

The Polylogue



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(RB) works as a critic, curator and organizer in and beyond the fields of architecture, design, heritage and the arts. In his practice he articulates new perspectives on spatial conditions and facilitates fertile ground for imagining and materialising alternatives.

Angela YT Chan

(AYTC) is a researcher and artist investigating climate change narratives through colonial history, technology, and justice. Her participatory and reflective activities often grow interdisciplinary collaborations across activism, policy, journalism and academia.

Francis Gene Rowe

(FGR) is a writer, designer and scholar who works in and with science fiction, utopia/dystopia, ecology, digital cultures, experimental poetry, oracular game design and divinatory practices.

A Polylogue on Collapse

In this roundtable discussion, guest-editors René Boer and Francis Gene Rowe talk to design academic Selçuk Balamir and artist-researcher Angela YT Chan about future cities and future collapse. This polylogue explores collapse as an ongoing process rather than a singular, apocalyptic event. The contributors consider collapse across both colonial history and the contemporary political moment, discussing the forms of collapse brought about by colonial expansion as well as the collapse within the colonial core itself, in cities such as Amsterdam and London.

Through discussions on empire, the climate crisis, infrastructure and the politics of preparedness, the contributors ask how future cities can become spaces of resilience, redistribution, and solidarity. In doing so, collapse emerges as a framework for new social and political possibilities.

Framing Collapse

RB When we think about the future, do we think of it as infinite? For this edition on future cities, we wanted to not only have a critical conversation around what the future looks like, but also about the concept of the future itself. I had to think of the 2025 celebration of Amsterdam's 750th anniversary. The celebrations suggested a certain temporality, of another 750 years to come, although that is unlikely. By my estimation, Amsterdam has another 100 to 150 years, or maybe even as little as another fifty if we are unlucky.

So, for this conversation, we want to focus on this finite temporality, with the inevitable collapse, of ecological, societal but also urban structures as the overarching framework. Things are collapsing in multiple ways, and maybe that is inevitable, but maybe we can think about and envision what the most just version of that might look like.

FGR When we were discussing the topic for this roundtable, there was a sense that things have been bad, are bad, and are getting worse, and that that should be part of the discussion around future cities. Much as it is understandable that

we want to think about forms of critique or visions that make us feel more hopeful, the notion of futurity as the stately advance of progressive ideals is coming to an end. Increasingly, there is an understanding, even among liberals, that history does exist and that it is happening.

There is a kind of thinking, an attempt to dominate the notion of a collapsing society, and I think that is one of the front lines, both in a more abstract or discursive sense and also in a literal sense: the language, history and politics used around collapse, and the people protesting and fighting each other in the street.

SB In my work, I used to frame everything through the lens of the climate crisis, but during the pandemic I went through a certain crisis of faith in this narrative. I was uncomfortable with having to negotiate between Western techno-scientific epistemology and radical decolonial critique. I got increasingly drawn to the collapse framing, even though I was critical of its conventional interpretation with Christian undertones: capital-c Collapse as the end times.

I would like to challenge this framing by exploring small-c collapses in their multiplicity and subjectivity. Rather than one singular Collapse, we should distinguish between different kinds of collapse: ecological breakdown, an empire in disarray, and the lived experiences of people whose lives are unraveling through polycrises. Collapse can mean the loss of livelihoods, jobs, land, belonging, meaning, community, and dignity. In this way, collapse resonates with how Indigenous peoples and enslaved people have historically, and continue to, experience collapse. It resonates with queer people, especially gay men who experienced the AIDS crisis. It resonates with European Jews and Palestinian Arabs. It also resonates with rural and working people in deindustrialised societies.

Instead of pontificating that “the end is nigh”, asking “what is collapsing for you?” can make us more attuned to the plurality of collapse. It can allow us to find commonalities and eventually to form communities and solidarities across differences. It doesn’t require an academic level fluency in climate science, degrowth economics and imperial geopolitics for people to recognise themselves in it.

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Francis Gene Rowe

The Collapse of Empire

FGR As we have talked about, collapse is not a discrete or singular event. I think the idea that it is reflects a trick of hegemonic historical thinking. For me, it relates to the human-centric way in which people perceive their own experiences and lives.

Scholars such as Kathryn Yusoff take a long-durational view of climate change and connect it to colonialism. There is a historical context to the current collapse of empire that we are witnessing.

AYTC Echoing Francis, I think it is interesting that cities at the center of colonial empires, such as Amsterdam and London, have envisioned many different kinds of future cities in other parts of the world that they colonized. The idea of these future cities was recycled across different climates and geographies and imposed upon different cultures. The creation of these future cities often meant the collapse of Indigenous and colonized societies.

Creating these future cities meant the testing of different policies, technologies, forms of cultural and political erasure, and the restructuring of labor

consistently took place 'overseas', on Others, through colonization. And now the urgency of futuring the cities in the heart of old empires coincides with these places beginning to face some of the impacts it has created elsewhere in the world – be they climate change frontlines, energy and water distribution scarcities, increasingly unemployment and poverty... and along with it all, such future cities probably do not consider participation by refugees, people facing forced migration, into their borders.

SB As Angela suggests, now the imperial core is contemplating its own finitude, and mistakes it for the end of the world. But the empire is not the world, and the end of the empire is not necessarily the end of the world. Clearly there are some collapses that are more desirable than others. One can simultaneously work toward imperial downfall while wishing to dodge a mass extinction.

It is no surprise that imperial subjects, including people unwillingly entangled with the imperial mode of living, feel existentially threatened. This is because imperial infrastructures that we depend on and that were meant to remain

hidden in plain sight are increasingly being exposed as dysfunctional. Fuel shortages, grid failures, food prices... These lead people to experience various stages of grief; collapse-denial, collapse-anger, collapse-bargaining, collapse-depression, collapse-acceptance.

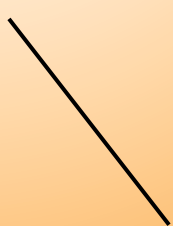
I am personally still going back and forth between bargaining and acceptance, as my work negotiates what can be salvaged from these cities, technologies and societies. I see collapse as the most hopeful framework we have, because it confronts us with a choice: do we remain attached to our imperial mode of living and to work on extending its lifespan? Or are we ready to 'hospice modernity' and reinvent what it means to be human?

FGR So, seeing this in the context of how the imperial core has become increasingly concerned with itself, with its own social and political body, rather than with its extracted periphery, this is manifested in the form of borders: both in how borders are violently maintained and in the rebordering of people already within a country, via increased surveillance and police violence, the ongoing dismantlement of public space and infrastructures of support, and systematic entrenchment of various phobias and forms of prejudice. More generally, it is reflected in the amplification of racism, Islamophobia, and other forms of reactionary hostility towards people who are marked out as being less human, less civilized, and less deserving of the right to participate in the city.

The final thing I will say is that, when the Roman Empire collapsed, many people's experience of it was that people stopped turning up to repair the roads.¹

So, maybe there is also a sense of collapse as a very grounded, immediate, non-globalized, and non-centralized experience of infrastructure, and of the continuities of the city, the world, and the future that are attached to it.

“Cities are clearly not very self-sufficient in times of crisis. That is why I think it is important to begin organizing within urban environments at an early stage.”



René Boer

The Social & Political Aspects of Collapse Narratives

AYTC Infrastructural collapse is often one of the first things we notice as a sign that a system is no longer working. The dismantling of efficiency and functionality reveals that the system was never really built to withstand the many frictions that people and decision-makers place upon it.

I think of collapse from a more human perspective, in the sense that things collapse when even the most basic standards of human decency, values, and ethics fail to be upheld in everyday actions. These everyday actions can lead to very long-term consequences. I am talking about the politics of sharing a planet together and what that means. The cultural normalization of xenophobic prejudice, which precedes the bombing of infrastructure and all-out genocide, is already the huge collapse.

So, I think it is often distracting, unfortunate, and ultimately unhelpful to recognize collapse only once its symptoms have become visible, when we suddenly realize that things are no longer working. That is not the root cause of the problem, nor a genuine acknowledgement of the timeline of collapse, but a justification of bystander excuses.

FGR I think it is interesting to explore the ways in which this collapse is now manifesting at the colonial core. We now see

urban spaces as the main battleground for this kind of contestation over the streets, which we have been seeing in the UK in the form of fascist race riots.¹

Some forms of collapse-oriented thinking are complicit in eco-fascism, and I think this tendency is only going to grow. We are seeing a mobilization of the slow and fast violence of empire, which has usually been deployed at the periphery, now being increasingly directed within its own borders, especially in cities.² The relative abundance that European middle and lower classes have historically enjoyed compared with working classes in the Global South is clearly under threat. Part of what will follow is a shift in the class composition of cities, something that is already happening through increasing precarity and the growing power of the landlord class.

Fascism is already enamoured with the notion of collapse, but its focus is more on demography, race, and religion. This is what figures such as Peter Thiel and Alex Karp appear to be fixated on: a neo-reactionary, almost Tolkienesque, vision of a particular medieval Europe defined by kings, white people, and Christians.^{3 4 5}

RB I think you are right, and that is precisely why it is important for the left

to embrace collapse as a concept and use it as an organizing framework. The right, and particularly the far right, have already been doing this by advancing their own narratives of collapse. Perhaps it would be valuable for the left to engage with the concept as well and ask what a just collapse might look like.

Going back to the terminology, it is interesting to see how national and local governments are rolling out disaster-preparedness campaigns. Last year, everyone in the Netherlands received a booklet explaining what to do in the event of a disaster and how to prepare for one. Museums are being provided with plans outlining where their most important paintings should be taken in the event of a disaster. This language of disaster is being adopted both by public authorities and by the far right. I think we should perhaps embrace terms such as prepping more confidently, while reimagining them through alternative values and power structures, as a way of counterbalancing these dominant narratives.⁶

AYTC Adding to those two interesting points, the right-wing movement has already been using a narrative of collapse to its advantage, and this has become very dominant in the UK. Reform has drawn upon this narrative for many years, and more recently the independent party Restore Britain has emerged. Once again, it is a narrative that seeks a return to some imagined point of origin, or to an early and highly exclusionary form of “Britishness” that erases much of the UK’s immigrant history.

What interests me is how attempts to recreate something from this particular moment in time and history can reshape

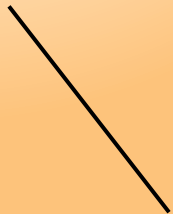
an entire historical trajectory. I am very conscious of how this represents yet another way in which history continues to unfold.

SB Building on Francis’s point, “end-times fascism” (Klein and Taylor 2025) is characterised by giving up on the living world while still clinging to the idea of technological progress.⁷ They intuit that power is infrastructural, and that cities are accumulations of infrastructure. After all, even the infrastructure that dominates the countryside ultimately exists to serve the flows of cities and empire. Rather than asking how cities survive collapse, perhaps we should ask which infrastructures deserve to survive.

The end-times fascists offer two complementary spatial strategies: retreat into gated communities, bunkers, private islands, floating cities, or seasteading projects and let cities decay and collapse. At the same time, they double down on their fantasies of fully automated, highly controlled, smart cities and economic zones that are built from scratch. Both scenarios fail to recognise that those who sow progress will also reap collapse; the two are inseparable parts of the same process.

Meanwhile, the left seems undecided on what to do with cities. One approach is to retrofit existing cities into denser and more compact settlements, even though that implies remaining entangled in global dependencies. Another is to seriously consider ‘unsustaining’ the city itself, by imagining new ways to inhabit bioregions and remedy metabolic rifts. This way, the boundaries of the city may become more diffuse and porous, to borrow René’s counterproposal to the *smooth city* (Boer 2023).⁸

“The creation of these future cities often meant the collapse of Indigenous and colonized societies.”



Angela YT Chan

Collective Action

RB I know that the fascist right is often engaged in rewriting history, but perhaps we can instead look to examples from Amsterdam's more recent past. One example is the squatting movement, which functioned as a large and broadly accepted para-statal structure within the city. Tens of thousands of people lived within it, often largely separated from the formal structures of empire: inhabiting abandoned buildings, not participating less in formal work, and creating alternative systems of support and provision.

When I became involved in the movement in the late 2000s, one of the first places we squatted received a visit just a week later from a group of people who showed up to repair the heating and electrical systems without us even asking. It was a very powerful experience. It demonstrated how easily you could connect yourself to broader networks within the city and operate according to an ethic of mutual aid and collective support.

I think this offers an inspiring example of how we might build similar networks today. At present, there is far less vacant space in the city than there once was, which makes recreating these structures more difficult. Nevertheless, it is interesting that many of the larger sites once occupied by the squatting movement were eventually legalized and continue to exist as large collective spaces. Often, the people managing them no longer have the capacity to fully program them with events and activities.

Perhaps these spaces could become new centers for collective forms of preparedness and resilience, alternatives to the highly individualistic, white male-dominated culture that often characterizes contemporary prepping.

AYTC I think there is a great deal we can learn from these alternative traditions and practices of collective resilience. The prepping space is still largely dominated by white, male, and often extremist perspectives. I think there is an important distinction to be made between that approach and forms of preparing for collapse that are rooted in communities of colour, queer communities, and neighborhood-based forms of mutual support and resilience.

On the one hand, there is an approach centered on the question: What can I buy to secure my individual household? On the other, there is an approach that asks: What can we build, salvage, reconstruct, and share together? The latter is based on a more communal understanding of preparedness and survival.

RB The urban scale is particularly interesting in this context. Historically, if you look at a major period of collapse in Amsterdam during the Second World War, the city experienced a severe food crisis. Many people had to cycle out of the city and travel increasingly long distances to find farms where food was still available. In some cases, people would spend days cycling to secure food and then make the journey back.

Cities are clearly not very self-sufficient in times of crisis. That is why I think it is important to begin organizing within urban environments at an early stage. What is interesting is that this is already happening in some places.

I live near Nieuwmarkt, a neighborhood in the center of Amsterdam, where, last month, a small crisis-response group was established. The people involved have no particular connection to the climate movement or to existing forms of political organizing. Rather, it is an autonomous collective based on mutual support and neighbourhood-scale solidarity. I think this represents a very powerful and interesting way of moving forward.

AYTC I also love the fact that some things cannot be scaled up. Some things are not meant to be open source, building and sharing certain infrastructures should be mindful of how it carries the intended community and shields them from harm by oppressive systems and powers. I look to digital media artists, such as Morehshin Allahyari who considers cultural heritage and 'digital colonialism' and Jon Corbett who is building an Indigenous computer programming language based on the Cree language.¹

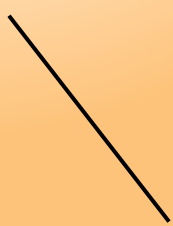
Many practices, forms of knowledge, and technologies are valuable precisely because they remain local, situated, and community-specific rather than being designed for mass adoption. There is something particularly compelling about linking digital infrastructure to ecological thinking: treating servers less as abstract, invisible systems and more as material technologies that require maintenance, energy, and care. I had a lot of playful, insightful learnings alongside my collaborator AI infrastructures researcher Boxi

A. Wu, when we brought a community of specialised participants together online in our 'Tiny Tech Futures' workshop.² We discussed and designed how low-tech and self-hosted technologies can play a role in lighter and greener creative practice. It was a part of the Sunlight Liberation Network programme, and we were energised to engage with practitioners, dreamers, and makers who have been working on this blend of environmental arts and perma-computing projects for many years.

SB Resilience without redistribution is simply adaptation for the privileged. The individualistic survivalist with the biggest stockpile of cans and guns cannot match the resilience of a diverse, egalitarian and democratic community. Communal resilience is measured in relationships, not stockpiles. So perhaps the opposite of prepping is commoning. We can treat the city as an open commons that is "free, fair and alive" (Bollier and Helfrich 2019).³ This involves working at the hyper-local neighbourhood level while also integrating these efforts at the scale of the city and the wider region.

Collectivist preparedness begins with ensuring vital system provision without relying on the infrastructures of empire and the contemporary city. Equal access to shelter, food, water, energy, care, knowledge, and tools has to be reclaimed and redistributed. This way we can avoid falling into the self-sufficiency trap, and instead find ways to remake the city as a place of interdependent survival. I call this 'collapsolidarity' — letting go and coming together while falling apart.

“I got increasingly drawn to the collapse framing, even though I was critical of its conventional interpretation with Christian undertones: capital-c Collapse as the end times.”



Selçuk Balamir

Endnotes ' The Collapse of Empire'

- 1 For more on the infrastructural collapse of empires, see Ehrenhalt (2017): Ehrenhalt, Alan. "When Nobody Comes to Fix the Bridge." *Truthdig*, 2017, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/when-nobody-comes-to-fix-the-bridge/>.

Endnotes ' The Social & Political Aspects of Collapse Narratives'

- 1 'Who were the far-right agitators at the Henry Nowak protests in Southampton?' *The Guardian*. 21 Jul. 2026 [theguardian.com/politics/2026/jun/04/who-were-the-far-right-agitators-at-the-henry-nowak-protests-in-southampton](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/jun/04/who-were-the-far-right-agitators-at-the-henry-nowak-protests-in-southampton)
- 2 Slow violence is a concept emerging from environmental studies, developed by Rob Nixon (2011): Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- 3 Konstantinou, Lee. "Mythic Capital." ARC: Religion, Politics, Et Cetera, arcmag.org/mythic-capital/.
- 4 Haiven, Max. "Palantir's Fascist Worldbuilding." Max Haiven, maxhaiven.substack.com/p/palantirs-fascist-worldbuilding.
- 5 Spectre Editorial Collective. "Tolkien's Deplorable Cultus." *Spectre Journal*, spectrejournal.com/tolkiens-deplorable-cultus/.
- 6 'Prepping' refers to the practice of acquiring skills, supplies, and equipment for emergencies and disasters.
- 7 Klein, Naomi, and Astra Taylor. "The Rise of End-Times Fascism." *The Guardian*, 2025, [theguardian.com/](https://www.theguardian.com/)
- 8 Boer, René. *Smooth City*. Valiz, 2023.

Endnotes ' Collective Action'

- 1 She Who Sees The Unknown: The Archive <https://archive.shewhoseestheunknown.com/about>
- 2 TinyTech Futures https://angelaytchan.net/blog/2025/250131_tinytech/
- 3 Bollier, David, and Silke Helfrich. *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. New Society Publishers, 2019.