



## 2013 Remaking Cities Congress

Urban Systems, Infrastructure, and the Post-Industrial City

Thought Leader Summary

# Is It Too Late?

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Is it too late?

Carbon in the atmosphere is already over 400 ppm; there will minimally be an increase in temperature of 2 degrees (C), our leaders are in denial or paralyzed by the prospect of taking any action that would make a difference. Climate change is too slow, too global, too difficult for the current generation. We prefer not to ponder an apocalyptic future, especially if we'll be cashing out before the horsemen show up.

If it is too late, what is the point of urban design that only cosmetically deals with the city as it is, not the city that will be pummeled by the forces we are unleashing?

New York before Sandy. Calgary, Boulder and Alcapulco before their billion-dollar floods. My city, Vancouver, before sea-level rise.

Yet a Monty Pthyonesque future—with continual news of fresh catastrophe - may be the opportunity that a generation of planners and urban designers need to advance an aspirational agenda that 'sustainability' cannot capture. (Too medicinal, that word: "Here, have a dose of sustainability; it's good for what ails you." And it's already been co-opted by those who have who have refined greenwashing to an art form.)

The future will instead be about 'defensive infrastructure'—the public works needed to protect our existing assets and as much of our way of life that we can afford. Massive resources will be diverted to those who promise they can protect us.

Traditionally, that has been the military, hand in hand with engineers capable of building and managing large, single-purpose projects. In peacetime, those skills are directed to the construction of public works that can transform continents: freeways, water projects, power grids.

Can those resources be used to not just respond to the impacts of climate change but to design, build and transform urban environments that are more resilient, more equitable, more beautiful?

Well, sure. There are already examples. But what we need now is recognition by those with the power and resources that it is possible to build both the dike and the greenway, to integrate landscape urbanism with strategic retreat, to create both a more beautiful and humane urban environment that responds to both the vagaries of nature and diverts us from doing more of what created the problem in the first place. But that strategy be conceived and promoted now.

It's not too late for that.