Draw your first universe. What does architecture achieve? What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place? What does it mean to be modern? Should we all be Architects? Memory of an object/future of an object.
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Being Tectonic is an ongoing research project initiated during the pre-programme period of the 2019 Oslo Architecture Triennale. In the autumn term of 2018 the curators ran a course in the Institute of Form, Theory and History at Oslo School of Architecture. The course was structured as an open think tank where readings and seminars on a series of themes were explored through writing, drawing and discussion.
The work collected here is made up of contributions from the curators and the students of the Being Tectonic course, as well as essays from the e-flux series Overgrowth, commissioned for the Triennale. These texts and drawings are presented beside a selection of references from people who shaped the seminars and discussions of the course and have inspired the thinking behind the curatorial theme of the Triennale. We would like to thank Erik Fenstad Langdalen and João Doria for helping to make the course and this publication possible.
4 Being Tectonic

7 Seminar 1: Developing Degrowth: An introduction to the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019

8 Developing Degrowth

12 Degrowth and the City

35 Seminar 2: Hyperobject Architecture: Understanding the widest possible view of our craft.

36 Hyperobject Architecture

55 Seminar 3: Thinking Space and Place

56 The Production of Space and Place

67 What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?

79 Seminar 4: The Nucleated Family: Is familism an ideology?

81 The Nucleated Family

100 Sustainability is not sustainable

107 Seminar 5: Dépense: Wasting time as an act of resistance.

108 In defence of our dépense

123 Seminar 6: Borders and Barriers: What should architecture be concerned with?

124 Cobbler stick to your last

128 Ethics have a sell-by date.

133 Seminar 7: Creative Methods in Public Space

134 Materiality as Performance
Being Tectonic

Matthew Dalziel
Tectonic culture, as understood in architectural discourse, is the art of connection between building elements. Its Neolithic root, Tek, meaning “to take by the hand” is also the root of texture. The richness of corporeal and haptic experience provided by the tectonic arts is well understood in architectural poetics and phenomenology, where richness in material relationships heighten an individual’s sense of being and belonging in a place.

In construction, the suite of nouns we use to describe tectonic relationships (stress, tolerance, tension, connection) share their meanings with the language of human relationships. Humans and objects alike, have tectonic relationships with each other governed by the dynamics between them. Our sense of being and belonging with each other is the companion to material tectonics governed by the ways in which we share the spaces we inhabit.

The 20th century preoccupation with efficiency has been quietly and unintentionally at war with tectonic relationships. Simplification and reduction of complexity have infiltrated our material lives through evermore seamless and smooth material experiences to such an extreme that the digital, virtual and ephemeral may now have assumed the throne of the material kingdom. In human tectonics, this same inclination toward simplification has infected our social worlds, diminishing our capacity to engage with complexity in our society and to be present in our relationships with each other.

The social, environmental and economic consequences of this great experiment in ceaseless growth and ever increasing efficiency are now at our doorstep. As Umair Haque put it in his article for the Harvard business review of the same name, “Our economy is obsessed with efficiency and terrible at everything else.” If we are to find a solution to our environmental and economic crisis the sophistication of our relationships with each other will be at its heart.
In a time where democracy and current systems of power are being challenged and change is an increasingly present and accelerating force in our global and local societies...

What is the role and relevance of architecture in the future?

Developing Degrowth: An introduction to the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019
Developing Degrowth
From birth to puberty, hamsters double in size each week. If this rate of growth continued, by its first birth-
day, a hamster would weigh nine billion tons, capable of consuming the entire global corn crop within less than a day. Even before humankind first saw a photo-
graph of the whole Earth and the Club of Rome met to write about its limits, we have long known that infinite
growth is impossible. Yet the critique of growth has fueled powerful reactions that have taken place both in and to our built environments, from deregulation and degradation to speculation, derivation, and exclusion. Architects and urban practitioners, toiling daily at the coalface of economic expansion, are complicit in the perpetuation of growth. They are also in a unique posi-
tion to contribute towards a move away from it.

It is increasingly easy to find consensus around alternative values to money and wealth, such as happiness and wellbeing. However, the power of capitalism is such that these protagonists are easily neutralized by treating them as commodities and reframing them as merely another flavor of economic growth, as “good for business.” Art and culture become creative indus-
tries; scientific innovations become national exports; social networks become advertising markets; psycho-
logical therapy becomes professional coaching; ar-
chitecture and design becomes surplus value. The be-
ief that the end goal of society is, and must always be, economic growth co-opts everything in its path.

Cracks in the paradigm of growth are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, and the warnings that we need to do something about it ever louder. The 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report warns that a global mean temperature rise of 1.5° is the “tipping point” for global catastrophe and that at the current rate we’re on, we only have twelve years to do something about it. Yet who is this “we” that can
afford 1.5°? For as Lumumba Di-Aping, chief negotiator for the G77 nations argued at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference, a global mean rise of 2° will bring a 3.75° temperature rise and disastrous effects to more hemispherical latitudes.

The hegemony of growth is often addressed pessimistically—that there is not enough coordinated will or incentive to enact the scale of change needed. Yet as the work of 2018 Nobel Prize in Economics laureate William D. Nordhaus demonstrates, addressing climate change can be both affordable and local. But to what extent can the crises of growth be effectively addressed with the very categories (“affordability”) and mechanisms (“locality”) which brought them about in the first place? What new concepts, vocabularies, and narratives might be needed to expand the ways in which growth can be confronted?

Climate change is just one consequence of being unable to imagine, let alone bring about the end of growth. The question of housing still has yet to be answered, while issues of availability, affordability, quality, and location only intensify with the sustained deregulation of real estate markets all over. Poverty persists in the world’s most vulnerable communities, and economic inequality only widens. An ageing population throws local economies into crisis, while social care and support networks are eroded from the top-down and bottom-up. On top of all of this, bodies continue to do what they have always done: move in search of a new life, be it from the countryside to the city or from one part of the globe to another, no matter by choice or by necessity.

As the drivers of growth begin to reveal their inadequacies for sustaining life, we must imagine alternative societal structures that do not incentivize unsustainable resource and energy use, and do not perpetuate
inequality. Here we can look to degrowth, a movement that contests the supremacy of economic growth and seeks to move away from its stressful, damaging, and ultimately impossible task; not by collapse, but by design. Working on the frontline of capitalism, it is through architecture and urban practice that alternative values, systems, and logics can be manifest in built form and inherited by generations to come.

What can architecture be when buildings are no longer instruments of financial accumulation? What kinds of spaces are built for cultivation, rather than extraction? What materials and technologies will be used when we can no longer afford value engineering? How will the architect of tomorrow will play a meaningful civic role in the creation of new building types, urban morphologies, social habits, and cultural practices? How will cities be formed when it is human and ecological flourishing that matter most? 

The Curators
The degrowth hypothesis posits that a radical, multi-scalar reorganization of society is needed in order to achieve a drastic reduction in resource and energy consumption and therefore remain within the planetary boundaries. Moreover, advocates of this hypothesis suggest that such a shift is not only necessary but also desirable and possible. Degrowth started as an activist slogan in France in the early 2000s against consumerism and commodification, but has since evolved into both a subject of academic inquiry and an international social movement. Degrowth now operates as a starting point for envisaging new worlds that can provide better lives with less, in which sustainability goes hand in hand with equity and a pluriverse of alternatives substitutes the growth “machine” that characterizes contemporary society.

Against this background, a series of innovative research agendas have been developed to support this hypothesis. Degrowth was first developed alongside the field of ecological economics, but its recent expanded agenda involves research in the fields of political ecology and environmental justice, anthropology, technology, philosophy, wellbeing, democracy, justice, and more. However, in a world that has been and is still being increasingly urbanized, degrowth has largely neglected the topic of urbanization. Its scholarship should thus develop theoretical and practical proposals in an effort to rethink what degrowth means as an urban form of life. Such a theoretical endeavor is urgent today since global population has rapidly grown, the biggest part of which lives in cities; increasing GDP levels being produced in cities has tied economic growth to urban expansion; and the ecological footprint of the cities has grown to become
the main drivers of unsustainability. Most importantly, this growth has not been distributed evenly and has produced high levels of marginalization both in urban centers and the periphery. Against this background the following questions are crucial:

How can urbanization be compatible with degrowth? How can cities become places of experimentation that challenge and transcend the growth imperative? What is the role of architecture and urban planning in this process? How can urban dwellers contribute? What is the role of urban governance?

The existing literature on these complex and, perhaps for the moment, rhetorical questions is marginal and primarily focused on the case of shrinking cities; cities that have undergone a crisis of production and GDP reduction and which managed to constructively adapt to this new reality. Despite the importance of these studies, the exploration of the relation between degrowth and the city is still underdeveloped. In order to envisage a tentative framework for thought and reflection on this topic, it is first crucial to examine the relation between growth and the current predominant model of urbanization.

The urban growth imperative

Cities have been pivotal for the development of societies all around the world. In the last decades of the twentieth century, they have gained further prominence and, often, became the signifiers of a country’s identity and wealth. In a continuously globalizing and antagonistic world, cities became the epitome of the “successes” or “failures” of a country and entered into competition for attracting human, cultural,
tourist, and financial capital; themselves often becoming a commodity to be marketed and sold.

These transformations, which have rapidly intensified since the 1970s, reflect not only economic and technological changes, but also the prominence and embeddedness of a particular “culture” of growth connected to neoliberal ideas and practices. Thus growth has become associated with unlimited expansion and profit-making, with minimal care for the repercussions to people and places. This particular imaginary—and reality—of growth involves the idea that limits (to growth) are inherently negative, and that limitations are “backwards” and out-of-context with the continuous demand for growth (and consumption) that “people desire and require.” In some respect, the arguments supporting this culture of growth have worked as a further legitimation for the neoliberal project itself. Hence, urbanization has been linked to omnipotent beliefs such as that more urbanization leads to more prosperity for more people, or that “greening” cities can become a prominent strategy for saving their ecosystems. Alongside these particular ideas of growth is the ideal of a competitive, self-reliant, and “expansive” individual whose identity and status is shaped by these characteristics as well as what it possesses and what it consumes; by potentially unlimited having and possessing.

Cities have been the terrain where this culture of growth has been materialized, in actual as well as in symbolic terms. Among other ways, growth has been spatialized through increasing privatizations, enclosures, and departmentalization of the city into enclaves of regulated consumption, as well as through real estate speculation and the financialization of
land and housing. It has been manifested by fancy office buildings, designer architecture of urban landmarks, and demand for ever bigger houses in city centers and the suburbs. While the spatialization of this growth imperative has resulted in increasing displacement and forms of exclusion from urban space and urban life as whole, it has also led to unlimited urbanization—by choice for the wealthier or by coercion for the poorer—and to the limitless use of resources. It has intensified practices of repression and mechanisms of control while exacerbating inequalities and injustices. In short, the model of economic growth and the culture that follows it has operated more as an amplifier of spatial and social injustices in the urban context than a means to mitigate them.

Architecture, if seen not only as a profession but as a set of intellectual and social practices and relations for the shaping of space and place, has played an important role in linking urbanization to the particular growth imperative, being tightly connected to both city branding and the entrepreneurial conception of the self as it is.

The architecture that is expressed by signature buildings and large-scale corporate developments has often been employed in—or consciously facilitated—the promotion, mainstreaming, or even celebration of growth-fueled worldviews. This architecture produced spaces exclusive to many, with costly, resource-demanding materials and construction techniques, and often involving highly exploitative labor relations with its workers. This approach reduces architecture into an act of design for the sake of design that is removed from the social and environmental. Conversely, growth-fueled architecture also entails
extensive housing production for the less wealthy with unsustainable materials and a reduced building life-cycle, thus also resulting in greater resource consumption with inferior quality of living.

However, there is also a different side to architecture than this—or at least one that aspires to be. Numerous voices have criticized both the maximum-profit driven developments and the use of signature-buildings. Even more so, numerous other architectural initiatives have worked on local, community/common and participatory projects, advocating through theory and praxis that another architectural rationality does and can exist. In the center of Athens, for instance, a former parking lot was transformed into an inclusive green park through the working together of residents, architects, activists, botanists and other interested people (albeit not without conflicts with the state). Similarly, in the outskirts of Barcelona, residents, architects, users and many other people successfully collaborated in order to redesign and re-construct the surrounding space of a former leper hospital and current well-known squat.

Therefore, architecture may also play an important role in destabilizing and finally countering this one-dimensional relation. The question that then emerges is: what kind of architecture and urbanism can contribute to the transition towards a city of degrowth, having social, spatial and environmental justice in mind? How can we create a new inspirational counter-narrative that also considers how urbanization and urban life takes place? How can we imagine cities and urban life without this (neoliberal) culture of growth that has dominated the past decades?

Angelos Varvarousis and Penny Koutrolikou
Towards a city of degrowth

There are multiple lines to develop a degrowth framework relevant for the contemporary city. Ecological economics, for instance, proposes that not every natural resource should be monetized or valorized in terms of exchange value, since there are resources that can be regarded indispensable of the (re)production of human (and nonhuman) and social life. Although numerous activists and theorists have voiced similar views concerning the urban, this approach has remained mostly connected to natural assets. As a starting point, we could think of transferring and applying this approach to cities, which might prevent certain urban resources from being commodified or sold off. In this sense, public spaces would remain public, as do a number of other resources (such as water, energy, etc).

This logic could also be expanded to common resources; resources that could be produced and/or organized by residents, thus giving rise to a diverse landscape of institutions that could be molded and remolded in order to reflect the changing and plural needs of the multiple groups that use them. Although the terms “commons” and “public” are often used interchangeably, urban commons emerge and thrive in the interstices of law and outside the binary dichotomy between public and private. It is exactly this co-fertilization of the commons with the principles of degrowth that can give new meaning to the reorganization of urban space. Cities are not only where the culture of growth is materialized, but also privileged terrains for the flourishing of commoning practices that prioritize use values and collective creation over exchange values and commodification.
Housing is pivotal in this line of thinking. Unlimited speculation in housing has resulted in numerous evictions, displacements, exclusions, and in the development a peri-urban urbanization that consumes both natural resources and agricultural lands. Thus, housing should be treated as an urban resource—be that public, common or otherwise organized. Such an approach doesn’t only concern housing but other public infrastructures that could also be considered as urban resources (such as education, health, etc). This is particularly pertinent for today’s cities who suffer economically while treating housing, public infrastructure, and other resources as a means for economic recovery and growth through speculation. Architecture could thus facilitate the optimization of the use of buildings without resulting in reproduction of sameness or in “glossy distinctiveness.”

As degrowth has its roots in ecological approaches, one could envisage a “degrowth city” as a field of experimentation with innovative forms of urban agricultural production, with widespread connections with the peripheries of the same bio-region. As part of efforts to transform the whole urban fabric into a broader food production ecosystem, local food networks that directly connect producers to consumers, urban gardens, green terraces, and vertical indoor and outdoor food production can have both material and symbolic impact in the ways urban dwellers live, produce, and connect to each other.

Since unbridled consumption is at the core of the present culture of growth, challenging and changing such material and symbolic aspects of consumption is central to thinking about a city of degrowth. Diverse consumption patterns that reflect personal

Angelos Varvarousis and Penny Koutrolikou
and cultural differentiations can exist and correspond to the bioregional profile of the broader area of the city. Degrowth implies a politicization of consumption, since every choice implies a simultaneous acceptance of certain limitations and a specific consciousness regarding the special characteristics of bio-regions. In this way, bio-regional differentiations are not necessarily considered as negatives that have to be resolved through imports. On the contrary, they can be treated as assets that form the basis of urban and regional diversification. Rather than homogenous patterns of consumption which end up in uneven and unjust impacts (and development), this might result in plural cities and regions.

Architecture is not a profession that is disentangled from the rest of social life and therefore is not only the responsibility of architects to envision and implement. If seen as a set of intellectual and social practices and relations for the shaping of space and place, then the question arises of who should participate in the architectural design? To this is extent, a degrowth city incorporates forms of collective and/or participatory architecture at various levels; from the micro level of the communal building to the neighborhood and even the metropolitan level.

A degrowth city is not a utopian dream or a nostalgic reverie of a previous era. Instead, it would be a city that acknowledges the global character of the contemporary world and which tries to limit some of its most harmful social and environmental aspects in order to allow spaces for new connections and patterns of common life to emerge. A city of degrowth would thus also be one that invents ways to welcome newcomers and allow mobility.
The idea of city of degrowth does not attempt to homogenize, but rather focus on inclusiveness. Heterogeneity and plurality are not contrary to the values of equity, living together and effective sharing of the resources. Difference and plurality are inherent and essential for cities and therefore diverse spatial and social articulations are intrinsic in the production of a city of degrowth. They are also vital for the way such an idea of a city could be governed; possibly through local institutions and assemblies that try to combine forms of direct and delegative democracy.

Rather than developing rigid thought-images that demand people to conform to them, a flexible and inclusive socio-spatial imaginary about a city of degrowth would be more helpful; an open and inspirational urban narrative. These preliminary questions aim not to function as a complete narrative, but rather pave the way for such a broader socioecological transformation.
“For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world.”

Gaston Bachelard
Draw your first universe.
In this drawing you see three apartment buildings of five stories each. They are identical, and they kind of create this island because there are roads circling around them. And they have a green space in the middle. I think it’s from the ’50s, but I’m not exactly sure when. As I was drawing I became interested in how it was like an Island. And how it didn’t work as an island, because it felt like you were under surveillance. There are no connections to the other neighbourhoods around it. It was conceived this way and built this way. Someone planned this thing and built it in one operation thinking that people can live here, and they’ll have what they need.

Our house is on the ground floor. There’s a small balcony here, a half a storey up. I have many memories of forgetting the keys and having to jump onto the balcony and check if by chance the door to the balcony hadn’t been locked.

Near by, there was a small wilderness where we tried to build a little wooden house up in the trees. We collected materials and stored them under the terrace for about a week, while we were in the process of designing this wooden house. We hadn’t started to build, just to collect materials. And right when we were about to take all these materials up to that small wilderness and build the house, some of the neighbours picked up on our scheme and called our parents at their work, and said that your children are building something that they’re not authorised to build.

All the apartments are identical. This is a plan of the apartment that I grew up in. You enter into the middle of the apartment so it feels very informal and welcoming. The moment you enter you are invited into this hall space and the everyday life of the people who live here.

I have almost a perfect photographic memory of the tiles in this hall, because when I was speaking on the phone I would walk in this little hall room and only walk...
on the middle of the tiles, without touching the edges of them. Balancing around like that.

It’s interesting how these memories kind of unearth certain spatial qualities. Now I can hear the sound of bare feet on the linoleum, and the phone cable going “tick, tick, tick...” across the floor. My parents still live here, and I still walk around trying not to touch the edges of the tile pattern. But it’s difficult now, because my feet are much larger than they were when I was ten. I have to balance on my heels or toes now.

Of course there are some things that I can’t remember so I just started to draw and hoped that the memories would follow.
This is where I grew up. It’s in the countryside, but it is a small village with maybe 5000 inhabitants. My parents built this house when I was one year old and they got this site from my grandparents who, lived 50m from this house. They chose this house from a catalog. A lot of the houses in this area are catalog houses. You can see it in the terrain. The site had to be flattened because the house only works on a flat landscape. The lines around the houses are the levels in the ground where they just removed the terrain.

When I was little I always was outside. I had two routes I always took. The first was to get to my best friend who lived one house away from me. To go there I had to go around my house and through a opening in the neighbour’s fence. The opening started with just one plank loose and this was fine when we were small. As we grew though, the opening needed to grow with us. I think my neighbours were a bit angry about the situation but this didn’t stop us. We just ran as fast as we could once were were through the fence and into their garden, through the fence, past a big oak and safely into my friends house. That was the first way. The other was down to the water where we did a lot of swimming.

Student

Draw your first universe.

Student

28
This is the first home in my memory. It’s an apartment in Xi’an, China, in the countryside near the mountains. It is in a huge closed community with high walls and gates. All the residents worked for an institute of aerospace, so they were classified. My parents and my grandparents worked here.

The building has four storeys, and we lived on the top floor. I only lived in this apartment from the time I was born until I went to pre-primary school, but I still have many valuable memories from this time. I always hung out with older kids in the mountains, forest and rivers nearby. We caught fish, crabs and frogs in the river with our hands, and cicadas in the forest as well. We also destroyed bee nests several times to prove we were brave. Once I held a baby wolf in my arms. These special experiences became treasured memories to me.

Unlike today’s Chinese high rises, many of our neighbours were friends of ours. We knew and kept in touch with each other because they were also colleagues of my parents. We didn’t have cell phones or computers at that time, so the adults always went out to chat, play cards and dance in the night, and kids played games like hide and seek together.

This house itself actually doesn’t have any special qualities, It was too functional, like a machine. My only memory about it is the dark and terrifying corridor. When I was little, I never went to toilet alone in the night. I was too afraid.
My first home 1993-1997
Xi’an, Shaanxi, China
Apartment of a community in a mountain
This is where I grew up. I lived in the house in the middle. It was placed in between an industrial road and a little hill with a forest. There was a steep road behind my house that led to the forest at the top of the hill. From there we could see the fjord and the docks below.

We would go down to the docks to scavenge for stuff we might use. The forest was a steep hill covered in moss. In the forest there were shelves of rock, completely covered in moss. We had one shelf big enough to accommodate all of us, which we called our living room, and we would bring our stolen scavenged things up there.

One time we found buckets filled with something I remember was kind of like soap. It had a texture like cream, and we covered the whole shelf in the stuff.

The neighbourhood was quite close, and as kids we felt quite surveilled by the neighbours, so the forest was our secret space to do whatever we wanted to do. My parents had a dispute with our closest neighbour because he dug up our garden once, and we would never go over there even though it was the closest house to us. We were quite scared of him, and once we put berries in his newly poured concrete.

I don’t remember too much about the inside of the house. We spent a lot of time outside as kids. They were timber frame houses. My best friend lived in the apartment in the basement of my house and we would dream of building a staircase so we could visit each other all the time without going outside.
“Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense... and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”

T.S. Eliot
Hyperobject Architecture: Understanding the widest possible view of our craft.
Hyperobject Architecture
Timothy Morton introduced the term hyperobjects to describe the entities that we are only now becoming aware of in the world. These entities are dispersed in time and space in a way that makes them extremely difficult for us to perceive. Global warming and microplastics are perhaps the classic examples of hyperobjects. We are aware of them and perhaps think about them daily yet we cannot see them, chart their territories, or fully understand their impact on our lives. The harder we look at them the more they disappear from view.

The more that architecture engages with contemporary cultures of consumption and financialisation, the shorter its time cycles become. Our discrete building projects live and die in the cycles of overdetermined use, planned obsolescence and fickle trends of fashion. And yet, architecture itself is old and slow. Along with language it is a cultural invention that has separated us from all other living things and contributed profoundly to the evolution of our cultures. Architecture is how we make ourselves.

Understanding architecture may help us to position ourselves in relation to the challenges we now face within the discipline of architecture and as a species. When should we build? How should we build? and For whom are we building? Morton draws our attention to the depth and breadth of our responsibility that we can now understand extends backward in time to the earliest documented acts of art and architecture and forward in time to when the last traces of our present actions are fully dispersed.
“The indigenous peoples of North America, when confronted with major decisions, would ask: what will be the impact of the action under consideration on the next seven generations, as well as on the legacy of the seven previous generations? Like many pre-modern peoples, they viewed their lives and actions within a vastly greater time span than the short-termism that dominates today’s business
and political electoral cycles, and were acutely sensitive to the consequences of these for ancestors, descendants and Mother Earth. This is the true role of culture, to shape and keep alive the narratives and rituals that connect us to our place and peoples, to the planet and the long march of history and time, so giving meaning to and guiding our lives.”
“My poems (in the beginning) are like a table on which one places interesting things one has found on one’s walks: a pebble, a rusty nail, a strangely shaped root, the corner of a torn photograph, etc... where after months of looking at them and thinking about them daily, certain surprising relationships, which hint at meaning, begin to appear...

In its essence an interesting poem is an epistemological and metaphysical problem for the poet. “

Charles Simic
What does architecture achieve?
Architecture can achieve the creation of buildings to give people a better life. Architecture can demonstrate power, welfare, poverty and tragedy to mention a few. It can change our view of how a life is to be lived. The Utopian ideals of architects have largely informed the thinking on the good life today. But what architecture achieves can’t always been foreseen, and good utopian ideas can end up as dystopias when played out.

20th Century projects like Frank Lloyd Wright’s - Broadacre City have formed the way we think about home ownership. They depict the good life as a place where we all have detached houses with private gardens and many cars in the driveway.

Out in the suburbs, the most commonly built house is a so-called catalogue house, a house that is only suitable for standing on a flat site. This is the type I grew up in. The catalogue house is the most affordable way of realising the dream of Broadacre. But this reduced type of building has no sense of place and damages its environment at every scale. Architecture’s transformative potential is diluted when transformed into a product.
“The attempt to care for hyperobjects and for their distant future guardians will strikingly change how humans think about themselves and their relationships with non-humans. This change will be a symptom of a gradually emerging ecological theory and practice that includes social policy, ethics, spirituality, and art, as well as science. Humans become, in Heidegger’s words, the guardians of futurality.”
The first thing you learn about architecture when you start to study it, is that it represents an ancient and fundamental need for us as humans; The need to build a shelter and to take control of our environment.

So let’s say that the fundamental idea of architecture is to achieve shelters for our daily needs and activities and to create a place to look out at the world.

We can put these shelters in two different categories. The shelter for individuals and shelters for a communities. The shelter for the individuals we may call a home, and the communal shelter might address a common need or belief, like a church, a town hall or a school.

Today these two directions have developed and become more complex. But the main core in our discussions about architecture is still touching on the topic of public and private, and how we navigate these territories. The history of architecture can also tell us about this struggle between private and public and help us to understand how our buildings inform or idea about family and community, self and other.
“Through restoring community, renewing civic life and claiming our place in the world, we build a society in which our extraordinary nature —our altruism, empathy and deep connection—is released.

When we emerge from the age of loneliness and alienation, from an obsession with competition and extreme individualism, from the worship of image and celebrity and power and wealth, we will find a person waiting for us. It’s a person better than we might have imagined, whose real character has been suppressed. It is the one who lives inside us, who has been there all along.”

George Monbiot
Architecture can be a way for people to inhabit a place. It is a tool used for the demarcation of space and for the creation of attachments to pieces of the world which are claimed as home. Architecture is therefore a way of meeting the needs of privacy and private dwelling space within a public and shared world.

Architecture is a way of expressing the stories of our culture, of our laws, and of our customs; ideas that must be made concrete in order to be observed. In this way Architecture is a tool which is in the service of our political ideas and our economic ideas as much as our cultural ones. Since architecture surrounds us and guides our everyday actions, it is an effective way of reproducing the ruling ideologies of a given society.
“The evolutionary map of the human heart reveals the crux of the matter. What we’ve created in consumer capitalism is an economy which privileges, and systematically encourages, one specific segment of the human soul—the upper right quadrant.

A limited form of flourishing through material success has kept our economies going for half a century or more. But it is completely unsustainable and now threatens to undermine the conditions for shared prosperity.

The idea of an economy whose task is to provide capabilities for flourishing within ecological limits offers the most credible vision to put into place.”
Architecture creates places to meet, live, work, play, learn, worship, govern, shop and eat. Places where humans and non-humans can create and recreate the spaces and conditions of life.

In trying to relate to the world around us we use architecture to surround ourselves with predictable experiences. Creating environments that determine and reflect our world views. Our concerns with the use and appearance of our buildings, with their purpose and their aesthetics is governed by the constant evolution of thinking.

Architecture is not just about the building itself but also about the possibilities that ripple out from it. All aspects of human life are rooted in our perspectives and made manifest in our architectures.

Our built environment is then a collection of memories telling the story of architecture’s evolution, its revelations and its failings. Architecture is our way of expressing ourselves to ourselves.

We believe in our present world, as all societies did in theirs before us. There is a blind trust in our present actions and architecture achieves the environmental, social and aesthetic memory of this present trust.

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Student
“Assuming that the development of urban, public, or communicative space is impossible as long as architectural methods and techniques remain dedicated to the production of works that proclaim themselves to be internally defined and self-sufficient, I believe that the most pressing task in our time is the description of the ways that better buildings have been oriented or inclined beyond themselves.”
One can say that there is an inherent potential in space. Maybe a better way to describe it would be to compare it to a stage, where life happens without us realising that there ever was a stage. Architecture can enable life within it, and in the same way, architecture can also be formed by how it is used. Architecture can be a tool of great social and political significance that contributes to defining how we live our lives. Design can act as an enabler of good situations, and can also be a generator of great social discord.

However, it is also important to remember that we are not alone as architects able to control the outcome of situations. Different people might have different perceptions of places, and a place associated with only good things for you can be a different story for another person. This potential in space is always present, and architecture has the ability to play an important role in social interaction and our everyday lives.
“The synchrony of the street and the theatre was not coinciden-tal but represented the double role of urban space and theat-rical space in humanistic culture; even as the public realm of the street took on the function of the theatre of daily life —the city as a stage for the social action within its protecting walls— so did the theatre retain its place as the ideal depiction of the world. The building of the streets inside the theatre brought the space of the real into the domain of the ideal, the memory of the one al-low ing the observation and per-haps the critique of the other. ”
Architecture fulfils our most basic needs, sheltering us from weather and protecting us from outside incursions. In doing this, architecture is a tool for solving the problem of our vulnerability.

Architecture also offers humans and their activities a kind of dignity, identity and meaning. Just as we wear clothes and dress differently for different occasions, architecture becomes the performance of our customs like another kind of costume.

The signals our architectures send instruct us about the rules and customs of our society. We will not sing and dance in the library, and we will not eat in the bathroom either. We understand the codes of conduct in our society in, large part, through our built environment.

In protecting us from the outside world, architecture has learned to help us manage complexity, dividing the world into spaces and places for various activities and purposes.
“The intrusion of personality into the public realm radically altered the bridge in codes of belief between stage and street... finding out about a person from how they looked became a matter of looking for clues in the details of their costume. This decoding of the body on the street... led to a divorce of art and society.”
"We recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far."

Doreen Massey
The Production of Space and Place
Why and in what ways does space and place matter for understanding social life and processes, and hence for making architecture?

How can we think about and work with space and place, and what are the consequences of doing so in different ways?

Being Tectonic is about how we live together and the impact of architecture on the way we share and live in the places we inhabit. Thinking space and place is central for understanding the social life and processes of how we live together and is therefore significant for thinking about architecture as a cultural device.

We all know that the world looks different depending on where you come from, and where you stand. There is no neutral and objective god’s eye view. Similarly there are also different kinds of imaginations and approaches as to where we go next. In other words, different ways of thinking place have profound intellectual and political consequences, and so it is important to reflect on these.

Let us start with an iconic political moment of late twentieth-century Europe: the fall of the Berlin Wall. The wall was a spatial form that, from its establishment in 1961 through to its breach in November 1989, obviously and powerfully impacted on life in the city: it divided space, restricted movement, separated the previously intertwined lives of its residents. It was a manifestation of geopolitical conflict and contested ideologies that had material and symbolic significance. That space is political in this context — that this spatial structure not only expresses and is shaped by political interests but also serves them — is as apparent from the scenes of its rupturing and dismantling as from those of its first materialization.
If, as I have pointed out, walls are one visible way that social life is affected by spatial forms, then we can use them to think further about other forms of boundaries and lines of demarcation in cities that make spaces what they are. We might think of gated communities or new urban developments and corporate offices, privately owned public spaces. In his book, City of Quartz, Mike Davis documents what he terms the ‘fortification’ of Los Angeles as the downtown area was developed during the 1980s through a massive influx of capital investment, and new controls instituted in what had formerly been public space. He writes: “Even as the walls have come down in Eastern Europe, they are being erected all over Los Angeles.”

Even elements of built form such as bus benches are shaped in ways that reflect ideas about who belongs to the space, and who does not.

The common description of these benches as ‘bum proof’ refers not only to one’s backside but to the slang word for homeless person, whose presence – so Davis notes – was then being increasingly pushed into other areas. These processes of exclusion lead to normative places where it is possible to be either “in place” or “out of place”. As Tim Cresswell points out: Things, practices and people labelled out of place are often said to have transgressed often invisible boundaries that define what is appropriate and inappropriate. Mike Davis observes how the new upscale places of downtown Los Angeles are full of “invisible signs” that warn off an “underclass ‘other’”:

“Although architectural critics are usually oblivious to how the built environment contributes to segregation, pariah groups
— whether poor Latino families, young Black men, or elderly homeless white females – read the meaning immediately.”

This example invites us to think more widely about the character of spaces in cities: about the ways in which these reflect certain interests and values, particularly of those with most power; but also how they in turn shape activities and practices, how they serve to concretise and to reproduce social divisions. These issues can be considered at a variety of scales, from the grand constructions of architect-designed spaces through to the everyday environments – including flat surfaces that are spiked to prevent sitting, and smooth surfaces adorned with bumps to prevent skateboarding.

Further, we can think about codes, signs, directions and orders that are not rendered in built form but are nevertheless important in shaping the spaces in which we live. Where do we feel uncomfortable or excluded, where does our class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality matter in this regard? How do spaces contribute to senses of exclusion as well as inclusion, of not belonging as well as belonging?

The social construction of space and place

There is nothing ‘natural’ or ‘timeless’ about space and place. They are social constructs. That is to say: they are made through practices and imaginations that are political, cultural and economic, and we know that we find differences between how these play out everywhere we go. The material and symbolic forms of spaces, as well as ideas about them, are produced in
different ways in different societies. Therefore, rather than focusing simply on spatial forms themselves, we need to inquire into the practices and processes through which these forms are produced. As David Harvey put it in his book Social Justice and the City, some forty years ago:

“The question “what is space?” is therefore replaced by the question “How is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?”

Around the same time, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre wrote his famous book The Production of Space, whose title speaks of a similar concern: to address the spaces of the world around us (particularly the spaces of everyday life) as socially produced, by which he means shaped, created and used in ways that are material and mental. In other words, the production of space incorporates representation and conceptualization, imaginations as well as material practices. By this he did not mean, however, that spaces simply reflect societies and their power relations, that they simply express them and can therefore be read off from them in a straightforward way. Rather, the important point is that these produced spaces, in turn, provide the medium for social life. Their creation affects and shapes that life – what it is possible to do, what ideas and imaginings can be formulated and so on. In other words, they have constraining as well as enabling effects. There is therefore a reciprocal relationship whereby our actions and practices produce the spatial world around us, while that world then constrains, channels and makes possible subsequent action and practice.
Towards a progressive sense of place

Today, we encounter conceptions of space and place that are frequently grounded in exclusion and fear. We might think here of the rise of the far right, nationalism, heritage projects which try to freeze places in time, fears around migration and ‘asylum seekers’. These conceptions relate to a worldview that is oriented around rooted fixed places with clear boundaries and stable identities. However, the more the world is ordered into discrete places, the more people and things that exist outside those places are likely to be labelled as disorder. For example, people that are seen as “placeless” (sans papiers), or who lead mobile lives (for example refugees, homeless people, gypsies etc.) are often seen as threatening towards these stable conceptions of place and space.

The work of geographer Doreen Massey plays an important role in countering this idea that mobility is a threat to place, and rather emphasises that places are actively constituted by mobilities. According to Massey, places are more about “routes” than “roots” because they are produced through connections to the rest of the world. Places, then, are sites for heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, identities. This is what Massey calls “a progressive sense of place”, a “global sense of place” and “an extrovert sense of place”. Places are here not defined by a clear outside and inside, and it is therefore much harder to make judgements about insiders and outsiders. It’s not a single identity, not a single sense of place shared by all. Just as people are recognized to have multiple identities, she notes, so do places. Accordingly, place
cannot be identified straightforwardly with for example community. Massey suggests that a common response to this approach has been to emphasise the local as a “retreat” from the global. Massey notes that this is indeed frequently exclusionary and reactionary. It involves attempts to exclude outsiders and return to some mythic or more pure sense of place identity. To counter these fears, Massey wants to promote a hopeful, imaginative, politically challenging geographical imagination of place.

Space, place and degrowth

Central to degrowth is to forge a progressive sense of place, as envisioned by Massey. This sense of place challenges two dominant approaches to space and place:

The first approach holds that spatial arrangements express or reflect social processes and divisions. We see examples of this, for example, when processes such as gentrification are positioned as the natural evolution of urban neighborhoods, and the role of the state in facilitating disinvestment and displacement is ignored. Or in geographical imaginations that subordinate space to time—for example, when different places are positioned as being ‘ahead’ or ‘behind’ one another in some way. Think, for example, of the colonial idea that the development we have undergone here in the Global North is a superior model to be imposed on the so-called ‘underdeveloped’ countries of the Global South. This, in spite of the fact that the dominant growth paradigm we have followed is catastrophically failing to deliver prosperity for all, rather it produces
inequality, pollutes cities and turns relatively self-sufficient rural communities into dependent ones.

The second approach emphasises the impact of space on social processes. At its most extreme this can become a spatial or environmental determinism whereby social practices and social life are more-or-less determined by spatial forms. Classic examples of this feature in claims where environmental differences and geographical location were key to explaining ‘the fates of human societies’. For example: tropical climates breed disease and laziness, while northern ones promote industriousness. Elements of this determinism linger, for example, in the claims of some critics that the spatial design of high rise housing estates causes crime, and hence that crime can be “designed out” (rather than addressed through dealing with underlyng issues such as unemployment, deprivation and so on).

The position suggested through the idea of degrowth, however, is about the mutual constitution of space and society. For example, degrowth acknowledges that there are many different forms of development and that the Global North has much to learn from the South in organising social relations and cultivating alternative narratives of human well-being. In Latin America, for example, the paradigm ‘Buen Vivir’ has initiated debates about what welfare and the good life means, as well as questioning the predatory relationship to nature that is imposed by capitalist patterns of civilisation.
Mapping social relations
A public square in my community
"The crisscrossing of social relations, of broad historical shifts and the continually altering spatialities of the daily lives of individuals, make up something of what a place means, of how it is constructed as a place."

Doreen Massey
What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?
Belonging for me is a place that has an effect, something that appeals and has memories attached to it. To create belonging in a place, one must be able to relate to it through memories. Belonging takes time to develop, therefore, areas that emerge over time are more successful as a whole than new neighborhoods where people have nothing to relate to.

In areas that have little variation in the built structure, it is up to those living to create a personal touch, such as hanging curtains, airing blankets outside the window, planting flowers in the windows, installing lamps that provide different lights, or putting outdoor furniture on the balconies. Children playing between the buildings can lead an area to have a feeling of belonging. Something that’s different from the other is important.

There is optimism in new developments, a real sense that they will provide good homes for new residents. But belonging takes along time to develop and modern buildings are not built to last. An area changes as those who live there develop social connections to the architecture and landscape. The places and spaces created serve a framework for a life lived.

What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?
"Nothing has fortified my own memory so profoundly as gaz- ing into courtyards, one of whose dark loggias, shaded by blinds in the summer was for me the cradle in which the city laid its new citizens. The caryatids that supported the loggia on the floor above ours may have slipped away from their post for a mo- ment to sing a lullaby beside the cradle—a song containing lit- tle of what later awaited me, but nonetheless sounding the theme through which the air of the courtyards have forever re- mained intoxicating to me."

Walter Benjamin
Place and the experience of place is a personal and subjective experience. We can also define place from a more objective view. Place can be defined from political, historical and cultural perspectives that may have more collective understanding. I can describe the place where I grew up, where I would say that I belong - a farm in Sweden, surrounded by lakes and forest. It might give you an image of a red house with white window casing. This is the place. I can go on and describe it in detail, and you could visit the place in your mind, but we could never share the same experience of the place. To me, belonging is something personal. Maybe it could be described as a result of a phenomenological perspective, where my perception and memory creates a place only I can go.

Student
“If one takes architecture as the expression of an individual life, one starts at the centre rather than at the face, asking what space is created rather than what plot is filled. Places thoroughly lived in become internalized in a series of adjustments till they represent a person to themselves.”

Robert Harbison
To belong somewhere implies that there is a larger coherence to be found in the relations that make up a place. This is because one does not belong with an object in itself, but with the range of objects that make a place. Belonging somewhere carries cultural and political baggage, as it may bring with it a need to conform to a set of ideological positions associated with a given place. Perhaps one belongs when one is not ready to or even able to point out these positions because they have been sufficiently internalised.

Belonging is a negotiation between the individual and the collective, the subjective and the objective, where when experiencing a new place, one becomes aware of the degree to which the practices that occur there are in line with or in conflict with one’s own sense of self.

What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?

Student Adam Caruso
“The urban environment is a precise emotional condition. Being in the city feels a certain way. This is similar to being at home, you know when you feel at home, when you can take your shoes off and relax. The feeling of being at home can be communicated to other people even though they live in different kinds of homes. Similarly, the feeling of being in the city is not easily confused with being in a shopping mall, or being in a theme park, and most people are sensitive to these differences...

The city is a development that is an embodiment of culture, of peoples, ambitions and desires. The city is a perfect and vivid instance of reality.”
You belong to yourself, you belong in the world, and you are a creator of belonging. Having a sense of belonging is a common experience. Belonging can mean acceptance. A sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter. Feeling that you belong is critical to valuing and enjoying life and in coping with its challenges. Some find belonging in a church, some with friends, some with family, and some now find it on social media. Some see themselves as connected only to one or two people. Others believe and feel a connection to all the people in the world, to humanity. Some struggle to find a sense of belonging and their loneliness is physically painful for them. A sense of belonging to a greater community improves your motivation, health, and happiness. When you see your connection to others, you know that all people struggle and have difficult times.

Your experience of places is deeply connected to belonging. There is sense of ease that comes from belonging in a place.

What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?
So much of the city
is our bodies. Places in us
old light still slants through to.
Places that no longer exist but are full of feeling,
like phantom limbs.

Even the city carries ruins in its heart.
Longs to be touched in places
only it remembers.

Anne Michaels
In my view, belonging is more like a kind of long-term emotional link to a place and one’s specific memories of it. When I come to place I have known well, it triggers many memories and perhaps even a certain mood. For example, every time I get back to my high school, when I see the gate, I can remember exactly how I walked through it every day I went to school, and also the grocery stores, bookstores, restaurants nearby.

The belonging of place is always specific. People do not often feel belonging toward a place they have never been or seen, unless perhaps its reminds them of something from their own story.

All our senses are important in developing this sense of belonging. What I felt, what I saw, the weather, the temperature, the smell etc. The senses trigger the fundamental experience, and then feelings, moods, joys or agonies make these experiences become unique to the individual, make us relive the stories of a place. When this happens then I know I have a special bond with this place and would call this belonging.

What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?
“What does it mean to live in a room? Is to live in a place to take possession of it? What does taking possession of a place mean? When does somewhere become truly yours? Is it when you’ve put your three pairs of socks to soak in a pink plastic bowl? Is it when you’ve heated up your spaghetti over a camping stove? Is it when you’ve used up all the non-matching hangers in the cupboard? Is it when you’ve pinned to the wall an old postcard? Is it when you’ve experienced there the throes of anticipation, or the exaltations of passion, or the torments of a toothache? Is it when you’ve hung suitable curtains up on the windows, put up the wallpaper, and sanded the parquet flooring?”

Georges Perec
What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place?

A sense of belonging can be achieved through the accumulation of experiences shared with other people at a place, where these moments are starting to mirror you as an individual. It’s the notion that you are not just an individual living in a place, but participating in a bigger picture, contributing to the making of a place. Belonging means that the place is changing or evolving with you, making you a part of the process of the place.

Belonging does not only apply to a material place, but to place as an idea as well. A place exists not only physically, but as an idea shared by you and other people. A memory of a moment in time can be your link to a place, or vice versa, and it makes you a part of the conversation of the place. Belonging also implies taking ownership of the place, not only physically but also acknowledging that your actions can make an impact on that specific place.

Student
“The philosopher Kimberley Brownlee identifies three forms of belonging: belonging with, belonging to, and belonging in. ‘Belonging with’ suggests an element of symmetry and reciprocity: we ‘go together’ with someone or something. ‘Belonging to’ could suggest that others may exercise power of ownership over us, but also has positive connotations: a child who does not belong to a family is likely to experience this as deep privation. ‘Belonging in’ suggests the ease we feel when we are at peace with our social setting or other elements of our surroundings. Together, these three forms of belonging help us to make sense of our lives and define our identities.”
It should be remembered that the currently dominant model of the family is not timeless or culture-free.

This model reflects a form of family characteristic of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh
—The Anti-social Family
The Nucleated Family: Is familism an ideology?
The Nucleated Family
If growth is the unquestionable heart of our economic system then the nuclear family is, well, the nucleus. From the global adoration of the British royals to political policy and rhetoric across the spectrum of party manifestos, the concept of family is wired into our understanding of who we are. But as Barrett & McIn-tosh remind us in their book The Anti-social Family; it should be remembered that the currently dominant model of the family is not timeless or culture-free.

The assumption that the principles of growth and the nuclear family are foundations of who we are is a function of what is called baseline syndrome. Humans are adaptable creatures and have a natural tendency to build stories around the familiar to make sense of the world. Unless we work hard to understand what has come before us, the tendency is to assume that the world we are born into is how it has always been. In contemporary culture this baseline is further reinforced by the false projection of modern social dynamic onto historical narratives.

When we begin to dig deeper into the story of family, what we find is that for most of human history societies were based on extended family models. These extended families were not exclusive to kin either but regularly included individuals beyond blood ties that were part of a household or village structure. Is it possible that this 2+x structure is actually anti-social?

Christopher Alexander recognized this problem in A Pattern Language when he said:

“Unfortunately, it seems very likely that the nuclear family is not a viable social form. It is too small and too tightly linked with many vulnerable dependencies.”
People need wider structures around them, so that they can find the comfort and relationships they need to sustain them during their ups and downs. Redundancy and flexibility were once critical concepts in architecture that allowed for stability and adaptability through loose networks, but our modern architectures and perhaps our modern families, are too over determined to be resilient structures; instead of movement and flexibility we now rely on every great strength and stiffness to be applied by force. Barrett & Mcintosh are quick to point out that the nuclear family is a comprehensible and rational choice given the parallel evolution of the modern ideology, however the rise of loneliness and distrust in our societies and the fractious relationships that are common place in the immediate family structure seem to suggest that reflections on both the source of familism and its relevance to the future should be questioned.
“I built a walled garden, a temenos, a sacred space. I lifted the huge stones with my own hands and piled them carefully, leaving tiny gaps to let the wind through. A solid wall is easily collapsed [but a] wall well built with invisible spaces will allow the winds that rage against it to pass through. When the earth underneath it trembles, the spaces make room for movement and settlement. The wall stands. The wall’s strength is not in the stones but in the spaces between the stones.”
“Modern architecture is thus an energy-profligate, petrochemical architecture, only possible when fossil fuels are abundant and affordable.”

Peter Buchanan
What does it mean to be modern?
To be modern is to subscribe to the view that knowledge is produced by experts working within compartmentalised fields. Some focus on the workings on society or culture, others are working within the natural sciences. Yet others are concerned with producing know-how that can result in new products, systems and designs. All of these experts are able to produce knowledge because their work is underpinned by a formal and methodological precision called science. To be modern is to believe that society is there for the sake of society. This is seen as a rational alternative to believing that society is there for the sake of religious, mythical or artistic aspirations, which are deemed pre-modern and obsolete.
“Modernism and Postmodernism are born of concerns with the shape of the modern world, as postmodernism represents a phenomenon of modernity’s bad conscience, of its self doubt. Such self-doubt has long centred on the hegemony that we have allowed scientific rationality and technological thinking to have over our lives, our thinking, and our practices, including the practice of architecture —even as this hegemony has rendered itself ever more problematic... Architecture along the lines of functionalism, programmatic determinism, and technological expressionism, produced buildings without connection to site, place, the human being, and history.”

Karsten Harries 89
Being modern means to be in the present time. Be what is popular now. It concerns style, values and now being in the 21st century. Modern is now. Modern is time. What’s modern will change with the time. “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we know, everything we are. Modern environment and experiences cut across boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction.” This is a good definition of modernity, I believe, in that it emphasises the idea of modernity as a paradox, as a unity of disunity, where all is related but at the same time separated. All the ‘modernity’ issues are linked to one another by complimentarity, or contradiction, at times, but how to understand where things come from and end up into we need more and more to have a very clear scenario of history.

In the end, it can be argued, modernity is a construct, a tool, to try to explain what world we live in today.
“As much as language, architecture played a key role in the creation of human culture, and so of us as complex, acculturated beings. It elaborated a complex world of diverse and intensified experiences and meaning for us to explore, internalize, and so expand who we can be. Now it is who we have become, as shaped by modernity’s mechanistic and impoverished world view, that causes the crises of our time. So it is time to rethink who we must become to heal the planet and ourselves, and how architecture and the city can help achieve this. This will entail transcending the modern notion of architecture as mere functional devices to once again be understood as cultural artefacts mediating our relationships with the larger world.”

Peter Buchanan 91
The reasons for the modern project itself might be lost for us today, only seeing the remains of a scattered way of thinking. The premise of the modern project was born out of ideas of a better standard of living, and therefore better quality of life. After all, every historic period in time was a counter reaction to something that needed to be changed, and modernism was an essential phase to go through. However, it is hard to escape the intrinsic unsustainable nature of the modern way of thinking. It is important to emphasise that the modern project was fuelled by the fossil fuels, and in itself became an unsustainable paradigm. Oil is not only pervading the ideas of the modern project, but also the physical execution of the ideas. So, realising today that the intention was lost, we are faced with the outcome that now seems more like a broken promise of a better life. Modernism generally distanced itself from the traditional, thus creating individuals who only looked at themselves as ‘campers’ in this world. Even though modernism has been succeeded by other architectural ways of thinking, we are still left with a modernist way of thinking about ourselves and the world we live in.
“To invoke modernity is ultimately to raise the question of the future. What should the future look like? What courses should we set? What does it mean to be contemporary? and Whose future is it? Since the emergence of the term, modernity has been concerned with unravelling a circular or retrospective notion of time and introducing a rupture between the present. With this break, the future is projected as being potentially different from and better than the past. Modernity is tantamount to ‘the discovery of the future’ and has therefore found itself intimately linked with notions such as progress, advancement, development, emancipation, liberation, growth. Suggesting that history can progress through deliberate human action, it is the nature of this progress that competing definitions of modernity be struggled over.”

Nick Srnicek
To be modern is to be innovative, with a departure from traditional styles and values. Modern is also a style in architecture, but this style is no longer modern. Today modern in architecture is more about the latest technology in construction. It’s impossible to build these kind of buildings without the technology. This makes the buildings vulnerable if the system goes down in the future. They are harder to repair and their aging occurs in decay rather than getting a patina.

But modern can also be a new way of seeing the existing, maybe to see new ways we can make a more sustainable environment with the things we have at our disposal. To be modern in the way we see architecture doesn’t mean that we have to create something that hasn’t existed before, it just needs a new way of seeing it. The world is full of existing artifacts and what to do with them when the new high technology architecture is to take place? Can we at some point see the existing as something that can be transformed to the new modern? And then let the modern be outdated but in a material that can handle it with grace.
“Modernity was triggered by the horrifying signs and prospects of durable things falling apart, and of a whirlwind of transient ephemera filling the vacancy. But hardly two centuries later, the relation of superiority/inferiority between the values of durability and transience has been reversed. In a drastic turnaround, it is now the facility with which things can be turned upside down, disposed of and abandoned that is valued most.”
To be modern is to have an identity, to be individual and to be seen.

To be modern is to be fast, to develop, to follow.

To be modern is easy to understand, it’s for everyone.

You can decide, click, do it yourself. Check in check out.

You are mastering your life.

Where you want to go, and who you want to be.

We live in a time where identity and individuality is shaping our common understanding of the world. We may belong somewhere and to one or several groups, but we are all unique. We are free and bound in the same time.

Our world has some domestic problems. A common debate, it’s something about climate change, economy, war, globalisation?

Some people use terms like ‘a post truth world’. Where we are, our debate and understanding of the world is now about feelings. The facts are suddenly secondary.
“Modernity is constantly in conflict with tradition, elevating the struggle for change to the status of meaning. Modernity is thus a condition that cannot be pinned down. Heidegger’s concept of truth is inseparable from his ideas about being... In his view, truth does not lie in statements and facts being identical... truth is not a state of affairs but an occurring: the disclosure, the bringing into the open. There is a continual play between the concealed and the unconcealed that can be observed by anyone who is sufficiently open and receptive.”
Being modern means to be involved with the current time. To be up to date with trends, movements, and philosophies of the time in which you live. To be modern could mean many different things depending on what exactly you’re talking about. You could be modern in the sense of design, or perhaps in the way you view certain debatable topics. It’s an ever-changing movement. To me, you could say being modern is to be adaptable in the highest form. To be ready and able to adapt to the time around you.

Being modern in the context of today could mean to have a crowd mentality. It could mean that like many people there might be a sense of being lost. Or a lack of purpose. Often it seems like today the purpose might be to create and create, rather than to take a step back and really think about what might be going on. In the modern world we live in, it might mean that consumerism and flow are what being modern is all about. The lack of sustainability and eventual spiral downwards could be seen as being modern. But it might also be seen as a call for change. To be modern might be to act upon all that needs to be done.

Student
“To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we know, everything we are. Modern environment and experiences cut across boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction.”

Marshall Berman
Sustainability is not sustainable.

Phineas Harper

100
Sustainability has been seen for years by architects as a worthy but tedious constraint. Tick-box regulations have been adopted by a compliant but begrudging profession. Sustainable design was necessary but not sexy.

Yet these days seemingly all buildings claim to be sustainable. Ken Yeang’s tree-festooned skyscrapers in Kuala Lumpur are “saving the planet by design”. The Interlace, Ole Scheeren’s hexagonal stacks of 1,040 apartments in Singapore, are a “synthesis of tropical nature and habitable urban space”. Bjarke Ingels’ waste-to-energy power plant, which will puff a ton of CO2 into the Copenhagen air with every 10 smoke rings is the “cleanest in the world”.

An increasingly irreconcilable variety of architectural strategies claim to be united by a common passion for ecology — green is the new black.

**Architecture, it seems, is acting**

Another much-touted triumph for the planet is Foster + Partner’s £1 billion European headquarters for stock-market data giant Bloomberg. This week the project scooped the RIBA Stirling Prize partly in recognition of its ecological credentials, widely billed as “the world’s most sustainable office building”.

Good timing too, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Incheon Report is as grave as it is categorical: a mean global temperature rise of 1.5 degrees is the tipping point for global catastrophe, with only 12 years on the clock to act.

Architecture, it seems, is acting. Across the world, environmental performance standards are driving up the energy efficiency of new buildings. BREEAM in
the UK, LEED in the US, the Estidama in Abu Dhabi, Green Star in Australia and, arguably the most ambitious standard, the China Green Building Label.

Bloomberg scooped the highest BREEAM certification possible of Outstanding – surely if there is an architecture that can limit warming to the 1.5 degrees needed, this is it?

It isn’t. “Sadly all this is not enough” says Spencer de Grey, head of design at Foster + Partners, presenting the project in Beijing.

De Grey showed research comparing international building performance standards against their knock-on share of mean temperature rises. His conclusion was galling. Even if the highest standards were universally adopted, we would be on track for a catastrophic three to five degrees of global warming. Bloomberg, according to De Grey, is a three-degrees building.

Let that sink in. Even the “world’s most sustainable office building” is fuelling global warming more than double what we can afford. And De Grey’s research did not even take into account the embodied energy of the 10,000 tonnes of sandstone cladding, the vast bronze facade fins or the deep foundations required to take their weight.

In the week the UN warned of an on-coming catastrophe, the RIBA was toasting a project its own designers says is hastening that catastrophe’s arrival

The billion pound question is, if an unprecedented budget and the unrivalled expertise of Foster + Partners was not enough to make Bloomberg sustainable, then what on earth could have been?

The answer is that its a bad question. Bloomberg is the oil in wheels of the global stock market. You can’t
make its corporate headquarters ecological much as you can’t wage an ethical nuclear war or build a sustainable airport.

We have sold ourselves on the idea that we can save the planet by making the current growth-based economy ever-more efficient. Smart cities will optimise commuter patterns, high-performance materials will span greater distances with reduced mass. Reusable coffee cups will consume less energy than disposable ones. Yet the sharp truth is that simply making the status quo more efficient, rather than shifting to a fundamentally different paradigm, as De Grey has shown, is a doomed strategy.

“Simply making the status quo more efficient, rather than shifting to a fundamentally different paradigm, is a doomed strategy.

This is an enormous conundrum for architects everywhere, cutting to the heart of any claim to social or ethical practice. Are we really content to continue in this trajectory? Do we think that enough carbon savings can be made elsewhere from transportation or agriculture that construction can continue unfazed?

You may have cut out meat and cut down flying (and if you haven’t, what the hell are you thinking?) but if
you’re still specifying concrete frames and demolishing, rather than upgrading old stock, you’re firmly committing us to three degrees and more.

In any case, we have long since reached the limit of what can be achieved through negative messages. The gravity of global warming’s effects have been known and campaigned on for decades but western democracies are not acting. This year the British government approved a new runway for Heathrow and imprisoned activists Richard Loizou, Richard Roberts and Simon Roscoe-Blevins for protesting against fracking. The warnings aren’t getting through. We need a new tactic.

For De Grey and his practice, it seems the tactic is clear. If the world’s most sustainable office building isn’t enough to save the planet, get a new planet.

A better world is possible and architecture has a critical role to play in the journey.

Foster + Partners has produced papers on terraforming Mars with autonomous drones and 3-D-printed lunar bases. In 2014 it completed a spaceport for Richard Branson. Once the climate movement were mocked as utopians with dreams of low-carbon economies and renewable energy.

Today that eco-warrior manifesto feels eminently practical compared to a new breed of specious space-colonising architect. This is not bold visionary thinking — it is escapism, seductive only to those who can imagine no alternative to infinite economic growth despite a finite planet.

What we can learn from Foster + Partners however is the power of the positive message. They understand better than most the challenges ahead but are not wringing their hands in despair. Mars is the wrong
answer to the wrong question but it is right that a better world is possible, and architecture has a critical role to play in the journey. Perhaps not through awarding stone-clad cathedrals of capitalism Stirling Prizes, but through redesigning the economic framework within which all architecture is made.

The profession is limbering up for the fight ahead. Not before time, stopping global warming is finally becoming cool.
Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinct parts. The first, reducible part is represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of individuals’ productive activity in a given society; it is therefore a question simply of the fundamental condition of productive activity. The second part is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity, i.e. deflected from genital finality—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.
Dépense: Wasting time as an act of resistance.
In defence of our dépense
Are you fed up with being told you don’t value your time or skills? Are you fed up with everyone you meet at parties thinking that you must earn swathes of cash for parading god-like around huge models of tower blocks?

Do you sit at your desk churning out designs for developers while dreaming of public libraries and concert halls? Do you feel uncomfortable on the frontline of capitalism?

Do you harbour a simmering vat of resentment for the time you have to spend on PQQs, ITTs and competitions? You scream if one more planning officer offers you design advice?

Do you feel a bit sick any time you don’t recycle something because you know it’s nothing compared to the environmental impact of your last specification? Do you believe there are right and wrong ways to treat materials that have nothing to do with sustainability credentials?

Are you frequently in trouble with your friends and family for working late, bringing your work home, taking your work on holiday, and going on holiday to work? Do you lust after hand drawings, hand-thrown bricks, and handed plans?

Have you had it up to here with calls for bringing back the fee scale, reforming education, and the endless rhetoric about the marginalisation of architects?

Perhaps you’re a selfish, whiny brat. Or perhaps what you’re picking up on is that identified in the 1940s by French intellectual George Bataille: the notion of dépense.
Dépense is the spending of excess energy not required for the conservation or reproduction of life. The theory goes that living things only require a limited amount of energy in order to survive, yet additional energy is available and so this must be used up on non-essential (or as Bataille would put it, non-‘servile’) activities. Examples of dépense or expenditure include funerals, pyramids, cathedrals, and music. Some might define these as culture. The key is that they are not means to some other end, but ends in themselves. Dépense diffuses the stress connected with shouldering this excess energy and enables the non-utilitarian expression of society.

The problem is that dépense, or indeed anything non-utilitarian, is difficult to justify in today’s society. Austerity, political uncertainty, the housing crisis, climate change, etc etc conspire to create a sense of emergency where things must be expended only with utmost consideration and necessity. Proponents of dépense point out that the expenditure of excess energy is not curtailed by these moral imperatives; it is privatised. The act of burning off this excess energy is left to individuals who, to varying degrees depending on personal wealth, splash out on exuberant luxuries.

This, however, won’t do. Not only is it horribly unfair but unless the energy is expended socially, it fails to diffuse this stressful burden. According to the theory of dépense, contemporary society desperately needs to find festive social outlets into which to pour our excess energy and in so doing bond with each other.
Is dépense an action architecture should play a part in? Can architecture be a form of social ritual, of expending energy, of sacrifice even?

Is our fatigue with the marginalisation of architects actually a fatigue with the patronising idea that we’ve lost our foot hold in an industry that grew to complicated for us silly creatives to navigate?

Is our frustration with the bureaucracy that shackles the making of architecture actually fury against the propagation of this myth of a vigilant battle in the face of countless unavoidable disasters that were carefully planned and executed for political gain?

Is our fondness for civic over private clients not a love for big government but a deep seated knowledge that unless the spending of our extras is shared, it does not meet our need for social ritual or diffuse our collective stress?

Architects are frequently accused of not engaging sufficiently with the business realities of our clients or the industry in which we operate. This is hardly surprising given that the widespread private commercial practice of architecture is a relatively young industry that has grown up in a rapidly changing environment. Most architects still worked in local authorities until the 1980s and since then we’ve had to grapple not only with developing viable business models but also huge technological change.

It would be easy to write off architects’ discomfort—even distaste—for business as naivety or immaturity, but this could be dangerous. Perhaps this suspicion and squeamishness points to something important; perhaps to a transition that we architects could play an important role in bringing about.
A landmark end of year AHO exhibition changed everything. The show catalysed an explosion of public excitement which quickly snowballed beyond any predictions. The year is 2042 and architecture has become by far the most popular hobby in Oslo, Norway and much of Europe.

Architecture has supplant girl guides, teenage rock bands, poker nights, computer games and even cross country skiing as the single most popular amateur pastime on the continent.

In this new world, where the majority of architectural thinking and tinkering is done by unpaid but hyper enthusiastic amateurs, what is architecture? How is it constructed and by whom?

How long do buildings last? Or should they last?

Who is responsible for them?

What is does this newly empowered generation of amateur architects mean for planning and building policy?
Should we all be Architects?
It is quite possible for anyone to build a house, even the most inexperienced amateur. Traditional building methods are accessible and open source in the truest sense of the term.

In Oslo Plan og Bygningsetaten — Planning and Building Services, exist to hinder people from building something they have always desired. This is by no means only a bad thing, because they also ensure that some aspects can’t be ignored. When there is a plan for an area it is also less likely that conflicts will occur between neighbors arguing about if the new garage is too close to the property line.

When there is a rule, it’s same for everyone and this is something most people perceive as fair. That’s why I believe if hyper-enthusiastic amateurs were to build all buildings without rules and plans, there would be conflicts. I mean some of the buildings could be even better than what we build today, but those excellent buildings would be in the minority. In a site where no one will be disturbed, I think that with all love the amateur builder would put into her/his work, a great connection would occur to the building or home, something that is a gain even if they build in areas with strict plans and rules.
Doris McCarthy — Fool’s Paradise
In a new world where the majority of architectural thinking and tinkering is done by unpaid hyper enthusiastic amateurs, buildings would be something else. It’s hard to say how they would turn out, but I believe if a hyper enthusiastic amateur, is not getting paid for a job, but rather doing it for the love, many more buildings would be products of passion. Perhaps the buildings would be unsafe, or rather lack on safety codes here and there. But I believe the amateur’s architectural vision could be realized. I believe they could be constructed by the amateur, or maybe by an outside agency. I believe they could last a long time, but maybe they shouldn’t. If an amateur unpaid enthusiast is building or designing a building, it sounds more like a small installation would be more responsible than another full-scale building.

It would be an interesting world where there is a constant shift of buildings. Perhaps a better one, where amateurs could get in touch with their local environments and plan architecture together rather than having a big agency come in and shock the community.
The Glass House, Christiania, Copenhagen
In this new world, architecture is relieved from the dependencies on top-down planning, liberated from speculation and greedy developers. Building is reestablished as an important cultural activity operating within different scales of community. Buildings are still constructed by professionals, but their scaled precursors can come from many places, as a degree is no longer needed to take initiative and be proactive. The job of the architect is no longer to squeeze out novel formal designs, but to mediate between a need for continuity on the one hand and a public demand for meaningful construction on the other. Smart infrastructure and modular building systems can allow parts of cities to change over time according to the needs and wishes of its citizens, while the workings of city planning becomes that of maintaining a larger coherence. Aesthetics replaces technology as the primary domain of planning, and the architect’s engagement with specific projects is expanded further into the future, so that buildings can be maintained and adapted over time. The primacy of form over programme is used not for profit but for the sake of architecture as an important part of the public realm.
The Cross and Rows, Chester, England, 1895
Charles Jencks wrote; ‘Instead of a city with ten thousand architects, we need a city of ten million architects.’ In a situation where everyone had this ambition, I think buildings would start to move outside the agreed conventions of what a ‘building’ might be like. Knowing that buildings are subjected to both a physical and social lifespan, it seems that the architecture of today has an ephemeral lifespan and only very few buildings stand the test of time. Buildings aren’t always able to keep up with changing household structure, lifestyles and tastes, and maybe we should realise that architects are no better at predicting the future than any others. In a case where people started building themselves, I think buildings would be under constant change, adapting to the likes of the user at different times of their life. There would maybe be the most ingenious solutions to the most mundane problems. Building would maybe entail using what you’ve got, and resorting to improvisation. The term Bricolage might come to mind, which is the process of improvisation in a human endeavour. It would be a way of undercutting specialisation, bureaucracy and hierarchy, and make it easier for people to put their own personal touch on the building, not ruled by the pre-fabricated products on the market that are often presented as your only choice. So in a way it could bring both positive and negative aspects. Maybe there would be buildings hanging together by the mercy of duct tape, or it could be perfectly built in accordance with code. It would all depend on the person who’s building and their imagination and capacity.
Lucien Kroll, Enfin chez soi... Réhabilitation de pré-fabriqués, Berlin-Hellersdorf, Allemagne.
“A gap opens up between the architecture as described in the official histories, and the architecture whose story is so rarely told. We need more people who dare to eschew the greats and the specials, and look to the everyday, the social, and the economic as forces that shape architecture.”

Jeremy Till
Borders and Barriers: What should architecture be concerned with?
Cobbler stick to your last
Few human creations affect us more than architecture. As such, beyond expecting its practitioners to have competency in the art and science of building; masters of the craft tend to have a wide grasp of general knowledge. The greatest architects of the 20th century were children of the 19th; Corbusier, Wright, Asplund and Lewerentz were steeped in the classics and religious mythology and trained as engineers.

As long as architecture has been in the institution, the question of what should be taught has been hotly debated. The Germanic, and to some extent the American schools, remain wed to a foundation in engineering, teaching technical knowledge and expertise with a peppering of architectural theory routed in French philosophy. The English and Scandinavian schools follow the French origins of western architectural education more closely. As Jeremy Till puts it

“Architectural education still clings to the fundamental pedagogical tenets of the Beaux- Arts, but is distracted from realizing this by the difference of the formal product that emerges at the end. The assumption is that since the outcomes look radically different, the processes that lead to those outcomes must also be different; new shapes are conflated with new thoughts. But in fact nothing could be further from the truth. While the product might have moved from classical plans to algorithmic driven blobs, the underlying principles remain unscathed, most of all the overriding autonomy of the process.”
The Norwegian architectural theorist, Christian Norberg Scholtz threw his hat in the ring by invoking the old Greek adage “cobbler stick to your last”. This would seem to suggest that the craft of architecture could be reduced to a specialism as finite as making a shoe, that the craftsman could keep his head down and concentrate on the product. But isn’t it precisely this head down attitude that has led to architecture being so out of touch? In his essay, “Black Box,” Rehner Banham remarks on the inward looking nature of the teaching studio.

“Anthropologists have been known to compare the teaching studio to a tribal longhouse; the place and the rituals pursued there are almost unique in the annals of western education. One of the things that sustains this uniqueness is the frequency with which students are discouraged from pursuing modes of design that come from outside the studio.

Anthropologists have already gone a long way in penetrating the inner workings of societies far more remote than the tribe of architecture.”

And what are the actual bounds of the shoemaker’s task? There is the handwork in forming the leather and the wood to be sure but is there not also a social role in this trade? The only remaining guild school from the Journeyman’s tradition is called the Compagnon du Devoir or Companion of duty. Built into in the master training of a journeyman is an understanding of a social role of the craftsman as a companion in the
community. The shoemaker’s task does not end with last but extends out to his role as a citizen.

So what is it that we should stick to in forming the foundation of our knowledge and in developing in our craft? Have Architectural education and practice not become notorious for diminished agency and competency and an increasing divide between the cult of our concerns and the real world? Perhaps now more than ever is the time for architects to look up from their last and seek out understanding and connection with adjacent and complementary disciplines.

Richard Sennett describes this well when he makes the distinction between borders and barriers. A barrier is a dead space where no exchange can take place. The walls of institutional and professional silos are perhaps a good example but also the glass facades of modern architecture. It turns out that transparency does not equal democracy. Borders on the other hand, are places of exchange where organisms become more interactive, due to the meeting of different species or physical conditions.

The painter who chastised that poor cobbler for his unsolicited advice couldn’t have been more wrong. Architecture badly needs to explore its borders and engage with knowledge it can find there. ●
Ethics have a sell-by date.

Maria Smith
Some design principles aren’t fit for the 21st century

Are the design ethics of the 20th century holding us back from operating ethically in the 21st? The likes of John Ruskin, Owen Jones, William Morris, Adolf Loos, Mies van der Rohe, Louis Kahn, Kenneth Frampton — to name a few — have left us with a weighty set of principles under which to create what is deemed good design. These are internalised in each of us, indoctrinated insidiously at architecture school where we are trained like naughty children under Supernanny until we feel that they are inherent truths.

We all know the kind of stuff. Good design is honest design, constructed from rationally chosen materials expressed in tactile, tectonic forms befitting those materials: truth to materials! ‘I like an arch!’ called the brick. Good design is not superficial scenographics deployed for effect; it is never merely visual. Good design is stripped back, where nothing could be taken away to improve it. Degenerate ornamentation glorifying chattelled labour is to be discouraged; less is more! Good design is of its time, exploiting technological progress. It is not nostalgic or pastiche. It is contextual, but intrinsically so; it is of its climate, topography and region. Good design digs deep and honours the essence of place.

It’s very hard to disagree with any of this. Even the architects who do mostly do so knowingly, with irony or poignant flamboyance. But given that these tenets were developed in a time characterised by stupendous technological and social progress, and we don’t live there any more, is it not right to question whether they might be becoming unhelpful?
We should not be churning out graduates conversant in critical regionalism but ignorant of embodied energy

According to Google Books Ngram Viewer, which charts the frequencies that words or phrases appear in published sources, ‘truth to materials’ rose sharply from the early 1950s to an initial peak in 1968. The global population in 1968 was 3.5 billion; now it is more than double that at 7.6 billion. Today architecture isn’t about honouring the essential properties of materials or pursuing the beauty of as few lines as possible. It is about enabling too many humans to live on this planet together. This is our great problem. It is social, technical and political and I ask, is it served by the aesthetic moralising of a wildly different age?

What harm could these principles be causing? Could our analysis, abstraction and reconfiguring of context in the name of good design be perpetuating outdated and now inappropriate building technologies? Is the contextual congruity of brickwork distracting us from stimulating afforestation? Could we be so afraid of superficiality and skin-deep scenography that we write off the signals of environmental design from trombe walls to straw bales as style choices to be justified and discredited according to pre-climate change design principles? Could our insistence on the distinction between the arts and sciences; our insistence that good design is not technocratic but elevated from mere engineering to an art, be preventing the scientifically rational from running the show? Is carbon sequestering being hampered by perceived creative perversity? Is our history of revered industrial
progress encouraging us to explore the design opportunities offered by, say, 3D printed plastics and steels just because we can?

It’s an upsetting thought that our design inculturation could be a factor in ethical shortcomings but I suspect it’s quite likely. After all, this is a very normal source of inertia that prevents change. I’m probably not advocating that we throw all of the last century’s design discourse out with the bathwater but I do believe we ought to be much tougher on ourselves. We definitely ought to watch out for using old tenets as alibis. And we definitely should not be churning out any more graduates conversant in critical regionalism but ignorant of embodied energy, carbon sequestering, or albedo management. To be intentionally provocative, isn’t the integrity of exposed concrete a bit like the oxymoronic righteousness of humane murder? •
“How can architecture promote a hopeful and politically challenging imagination of space and place?”
Making Space and Place Seminar 1
Materiality as Performance
In Monthey, a city of approximately 17,000 inhabitants located in the Swiss Alps, I carried out the socially engaged artistic project Montopia (1-7 September 2014) with my artistic collective, zURBS. Over the course of one week politicians, schoolchildren, the elderly, the unemployed, young professionals, parents and students took part in workshops where they collectively created a model of Montopia - the Monthey of their dreams and desires. Montopia was built out of objects that the participants had found in the city: a fountain made out of a snail shell and a green glass bottle, a beer-can tree, a climbing gym made out of a mushroom, a cone temple, a glass tower of witches made out of an apple and a brown glass bottle, an interactive opinion sculpture made out of a takeaway coffee cup, a media library (médiathèque) made out plastic bottles taped together with wood and flowers, a hotel made out of an orange and white traffic cone, an energy station made out of a pine cone, flying public transport made out of a brown leaf and a taped-together piece of wood, and so on.

The Montopia model was exhibited at the local arts festival. Apart from the physical model in which buildings and places were made out of various objects, the exhibition consisted of a series of collages in which each object-building was photoshopped by the zURBS team into present-day Monthey. The bottle fountain was placed on a roof terrace in-between two housing blocks, the beer-can tree stretched its branches out next to the local green house, the interactive coffee-cup sculpture filled one of the places in an empty parking lot, the glass tower of witches cast its shadow on the big mall close to the city centre and so on. Each collage was accompanied by a description...
of the building, based on the stories the participants had told during the workshops.

The set-up of the exhibition mimicked that of an architectural presentation where architectural and urban plans are presented to the public through visual renderings, written specifications, miniature models and technical details. However, the exhibition did not aim to reflect or represent a glossy image in order to ‘sell’ the idea of Montopia. Instead it was intervening in the conditions of the city’s existence by turning the internal logic of the architectural presentation on its head.

The fact that the exhibition appropriated the domain of authority of architectural presentations was important in order to undermine the discourse of ‘reality’ as a dominant and universally shared construction that does not acknowledge its own constructedness. By usurping this discourse of ‘reality’, the exhibition transcended the real/unreal dichotomy. This transcendence is at the core of the notion of ‘materiality as performance’.

Materiality as performance is an approach to urban space that seeks to interrogate the interplay between the imagined and the material, and in this way provide a powerful lens through which residents can view their city and collectively envision, negotiate and articulate alternatives to present conditions. Urban inhabitants tend to be placed in passive roles as consumers rather than active citizens, framing the politics of the city as concerned with developing capitalist accumulation rather than human potential. Imagination is socially placed within the domains of non-authority such as the childish, placing the loci of authority in the marketplace, the state or the university - places that deal with the ‘real’ world. Seeing materiality as performance is
an attempt to subvert this distinction between the ‘real’ and the imaginary by refusing to accept what is presented to us as given.

As the architect Jeremy Till points out, the way that we conceive of and eventually make our cities, and the buildings that constitute them, are to a large extent determined by the way that we represent them. The standard method of architectural production and representation is enthralled by the classical model - stable, unified and ordered within a coherent and rational system. The architectural project here proceeds in a steady manner from the scale of the city, through the scale of the building and finally to the scale of the architectural detail. At each of these stages, particular issues are investigated and kept within the exclusive territory of the relevant scale. In this linear process the city at a large scale tends to be privileged as decisions made at an early stage determine what follows. Eventually, Till argues, the city is reduced to a series of codes that are reductive and exclusive: the scale excludes the realm of the body, the graphic excludes the social and political, and the rational method and representation exclude the imaginative, the suppressed and the irrational. As a result, the city, as this form of master plan, is not seen as a heterogeneous space of inhabitable difference, but as a system that is there to be controlled.

‘Materiality as performance’, as a dialectical approach that attempts to make explicit the reciprocal relation between our material and imagined worlds, suggests an opposite trajectory. Rather than treating representation as a fact or thing relating to a rational whole, representation is here seen as an ‘event’ or constitutive activity that involves offering constructions
or images. Hence, ‘materiality as performance’ attends to the performative and aesthetic aspects of representation. It is important to note here that this understanding of representation does not at all deny the social and political interests, ideologies and other attachments that condition the terms in which the representation is made. Rather, it maintains that such material realities are constituted through practices of meaning-making. Accordingly, representation is always tenuous and unstable. The Montopia exhibition tried to make this inherent instability explicit by countering the idea that representation may offer a stable, transcendent view of an enclosed rational and technical whole.

In the photo collages, for example, the objects that featured as miniature buildings in the physical model of Montopia were magnified to disconcerting effects: the traffic cone looks tall as a mountain, a flower covers the whole roof of a building block, a glass bottle is the size of a house, a feather takes the shape of a huge sail, a pine cone is twice as big as the excavator in front of it and so on. Accordingly, the collages were portraying in a painstakingly lifelike fashion buildings and places that do not belong to our shared perception of external reality, so as to convey the experience of an alternative world that is at the same time dream-like and absolutely real. The juxtaposition between the two states of dream and reality aimed to create what James Clifford calls ‘the order of an unfinished collage rather than that of a unified organism’.

Furthermore, the representation of the gigantic objects in the photo collages was juxtaposed by the physical presence of the model of Montopia with the objects in their original size. By incorporating these
everyday found objects as part of the model, the traditional view of the city-model as a self-contained ideal world mirroring the real world beyond it was significantly undermined. Hence, the model rather offered itself as a stage on which viewers could project a series of actions, suggesting use, implementation and contextualization. Whereas the objects in the collages were gigantic, giving the impression they could envelop and surround us, the objects in the model could be held within our hand, encouraging us to deal with materiality on an intimate level: the audience could investigate the tactile qualities of the objects (Heavy? Light? Smooth? Sticky?) and share personal associations relating to them (Why did they want this object in Montopia? How does the object relate to Monthey? What personal memories connect to the object?). The collages attempted to make the personal projections of Montopia into presentations of lived possibilities, but in doing so presented a physical world of disorder and disproportion. The physical model of Montopia and the photo collages, then, mutually defined and delimited each other. This juxtaposition between the collages and the model rendered intelligible the transformation of a traffic cone into a hotel, a bottle into a fountain and thus let the semiotic and experiential processes through which meanings are produced come readily into view. Through this process our view of materiality is expanded: it reveals the dialectical relation between practice and representation by elucidating how representations are inseparable from the broader social practices that authorize their existence. In the context of the exhibition the traffic cone was authorized as a miniature high-rise hotel, whereas a traffic cone in the middle of the road is a marker to
Materiality as Performance

direct traffic. Hence, by breaking habits of mind and experimenting with forms of representing the materiality of our everyday, the exhibition suggested the possibility of another miraculous world based on radically different principles of classification and order.

From the perspective of representation, then, facilitating an understanding of materiality as performance foregrounds the performativity of representation, and thus the distinction becomes blurred between Monthey and Montopia, the real and the imagined, practice and representation.
Memory of an object/future of an object.
A nice thing with Oslo in the summer is the public parks and the community it creates when the people settle down for a while, in the sun, side by side. This is a space that unites the population. Some socialize over the gang’s boundaries; another is sitting alone reading a book; in another spot a bunch of friends are reunited after the day’s work bringing food and drinks, to share together, while one homeless takes a nap. The park is a public place that combines people of different backgrounds, a place for everyone. The offer is free, however, there is still potential for improvements.

The item I have chosen is not something I wish in the streets of Oslo, rather avoid. It’s toilet paper. Even though Oslo has public offers, one of the most precarious offers is still missing, public toilets. Today the population is dependent on the private business premises where you have to act as a customer to access a thing I mean belongs to human rights.

Therefore, I see that my contribution to a more including city is public toilets. They should be placed out to offer an asset to something I think that a welfare city should be able to offer it’s population.
When looking at the object there are many memories that come to mind. There have been instances where I have sat on objects such as these while talking to friends around me. There have also been times where I would bump into them while staring at my phone and walking. These, for lack of a better term, structures, act as a separation for vehicles. They allow an area to divided. Essentially the memories I have of these things are not memories of its intended function. They in turn are memories of impromptu seats, or of playful obstacles.

A vision for this object’s role in Oslo, in the future would be redesign of it. They seem to create borders where often one might already be implied. The fact that they stop vehicles from entering is not exactly what I envision for its role in the future. Perhaps a structure like this can become a designed object that becomes much more than just an extrusion, but maybe a seat, or a bike rest, or anything else. Essentially all these things do is act as a afterthought. A solution to a human action after an area is built. Perhaps these could become part of the building they inhabit.
AN EXTENSION

From street view — Audience gallery structure.

From rear view — An apparatus seat.
The object I’ve chosen is the street lamp that is found many places in Oslo, hanging in the middle of the street suspended by wires attached to the building facades. They range in colour from white/grey towards black, and their shape is that of a kitchen bowl turned upside down.

It is hard to distinguish a specific memory the object evokes, because it is such a generic and common part of the city. I associate it with the street lamps in Copenhagen, that are much the same. They remind me of autumn evenings in particular, when the wind makes them dance around so that they light up the facades of the buildings. They have an atmospheric quality which works in much the same way as tram lines do. Tram lines and the lamps’ wires stretch out and draw parts of the city, which then feel more present and permanent.

Similar to how the city’s many tram lines eventually meet and merge into just a few main lines that gather in old warehouses where the trams are stored and maintained, I would like the street lamps’ wires to weave into each other at a specific place in the city, where they create a pattern of wires all lit up at night. I would like the building to have no specific function, but be open to the public and possibly used for events or gatherings. It could become a kind of monument in the city, but instead of statues or sculptures depicting important people or events, it would be a monument to and of the city itself and its infrastructural tapestry.
Future of an object in Oslo - Street light
In the centre of Fedora, that grey stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today. In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe.

The building with the globes is now Fedora’s museum: every inhabitant visits it, chooses the city that corresponds to his desires, contemplates it, imagining his reflection in the medusa pond that would have collected the waters of the canal (if it had not been dried up), the view from the high canopied box along the avenue reserved for elephants (now banished from the city), the fun of sliding down the spiral, twisting minaret (which never found a pedestal from which to rise).

On the map of your empire, O Great Khan, there must be room both for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer.

— Italo Calvino
“The presence of possible Fedoras that may never exist as such allows us to think that the Fedora of the present is perhaps not so necessary and may therefore be changed. We are not taken back in time to change the possibility that materialized. Rather, by contemplating the counterfactual in which its opposite materializes, by leaping backwards playfully we dash forward for real, in search of a third possibility not yet given, but whose possibility has been revealed through the game of nostalgic combinatory of the possible.”


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Draw your first universe. What does architecture achieve? What does belonging mean to you, and how does it relate to your experience of place? What does it mean to be modern? Should we all be Architects? Memory of an object/future of an object.