

## A Year in a Few Thoughts

I was asked by *Future Architecture Platform* to review the applications for this year's call for ideas on the future of architecture. It has been fascinating to look over 360 applications and some 1,000 pages worth of proposals.

It was a revealing exercise: One I had the privilege to have a panoramic overview of today's discourses and interests occupying architects and the discipline's adjacent thinkers; two I had the opportunity to reflect upon how these separate ideas could, especially zooming out from the specificity of each project, begin to tell a larger story on the current status of architectural discourse.

What I will try to do today is highlight what I think are the more interesting ideas, questions, and trends that have surfaced.

I must explain that I use the word interesting, which can often convey a certain banality, but its use is not facetious, rather an attempt not to evaluate these proposals based on whether they are good or bad; instead qualify if they point to larger questions and ideas being asked by the discipline and society. So, I understood my role differently from the jury where I did not have to determine the validity of each approach or idea, but had to recognize emerging trends, directions, or potential questions being posed.

To preface, I had to extract and amplify the intentions behind some ideas in order to expose an underlying train of thought that might have not been immediately detectable.

Finally, I should disclose that the ideas that I resonated with are those that touch upon part of my own work or the CCA's upcoming research and curatorial projects dealing with societal transformations, urban and non-urban issues.

So, I would like to start by using a card that is part of the Gordon Matta Clark archive on 'Anarchitecture' at the CCA, which gives a sense of how I view my role today, but also the CCA's approach and perspective to the architecture debate today:

"Here is what I have to offer you... confusion guided by a clear sense of purpose"

So here you go, a series of hopefully purposed, but still elaborately confused thoughts.

## Thought 1: The Future is the Present

What did the responses on ideas for the “future of architecture” reveal? What is their conception of what the future is and when it begins?

We should first say that architecture, urbanism, and design are inherently projective in nature. Constantly, speaking to what is the next—even if formally they may draw from the past. However, in a better version of itself, architecture should inform, share, and visualize what is to come. Even if a project is about the present, and its ambition is not a project of a larger social, political, economic, cultural, technological, or environmental transformation, it is always defining a scenario that will happen.

What struck me in reviewing the applications is the future being envisioned was one that is not so distant or distinctly different from our present moment. At the very least it is built on the same shared assumptions and premises we have today. Often not needing to change or evolve society’s cultural consciousness to implement their vision for the future. They rely on, for example, current technology, our existing obsession with social media and the belief in the opportunity for digital technologies to foster a shared and democratic dialogue. It is an extrapolation of the present, rather than a break from it.

Perhaps, we are in a moment of excessive love for the present, the “right now,” making it difficult to depict or imagine a future that is so radically different from the present.

American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff recently wrote a book entitled the *Present Shock* in direct response to Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock*, published in 1970. Rushkoff believes that twentieth century futurism—most concretely expressed in the space-race—has led to a myopic view and obsession on the present in the twenty-first century. He writes, “Prophecy no longer feels like a description of the future, but, rather, a guide to the present.” The danger of futurism was an over consideration of what “could be,” versus the danger of presentism is an uneven consideration of “what is.” His first chapter focuses on what he calls “Narrative Collapse,” which is the loss of the linear narrative as a result of our short attention spans and need for instant gratification. This has resulted in becoming more concerned with making sense of the present.

It seems to be the end, for now at least, of imagined revolutionary scenarios and long-term transformations.

However, is this necessarily bad? Or is this the fault of architecture’s capacity to think about tomorrow? I would say no, because perhaps we are so embedded in a moment of transformation, that we do not need sci-fi scenarios or utopic visions to offer us possible versions of the futures. Often these visions function to stoke change in a time of stagnation and inactivity. If we reflect

upon major technological shifts in the last fifty years— the computer, the internet, the smart phone— they have and are rapidly transforming how our bodies relate to the world, more than in last two thousand years.

I suspect, being in the midst of these societal transformations that we are unable to understand time both accurately and precisely to distinguish between the present and future.

Overall, all the proposed projects want to be in the future, because of the desire to usher in transformative attitudes; but how far into the future remains undetermined.

## **Thought 2: Welcome Anthropocene**

At this point we are all familiar with the new epoch we live-in; the Anthropocene. This period is characterized by human activity as the definitive force driving change in the environment and climate. Even if nature seemingly acts as a primary force of change, it is caused or exacerbated by human activity, setting into motion an unintended sequence of effects. Only a few projects proposed actions, remedies, and interactions with nature, rather the majority of proposals centre the human as its subject—the thing in need of care.

It remains all about us, humankind.

In 2016, Marlboro launched a campaign with Leo Burnett called *You decide*.

The main intention of the campaign was to claim that the responsibility of our health does not reside in a shared condition; or in the hands of any government or institutional entity: It is now the responsibility of the individual. You decide how to treat your body. It is your decision if you engage in activities that could be detrimental to your health like drinking, smoking; versus if you decide to exercise or engage in activities deemed healthy. Therefore, the human body is treated and begins to be understood as a machine, for example, like your car: it is up to you to drive it correctly; carry out annual check-ups; repair, remove, and change any piece to optimize its lifespan.

We have moved from welfare to well-being. We find ourselves far from the welfare-state health policies developed during the postwar era, promoting preventive medicine and establishing health as a social right of every citizen. Higher health care costs, reduced public services and spending, and the affirmation of an individualist rhetoric, mean that today health is increasingly considered an individual responsibility.

There are certainly other ideas that emerged in the applications: many were about gender equality, diversity, how to take care of those with special needs, and the on-going and intensifying refugee crisis.

Also, a re-thinking of the ideas of companionship, which looks at new ideas on love, family structure, and how new habits with these ideas may manifest spatially and architecturally. More so, there was a preoccupation with the non-human: how architecture could respond when designing for humans alongside new entities, such as robots or animals when incorporated into our daily routines.

Overall, a sincere interest exists in investigating the new social rituals derived from changing models of living. Often this interest does not have a political agenda, but a social naïveté that speaks to a larger diffuse interest in human behaviors and its potentials. What we can observe is design switching scales, focusing on the individual human's need (what is right for their body, emotions, social connections, etc.), rather than society at large. Ideas become concerned with the notion of leisure and on how to have fun.

### **Thought 3: The Supremacy of the Digital**

Digital is our new framework and will continue to be; according to the submissions we have received.

The digital we have today, is no longer tools for design or fabrication. This was the fervor of thought in the last 30 years.

Today, the digital is connected to our emotions, used to increase and personalize any experience we are to encounter in life. This brings about a new kind and form of narcissism: the creation and proliferation of personalized spaces.

William Davies, a social and political theorist, calls this the age of emotional capitalism; and architecture seems to fall into its trap, similar to how it served a neoliberal capitalist agenda. Our age is characterised by self-obsession: What matters is not what you think or do, but how you feel. This is a subject of interest at the CCA, which is tackled in the upcoming exhibition *Our Happy Life*, curated by Francesco Garutti, which looks at how the new Happiness Agenda's are shaping the built environment.

Not to risk any confusion, I must be clear about this, happiness is excellent for business. A happy worker can be as much as twelve percent more productive. A science of human sentiments—what Davies calls “the surveillance, management and government of our feelings”—is one of the fastest growing forms of manipulative knowledge. As well as market research into shopping, that uses extensive face-scanning programmes to reveal customers' emotional states.

There is no doubt we live in a time riddled with anxiousness, no longer trusting experts or politicians, fearful of terror, often dwelling in the past, and unsure how to evaluate what is true in a world of “alternative facts.” This is what Davies defines as “nervous states.”

Our reliance on this idea of the digital is predicated on the assumption that it could provide us with reliable data and offer a new shared truth. Social media, digital mapping, and applications provide a new set of tools and methodologies—crowd sourcing, crowdfunding, school's use new processes to learn together, the use of media as reality TV to share architectural ideas—to better ascertain what are a community's real wants and needs.

This comes with opposing ideas which starts to render building typologies obsolete. Why have schools and libraries when all learning will be online and digital? The absorption of these once public or social spaces into the digital realm, creates a nostalgia for their existence. Many proposals suggested monuments to these urban memories and disappearing typologies; to remember a not so distant past.

#### **Thought 4: Urban and the Non-Urban, maybe Rural**

Many of the proposals dwell on the issue of delineating the urban, especially in respect to territories that are non-urban but aren't the countryside; or there was a renewed interest in the rural.

We experienced in recent political events a divide in culture and politics, needs and values, between city dweller and non-city dweller, which have come to a head in recent world events. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and those recently in France, are representative of growing tensions and a diverging set of values between these two geographic and citizen factions—the city dweller and non-city dweller.

Other ideas looked at ways to bring back a real production economy in the city in order to bridge this divide while also offering new models for housing and communities based on new farming models and practices.

It is unclear how productive these investigations will be and if there could be a scenario that goes beyond just local experimentations; or whether these investigations will yield an immediate application to the built environment. This remains an important focus for years to come. Many of the schemes posit that culture in the non-urban environment is more original and intact because of its connection to the real needs of its inhabitants. A rediscovery for the vernacular that is somehow interesting to register.

Along with questions about the urban, deeper questions are formulated, such as questioning the concept of ownership. One proposal asks: Do we need to own property to be part of society?

#### **Thought 5: What is Left Out**

What is absent in these applications, also says a lot about the current trends and ideas that pervade the current cultural landscape.

I would have expected a lot more focus on environmental issues. Instead, those who addressed environmental issues took a narrower approach with a focus on dealing with waste management, e-waste, or smartphone applications which would reward people for good behaviour when reducing their carbon footprint.

However, this is not seen as a main problem to tackle in the future. This could be seen as good news, where these issues have become so apart from the conversation, that they are no longer seen as something separate to address but are a point of consideration in tackling other issues and will always surface in any discussion. On the other hand, there is potential for the issue at hand to be eclipsed and put aside without being solved.

The other was the absence of approaches that called for larger change. Many of the ideas seem rooted in a local need/response and struggle with the taking that specific case and making it a shared and collective discourse to incite transformative structural change. We certainly do not want generic ideas, but we need to talk to ones that are relevant to many.

### **So, in Conclusion.**

It is up to us to choose any of these ideas and to make them our future. Right now, these ideas are just a soft whisper. I hope the solid ones persist and will be documented by this platform to be shared and discussed.

Thinking about the future of architecture, my hope is architecture will try not to just offer solutions but will always occupy a space of friction. We know that architecture cannot dictate the agenda of today's and tomorrow's societies, but we should be cautious in adapting those that are easily and readily offered to us. Architecture has the opportunity to look where others do not and develop a position that questions the framework of positions which are deemed fashionable. It is harder, but it doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

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