Global Peripheries: Growth, Disinvestment, and Change in Multicultural Houston

“There are also, and probably in all cultures, in all civilizations, real places, effective places, places that are written into the institution of society itself, and that are sort of counter-emplacements… Since these places are absolutely other than all the emplacements that they reflect, of which they speak, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.”

— Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces (1967)

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The utopian realm of suburban life has historically epitomized the American Dream, a vision of opportunity and prosperity expressed in greater autonomy, single-family home ownership, and car dependence. After World War II, the suburbs were where most Americans wanted to live and the rest of the world took notice. Mid-twentieth century suburbia flourished and imparted profound and lasting influences on popular culture, mass media, consumer tastes, and housing expectations. Since that time, the United States has continuously exported its suburban ideals to the rest of the world, while American suburbia has simultaneously become increasingly globalized. Within this peripheral ‘utopia’, the shopping mall and strip center have emerged as uncontested icons of American culture—exemplars of social and commercial values that represent the United States to the world and Americans to themselves.

In recent years, shifting demographics in the expanding metropolitan areas of the American Southwest have begun to suggest that suburbia has grown considerably more diverse and complex, as well as undeniably tethered to developing countries. Within this new periphery, undercurrents of racial, economic, and social segregation persist, however suburbia is being re-appropriated and hybridized into a place of new opportunities. Homogeneity and conformity are rapidly diminishing to allow for greater diversity and a dramatically altered built environment. At the same time, disinvestment has fueled the growth of emerging places of *otherness*, radical shifts in usage, less formal occupancies, and alternative consumption patterns that fall far outside of conventional expectations. In suburbia, fading utopias have given way to a multicultural landscape of fragmented *heterotopias* that colonize, control, and exploit obsolescence while establishing new normative conditions.

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Using Houston as a metropolitan laboratory, this paper researches abandonment, migration, and global identities to illustrate how suburban obsolescence provides new opportunities for globalized city-making. It examines forces of growth and abandonment in suburban Houston, while identifying alternative occupancies, ways of building, and modes for redefining urban peripheries into more adaptable, resilient, and diverse environments. Case studies present examples of how emerging places of *otherness*—or heterotopias—have seeded themselves within obsolescence to develop an alternative take on the American Dream. This paper considers these conditions to contemplate futures, while questioning what gentrification means within the transnational peripheries of Houston. More specifically, it examines how commercial obsolescence in American suburbia has allowed immigrants to organize, participate, and prosper. Characterized primarily through the adaptation of existing buildings and modest interior interventions—low-cost and participatory actions support socioeconomic resilience. These transformational shifts have fostered the emergence of a new periphery, a dynamic ersatz-urban place of remarkable demographic diversity.

A PERIPHERY IN TRANSITION

Across time and cultures, the built environment has represented a dynamic social construct based on values, practices, perceptions, and production. As a contemporary metropolitan environment developed on the premise of car dependence, Houston is characterized by resoundingly informal methods of urbanization, suburban sprawl, and an astonishing level of obsolescence and abandonment. Within such seemingly adverse conditions, heterotopias — or spaces of a shared ethnic, social, or cultural experience — have emerged to fuel bottom-up approaches to adapting an overbuilt suburban landscape. Small-scale interventions act as autonomous agents of resilience within a globalized city, reflecting a considerable range of human needs, daily routines, social desires, and cultural expectations. Expanding disinvestment beyond the inner loop of Houston creates undeniable challenges for urban connectivity and long-term sustainability. This suburban world resists typical expectations for uniformity, as well as mainstream perceptions of upward mobility. Contrasted with conventional suburban stability,

Figure 1: Best Products Store, Southeast Houston; James Wines, SiTE, 1975; courtesy of Berkshire Arts.

impermanence has shifted the built environment to more informal occupancies and forms of consumption. Likewise, an implied devaluation of social uniformity and commercial homogeneity celebrates the commonplace, ordinary, and unschooled manipulations which reject the formal hand of architects, designers, developers, national retailers, and home owners' associations.

Today, the altered built environment of an inherently multicultural peripheral Houston increasingly percolates up rather than trickles down, offering higher self-sufficiency, more flexible organization, and greater long-term viability. Intermingled within abandoned 1970s retail strips, enclosed shopping malls, and fading housing subdivisions, adaptation challenges the notion that such places are dead. Physically and psychologically distant from the gentrified inner loop, these small-scale interventions confront conventional suburbia. Growing into spaces of otherness, they are places of vitality that create opportunities for economic freedom and assimilation.

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Figure 2: Hoa Binh Center, courtesy of Swamplot

OTHERNESS AND HETEROTOPIAS

In *'The Production of Space'*, Henri Lefebvre proposes a critical shift in spatial perspective by identifying the multi-faceted processes of production that underscore multiplicity of authorship in the built environment.[1] Lefebvre asserts that cities, buildings, and interiors are ultimately products of social practices. As a Marxist theorist who was highly critical of the economic structuralism that dominated the academic discourse in his time, he argues that the everyday manipulation of space is fundamental to the growth of society, and thus, in shaping the city. An embrace of such theory implies distrust of the heroic, formal, and fashionable, as well as suspicion of architecture that acts as an agent of commodification.[2] Thus, by reframing architecture with the inverse — the everyday impact of people reshaping buildings — Lefebvre celebrates the commonplace, ordinary, and unschooled manipulations that buildings and cities receive apart from the top-down hand of architects, planners, and developers.[3] He fixes his gaze on the lives of buildings well beyond the moment of their completion. Unlike the formalized ritual of Architecture, everyday manipulations are anonymous, layered, imprecise, and unstructured, and thus, they are difficult to quantify due their irregularities. Disorganized and fragmented, they exist as contradictions, contributions, and collaborations.[4]

As globalism shifts the notion of 'territory', the contemporary relevance of utopianism has increasingly migrated away from the unattainable and toward the potential for ersatz-utopias, or heterotopias, within our quotidian world. Similarly, Michel Foucault employed the term heterotopia to describe such places and spaces that intermingle multi-faceted layers of meaning, as well as simultaneity and connectivity to other places. As worlds of otherness, which are neither here nor there, they engage with the physical, mental, and phenomenological characteristics of memory.[5] Heterotopias appropriate aspects of remembrance gleaned from lives lost, representing the manifestation and approximation of physical places among a shared people. They satisfy the basic human desire to claim, redefine space, collaboratively territorialize, and provide collective security. In Houston, ethno-cultural heterotopias are well established throughout the periphery, illustrating that the metropolitan area is currently the most diverse in the United States.[6]

FINDING STABILITY IN OBSOLESCENCE

For marginalized populations, survival is based upon a community's ability to reorganize and remake itself socially, economically, and spatially. In the suburban built environment, resilience takes on a social dimension based upon the existing building stock, re-use, and re-investment, as well as associated redundancies that mitigate the potential for economic collapse. The outer periphery of Houston has been conceived over time in discontinuous bands of residential, commercial, and industrial development. Although fragmented, these autonomous 'places' have been embedded with the institutional memory of a first generation that was predominantly professional, middle to upper middle class, upwardly mobile, and Caucasian. Revealing echoes of the past, various neighborhoods across the metropolitan periphery have undergone considerable change, migrating slowly away from the conventional mainstream and toward a more economically and ethnically diverse demographic future.

Today, much of the outer periphery in Houston contrasts considerably with its original intent. Multicultural, unstructured, visually disorganized, and socially fragmented, suburban Houston has become increasingly organic, reflecting the subtleties of past usage patterns, as well as the marked transformation of more recent shifts. Much like the upheaval encountered by displaced persons, this new periphery is defined by un-ideal physical circumstances and disordered spatialities, however, it also offers significant potential for new forms of socioeconomic growth, cultural hybridization, and urbanity. The fragmented Houston suburban environment encountered by immigrants allows more informal commercial enterprises to percolate and prosper. Within an architecturally unremarkable landscape, modest community needs shape an everyday built environment leveraged through an accessible cache of undervalued buildings, neighborhoods, and international mercantile cultures.

Immigrant communities have forged new American identities within the finely grained retail strips, enclosed shopping malls, abandoned warehouses, and residential streets of a forgotten periphery. Emphatically un-monumental, antiheroic, and autonomous, these transformations reflect limited means, as well as the impact of time and collective memory. Considering immigration and the suburban neighborhood, heterotopias satisfy the basic human desire to mark and redefine space. Undervalued existing buildings are the primary building block of places of otherness, offering an available and accessible infrastructure for mercantile activity. In Houston, this disi nvested built environment subverts conventional suburban expectations to reveal characteristics that are more typically associated with working class urban neighborhoods.

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Figure 3: Greenspoint Mall, courtesy of LTSR.

ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE WITHIN A GLOBALIZED PERIPHERY

The idea of fostering resilience in urban infrastructure is a strategic theme and operational goal for many cities around the world. Researchers, scholars, and practitioners in various disciplines have struggled with the notion of resilience in their respective fields for decades. What does resilience mean in Houston, and more specifically, how might it be accomplished in its suburban periphery? As architects, designers, and planners struggle to develop prescriptive models that guide resilient practices at the metropolitan scale — the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of resilience have become increasingly more relevant within established urban forms. More recently, the focus on resilience has shifted away from anticipation of risk and mitigation, and toward a more integrated and incremental model that promotes protective and preventative strategies. Conventional or low-tech approaches to resistance may be linked to more responsive and regenerative aspects of resilience.

One of the most vital and central aspects of resilience is the ability for neighborhoods to adequately support their own residential, commercial, social, spiritual, and cultural needs. In the outer periphery of Houston, the adaptive potential of existing and undervalued buildings systematizes a bottom-up framework of social support for the economically disadvantaged. The following case studies illustrate change and emerging heterotopias within the outer periphery of Houston and that resilience may be linked to heterotopia. These examples evidence an ongoing transformation in production and consumption, from a landscape defined by 1970s suburban homogeneity into a place of multicultural urbanity.

1_FROM RUIN TO RUIN: *THE BEST PRODUCTS STORE*

The Best Products Company of Richmond, Virginia was a catalog retailer founded by Sydney and Frances Lewis in 1958.[7] As merchants and art and design aficionados with a desire to draw interest to their stores, they commissioned James Wines and SiTE (Sculpture in The Environment) to design a series of unorthodox and irreverent retail showrooms. The Houston showroom opened in 1975 on a site near Almeda Mall—a regional shopping center built by the James Rouse Company in 1968 that was the premier mall in Houston at the time. Named the Indeterminate Façade Building, the showroom was one of nine radical, prototype big box stores designed by SiTE for Best Products that rethought standard, utilitarian suburban retail architecture. Wines described the project as

the de-architecturization of the façade achieved by extending the brick veneer beyond the leading edge of the roofline, resulting in the appearance of something between construction and demolition.[8] The resulting subversive, displaced, and fragmented form evoked ruins or deconstructed buildings, a vision of neglect that would ironically presage a future of disinvestment and decline in the Kingspoint neighborhood.

As a commentary on both the strip shopping center and the suburbs, Wines mobilized commonplace buildings to work against conventional expectations, as well as the reigning social, psychological, and aesthetic notions in 1970s suburbia.[9] The ambiguity of its form, subversive decay within a context of normalcy, foreshadowed the future of the Best Products store to distort its relationship with site, formality, proportion, scale, history, and nature to reveal tentativeness and instability. The architecture subverted utopia to foretell a story of dystopia on the horizon—a witty and provocative narrative that challenged the increasing irrelevance and complacency in post-1968 architecture.

The Houston showroom was perceived as a profound conceptual statement in the art world, yet viewed with deep distain by mainstream architects. The Indeterminate Facade Building rejected architectural conventions relative to form, space, and structure. Rather, Wines believed that the Houston showroom was an 'architecture of information', retelling a site narrative that straddled the line between art and utility, environmental and consumption, permanence and deconstruction.[10] Trained as not only an architect but an artist, sculptor, and graphic designer, Wines views buildings as a social provocation. Accordingly, the Best showroom emerges from a liminal place between art and architecture.

The Indeterminate Façade Building, with its purposely 'ruined', fragmented, and crumbling profile, has somewhat ironically succumbed to the cyclical rise and fall of suburban retail. It has been radically altered to appear more conventional over time — the subversive qualities of its form have been subverted, intentionally leveled, and rebuilt to convey a more ordinary and 'finished' appearance. Today, this landmark building exists in a tentative state of abandonment, surrounded by a security fence and a parking lot filled with shipping containers, the building has been unapologetically stripped of both its architecture and memory.

National retailers left the Almeda Mall and its vicinity for upscale malls or mid-range strips elsewhere — the middle ground has been abandoned. Apart from this demographic shift, the pragmatic and utilitarian Almeda Mall appears to have been rooted in the austere aesthetic and new town planning principles of Victor Gruen and European socialism, rather than the current preference for luxury and conspicuous consumerism. In place of national branding strategies and suburban homogeneity, immigrant merchants have carved out a niche to provide general services such as car repair, pawn shops, nail salons, clothing stores, and restaurants serving multi-ethnic and multi-income consumers. Although neighborhood retail has not been entirely abandoned, it has transitioned from one heterotopia to another, from 1970s white middle-class conformity to contemporary working-class Latin American immigrant aspiration. The Almeda Mall, Indeterminate Façade Building, and their adjacencies meet new patterns of consumption and more informal desires in Kingspoint.

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Figure 4: Best Products Store, *yesterday vs. today*
Southeast Houston; James Wines, SiTE, 1975;
courtesy of Berkshire Arts.

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Figure 5: Typical *Dog-Leg* strip mall, courtesy of LTSR.

2_FROM CONVENTIONAL TO TRANSNATIONAL: *THE DOG-LEG STRIP*

The everyday strip mall falls into the category of non-pedigreed 'architecture' and is defined by its vernacular, spontaneous, and anonymous development. Like other American storefront typologies, outer loop retail corridors are defined by their neutrality and functionality. As one of the most ubiquitous 'vernaculars' in Houston, the strip mall is a quotidian architecture that develops informally and incrementally. Although it is derided, the strip mall operates much like an urban retail street, offering a plug-in system for quick-start economic opportunity. As a temporal typology, the strip mall vernacular of Houston remains largely undocumented, however, it serves specific needs for retail, sacred spaces, cultural organizations, and restaurants. Adapted to the idiosyncrasies of a more diverse population, the strip malls have become a new context that has allowed an ersatz-street culture to develop within the outer loops of Houston.

The oldest strip malls along these peripheral corridors date from the early 1970s. Many of these L-shaped 'dog-legs' that turn their stores off the street offer an unexpected finely-grained retail typology, one that has been entirely rejected by big-box national chains and ancillary specialty retailers. The neighborhood-scale and affordability of this retail typology is of particular significance to the social, economic, and communal parameters of resilience. Offering new immigrants the ability to become economically independent, these modest retail strips have been critically important for emerging mom-and-pop merchants.

Opportunity exists within obsolescence. Older strip-malls are forced to confront not only demographic shifts, but also changes to the institutions that have come to define our contemporary culture such as relative proximities, consumer technologies, and unlimited choice. When the oldest strip-malls were new, they provided developers a pragmatic way to organize low overhead and moderate yield shopping districts. Tethered to subdivisions in a generally pre-big box era with fewer options, the strip-malls created a common sense efficiency that addressed basic needs with modest expectations. Big box stores, regional shopping malls, and the internet have effectively undermined the viability of most of these early strip-malls. National retailers avoid them since they suffer from both insufficient parking and low profitability. Services have decamped alongside small shops — jewelry repair, greeting cards, photographers, printers, banks, optometrists, and dentists may now be found within big-box stores as well.

New needs have emerged within a demographically diverse periphery. Today, strip malls address the most modest of consumer needs — dollar stores, $3 haircuts, nail salons, smoke shops, bakeries, ethnic restaurants, and video stores have filled a void left by dry cleaners, hardware shops, and wallpaper stores. Less formal occupancies have transformed these obsolete infrastructures into strip-mall sized places of otherness—'Little' Saigons, Mexicos, Tegucigalpas, and Colombias. Here, the livelihoods of multiple families are leveraged upon a small investment allowing human relationships to form supportive interdependencies

3_FROM PACKED TO PERFORATED: *The Dead Mall*

After World War II, urban life in the United States began to fracture and disperse along social, economic, and demographic lines. Much has been said about the collapse of American cities and the social cohesiveness that they fostered, as well as the simultaneous rise of a homogeneous, trans-continental suburban culture. Several socioeconomic factors converged to continually drain authentic commercial districts from the central core, while promoting peripheral greenfields as lands of limitless consumer opportunity. Fueled by mass media and television

culture, mainstream American consumer patterns transferred in successive rings beyond the center core and then matured in suburbia. Suburbs witnessed the emergence of entirely new and autonomous forms of public-commercial space as urban retail fragments within a boundless landscape. Conventionally *urban* commercial and social experiences were displaced to the suburbs and became internalized; communal life in the United States was effectively translated into controllable *interior* worlds.

The developmental patterns of shopping malls have become synonymous with automobile dependency and suburban sprawl. For a generation of Houstonians raised in the post-war suburbs, expectations of civic space were incubated in the encapsulated worlds of shopping malls, and thus, orphaned from any tangible connection to downtown. Rather than choosing between the authenticity of urban retail districts versus the convenience of the suburban shopping mall, suburbanites became connoisseurs of their own realms, choosing between malls that increasingly competed for patrons within the same territories. Shifting consumer preferences, forged in a throw-away suburban culture of post-war largesse, would result in waves of retail abandonment not unlike those experienced in central cities during the post-war years.

Concurrent with these shifts, many North American cities including Houston, have attempted to compete with suburban malls by co-opting the typology for downtown. For the most part, appropriated suburban forms have ultimately failed in a downtown context. Rather, central cities have re-emerged in recent years through widespread reassessment of their valuable cultural venues, building typologies, urban configurations, and civic life. In wake of this, a transformational shift has placed the suburbs and their utilitarian buildings into a state of increasing disinvestment and abandonment. More recently, enclosed shopping malls of the suburbs have shifted in status from desirable amenities to unwanted liabilities.

In *'The Architectural Uncanny'*, Anthony Vidler considers architecture in regard to the *uncanny* as a metaphor for the modern condition. He analyzes the state of Architecture in an era of increasing obsolescence in everyday building typologies of the recent past. He interprets the ungrounded qualities of abandoned or under-used shopping malls as the wasted territories of consumerism, corporate disinvestment, and post-industrial culture. Vidler considers the problems inherent to such architectures as they lose their novelty and fade into ghosts of the past, proposing a future vision of retail environments built upon the ruins of alienation, suburban exile, and obsolescence. Forgotten by their intended users and appropriated by others, these so-called *dead malls* are the cast-off orphans of a recent past civilization. They exist along the undefined margins of our suburban landscapes as scars and dead zones, yet there are qualitative nuances in their so-called deadness. Existing in various states of informality and disinvestment, 'deadness' ranges from total erasure to emerging, vibrant, and alternative communities of otherness.

Conventional malls built during the first and second waves of mall development are increasingly a lost generation. One prominent Houston example of this phenomenon is the Greenspoint Mall located at the junction of Interstate 45 and Beltway 8. It has been diminished by the re-emergence of downtown, new retail forms, web-based means of consumption, and shifting demographics. Opening in 1976, Greenspoint Mall was once the largest mall in the Houston metropolitan area. By the late 1980s, it began to wane with the mid-1980s oil recession, the arrival of newer malls at Willowbrook and Deerbrook, as well as a dramatically

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Figure 6: Greenspoint Mall carnival, North Houston courtesy of Reithoffer

rising crime rate. Over the last ten years, most of the original six anchor stores have closed, while mall shops have transitioned from national retailers to locally owned merchants. The mall itself has become increasingly dead, yet the massive parking lots have witnessed new activity in the form of carnivals and motorcycle meet-ups. These informal activities offer new layers of life that contrast radically with the past.

CONCLUSION

Aging strip malls, big box stores, and enclosed shopping malls effectively — if somewhat ironically — afford immigrant communities an existing connective infrastructure that serves many needs. Ethnic shops, storefront churches, and social clubs are housed in former bastions of suburban conformity. In their transition from solidly middle class to greater socioeconomic diversity, suburban neighborhoods and their long-time residents must negotiate various polarities — chaos/order, ambivalence/adaptation, resistance/resilience — while continually learning and transforming within a new context. The obsolete and radically altered retail environments in these neighborhoods offer a window on the future of Houston. On the one hand, suburbs are increasingly more urban, heterogeneous, and socioeconomically blended. On the other, they contain core attributes of resilient systems — resource diversity, resource availability, and institutional memory — and thus, offer the potential for more complex socioeconomic layering and urbanity.

In contrast to its intent, Houston's early twenty-first century periphery is resoundingly less shaped by developers, designers, and the exclusionary views of HOA-defined 'people like us'. Adapted through the needs of laypersons, merchants, and makers, this temporal and globalized landscape is increasingly contingent upon affordability, practicality, compromise, and connectivity far beyond the physical boundaries of the United States. This new periphery sabotages conventional wisdoms and shifts our expectations for what is possible in suburbia. Unlike most North American cities, suburban Houston offers exceptional affordability and a near limitless opportunity for the adaptive re-use of overbuilt existing retail infrastructure and housing stock. Furthermore, various incremental accretions reveal the subtleties of faded experiences, memories, and spatialities of a past suburban paradigm. A formerly homogeneous suburban utopia has been replaced by a far more complex and globalized urban heterotopia.

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ENDNOTES

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2. John Sturrock (1979), *Structuralism and Since: from Lévi Strauss to Derrida*
3. LeFebvre, Henri, *The Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1,* John Moore trans., London: Verso. Originally published in 1945, reprinted in 1991.
4. LeFebvre, Henri with Catherine Regulier-*Lefebvre Eléments de rythmanalyse: Introduction à la connaissance des rythmes, preface by René Lorau, Paris: Ed. Syllepse, Collection "Explorations et découvertes". English translation: Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life, Stuart Elden, Gerald Moore trans. Continuum, New York, 2004*
5. Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias. This text, entitled "Des Espace Autres," and published by the French journal Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité in October, 1984. The text was the basis for a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death. It was translated from French by Jay Miskowiec.*
6. Kever, Jeannie, *'Houston Region is Now the Most Diverse in the U.S.', Houston Chronicle,* March 5, 2012.
7. *Sydney Lewis was a leading collector of contemporary art, Art Nouveau and Art Deco, and a major benefactor of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. With his wife, Frances, Mr. he founded Best Products in 1958 as an early and highly successful showroom catalogue business that specialized in household appliances, jewelry, toys, sporting goods, cameras, and electronics. The couple found their true calling in the early 1960s, when Mr. Lewis's doctor told him that he was working too hard and needed a diversion. Acting on a lifelong common interest, the Lewises became patrons of both art and architecture, supporting an innovative program of high-profile alternative buildings for Best Products and collecting contemporary art, concentrating at first on Pop Art and Photo Realism. Over the next twenty years they amassed an enormous collection and became close friends with many artists and architect James Wines of SiTE. They frequently acquired art through trades of Best Products goods, enabling many struggling artists to furnish their lofts with appliances and televisions and to live in relative comfort, sometimes before they were selling much work. Source: New York Times, Roberta Smith*
8. Drexler, Arthur: *'Introduction' in: 'Buildings for Best Products',* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1979, p.10.
9. Moss, Stanley, *BOMB, 'Artists in Conversation: James Wines',* Spring 1991.
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PARADIGM OR PRACTICE: MODELS OF DESIGN + RESEARCH FOR A NEW GLOBAL AGE

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