

**Future  
Architecture  
Platform**

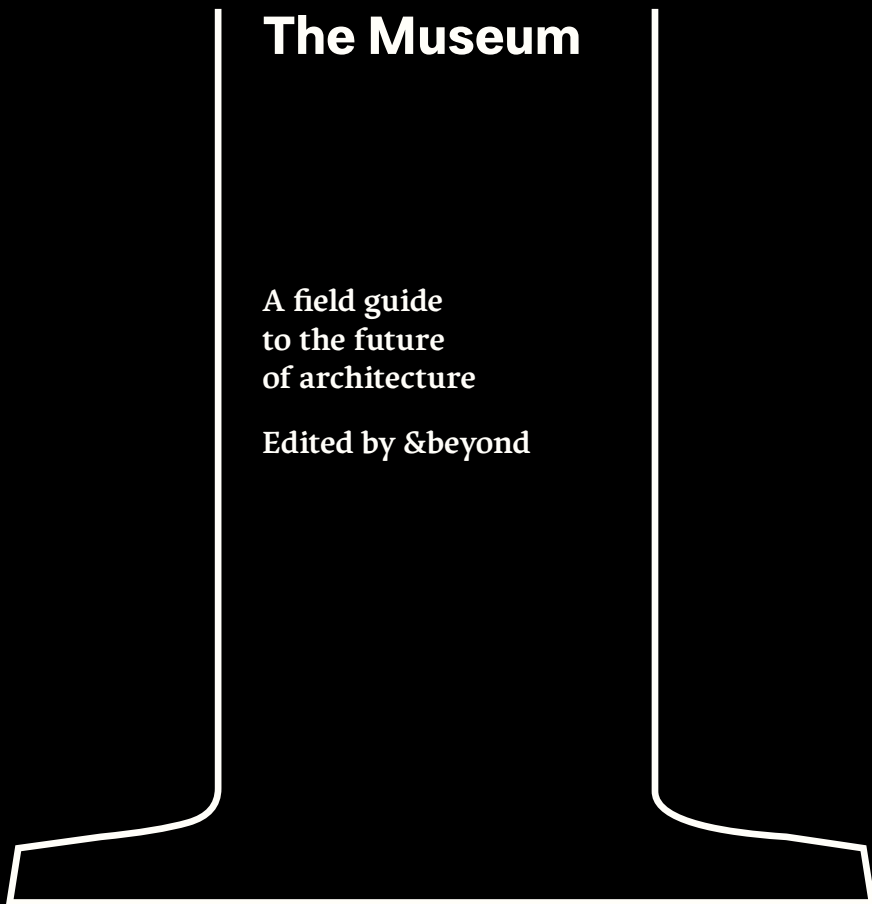


# **Archifutures**

## **The Museum**

**A field guide  
to the future  
of architecture**

**Edited by &beyond**



# The Alchemy of the Wor(1)d



**Some ideas  
about plausible futures  
in architecture publishing**

A stylized map of Europe is shown in black silhouette against a dark red background. A white circle is placed on the Iberian Peninsula, indicating the location of Barcelona. The text 'dpr-barcelona' is written in white below the circle.

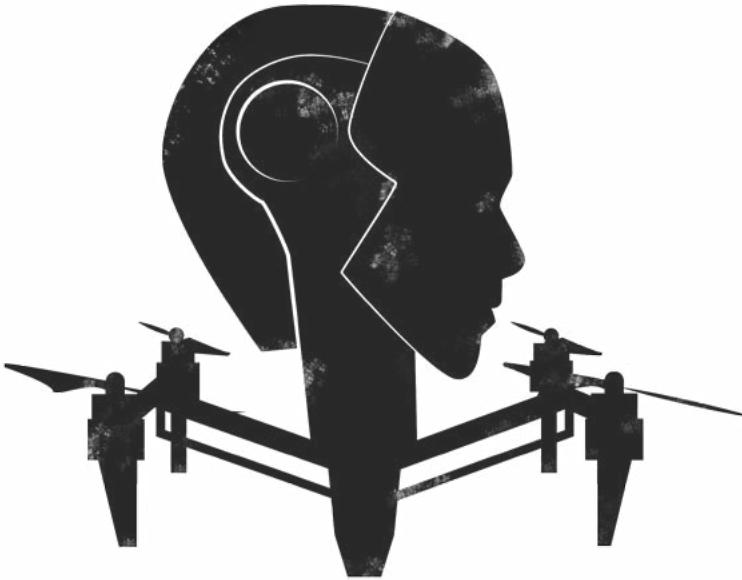
**dpr-barcelona**

**The Alchemy of the Wor(l)d**  
**Some ideas about plausible futures in architecture publishing**

Interview by Sophie Lovell & Fiona Shipwright  
Illustrations by Janar Siniloo

“The future of expertise will be defined by people and artificial cognitive systems working collaboratively... architecture, academia and the publishing industry should take note of this, and the sooner the better.”

**Archifutures editors & beyond talk to the book's publishers dpr-barcelona (César Reyes Nájera and Ethel Baraona Pohl) about digitally-mediated connectivity, complexity, survival and how to realise "the book of the now".**



We can easily agree that we're living a paradigm shift, but we wouldn't describe it as so-called post-digital culture, we would say that a more accurate description is that of post-humanism, as humans, non-human beings, and intelligent technology are becoming increasingly intertwined. Interactions between humans, materials, technologies, plants, and animals are at the core of new architecture developments.

**We are in the middle of a huge post-digital paradigm shift at the moment – some call it the beginning of the Fourth Industrial Revolution – architecture and publishing are disciplines that are both experiencing and driving effects at the front line of these changes, would you agree?**

### **dpr-barcelona**

Founded by Ethel Baraona Pohl and César Reyes Nájera, dpr-barcelona is an architectural research practice based in Barcelona, dealing with three main lines: publishing, criticism and curating. Their work explores how architecture as a discipline reacts in the intersection with politics, technology, economy and social issues. Their publications, both digital and printed, transcend the boundaries of conventional publications, exploring the limits between printed matter and new media, transforming traditional publishing practice into a live exchange of knowledge. Their [net]work serves as a real-life hub, linking several publications and actors on architecture and theory.

In publishing the increased presence of algorithms and artificial intelligence is creating new kinds of meta-narratives. Some of these create uncertainty and confusion, whereas others simply open up a whole new world in terms of access to information and research possibilities. Our main concern in this context – the thought that we constantly ruminate upon – is how these flows collide to create new formats, and how they coexist, whilst trying to avoid the dichotomy of being either *for* or *against* the digital. We need to decode our imaginary from the concepts we learned in the past, which, to a certain extent, have been handed down by those who wanted to preserve the system as something static rather than dynamic – no matter if we're talking about publishing, architecture or the economy.

**We are dealing with massively increasing complexity and the need to communicate advances and changes – despite the complications involved with that complexity – as well as rapidly evolving parameters and strategies on all sides. What can we as architecture publishers and critics effectively do when the battle appears to be on all fronts?**

First of all, we should be aware that such complexity is a contemporary condition which not only affects publishing in architecture. In our opinion it is not a battle, but a chorus of voices which at first sound dissonant, but at certain points become harmonic if you can finally distinguish the patterns within. Other disciplines like computer science, medicine, biology, mathematics and music have been more effective in embracing such complexity as part of their language, but we're afraid that neither architects nor architecture publishers are trained to respond to the dynamics of active parts and differential change which are the inherent conditions of many contemporary practices and networked communication.

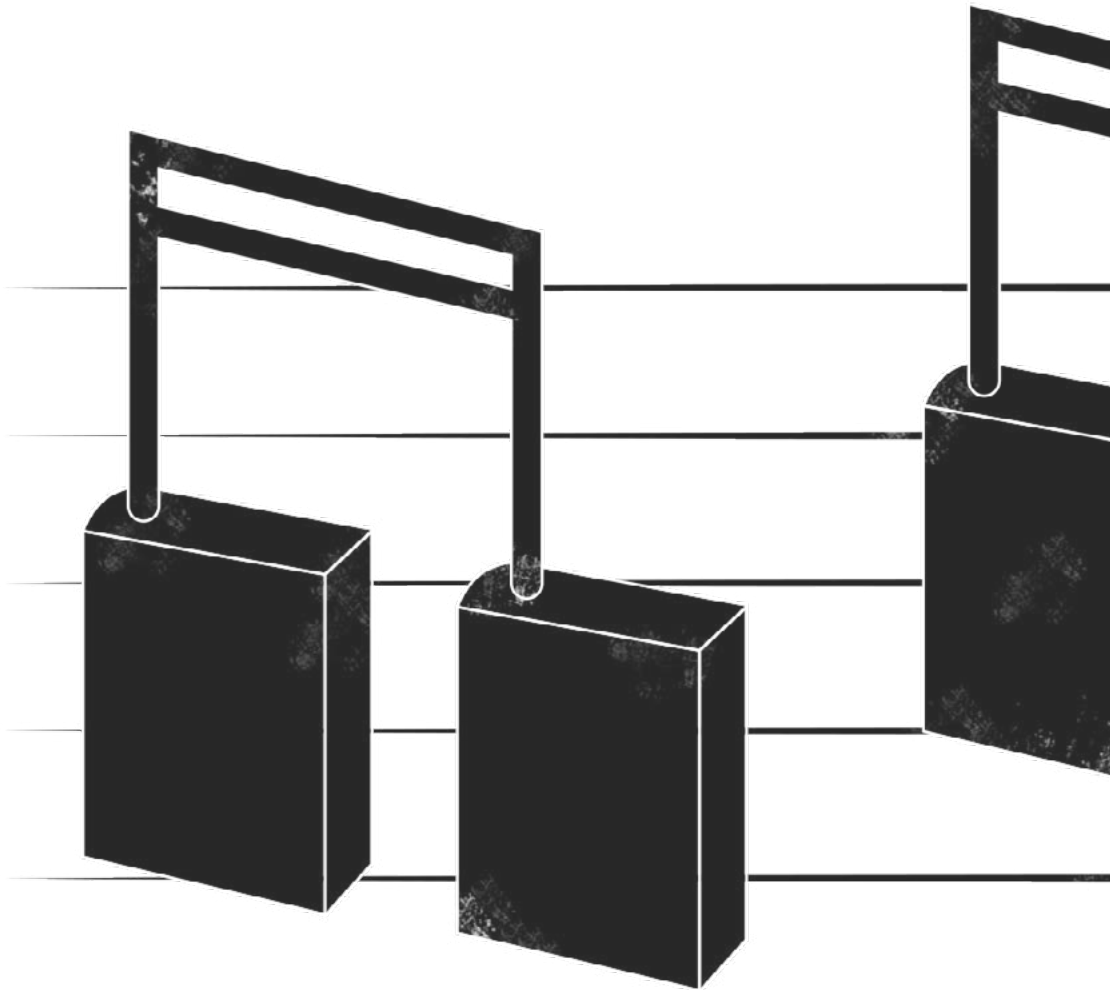
The traditional, orthodox position often required is that we, the publishers, take the role

of guardians and emissaries of the experts in the control of style, form, composition and even quality in architectural construction, according to the kind of content we decided to share. This is rooted in the kind of practices based upon premises of productivity growth inherited from the twentieth century, but they hardly respond to the current state of the world and the myriad nuances of our practices nowadays.

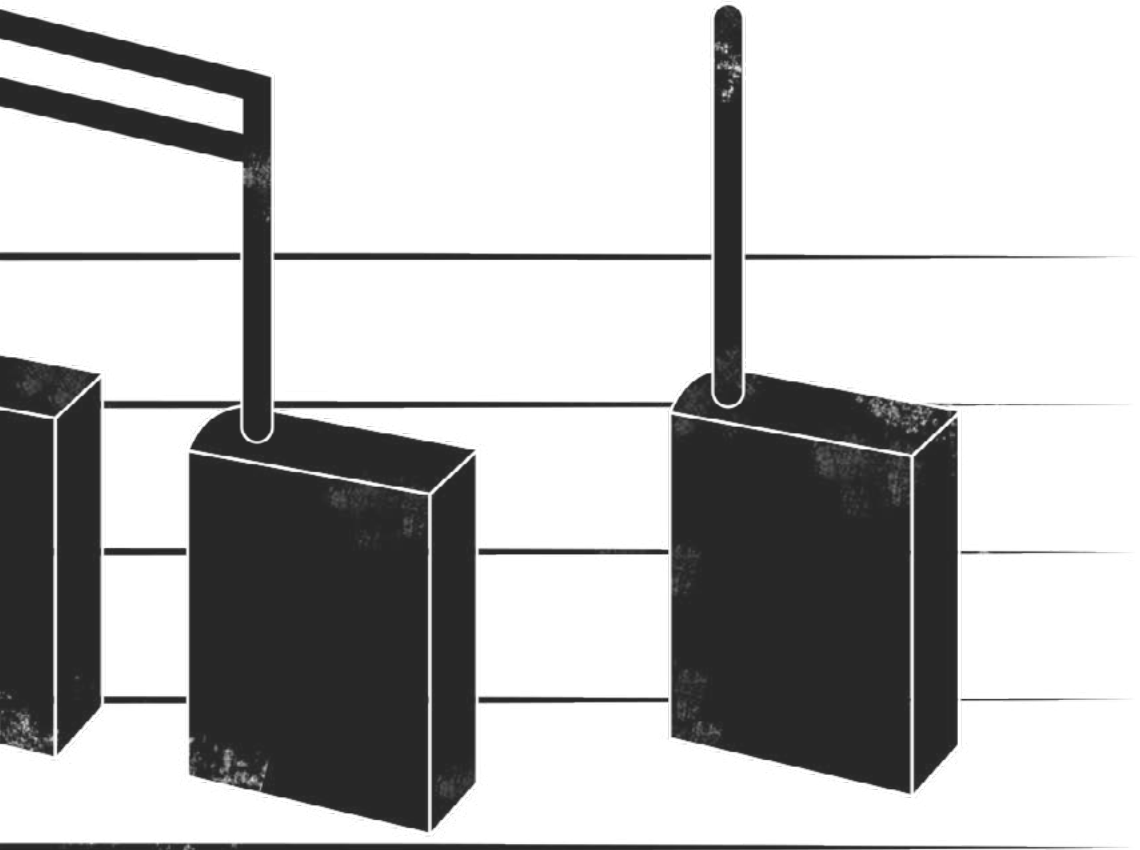
Although we're confronted by new scenarios, we also have new tools to deal with, to test and emulate complexity and we're learning new languages to describe, question and communicate our practices. Thus our position should be completely different to the previous one in which a handful of agents and voices generated the (Western) elitist and triumphalist narratives of architecture.

As a single experience our activity is contingent, but collectively it is deeply intertwined with the forces defining social and consumption models and so our position should be necessarily political and philosophical. As publishers our role would then be closer to that of the composer, able to read all at once those myriad patterns, connections, flows and forces determining the conditions in which we work and live. If our resulting narratives are able to inform and include the ones we are connected with, then we consider that we would have made our contribution to the symphony.

**What positions can we take? What are our roles as publishers in this new context?**







**In your work how do you, approach and organise information when there are no strict compartments to put things in anymore – no easy boxes for classification?**

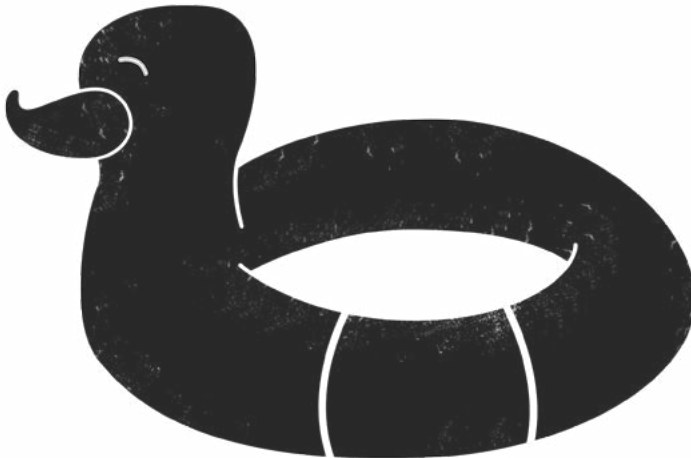
In his book *Thoughts of Sorts*, Georges Perec questions the division between thinking and classifying. We ask ourselves the same question: how do we classify what we think? How do we think when we want to classify? For Perec, *to think finitely is to classify* – the same happens with our work. Of course we organise our documents into books, articles, blog posts and so on, but when we're working, classifying is not a task isolated from thinking and connecting experiences and practices with contents and research.

Both of us experienced the imperative level of organisation required for PhD level research with its specialised databases and repositories. But the start of our practice coincided with the emergence of social networks when we suddenly discovered the possibilities of distributed exploration of specific topics. At first we used to search for information, but over time it started reaching us, with almost no effort on our part, through networked communication. We started noticing the emergence of a pattern in how to explore and generate interactions. We discovered, along with many others, the great capacities of small blogging platforms for classifying and displaying information.

**So the approach you evolved is a networked one, drawing on the hive mind of your contacts and connections?**

Absolutely yes. Moreover, this possibility of building up our practice as an open repository came coupled with a critical view of academic publishing and copyright mechanisms that allegedly safeguard intellectual production.

Therefore our classifying and thinking also became a form of activism, similar to that of other repositories such as AAAARG, Monoskop or UbuWeb. The organisation of ever increasing amounts of information also leads to the challenge of having time to read and manage it all, so we're now working on building up spaces of interaction where artificial cognitive systems and critical human thought can work collaboratively. We foresee the results as being really exciting for publishing since the outcomes are not closed results, rather a means of communication allowing feedback and reconceptualisation.



This quote from Keller Easterling describes the idea well: “The documents that architects present in the future might not be snapshots of perfect moments, but specifications for linkage and inter-dependency that remain in place to counterbalance and imbalance each other”.<sup>1</sup> We see this way of working reflected in how bookshops or libraries tend to categorise our books; they are hardly ever placed in the same section as one another and rarely under “Architecture”.

<sup>1</sup> Keller Easterling, *No You're Not*, e-flux architecture  
Retrieved September 30,  
2016

**It's not just the disciplines we are dealing with that are becoming more and more interconnected, but the roles we are assuming in our work as well: an editor is no longer just an editor, an architect is no longer just an architect. You yourselves are architects who view publishing as a platform, as practice. What parallels can we as publishers, researchers, editors and communicators draw with the experiences of architects?**

Perhaps we can respond to this by quoting Chus Martínez<sup>2</sup>: “We are in a revolution of thinking and communication, since neither text nor image alone can sufficiently describe reality. This reality, or time, so to speak, needs a language that measures as well as maps; describes as well as depicts.

There is no single language, discipline, or realm of knowledge that alone can handle the task of dealing with the world.”

In this sense, we have been researching what we call the alchemy of the wor(l)d. Many authors – including Arthur Rimbaud, Roland Barthes, Vilém Flusser and Wittgenstein – have written on the necessity of creating or rediscovering other or new languages to understand the world in order to know how to properly react to it. If language is what gives form to our mindsets, then even the names we use to identify our practices should be discussed, as they need to evolve accordingly as different professions do too. We need to decolonise our minds, and thus our behaviours, from what we have taken for granted.

<sup>2</sup> Chus Martínez referring to Vilém Flusser, in conversation with Sofia Lemos for *Volume #48*

**The notion of *the commons* can be found digitally in publishing and physically in architecture. How in your view is this changing the role of both the group and the individual?**

We always try to talk about commoning rather than “the commons” because a verb involves action and action can become interaction. The notion of commoning is transforming

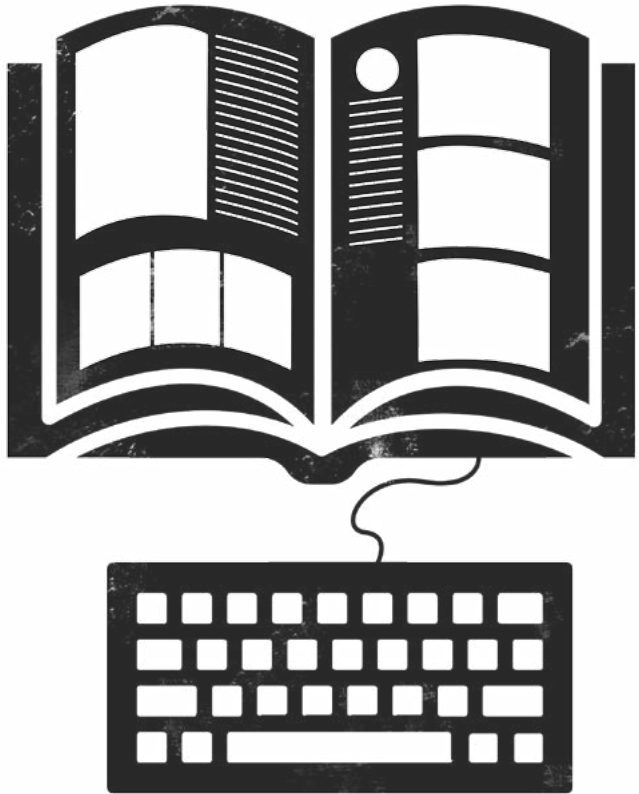
and changing the ways we have shared traditionally (we can share a space, if referring to architecture; or we can share knowledge and information, when talking about publishing). However, the main question with the issue of commoning concerns how we live and work together. Because to be working together creates a relationship of support that you could call a “political friendship”, and which entails commitment, allegiance and responsibility. That is deeply related to how we understand the new roles you’ve mentioned: as pertaining to individuals that are able to contribute, but are at the same time part of the collectivity that is working together to create realms of thinking about and a critical understanding of labour, production and education.

It’s important to note that commoning, as a philosophy of action, is characterised by a creative, flexible, purposeful attitude, but at the same one time that also implies conflict and disagreement. This is something good and valuable; there is no social or political evolution without conflict. Following Chantal Mouffe’s ideas, the moment of the political is when a “them” becomes a “we”.

True, as we were discussing above, it is not only a matter of new formats, but also how

these different disciplines can or should adapt to new understandings of labour and work. Concepts that were taken as valid and legitimate until now, like patents, copyrights, ownership, and so on, are actually evolving into a range of open systems where the collective becomes more important than the individual in the context of creating, caring and distributing.

**The issue of copyright also comes to mind in this respect...**



Against the backdrop of this paradigm shift, we are witnessing the emergence of a set of nonsense responses – Anish Kapoor acquiring exclusive rights to a colour, the Vantablack pigment, for example, or Apple Inc. patenting a paper bag, among many others – that can be understood as the system fighting to preserve itself instead of embracing new models based on distributed networks, where both production responsibility and revenues are allocated to wider groups or collectivities. This can – and should have – an impact on the economic and the political.

Instead of talking about “fractures”, the notion of the platform you mention from the *uncube* experience, including all the different formats – from blog to magazine, from Facebook posts to an Instagram feed – is for us like a constellation where some stars are born, some of them die, but in the meanwhile they co-exist and form a recognisable pattern. In our case the different platforms are the stars, and our publishing project, the constellation. That said, we always refer to the concept of publishing as “making public” and thus the format becomes subject to the editing process. In line with McLuhan’s famous statement: “the medium is the message”, we believe the work of an editor has evolved from just editing content to editing both the content and the medium. This is about distributing the content through the most appropriate platforms and allowing several possible readings of the meaning of the word “publishing”.

We have more tools than ever before, and it’s essential to understand the qualities and characteristics of each format in order to define how to best present and distribute content. As for our own work, every book is different; from a collective publishing experience involving open source contents and/or augmented reality interactions to a whole book contained in a floppy disk.

**On another level, with architecture the sense of “place” is losing its priority – the “site” means something quite different now. This is also reflected in publishing: not in terms of digital vs. print – as so many, wrongly, try to simplify it – but with a much greater degree of fracturing. When we were making *uncube* (*uncube magazine.com*) it was not just a magazine with monthly issues, but also a network, an archive, a blog, Facebook posts, a Twitter feed, etc. as well: a publication which expressed itself on and within a myriad of platforms. How does this mirror your experience?**







We understand this myriad of platforms as an opportunity to approach publishing practice as something in between Borges' *The Library of Babel* (1941), Alain Resnais' short film *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) and the Quay Brothers' stop motion short film *The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer* (1984) – based on a puppet simulacrum of Jan Svankmajer, whose head is an open book – where books never end, but are alive and can change from one moment to the next.

This is what we call “the book of the now”. Just as in architecture the sense of place is not as important as it used to be, also in geopolitics the concept of the nation state is losing priority and the borders we are creating today will tomorrow disappear into several iterations. It is the same with books or editorial content: we cannot draw borders anymore, when all these platforms – the printed book, a blog, or social networks – are intertwined with and support each other.

**Perhaps the most pressing result of these changes is the issue of finding new models for financing. So much has changed and yet the funding patterns have been slow to follow. What directions do you feel we now need to take? Is the paywall in digital publishing an inevitable consequence? And is this a good thing?**

The problem with paywalls, as we see it, is that they are based on the current existing economic system. The same can be said about the emergence of crowdfunding platforms or what has been called “the sharing economy”. All of them have been created to collect

funding that is in the same old currency, without creating any structural transformation. You collect money in an innovative way only to ultimately preserve the same old inequality system, where a large part of the resources are allocated to intermediaries and the intellectual work is often the last to be remunerated.

Of course we're talking here in general terms. Although very interesting experiments are happening, we just want to recall the notion that we'll change nothing if we just try and innovate the last links in the chain without taking a critical approach to the system as a whole. Our struggles to understand the effects of new economic models are shared by a larger community, from blockchain (a technology that underpins bitcoin) researchers to local economy defenders. We're all trying to discover or establish new models that respond to the current state of the world. Perhaps this necessarily has to entail questioning our way of living, consuming and accumulating; no matter the kind of goods we're talking about, whether it's food, smartphones or information.



We haven't got any answers yet, but we have countless questions!

And last, but actually first: the audience, the *readers* and *users*. The experience of using space and consuming media now has a far higher degree of feedback. The interactive aspect is becoming greatly enhanced (think: Pokémon GO). Users and readers, as well as producers, are able to compile, define and control these relationships and be part of them in ways hitherto unimagined (possibly at the expense of real life interactions with their fellow human beings). The passive aspects of their roles in this respect is diminishing – complex relationships are developing between individuals and their environments. Where do you think we will be going with this in the long-term future? Are many of us going to end up as multimedia content providers and curators in a parallel virtual existence built around a basic physical grid? And “we” refers to both architects and publishers in this respect.

You’re right to point to feedback and new layers of interaction with space; and this is exactly the condition derived from collective clusters of practices and voices building future architectural and design discourses, where value will not be judged according to individual expertise but by the quality of interactions. We would extend the meaning of “we” to those non-human elements that are increasingly taking an active role in this exchange. As we said above, we’re now refining our practice on the plausible hypothesis that the future of expertise will be defined by people and artificial cognitive systems working collaboratively. This would require the design of work environments combining

human and cognitive computing platforms; architecture, academia and the publishing industry should take note of this and the sooner the better. As editors we consider that we need to be already connected when these kinds of quality human/non-human interactions occur – and voluntarily disconnected, if needed, for critical reflection. In our opinion this would be one of the main challenges for architects and publishers, to keep adding value in the construction of the spaces and meta-narratives to come. ■