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What Am I A Citizen Of?



The speculative futures of architect Liam Young

Interview with Liam Young
by Shumi Bose



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“You can no longer talk about place as a singular point on the map, or a city as being a singular zone. A city is now atomised, distributed and mediated.”

Liam Young is an architect who doesn't believe in architects. He operates in the spaces between design, fiction and futures. Working between any number of cities and non-places, he is usually located somewhere on the disembodied network. Shumi Bose was lucky to catch up with him (in London) for in one of his rare terrestrial moments.¹



The reason my work has moved so far away from architecture in the traditional sense of making buildings is that it is such an inherently slow medium. When the city is evolving so quickly, it's difficult to respond if you're operating in a discourse that has a five- or ten-year project lifespan. Equally the forces that are shaping the city no longer exist within the physical spectrum; they're more like technologies – cloud-computing connections, ubiquitous networks – so the architect, once the vital agent of change within cities is now being displaced by the technologist, strategist or network engineer.

Do you think it's still useful to be working on speculative futures?

Liam Young

Liam Young is a speculative architect who operates in the spaces between design, fiction and futures. He is a founder of the think tank *Tomorrows Thoughts Today*, a group whose work explores the possibilities of fantastic, speculative and imaginary urbanisms. He also co-runs the *Unknown Fields Division* with Kate Davies, a nomadic studio that travels on annual expeditions to the ends of the earth to investigate unreal and forgotten landscapes, alien terrains and industrial ecologies. Liam's projects develop fictional speculations as critical instruments to survey the consequences of emerging environmental and technological futures.

Previous page: LHR London Airport, 14 November 2016.
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This page: SIN Singapore Airport 03 August 2016.
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¹ Interview first published in *TANK Magazine*, Volume 8 Issue 2, Autumn 2014. Reproduced with kind permission.

So how can the architect find ways to operate?

We're at a point now where the future is increasingly undefined. If you watch the pattern of, say, science fiction in the 1980s, it had this kind of lifespan of about 30 years, where you had a reliable present: the length of the *now* was long enough that you could make predictions and not look like an idiot. The length of *now's now* is much, much shorter, to the extent where most science fiction – William Gibson's recent novels, for instance – are written utterly in the present. There isn't that period of certainty that you can bank on; there are so many balls in play – climate change, economic collapse, biotechnologies, ubiquitous computing – that the physical, cultural and societal landscape in five or ten years may be radically different from what it is now.



This page: CBR Canberra Airport, 27 October 2016.
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Opposite: SZX Shenzhen Airport 07 December 2015.
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The position of the architect-as-advocate is gaining some currency. Do you think architects are trying to claw back a position in political activism?

Listen, I advocate for an utter dissolution of the term architect. I think an architect's skills are completely wasted on making buildings. But

I don't see it as weakening the profession, I see it as

strengthening. It means that the profession can find traction in other fields: the architect as strategist, as politician, as planner; the architect as curator or editor or writer, as activist or storyteller. Finding ways to operate in other disciplines just gives us much more agency.



Shumi Bose

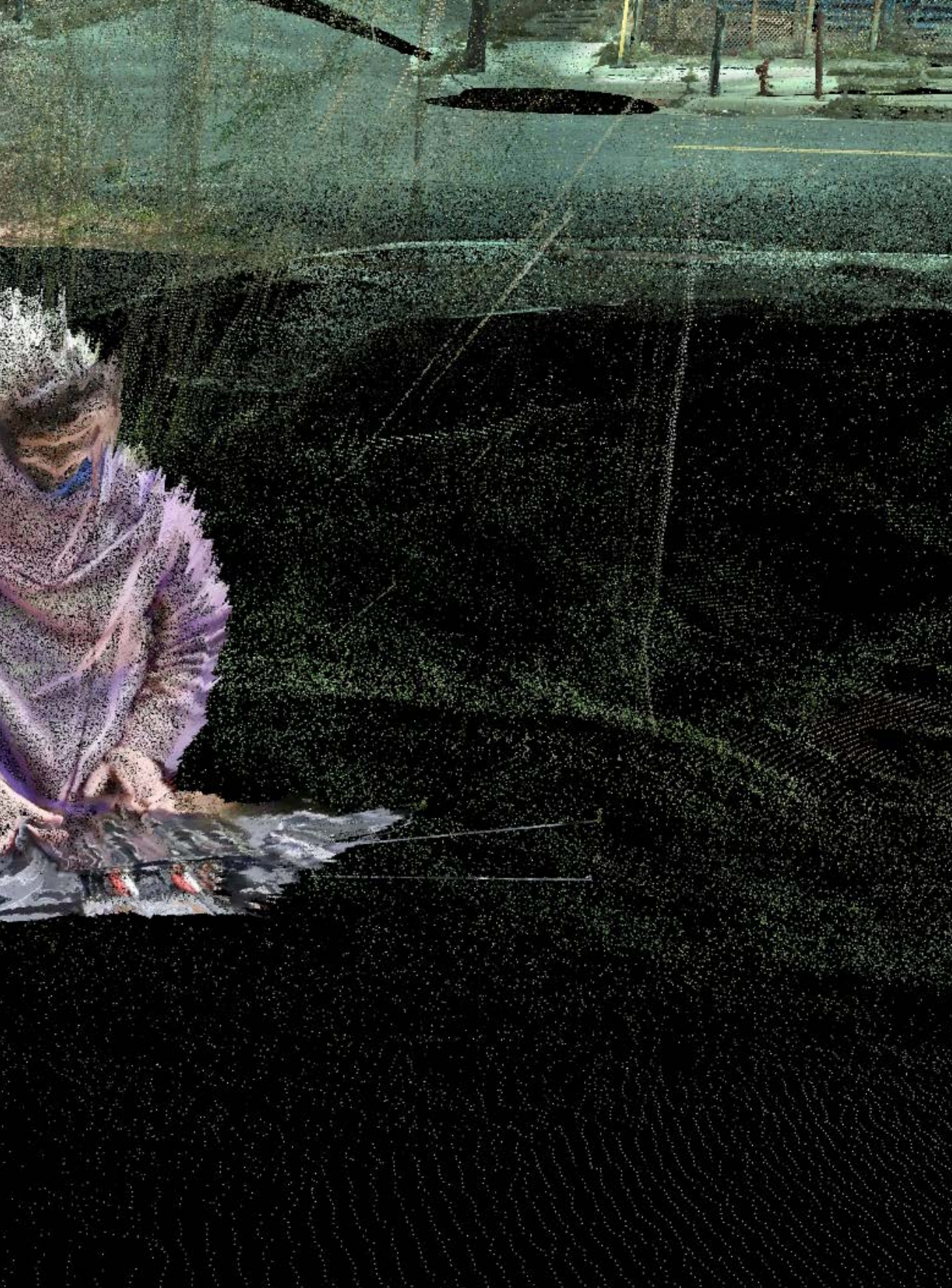
Shumi Bose is a teacher, researcher, curator and writer about things related to architecture, cities and spatial practices. A lecturer at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and the Architectural Association, she was a co-founder of the REAL foundation and co-editor of the *Real Review*, launched in 2016. She has held editorial positions at the *Architect's Journal*, *Blueprint*, Strelka Press and *Afterall*, and has contributed *TANK*, *Volume*, and *PIN-UP*. Her publications include *Real Estates* (with Fulcrum, Bedford Press, 2014) and she was co-curator, with Finn Williams and Jack Self, of "Home Economics", the British Pavilion exhibition at the 15th Venice Biennale of Architecture 2016.

Not at all, no. I mean I tried that. I learned how to do timber detailing for private

beach houses on the Sunshine Coast in Australia; I worked for Zaha Hadid, designing science-museum-opera-art gallery-China-Dubai projects. All of which, in the context of making and shaping cities right now, is utterly fucking irrelevant. The notion of what cities are and how we define them as such is fundamentally different. *Cities* are popping up in all different forms, based around people's interests or *likes* – maybe Justin Bieber's fan club is just as much a city as London. A city used to be defined by the people who live in it: you're in London, I'm in London, we're in London together, that's what London is – a bunch of people in London. Now, my experience of London is

Is it safe to say you don't miss being a traditional architect?





actually mediated by a computer network, my Facebook friends, whoever I'm having Skype meetings with; I have no idea who lives above me or below me. My experience of my surroundings is predicated on network access and internet speed; my window to the city of London is a glowing, beaming rectangle, throwing out radiation at me.

But is that comparable to the spatial reality of the city?

It's a new spatial reality.

Technology doesn't replace the city; it's another layer. I

tell this story about a field trip I made to Chernobyl, with Unknown Fields, a nomadic design studio I run with Kate Davies at the Architectural Association. A couple of years ago a Ukrainian-based gaming company went through Chernobyl and mapped it in meticulous detail, and used that to create the landscape in a game called *Stalker*. A security guard told us stories of his nights in the exclusion



zone, where local fanboys of the game would sneak into the area and play out their characters. The guards played out their roles, too, chasing these kids through the crumbling ruins. This place is at once a physical and real condition that we're all standing in, but also this fictional condition. The city of Chernobyl is in the ground, through the radiation, in the trees, in the giant catfish, but it's also distributed across the planet, in flickering constellations of these luminous rectangles, consumed and occupied through the game. You can no longer talk about place as a singular point on the map, or a city as being a singular zone. A city is now atomised, distributed and mediated.



Previous, opposite and this page: Stills from Where the City Can't See.

In a normal week, I spend four days in New York, three days in London, but maybe one of those days is in some other random city giving a lecture. I spend more time sleeping in an aeroplane than in my flat; I eat more meals in the airside of an airport – which is a deterritorialised no man's land – than I do in a real city. What am I a citizen of? I have an Australian passport; I have temporary residency in London; I have an even

How many (physical) cities have you been in during the last few days?

more temporary residency in New York. So the question of agency and citizenship is a really interesting one to think about. What do I identify with? It's not about locality, it's not about physicality, or borders on a map. It's about another kind of connectivity than adjacency.

So then what qualifies you to be of a place, to be a citizen?

Well, you can hold a passport to multiple places. Can I be a citizen of Australia – where I can still vote – remotely, where I still have an incredible network of friends, where I still have a storage locker with physical stuff in – but where I spend only two weeks a year? What does home mean in that sense? I can't vote in the US, but I spend four days a week there. I vote in Australia, but I spend two weeks a year there. I don't vote in London because I'm too busy when I'm here catching up on all the things I miss. I don't know who my neighbours are; I have a lot of collaborators through work but most of them operate remotely, so it's not about where I work that defines who I am. My friends are dispersed but I usually see them at conferences or meet them in some random city – so I don't define where I belong by where they are either. A student of mine made this project about IP addresses and territory. One iteration looked at the Western Sahara, one of the only places on the map that is classified by the UN as ungoverned; it has a very strong ethnic population that has been displaced, forced to flee and scatter across the world. The project was speculating on the idea of siting an IP address in this place, so that all this atomised and dispersed population could still occupy their homeland, but through the network – so they could cyber-squat their territory. What would that mean for the people who can't be there physically to be there digitally – and vice versa? This question of citizenship is actually

really urgent. And that reevaluation of cities is equally urgent.



Still from *In the Robots Skies*.

In a very dry sense, legally you start to get into questions of jurisdiction and of borders.

Take Megaupload, for example: some guy in New Zealand running a website placed on servers scattered all over the world on which are movies uploaded by thousands of users – how do you prosecute in a case like that, and which government does the prosecuting? And where? In a cultural and societal sense, I'm interested in the opportunities that starts to present: when you are not bound by a geographical location that you might be born into, you can start to make choices about forms of citizenship. Can I be a citizen of Justin Bieber? I can choose to be a Justin Bieber fan, and spend my time in Justin Bieber Land, being a citizen of the Beliebers. I can choose to be a weird quicksand porn freak, and for that to be

What's at stake in this question of citizenship?

my community. I can surround myself with like-minded people and I can base my reality and my existence based on that network. We saw something like this emerging in Japan, with communities like the *hikikomori*, the people who lock themselves away and survive purely through online gaming environments and delivery food.

It's hard to reconcile a certain kind of design with this. Obviously there's a space for visual culture, but less and less for physical culture.

I don't know: for the *hikikomori*, what is physical reality? We used to say "virtual reality", which is an utterly outmoded term now; the

digital and the physical are not mutually exclusive things. You can't use those terms in opposition any more; our experience of this physical space is utterly conditioned by the *digital footprint* that we're occupying at the same time. I talk about the idea of the shadow city, that the city is not just the physical city but also these luminous electronic *shadows* that we can occupy in different ways. ■