



# IMPERMANENT ARCHITECTURE

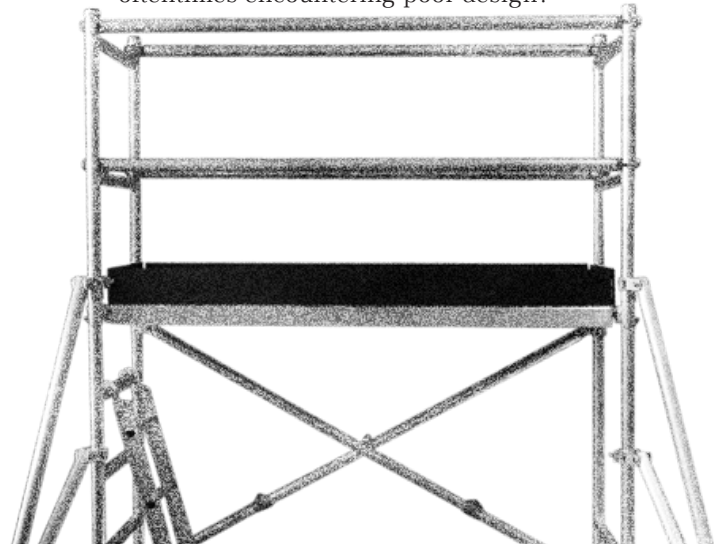
## The Medium of Existence

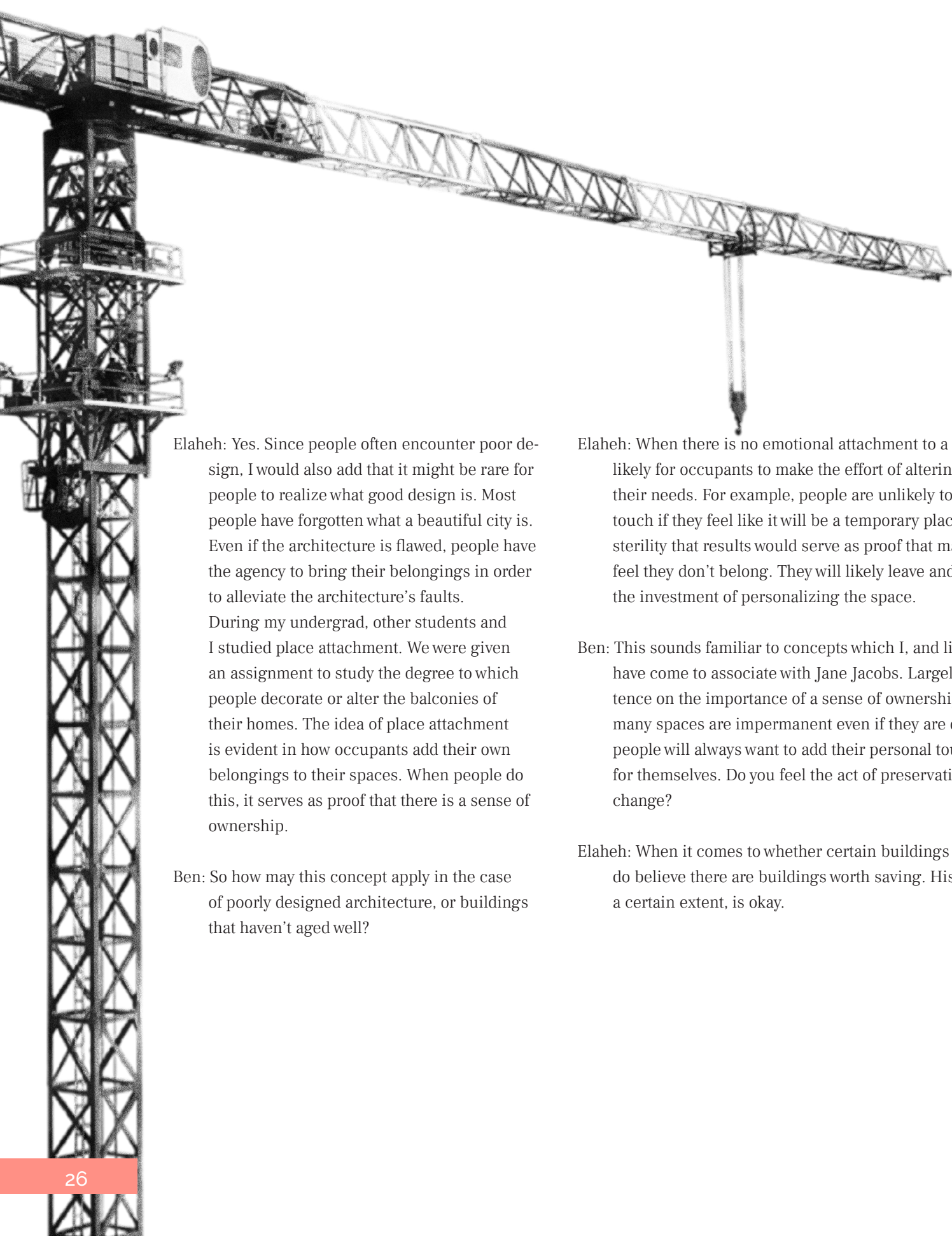
*Elaheh Houshmanidpanah + Ben Decuyper*

*In the Fall of 2019, Elaheh Houshmanidpanah and Ben Decuyper participated in the AIA Central States Region Student Design Competition with teammates Tanaka Kawondera and Skye Reid. The following conversation was catalogued in the days after the competition as Ben and Elaheh both continued to ponder the implications of the competition brief. The team placed second overall for their proposal "Pervious Park". Ben is a fifth-year architecture student, previous Telesis alumnus, and part of the Metamedia editing team. Elaheh is a second-year graduate student in architecture from Iran with an Bachelor of Architectural Engineering from Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman.*

Elaheh: People don't understand the effects architecture has on their life. They just ignore the qualities that each space can bring. You occupy spaces and this has an effect on your mood. We all have experienced places that make us happy, sad, depressed, in other words the places that make you stay longer or leave soon.

Ben: Americans spend 90 percent of their lives indoors (Environmental Protection Agency). It isn't specified what percentage of the remaining time is spent within a designed context. Even if we are not indoors, we're likely surrounded by buildings or at least occupying an exterior space that has been heavily altered. Do you think people are ignoring the effects architecture has on their life because they are oftentimes encountering poor design?





Elaheh: Yes. Since people often encounter poor design, I would also add that it might be rare for people to realize what good design is. Most people have forgotten what a beautiful city is. Even if the architecture is flawed, people have the agency to bring their belongings in order to alleviate the architecture's faults.

During my undergrad, other students and I studied place attachment. We were given an assignment to study the degree to which people decorate or alter the balconies of their homes. The idea of place attachment is evident in how occupants add their own belongings to their spaces. When people do this, it serves as proof that there is a sense of ownership.

Ben: So how may this concept apply in the case of poorly designed architecture, or buildings that haven't aged well?

Elaheh: When there is no emotional attachment to a place, it is far less likely for occupants to make the effort of altering a space to meet their needs. For example, people are unlikely to leave their personal touch if they feel like it will be a temporary place for them to live. The sterility that results would serve as proof that many people in the area feel they don't belong. They will likely leave and therefore won't make the investment of personalizing the space.

Ben: This sounds familiar to concepts which I, and likely many others, have come to associate with Jane Jacobs. Largely because of her insistence on the importance of a sense of ownership. With that in mind, many spaces are impermanent even if they are designed well because people will always want to add their personal touch or alter the space for themselves. Do you feel the act of preservation stifles this need for change?

Elaheh: When it comes to whether certain buildings should be preserved, I do believe there are buildings worth saving. Historic preservation, to a certain extent, is okay.

Ben: In what instances would preservation be okay?

Elaheh: Taking the initiative to prolong the life of a special building is fine, but to go back and attempt to touch up colors, minute details, etc. that is artificial and unnecessary.

Ben: How are we to determine which buildings are special enough to save?

Elaheh: I believe buildings which help to frame special urban spaces or have strong focal points are worth saving. Maybe one question to ask is can I make a better version of this place? If I wish to stay and feel I cannot improve the space, then it is worth preserving.

Buildings that are connected to nature are also valuable. In this example, by preserving certain buildings, you are also preserving the landscape they help define. For example, in Iran, homes that are made of clay, blend with the landscape and form small micro-climates in their courtyards, a preliminary version of Persian gardens. If you were to demolish these homes, you'd be eliminating the landscape. In certain instances, preserving the landscape is just as important as preserving buildings.

Ben: The inclusion of unique detailing, connection to nature, and contribution to meaningful urban spaces sounds like an architecture that has the characteristics of timelessness.

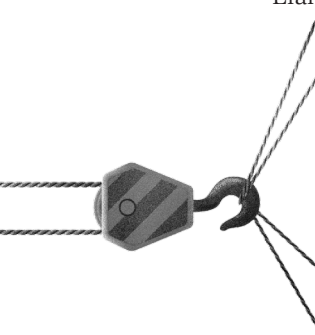
I would argue that in many cases, buildings found in downtowns or suburbs are not founded on these traditional principles. Also, buildings that collectively give form to faulted urban frameworks should not be seen as timeless or unalterable.

So, your earlier comments about place attachment, and how such conduct yields a built environment of constant alteration and devoid of outright renewal are very interesting. In many ways, the concept suggests the necessity for successful, personal designs to undergo change. And this change isn't a bad thing, but is instead evidence that the architecture is worthwhile.

On the other hand, it is completely reason-



able for people to only invest in buildings if they know they are making a long-term investment. As a result, we find ourselves in an unfortunate position. When a building is constructed, regardless of its quality, it is likely going to be with us, in an unaltered state, for quite some time. There is a sense of permanence to the act of construction.



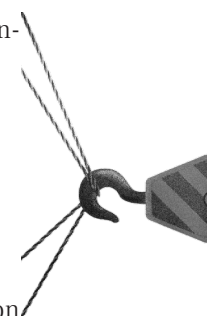
Elaheh: Also, even if a building is personable following its completion, that doesn't guarantee the building will remain a success in that regard in years to come. Ultimately, I feel it comes down to the autonomy of the people and not a designer or architect. It is ultimately in the people's control to alter the built environment to meet their needs and reflect their identity.

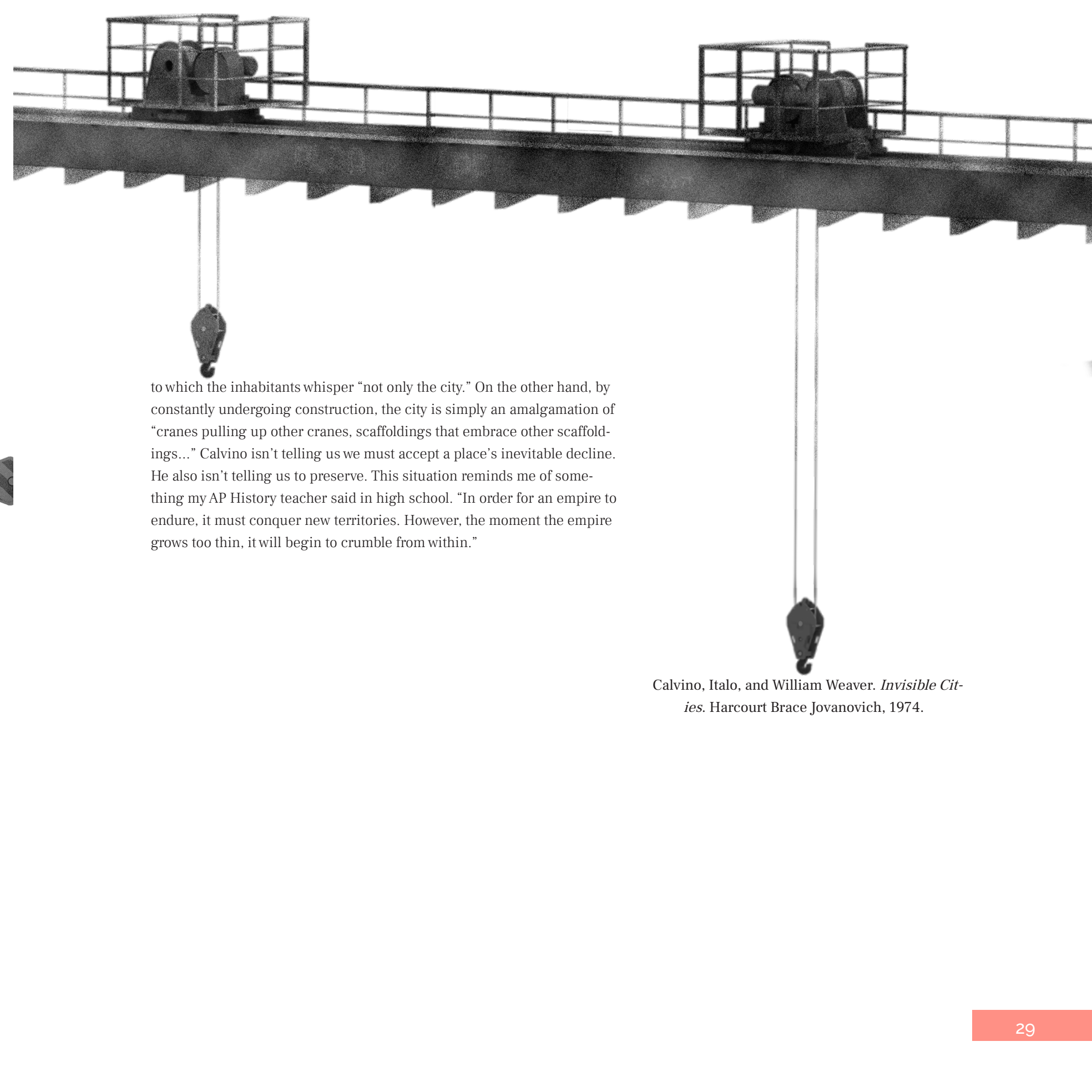
Ben: On that note, I can't help but think of Ise

Shrine in Japan. It is rebuilt every 20 years and at each point of reconstruction, new building methods are incorporated into its design. It's much more flexible than something like Notre Dame, which will be impossible to replicate in its reconstruction. Again, the concept of place attachment and peoples' willingness to alter their spaces comes to mind. Since Ise Shrine undergoes a voluntary, cyclical reconstruction, it is an example of impermanent architecture. But it could certainly go further than simply incorporating new construction methods.

What if most buildings were reconstructed every 20 years and at each point of reconstruction, the design and post occupancy were evaluated to question whether or not the design should be altered to adopt new uses, construction methods, configurations, or whether the building should be kept at all?

In Reference to Calvino<sup>1</sup>: The city of Thekla, a city constantly under construction "so that its destruction cannot begin"... In a way, Calvino manages to characteristically, ingeniously, sum up a collection of opposing positions in a single provoking story. In one sense, as noted in the passage, if the city's progression stops, the city will crumble;





to which the inhabitants whisper “not only the city.” On the other hand, by constantly undergoing construction, the city is simply an amalgamation of “cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings...” Calvino isn’t telling us we must accept a place’s inevitable decline. He also isn’t telling us to preserve. This situation reminds me of something my AP History teacher said in high school. “In order for an empire to endure, it must conquer new territories. However, the moment the empire grows too thin, it will begin to crumble from within.”

Calvino, Italo, and William Weaver. *Invisible Cities*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.