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# **Archifutures**

**The Studio**

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

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# Where Have All the Flowers Gone?





**Architecture  
after the future**

**By Ana Jeinić**

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“The entire dimension of the future, as an anthropological constant of the human existence, has been squeezed and pulled into the present moment.”

**Ana Jeinić analyses how our presently conflicted understanding of the future, trapped in the present or looking back to a nostalgic retro-future of the past, is beginning to manifest itself in architectural thinking and points the way to nascent transformations of the architectural discipline.**

In his tellingly entitled book *After the Future*, Franco Bifo Berardi wrote: “I want to rewind the past evolution of the future in order to understand when and why it was trampled and drowned.”<sup>1</sup> This claim reveals a deliberate contradiction in the relationship with the future that characterises our era – we tend to talk about the future in the past tense. As Berardi notes, the genuinely futuristic attitude of the modern epoch with its firm belief in progress has been gradually replaced by rather sceptical views and expectations regarding the future of global society. In the last decades of the twentieth century, with its recurring economic crises, the discouraging reports to the Club of Rome and the seemingly definitive collapse of the vanguard communist project, the picture of a bright and open future started to decompose.

The reaction was a retreat into the tangible but highly insecure present, the restricting character of which has been somewhat obscured by the infinite extensions and multiplications of its media-based communication technologies. As Marc Augé vividly put it: “Technological innovations exploited by financial capitalism [...] are promoting an ideology of the future now, which in truth paralyses all thought about the future.”<sup>2</sup> The true reason behind such a deliberate imprisonment in the vulnerable present is nothing else but fear – the lurking fear from seemingly unchangeable and potentially disastrous future scenarios. As a result, the dreaded future is ignored.

## Ana Jeinić

Ana Jeinić is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Architectural Theory, Art History and Cultural Studies in Graz, where she was also teaching from 2010 until 2015. She studied architecture and philosophy in Graz, Venice and Delft, and graduated in 2009 from Graz University of Technology. In 2014, she was a guest researcher and lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. She is co-editor and co-author of the book *Is There (Anti) Neoliberal Architecture?*, and a regular contributor to *GAM - Graz Architecture Magazine*. Her ongoing curatorial project *Architecture after the Future* has been awarded the Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky Grant 2016. Currently, her research focuses on the relationship between architectural concepts and political strategies in the era of neoliberalism.

*Previous page:*  
*Budućnost (Future)*, 2013  
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1 Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, eds. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), p. 19.

2 Marc Augé, *The Future* (London/New York: Verso, 2014), p. 3.

### Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

It seems as if the entire dimension of the future, as an anthropological constant of the human existence, has been squeezed and pulled into the present moment – “the future is now” has become the slogan of our post-futurist era and, as so often happens, it is architectural institutions, theorists and practitioners who have been among the most eager to discern and welcome the spirit of the time<sup>3</sup>. But the suppressed and imploded future reappears in distorted forms – as the explosive fear of apocalyptic future developments related to climate change, environmental devastation, technological catastrophes, global wars and mass migration, or as the nostalgic memory of the “the age that had the future”.

These two perverted notions of the future are at the root of our increasing fascination with the ruins of modernity. The desolated modernist environments trigger and feed the nostalgia for the “naive” age of progress and happiness, whilst simultaneously prefiguring the dystopian future of our nightmares. For the moment, however, they liberate us from the fear associated with such catastrophic expectations by turning the dystopia of decay into an alluring aesthetic phenomenon. The contradiction, malaise and despair characterising the relationship of our generation toward the futurist legacy has been incisively captured by the young Croatian photographer Bojan Mrđenović in his photo-series entitled *Budućnost* (Future) – the series shows the decaying retail buildings that used to belong to the once successful socialist company of the same name. The signage of the company’s name is still visible on the front of each building, sitting suggestively above the derelict remnants of what was meant to be our future.

<sup>3</sup> In 2016 alone the slogan “The future is now” has been used as a title of several architectural events and publications – e.g. the 999 issue of *Domus* (February 2016), the 2016 National Architecture Conference of Australia held in Adelaide 28-30 April, and Belgrade International Week of Architecture (BINA), 5-28 May.



Confronted with the exasperation emanating from Mrđenović's photographs one cannot but ask: how is it possible that we have accepted the collapse of all the brave future projections of previous generations, whilst deliberately renouncing the making of our own? How is it possible that even the most radical political movements of the last few decades have satisfied themselves with subverting, mitigating or just slowing down the devastating course of the crisis-driven neoliberal restructuring (with all its tragic social and environmental consequences), without working out amongst themselves comprehensive future alternatives?

*Budućnost (Future)*, 2013.  
© Bojan Mrđenović



ANA NA USLIZ

Budúcnosť

TRAMM

NOČ PEČENIH VOZLOVA 91

sex!

CS.F.P.P.

Pus





Producenti

DMR  
VANS  
DROVE  
SWATI

Previous page: *Budućnost*  
(*Future*), 2013.

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The reason for the dominance of the “rejective” and the near disappearance of the “projective” forms of political engagement should be sought in the effects of neoliberal ideology, more specifically, in the peculiar function that the term “totalitarianism” has assumed within this ideological framework. As accurately observed by Gal Kirn and Robert Burghardt, the contemporary discourse of totalitarianism “dismisses everything that challenges the present order as a threat to freedom”,<sup>4</sup> blocking in this way any intention “to open the present towards the future”<sup>5</sup>. In such a context, the relationship towards the remnants of the (revolutionary) past cannot be a productive one either – instead of being subject to critical analysis and reassessment, the past is “frozen” as the work of passive nostalgia.

At the same time, deprived of its most fundamental role of “bringing change”, the future has become subject to self-interested, short-term speculations, which lack any aspiration of changing the present order, instead merely projecting the existing developmental trends into the future, turning the latter into a source of profit. Indeed, the expected profits of financial traders, insurance companies, real-estate agencies and global corporations are dependent upon the basic predictability of the future and any serious rupture in the predicted course of time is enough to burst the bubble of speculation. What is more, speculative future expectations are projected back into the present, closing the temporal loop which undermines any possibility of transgression – when, for example, online shopping companies use our previous purchases to estimate our “future wishes” and send them back to us in the form of personalised shopping suggestions, they actually impede any significant changes in our tastes, interests and behavioural patterns.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gal Kirn and Robert Burghardt, *Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials. Between Memorial Genre, Revolutionary Aesthetics and Ideological Recuperation*, *Manifesta Journal* 16, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For the concept of time associated with speculation, see Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik, *The Speculative Time-Complex*, (accessed in June 2016).

Trapped in a quadrangle formed by fatalistic dystopian fears, passive nostalgic mourning, the impeding discourse of totalitarianism and the circular temporal loop of profit-oriented speculation, the future seems to have lost its vital transformative potential. It can be reasonably claimed that the shared cultural imagination of the global society has entered the post-futurist stage. To recognise this troubling condition, while dismissing the illusion that architecture could simply remain untouched by it, presents an important task for contemporary architectural theory. Engaging with this task does not mean being overly modest or pessimistic – in fact, recognising something is the first step towards overcoming it.

Consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, many architectural practitioners, activists, and researchers have indeed initiated the process by which the architectural project is adapting in diverse ways to the post-futurist zeitgeist. These complex and manifold adaptation strategies are waiting to be discerned, understood and examined. All the more so because the resulting changes concern the very idea of the project as the central category of architectural design. In the conventional sense of the term, the architectural project has always been a “project of the future” - e.g. by designing a house, an architect envisages with the help of drawings, models etc. something that does not yet exist in the present, but will possibly exist in the future. Taking this into account, it is possible to imagine the impact that the on-going social implosion of the future is exercising on architecture as a discipline. The following brief consideration of the diverse post-futurist design strategies that are emerging should be understood as a first step towards an, as yet incomplete, analytical assessment of the transformation(s) of the architectural discipline in a cultural context shaped by the crises of the future.

**“Many architectural practitioners, activists, and researchers have indeed initiated the process by which the architectural project is adapting in diverse ways to the post-futurist zeitgeist.”**

## Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

*Temporary  
architecture  
(the future now)*



Above and Below: Raumlabor,  
*The fountain house*, Montreal  
2014. © Markus Bader

*Futuronostalgia  
(mourning the pure  
form)*

Pop-up constructions, tactical design, temporary spatial interventions, informal urbanism, flexible planning, guerrilla architecture and similar popular concepts have all, in spite of considerable differences in the context of their application and the ambitions of their protagonists, something in common – they are not built for the future, but for here and now. They deliberately renounce durability and accept (or even promote)

ephemerality as the incontestable social condition. They merge the temporal distance between the development of the project and its materialisation. The “project” gets absorbed by the “practice”.

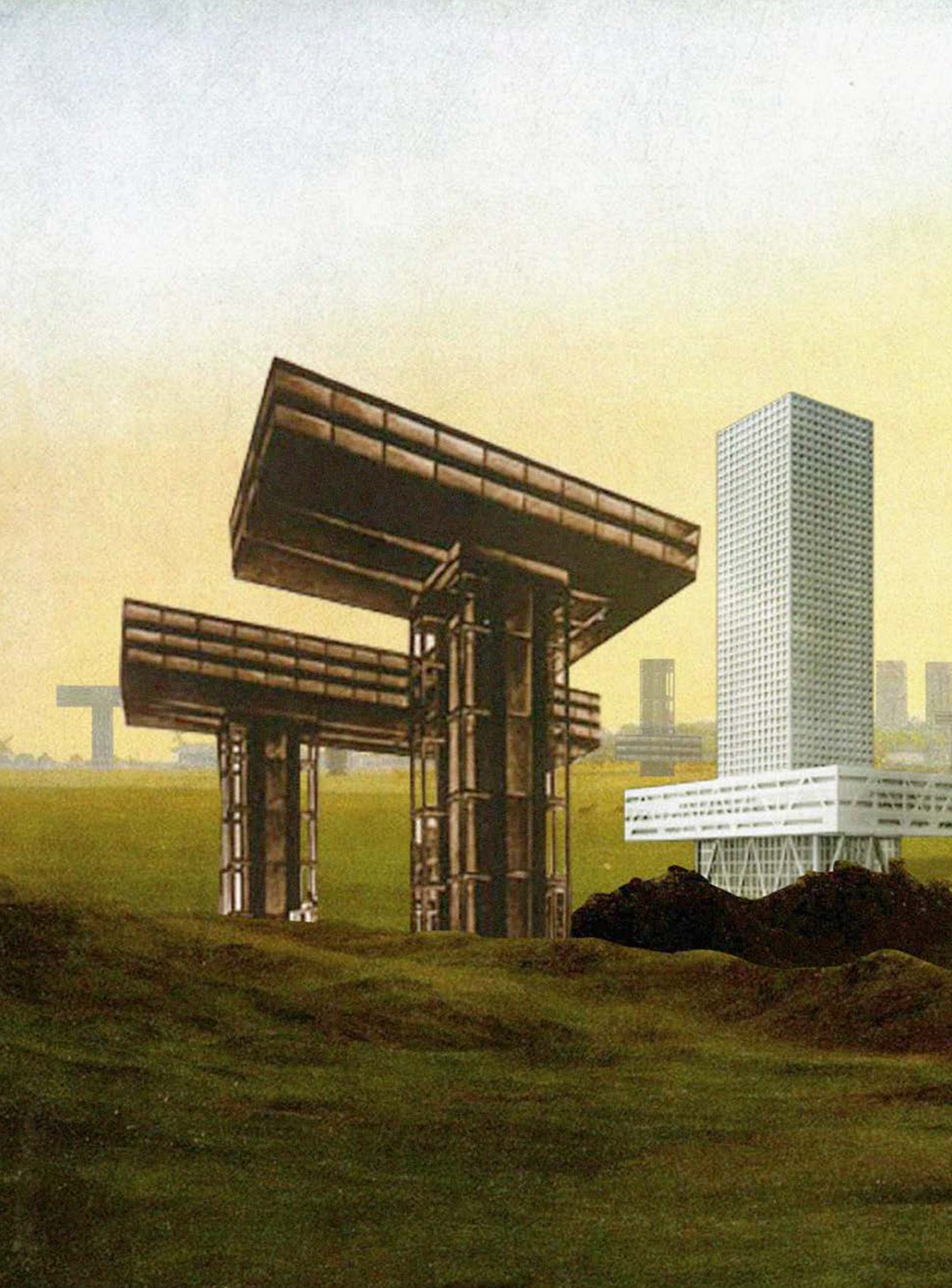
In the long history of architecture, there were recurring periods in which (after an era of inventions and revolutions) old norms and values were reclaimed and re-established. There is, however, something quite specific about the contemporary version of architecture’s recollection of its recent past. It is exactly the futurism of

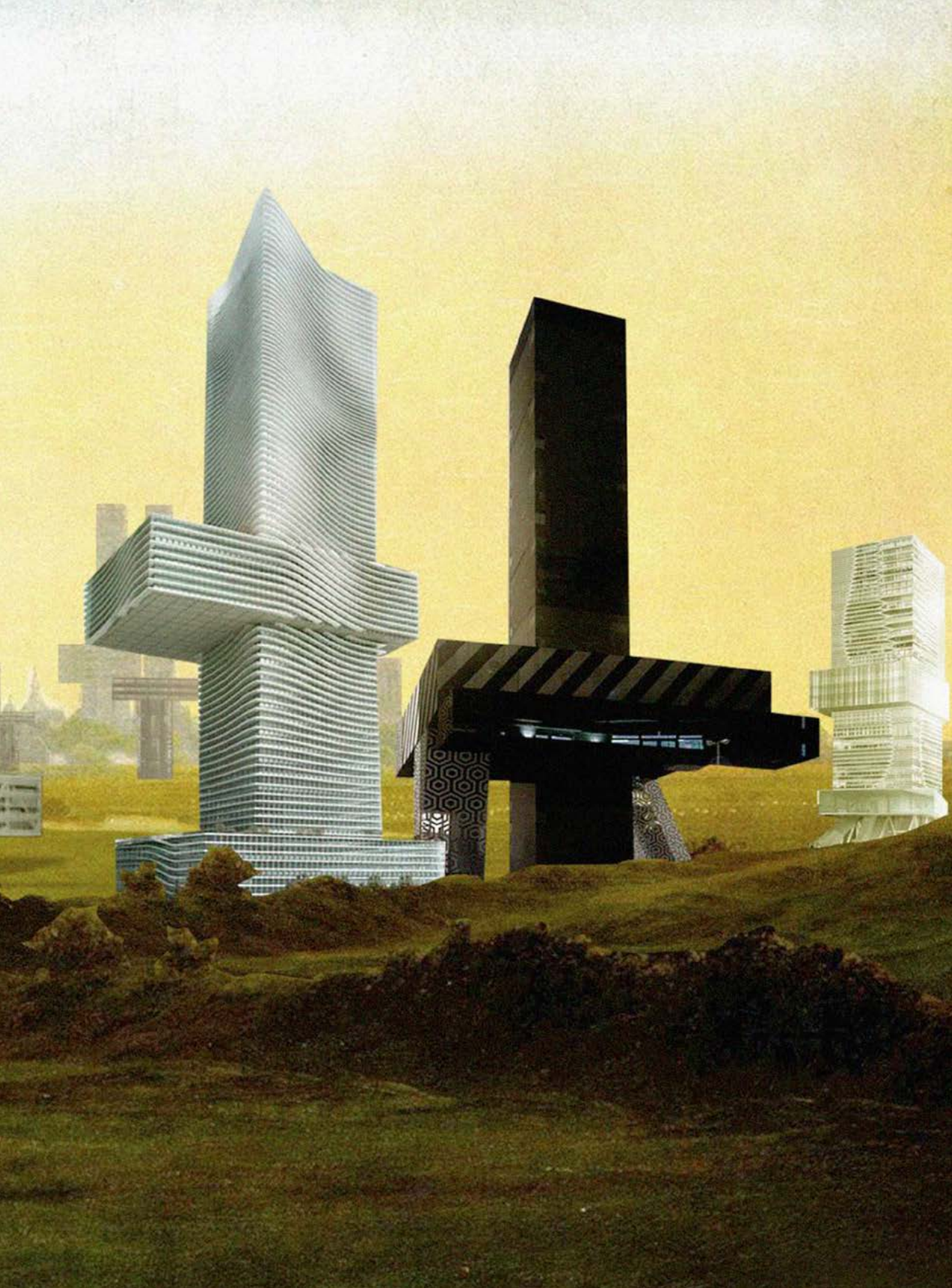
the previous epoch (with radical, uncompromising, pure form as its architectural expression) that has become a strange object of nostalgia. Consequently, no specific formal language is longed for, but the form itself – firm, clear and absolute form, opposed to the flexibility and ephemerality of a world shaped by financial capital, permanent wars, climate crisis, and massive migrations. By its tenacious apotheosis of the architectural form, “hardcore architecture” (as labelled by the editors of *Arch+ Magazine*<sup>7</sup>) is itself an expression of the deeply rooted and thoroughly legitimate fear that, in contemporary capitalism, architecture is threatened not just with the loss of its disciplinary integrity but its very *raison d’être*. Indeed, the space of real-time financial transactions needs no architecture, no future and no politics.

The only form of truly utopian architecture, which flourishes in our essentially anti-utopian era, encompasses projects of high-tech, self-sufficient, “smart” and “green” superstructures of the future. These projects have indeed much in common with futuristic utopias of the high modern era: faith in technological development, vast spatial scale of proposed interventions, radical changes in prevailing lifestyles and their material conditions and, last but not the least, the futuristic orientation itself. There exists however a crucial difference in the way that modernist visionary architects understood and related to the future compared to their contemporary successors. It seems as if the future changed its sign from positive to negative – if the function of modernist utopias was to anticipate the promising future, the role of the “salvatorian” utopias of our era is to save us (or at least some of us) from the effects of the apocalyptic future scenarios (climate change, ecological disaster, depletion of resources, escalation of poverty, forced migrations etc).

<sup>7</sup> See *Arch+* 214 and 215 (spring 2014).

***Salvatorian  
utopianism  
(in expectation  
of the disaster)***





## Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

Floating constructions for climatic migrants, encapsulated high-tech oases in regions affected by desertification, intelligent surveillance systems for cities in the “age of terror” or artificial environments for the preservation of endangered species do not promise us a bright future.



If “asking questions rather than providing definite answers” counted until not so long ago as the privileged formula for “pure” (non-applied) art, during the last few decades this has been gradually appropriated by architecture. Already Peter Eisenman used the architectural project as a tool for “critical” interpretation and “deconstruction” of inherited design formulas and not so much for anticipating the future. While Eisenman’s interpretative gesture addressed the formal grammar of architectural design, the reflexive architects of a more recent generation(s) have become more concerned with the cultural, ecological or political dimension of the built environment. However, they all share the tendency to maximise the analytical dimension of a design while

*Interprectures  
(reflecting instead  
of projecting)*

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Contemporary Hardcore  
Landscape IV: Steel Clouds,  
Wai Think Tank.*

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Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Nord-  
Pas de Calais, 2013.*



simultaneously minimising its projective component. Instead of envisaging the future, the analytical project reveals, interprets, questions, recombines, polarises, radicalises, politicises or subverts the present.

†

Sooner or later the future will break free from its temporary imprisonment. Neoliberal fatalism will be replaced by the principle of hope; nostalgia will give way to productive remembering; the idea of totalitarianism will stop functioning as an ideological weapon and become a critical reminder instead; speculation will not serve pragmatic individualism, but “utopian communism”. Modernist futurism will be critically reassessed, giving way to a new notion of the emancipatory, future-oriented project. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that the process of the resurrection of the future as central focus of radical politics has been unleashed already<sup>8</sup>.

It is thoroughly wrong, however, to assume that architects alone can revive the idea of the future in a cultural condition that is still defined by its overall crisis. If detached from broader social movements and political strivings, architecture, presuming to remain the last bastion of futurism in the midst of an essentially non-futuristic culture, cannot but succumb to the naive pseudo-utopianism of those who aspire to eliminate social problems through technical solutions. The practice of architecture can turn socially produced future perspectives into tangible spatial forms, but it cannot invent our futures for us. ■

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Pierre Rimbert, *Contester sans modération*, *Le Monde diplomatique* #746 (May 2016), p. 3.