

What Depressions Look Like

AMY HOWDEN-CHAPMAN

THE ABSENCE OF ANYTHING NEW TO LOOK AT seems to be foreshadowing what is to come. In an inventory of these times, what is missing is any sign of concrete change - that is, concrete changing shape and towering up. The city is becoming still, the skyline is ceasing to oscillate. There are whole blocks where nothing appears to be forming - whole blocks have been left form-free. The new refusal of money to meld into credit is not even leaving absence in its wake. There is no wake, no waves, just plain stillness.

I can see people with the words 'these are strange times' drifting out of their mouths and about their minds. And I've seen some people with strange minds referring to these times of 'financial contractions'. The strangeness of these times is that we can't see ahead, we can't see what will be. Uncertainty has blocked, blindfolded, brick-walled, built out the view of our long view. Now the only place to look is around, and it's strange to see what is just over there. In times like these we expect to see something change, but it is more likely that the only change we will see is less change.

How will it look? Less like a dustbowl, less like soil soup; more like a pit of dirt, a building site without the building. Buildings being built now will be given at least skins, rain shields. But that will be all. They will be nothing but 'see throughs' - nothing internally complete. The bimbos of buildings.

Every day on my way to work I pass a plywood wall with the words 'A life above the ordinary' written along it. Each letter is black and sleek and almost as tall as I am. The wall is taller than I am - I can't see over it. Before the wall, there was a building, and before they pulled the building down, they built a set of stairs on its roof. The stairs were made of scaffolding, and they climbed up three invisible stories so that prospective buyers could see what the view might be like from their future life above the ordinary.

The building site is surrounded on three sides by roads, so that on each corner of the site there is an intersection. All around the site there is a continuous stream of cars idling and then accelerating away. Behind the wall there is the pit; above the pit hangs a billboard. On the billboard there is a goofy picture of a traffic-light switched to green and the words, 'We're all go. Bucking the Trend. Work starts Nov 08.' November has passed. Things may still change behind the wall, but they are changing so slowly that it seems like nothing is happening at all.

It is hard to see forward, but it is getting easier to see backwards to what was happening. To see how the buying of mortgages by Wall Street investment banks added pressure for more and more types of mortgages to be approved, because that's what commissions depended on, and commissions were big.

This American Life lets you see slices of what was going on by letting you listen to the stories of people like 'Glen'. Glen was making between 75 and 100 grand a month: 'We lived mortgage,' he says. When he wasn't working, he was doing his next favourite thing - spending in the company of b-list celebrities: 'Christina Aguilera and all her people are there ... we order three or four bottles of Cristal at one thousand

dollars a bottle.' He had five cars, a \$US1.5 million vacation house in Connecticut and a rented penthouse in Manhattan.

Glen made much of his money making large loans to people with very little money and bad credit: 'They could barely make their car payments, and now we were giving them a three hundred thousand dollar, four hundred thousand dollar house.' There were NINA loans - No Income, No Assets - loans that were designed to enable people to get away with lying. Glen now has to borrow money from his dad: 'I have to watch every penny,' he says. He's not making any mortgage payments; he can't afford to¹. It seems so easy to blame people who like b-list celebrities.

First you look and then you see. 'All I can see is greed,' I say to Mike. 'Bernanke wasn't making decisions to make personal gains for himself,' he replies. Mike uses his logic to see other people's logic. I like that he can see things that I can't see.

Every time some new café would open up, my mother would remind me that things haven't always been opening up. There was a time before my time when there used to be more things closing down than opening up. See-saw.

I have always loved thinking of the time in the world when I was alive but didn't realise I was alive, the time when I was a child and there were bands that were big but I was home asleep in bed. I get nostalgic for those times, times when the Front Lawn was it, when the whole of Auckland was sitting on the veranda in the sun strumming and singing along to 'Andy', the song about the dead brother that tries to be nostalgic and grumpy about new flashy Auckland money, but just ends up being sad. In times like these there is nothing better than listening to a sad song.

A widower once said to me that the worst thing about his wife dying was that she stayed dead. Maybe there is nothing worse for us than things staying the same year after year.

In the late 1930s, Arthur M Schlesinger Jr concluded that the dominant mood of the unemployed early in the Depression was despair. 'People, he declared, were sullen rather than bitter, despairing rather than violent. Such Americans sat at home, rocked dispiritedly in their chairs and blamed "conditions"². In a crisis, if the worst thing to see is that nothing is changing, then the worst thing to feel is that you can't change anything, not even yourself, that you can't even stand up from your chair.

A depression looks like a hollow, like an area that has sunk below its surroundings. We may have to build our way back up and out with green jobs, toothpicks and gum. I can see a new skyline of saliva bubbles, ladders, and clean smiles.

1. 355: 'The Giant Pool of Money', *This American Life*, 5 September 2008, <http://www.thislife.org/Radio/Episode.aspx?sched=1242>.

2. McElvaine, Robert S. (ed.), *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the "Forgotten Man"*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1983.