

# Introduction

## Archifutures

This, the third volume in the *Archifutures* series of field guides mapping the future of architecture, is focused on *The Site*, and it is a call to action. Containing sixteen of the most inspirational proposals, strategies and projects sent in to and selected by the members of the Future Architecture platform in response to their call for ideas at the end of 2015 – and coming from practitioners, architects and designers from around Europe and beyond – these are practical solutions that could be shaping and making that future on a site near you soon.

In *Volume 1: The Museum*, the spotlight was firmly on the Future Architecture platform members themselves, mapping their strategies as institutions and organisations involved in the communication and support of the latest thought, theory and practice of those leading architecture today.

*Volume 2 The Studio* then presented a first tranche of essays and interviews from these innovators and others, focusing in particular on the cutting-edge thinking and theory that's framing and scoping out (possible) architecture futures today.

Now this third volume, *The Site*, presents a further selection from the call for ideas with the focus this time firmly on the nitty-gritty of practice: projects and strategies that are on-site or site-ready to shake up that future.

Together the contributions presented here can be seen to represent a collective rolling up of architectural sleeves: projects that are about getting on with the task in hand, getting hands dirty to make a better world. They act as a signal call of a new generation of architects not content to accept the status-quo as it is – the poverty and inequity which seems to have become hardwired into how so many of our cities and societies have developed today, questioning what it is means to be an

## Introduction

architect and reasserting the agency of what architecture in its widest sense can contribute, not just to the debate but to helping change things for the better.

In the context of the call to arms, however woolly, of *Reporting from the Front*, the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Alejandro Aravena – that demanded a return to an architecture focused on the human condition “as a way to improve people’s quality of life” and for architects to be “scrutinising the horizon looking for new fields of action” – much of the work presented here can be seen to reflect this new engagement. Practitioners reporting from the many fronts where architecture in its widest sense can make a difference, whilst also remaking what it means to practice architecture today.

And given the buffeting winds of uncertainty, and the present breakdown of past sureties – driven by technology, economics, politics and toxic cocktails of all three – in a time not of things given but of things not, post-truth, post-digital, post any consensus on what can be done – it is the anger, yet ultimately positivity, of the projects presented here that is heartening: the hapticity of creating a better place in the world, a dwelling, that “room of one’s own” which architecture can make.

One of the key points coming out from many of the contributions is that what we do right now matters – so what are contained here are action points for now. For the seeds to making the future better through architecture, start here.

In no work is this clearer than that of the experimental research collective, URBZ (p. 24), whose experience on projects improving conditions in informal settlements around the world, including their work in the slums of Mumbai, informs the piece written by its two founders Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava. They passionately argue that the most radical and optimistic act an architect can do is not to plan a perfect utopian solution, but to work out a real problem on the ground, to

improve conditions in neighbourhoods and for communities as they are developing now.

Filipe Estrela and Sara Neves (p. 66) similarly outline their hands-on projects in rural Bihar in India, where they've been working with local villagers to develop a flexible housing model that radically improves living conditions, while still drawing on local materials and skills – making architecture which is about the whole life-cycle of a building and not just static form-making.

This emphasis on utilising resources that already exist – in other words: not reinventing the wheel but adapting and updating it – infuses several other of the contributions too. This can include the reutilisation of the key resource of existing buildings themselves: abandoned or derelict structures, which unlock strands of local culture and meaning that are already embedded in the built landscape, something seen clearly in the work of Ignacio Gias from Spain. His project (p. 170) proposes imaginatively to renovate the *hórreos* of Northern Spain – old, out-dated and disused farm storage buildings – for use as the basis of a new network of cultural tourism and economic revival in the region.

Similarly, Slovenian architect Andrej Strehovec (p. 126), shows how more temporary, ephemeral inflatable living spaces – or “capsules” as he calls them – inserted into the carcasses of disused buildings, could quickly and cheaply repurpose them where previously they would have been too expensive to restore, giving sustainability to rural and other communities.

Utopian tabula rasa projects are noticeable by their absence here, with urban proposals looking not at instant transformation but at supporting a socially informed evolution of cities, improving quality of life through sustainable urban revival or thoughtful new architecture. For instance Natasha Reid's creative solution (p. 114) to London's housing crisis is to recast the traditional townhouse typology into a mixed-use, communal set of facilities better suited to that city's increasingly diverse needs and

## Introduction

population – flexibly underpinning and maintaining a healthy social mix. Aleksandra Zarek (p. 178) meanwhile outlines her integrated approach to the rejuvenation of whole city districts rather than just through the isolated renovations of individual buildings, making for a much more holistic, sustainable urban evolution in cities, both physically and socially.

Reigniting the ambition and the passion seen in the past in the development of our cities and their improvement for the mutual good – not just in their visible superstructures but in their invisible and often overlooked infrastructures – is what informs Manon Mollard's contribution (p. 92). She speculates on how a city like London could re-harness the flows and structures of the water systems that keep it serviced and dry – echoing how they were once such a powerful a force for good and a symbol of modernity and pride when laid out in the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile it's the other, often faceless, sometimes even pernicious, veiled or hidden systems which underpin the development and look of our cities and spaces – the structures of state-power, of politics and finance – that are the driver behind several other contributions. These uncover how architecture is itself both an expression and tool of these systems, but also how it can also be used to subvert, critique and reveal them, not just as a passive product but an active condition of resistance.

Thus in his contribution, Léopold Lambert (p. 102) exposes and analyses the inherent violence that forms and informs our built environment – the spatial consequence of the politics of the state – from border posts and walls to the police stations of Northern France.

And it is in the context of the stranglehold of extreme land-values in the property market that the neoliberal financial system has created, where Jack Self (p. 48) proposes a provocative project, showing how architects, rather than being sidelined, could become prime agents for change, by subverting this very system to leverage the finance to provide new affordable social-housing for all.

## Archifutures

Similarly the proposal by international office Plan Común (p. 36) for a giant public greenhouse in Graz, Austria questions the economic drivers behind the development of cities today and the gradual privatisation of public urban spaces – and ways to change this.

The issue of borders, and their breaking down, seems to be a running theme – not least in the idea of the future itself as some bordered off territory observed from afar or indeed in the definition of what being an architect means – but also in the ways architecture and design can impact on new ways of living and interacting. So in Lavinia Scaletti's contribution (p. 194), she explores the breakdown of traditional ideas of the private versus the communal, as a consequence of the new forms of nomadic inner city-living forced on many priced out from permanent accommodation, proposing new structures designed to support – and indeed celebrate – this, a new infrastructure of shared resources and facilities.

Linnea Våglund and Leo Fidjeland (p. 92) in their work question the fundamental division between the manmade and natural, looking at what a future of genetically designed nature – and of architecture and design made from artificial “natural” materials – could be, and how it might shift our relationship to the world around us and our ideas of home.

Meanwhile it is the creative reworking of the tools of narrative and communication in architecture and the tropes of representation that Jana Čulek (p. 156) analyses. She considers how the use of storytelling in the representation of Dutch architecture has been a factor in its success, and looks at how a combination of visual and textual narrative can better explain architecture to its users.

A desire to reframe the “narrative” of architecture also drives the work of Guerilla Architects (p. 134), who seek to recast ideas of public space through playful or subversive actions and interventions – cooking, cleaning and mobile co-working around empty buildings and lots – acts that help question and reimagine the city around us.

## Introduction

Still for all the barrier bending, not least of the old silos of “the profession” of architecture, the core skills and expertise that architects through their training can uniquely bring to issues, remain. This can be clearly seen in the work of Jan Glasmeier and a.gor.a architects (p. 144) on the Thai-Burma border and in Chiang Mai, where their design and construction of education centres for marginalised groups, utilises both established local patterns of building whilst incorporating innovations from their own training and background in Europe.

Their work underlines the constant thread that binds all the work presented here – and that has always underpinned the impulse for good architecture – the hope and optimism for making a better world – even if incrementally, project by project, bit-by-bit.

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