff” that humans have made exceeds the weight of all the global living biomass. The researchers report that on average, for each person on the globe, we produce each week our own body weight in manmade materials. The numbers are startling when taken collectively and when considered over time. What this thoroughly researched study points to is that our current linear built environment paradigm of TAKE-MAKE-WASTE outweighs all the mass of the flora and fauna on our planet.

This revelation is coupled with the realization that much of the stuff we produce and consume is on a fast track to the landfill. The U.S. EPA estimated that 600 million tons of construction and demolition debris were generated in the United States in 2018, which is more than twice the amount of generated municipal solid waste (household garbage). We build new, remodel, and abandon without any consideration for the end of life of our

houses, commercial offices, or industrial spaces.

Midwesterners know well the social, economic and aesthetic impacts of residential and industrial abandonment. In some of our community’s both urban and rural spaces we become “blind” to the abandoned houses and commercial facilities that surround us. We seem to accept blight as a force of nature upon which we have little or no impact. Things are built, we use them for a while and over time they go out of use. At that point in many cases the original owners/builders have long since abandoned any legal or moral responsibility to care for, or remove, the structure leaving the local community with an abandoned facility.

Abandoned structures can have a variety of negative impacts on a community. They are attractors of crime, reduce the value of nearby properties, are potential sources of lead and asbestos contaminants and in the case of some industrial and

commercial abandoned properties can be sources of even more toxic chemicals that can have long term health effects on a community.

Abandonment “breeds” abandonment and an overall sense of community decline. In addition to inflicting harm on a community our current policies often allow those who built and used the structure in the past to essentially “walk away from it” so that the cost of removing or cleaning up a site falls upon those left behind and our children. We harvest limited raw materials, build our homes, offices, and factories, use them for a while and eventually abandon them and over time we make others pay for the removal of the structure and the valuable raw material we used in building the structure is shipped to a landfill.

Our overall “blindness” to the consequences of how we build our homes, our offices and our factories and our communities is wasteful, unjust, and ultimately quite selfish. We do this to ourselves which means we could change this behavior if we cared too. What if we adopted a circular built environment perspective that recognizes that structures have an “end of life” and we plan, design, build, rebuild, deconstruct and salvage our

built environment in such a way that we maximize the salvage of the valuable raw materials and we simultaneously secure the financial resources and support incentives so that at the end of a structure's useful life the cost of removal and cleanup does not fall upon the general community or future generations? We can end this self-inflicted disease.



**“We are all blind until we see
That in the human plan
Nothing is worth the making if
It does not make the man.**

**Why build these cities glorious
If man unbuilt goes?
In vain we build the work, unless
The builder also grows.”**

-Edwin Markham