

Good evening, everybody. I am grateful to the organizers of the Future Architecture Platform for inviting me to deliver the 2020 Annual Reflection Summary. It is an honor and a responsibility, as well as a fantastic exercise.

I want to start by congratulating those who submitted projects to the Call for Ideas. It is beautiful to be here today to celebrate architecture in all its diversity. And no, it is never too much. In fact, we need more ideas coming. Yet, it is also important to reflect on what is that that brings all these ideas together. I might have a few suggestions to offer.

One disclaimer before we continue: It is the end of a long day, I have a thick Spanish accent, and plenty of notes. Are you ready?

Let's begin with Tables.

Tables

Across the call, a number of proposals exude nostalgia, a longing for having a position *in the table*. Yet, do we really want to sit at *that* table? I am not sure how you imagine the table where we were previously seated, and no longer are. Every time I think about it, what comes to mind is a table full of white men, cups of coffee, seated next to a window overlooking a city, a global city.

I assume that is the table where power is enacted and distributed, around which are gathered those who decide on how many luxury apartments and thin, tall and empty towers a city can handle. I might be exaggerating, but I believe *that* is the table that we say we are no longer invited to. And, therefore, what does the fact that we want to be seated there it actually say about us?

Even if we go to that table with higher (ethical, social, environmental, political, aesthetic) ambitions, are we ready to represent all those who are not there, who are not invited or allowed to be at the table? Are we ready to challenge the politics of the table? Or do we just want a piece of the cake that is being cut and eaten on top of it?

We are not seated at *that table*, a table where we used to be. And yet, perhaps, the most pressing question here is if we actually have any table around us. A table. A physical mediator between participants of a conversation, between banqueters, eaters around the meal—the cake—about to be served. A table as the ghostly embodiment of a discussion we want to have.

Tables are important.

Hannah Arendt reflected about a table in her book *The Human Condition*. "What makes mass society so difficult to bear", Arendt writes, "is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation", Arendt continues,

“resembles a spiritualistic seance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible”.¹

Do we have a table around us? What is it that brings us together?

Karl Marx also brings a table into view. A weirdly animated wooden table. In *The Capital*, the figure of the table is mobilized as an exemplification of commodity fetishism. Arguing that the mystical character of the commodity is not linked to its use-value, but to its exchange-value, Marx alludes to a dancing wooden table. The table serves as a demonstration of the dual nature of commodities—the dislocation between their utility as things and their power or aura as agents of abstract value.

According to Marx, the table, as a commodity, “appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing”. However, “as soon as it emerges as a commodity”, he continues, “it not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will”.²

Both Arendt and Marx’s vanishing, animated, dancing tables have a spiritual, magical nature. Not by chance, a popular interest in spiritualist table-turning had been spreading throughout Germany since the late 1840s. Marx’s formulation around that mysterious inner life of the commodity could very well be brought here today to talk about architecture, and to its magical, mystical, and ghostly qualities as a commodity. In my image of those men seated around a table, the table also starts dancing above their heads. What brings them together is probably no other than those ghostly qualities of architecture as a commodity. “Are we feeling ashamed enough by the architecture that shows the embarrassing sides of our culture?”, asks one of the proposals.³ Are we, for instance, ashamed by how architecture has been rendered as a monumental repository of capital?

I do miss, in these 433 ideas, more on housing. Rather than a people’s right, the architecture of housing has become a preferred form of investment. The contemporary house is an asset at the centre of speculative operations and neoliberal policies of urban development. Its architecture follows the cruel logic of the markets. The majority of contemporary housing projects, master plans and policies serve to sustain forms of precarity and processes of unequal access among the population. Inequalities that perpetuate longlisting forms of violence towards excluded and oppressed communities, and in which the architectural community is also complicit.

In this context, some of the proposals address the “utopian promise to provide every Soviet family with its own apartment” and attempt to imagine futures for the stock of prefabricated

1 Arendt, Hannah, *The human condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 2nd edition, 1998), 52-53.

2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol 1., trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 163f.

3 Fabio Ciaravella, Cristina Amenta, Mimì Coviello, Clara Cibrario Assereto, “Architecture of Shame. A collective psychoanalytic session for European architecture”, Future Architecture Platform, Call for Ideas 2020: <http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/c5b96c3a-658e-4573-82b7-587c4b6c7276/>

house-machines.⁴ Obviously, we can now have a critical view on the homogenizing nature and forms of oppression embedded in these architectures. Yet, where are our current ideas for providing housing for the majority? And how do we bring those to the table(s)?

Whereas some propose to design alternative tables, such as platforms that steer the conversation between agents in the construction and inhabitation process, most architects seem to have ambiguous positions when seated at the table: aiming at being critical while wanting to be part of the same structures and systems they criticize.

Tables. We need more tables. Tables that prioritize affective dimensions. Structures of solidarity. Alternative forms of collectivity. Tables that encourage forms of resistance and societal demands for more horizontal structures. Strategies for increased civic agency. Rather than aiming to sit at those tables to where we claim we are not being invited, architects have the opportunity, and I would argue the responsibility, to render those tables obsolete. And to focus, instead, on creating new ones where to reorganize architectural practice and its role in reimagining societal, economic, and political structures.

Tables are something that bring things together or set them apart. As do **lines**.

The call attracted a series of projects centered on lines, very long straight lines, very long arbitrary lines. Symbolic and geopolitical lines, through which to treat the planet as an artefact that could be handled. Territories, time and climatic zones, products of infrastructural libido, colonial and imperial enterprises are defined by long, seamless lines. With the outcome of architectural and logistical thinking, these lines aim to reform collective life by introducing order and control.

That's what we architects have been historically trained to do. Lines. Lines that create insides, outsides, ups and downs. Lines that support and materialize differential conditions. An entire system of divisions. Historical forms of exclusion and discrimination. Lines. Clearly outlined, abstract and assertive lines.

These lines are emblematic of a visual and conceptual order, one that stimulates humanity's Modernist dreams to command over space and time, over territory and resources. Lines are imagined and drawn, their thickness and imperative clashing with the spaces and material realities upon which they are imposed. What actually happens when these lines "touch the ground"?

What if we follow and look closer at these lines?

The Institute for Linear Research imagines an open platform researching contemporary landscapes by walking on a straight line around the globe. Walking this otherwise abstract and floating line would allow, they suggest, to conduct investigations "into landscapes that we [emphasis mine] do not even know exist".⁵ The line, in this case, also serves to controversially outline a distinction between a we and an unknown other—human and non-human.

4 Goda Verikaite, "Recycling Utopia. Exploring (im)possible futures of Socialist mass housing", Future Architecture Platform, Call for Ideas 2020: <http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/5bdd0916-6b64-4fac-b9af-a4a04cebfca5/>

5 Matilde Igual Capdevila and Luis Hilti, "Institute for Linear Research. Walking around the Globe", Future Architecture Platform, Call for Ideas 2020: <http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/eadbcd51-a83b-41a0-bd68-b50eeb242d89/>

In the case of the project “35 Meridians of Radical Rituals”, the focus resides in surveying all territories along the 45° parallel, from the Atlantic coast to the Black Sea.⁶ The intangible and arbitrary line of the parallel and meridians, here used to “to reinvent common space beyond identity and borders”, has been paradigmatic of an abstract idea of time and space. These are lines that cross through climates, geographies and borders, something that for too many bodies is impossible or has dramatic consequences today. The establishment of the Prime Meridian time, for instance, was central to the international division of labour and systems of spatial distribution, accumulation, and exploitation connected to the history of imperialism and colonialism. The existence of a Longitude 0° inevitably renders other territories beyond it as peripheral or in perpetual delay and latency. And if the connection with architectural practice is not self-evident, let’s just reflect on how time differences have benefitted, among others, renowned Western architectural practices. By employing the services of offshore workers, such as those in the so-called render farms, architectural offices have assured a 24/7 production machine capable of responding to the demands of the market.

Too often throughout history, architectural proposals based on straight, very long, abstract lines, frequently stand for hegemonic systems of political domination. Tools for subjugation and exhaustive reconfiguration of the territory. Yet, as these lines engender geopolitical and social imaginations, it could also be deployed, perhaps, for the re-imagination of collective politics. And that’s precisely what some of the ideas selected here propose. The lines that order and divide the world seem to be mobilised in them as an attempt to bring the world together. That is to be celebrated and taken further.

Could we design systems that, instead of striving in generalisation and homogeneity, would be able to accommodate contingency, diversity and difference? Fluid, trans, queer and non-binary lines instead of straight ones.

Tables

Lines

And their **ruins**

“We live in an age of ruins”, claims Urbanaarchitettura, “the ruins of the welfare state in its various ideological and geopolitical embodiments”.⁷ Yet, it is “precisely in the ruin of an institution lies the prospect of a de-institutionalized idea of collectivity”.⁸

As even the immediate future becomes increasingly uncertain, architectural practices embrace the exposure of their future ruins instead of their concealment. This position, I would argue, renders possible a form of collective agency. One that allows for the re-evaluation of the impact of the architect’s work in relation to received ideas of progress.

Perhaps the pressing desire to render architecture durable has to be confronted with a more unstable paradigm. In the project “An Anticipatory Theory of Ruin Ecology”, Jason Rhys Parry proposes to study the buildings’ afterlives as potential future homes for nonhuman

6 Alkistis Thomidou & Gian Maria Soggi, “35 Meridians of Radical Rituals. Along the 45° parallel from the Atlantic coast to the Black Sea, an itinerant survey on collective actions, heritage, and imaginaries that reinvent common space beyond identity and borders”, Future Architecture Platform, Call for Ideas 2020: <http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/6e95d226-d227-4866-bda8-a7e67affee66/>

7 Marco Moro, Paolo Pisano, Sabrina Puddu, Francesco Zuddas (Urbanaarchitettura), “Institutes of Care. Spaces of (de)institutionalized collectivity”, Future Architecture Platform, Call for Ideas 2020:

<http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/879e9c28-fd01-46b3-bb18-e8c8205d28e6/>

8 Ibid.

species.⁹ Architectural practice is, in this example, entangled with uncertainty and forms of disappearance; its ruin having a generative potential in the aftermath of climate crisis and the collapse of the dream of industrial progress.¹⁰

This condition enhances a productive state between emergency (in the sense of being emergent) and decay. And it prompts, I would argue, the critical reinvention of the discipline in the face of open, uncertain futures.

Yet, this understanding of ruins and of architectural practice is situated far from the longstanding enthrallment of fascist regimes with ruins, generally exemplified by the "theory of ruin value" claimed by Adolf Hitler's chief architect Albert Speer. Leaving behind aesthetically pleasing ruins that would defy time and oblivion, as the monuments of old, is not the main focus here. Rather, the architecture of ruins acknowledges the transience of human societies and their ways of living. Some, as scholar Patricia MacCormack, take it even further, arguing for human extinction as the very least we can offer as an act of love to the planet.¹¹

Don't worry. I'm not here to make a plea for human extinction, but to argue for compassion for and acceptance of humanity's ruins; for the decentering of the human from the architectural practice; for giving way to new forms of sensible cohabitation and notions of care, welfare and comfort that account for humans and nonhumans.

Ruins. Ruins as testimony, as carrier, as generative potential for more -than- human alliances. Ruins, fishes and bullets. Ruins of war, ruins of the abandoned urban areas. Bodies as ruins.

My body as a ruin. My body is a ruin.

I feel ill and extremely tired today. Please don't feel sorry for me. I am not sharing this as an anecdote to get your sympathy, but because my ruined body has much to do with tables and lines.

In 2015, I got Lyme disease from a tick bite I got during a trip. My recovery was lengthy, and even if I am one of the lucky ones who recovered, I still deal with some of its effects. The fatigue of my ruined body is that of the planet. One of the fastest growing zoonotic diseases, Lyme disease spreads from animals to humans, crossing some of the historical lines and self-contained compartments that now we see blur. The spread of Lyme disease is inherently connected to patterns of urbanization. As humans alter landscapes and replace forests with new urban developments, Lyme and other diseases increase. The displacement of mammals due to urbanization and the climate crisis have dramatic effects on the spread of pathogens.

9 Jason Rhys Parry, "An Anticipatory Theory of Ruin Ecology. Building Future Ruins for Endangered Species to Thrive", Future Architecture Platform, Call for Ideas 2020: <http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/834007fc-a8e5-4081-a313-6dcaa3a34ce4/>

10 For a reflection of what manages to thrive in the ruins we make, as well as how capitalist destruction could bring new forms of multispecies collaborations, see Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

11 See Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Lyme ruins bodies as humans ruin the body of the planet, leaving both in a vulnerable position.

This is, I'd argue, not the time for heroic architectural figures. Or masters. Is not the time for dreams of landscape's domination. Is not the time for those proudly sustaining and encouraging overwork and hyper-productivity, the relentless machinery of architectural production.

The adoption of humility, even vulnerability is a political position. It is, perhaps, the position that challenges the conventional tables and lines that have guided architecture and its dreams of infinite progress, as well as the white masculinist subject that sees the world as his own possession.

Tables. Lines. Ruins.

Thank you,
Marina Otero Verzier