

Title Friction in Fiction: Constructing an Ecological Future

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The LSA (London School of Architecture) was set up six years ago and delivers a radical post graduate architectural programme. The ethos of the school is to reconnect academia with practice by creating a networked programme of exchange and learning. History and Theory are taught under the umbrella of Critical Practice.

This paper speculates on the value of immersive and personal written responses to the almost impossible challenges posed by the climate emergency. It explores the importance of creative writing as an alternative to the generic dissertation. The student responses offer transformative thinking that kick-start new narratives and ways of being. By opening up the discourse to fictional writing we encounter the framing of architecture as a story of futurity; a space to project into rather than look back on to. As a methodology this connects well to that of architectural practice where every drawing from the sketch to the working document is a representation of intent for something yet to happen.

Keywords:

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Research line:

4. Revolutions from / to the University & New agendas

Preface

This is a strand of research that draws on student writing from the LSA (London School of Architecture) as an original source in order to share alternative approaches to the teaching and learning of architectural theories and histories. Not only does this recognise the influence and thinking of the cohort, it further validates their future practices. They are encouraged to articulate what they believe to be imperative and engage in ethical discourse prompted by the ecological crisis. By opening up the pedagogical discourse to fictional writing we encounter the framing of architecture as a story of futurity; a space to project into rather than look back on to. As a methodology this connects well to that of architectural practice where every drawing from the sketch to the working document is a representation of intent for future action.

Introduction

“We must feel and accept the essential limits of the planetary system on which we entirely depend, and we must embrace our capacity to remake our collective fictions and thereby redistribute social and political power”.¹

What happens when the stories we tell ourselves are the wrong ones; not quite true or damaged? For Genevieve Guenther this question is now a familiar one entwined with politics, fake news and the global agency of the press. However, it also resonates with our architectural-selves when we encounter the tension between what we have been educated and trained to do - design architectural building - and a growing understanding that in this rapidly transforming world this is no longer the default position. We find ourselves in an existential dilemma. In a myriad of different ways the stories of C20th architecture have reached their sell-by date; they are patriarchal, colonial, hierarchical and extractivist. Yet the meta-project of architecture continues to thrive. When activist George Monbiot challenges the mono-capitalist ideology of the status quo, he argues discredited narratives cannot be discarded, they need to be replaced with a new narrative.² In developing this question the collective Open Democracy asks what kind of intellectual, affective relational capacities and dispositions do we need to develop in order to hold space for the emergence of alternatives that are viable, but currently unfathomable?³ This paper seeks to look at how these stories might come to be written in the age of climate emergency.

Part 1

Reality Check

When Daniel Wahl suggests that the story we are telling about humanity – who we are, what we are here for and where we are going – no longer serves as a functional moral compass, he is challenging our fictional relationship with Gaia.⁴ This term references the goddess in Greek mythology who represents the earth as well as the biological principle proposed by scientist James Lovelock in the 1970’s as an understanding that all living organisms interact to form a self-regulating complex ecosystem⁵. While some critics have called this a metaphor or myth rather than a mechanism, the traction of the theory appears to have come of age.

A myth can be understood as a legend or invented story and while not necessarily scientifically correct, they exist to explain the human condition. Although our enlightened scientific culture turns its back on such tales, there is an urgent sense that in order to reconnect with the earth we need to rediscover our mythic selves. Indeed, humans have been telling stories for millennia as a way of situating themselves and using their imaginations to creatively interpret forces out of their control. Yuval Harari describes this as a triple-layered reality where, “In addition to trees, rivers, fears and desires, the Sapiens world also contains stories about money, gods, nations and corporations”.⁶ At the elemental level it is the interweaving of these myths and stories that make up our understanding of the world. Harari convincingly argues that it is the ability to share narratives with huge numbers, mainly strangers, that gives rise to large scale co-operation whatever the dominant political ideology. Significantly these can change very quickly, as we see today.

Traditional architectural history, at least in British Schools, teach that these changes are often described as periods, styles or ‘-isms’, and while this fits neatly in to the C19th preoccupation of cataloguing, it presents history as the unfolding chronology of progress. Yet it does little to explain the current crisis which can be viewed as a hubristic belief in the man-made. Far from designing a better world, we come to realise we have destroyed it. Furthermore, as we look through the lens of the Climate Emergency and confront the statistics, we discover uncomfortable facts that demonstrate our actions have created a radically

degraded environment in a very short space of time. This tipping point demands us to consider 'after architecture' where the focus of spatial production has to go beyond the building and into a cycle of nurture and repair. We cannot ignore the distressing truth that our world has been formed through the destruction of other world's leading to the death and extinction of other species, habitats and cultures. Our precious planet is being exhausted. David Wallace-Wells describes the 'uninhabitable earth' as a place in the near future that has been almost destroyed, suggesting the situation is already much worse than we think. His motivation to inspire action and anger is to both to shock and to galvanise us into action as there are limited choices to be made that will determine our collective fate for millennia to come. Unless our outdated education systems are reimagined and our biased corporate media challenged, we remain stuck in a singular self-harming trajectory unaware of the complexity and threat. This can be interpreted as the death of Modernism, a human centric myth, and could be the beginning of a regenerative age that is in symbiosis with creation as a whole.

Re-writing History

That history is not static remains a contested notion for some; in particular the current strain of populist politics.. However, it is only through interrogating the past using newly discovered tools with an awareness of intersectional narratives and prejudices that we can critique the ideology of Modernism so that architecture, as critic Peter Buchanan suggests, will evolve from focussing on individual buildings and objective issues to becoming an art of reweaving multiple webs of relationships.⁷ When J. G. Ballard suggested that it is possible to write fiction with architecture,⁸ he might have been talking about Delirious New York, the 1978 work of urban science fiction by Rem Koolhaas, where Manhattan is depicted both as a culture of congestion as well as the arena for the terminal stage of Western civilisation.⁹ For historian David Gissen this tension between fantastical tales situated within equally fantastic structures, amount to a utopian project of escape. He concludes that architects are active in developing this form of fictional political activity though he is unsure how this will play out.¹⁰ Written in 2009 we can see that the questions no longer pertain to form making as proposed by Koolhaas, but to those of a global society struggling to reimagine its very existence. The rise of the *parametric* as a mode of constructing complex geometries is not necessarily a breakthrough but, as Doug Spencer suggests, a representation of neoliberal fiction and the flow of spatialised capital.¹¹ Rather than the imagined utopia of human progress it has morphed into a dystopia; literally translated as a 'bad place'. Time and again the architect imagines a future free of contingencies and consequences and thus remains guilty of propagating the myth of self-determinism. Who do we listen to now?

Re-writing the future

The recent blossoming in the UK of organisations and associations that nurture young architecture writers can be seen as a sign of the need for alternative critical positions. In the UK the Architecture Foundation, whose stated mission is to bring new voices to the conversation about London's future, has initiated a number of progressive projects around writing.¹² Notably its New Architectural Writers programme (NAW) is a free plan for BAME emerging talent. Their first publication, *Afterparti*, initiates commentary that builds on a comment from architect Indy Johar who suggests that the purpose of architectural education is to 'disrupt practice'. It features a spectrum of provocative pieces advocating for an ethical community-driven future. This is best summed up by Aoi Philips who in her essay titled *Equipped with a moral compass: examining architectural education's shortfalls*. She reflects that the peer pressure to be ethical and 'listening to people' is powerful in architecture schools, yet is very rarely taught.¹³ This revealing insight surely gets to the heart of impasse in the design curriculum; that is it deaf to very problems we need to address. In *Gross Ideas: Tales of Tomorrow's Architecture*,¹⁴ the conclusion is that before you can build a better world, you need to imagine it first. It follows that architectural education has to push the boundaries of speculation from the studio onto the page.

Part 2

In the UK 'Part 2' is the term for post graduate education in Architecture defined by the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects).

The LSA finds itself at the centre of a live debate around the future of the planet. For a school of architecture this is progressive and necessary; we have an ethical duty. The ambition is to nurture graduates that feel prepared to enter an unstable world with tools, knowledge and discipline in order to participate in changing and remedy the built environment. In order to challenge the hermetic nature of architectural discourse, the LSA chooses to engage in ecological conversations and research that causes friction; rubbing against the orthodoxy of expansionism and corporate interests.

As a generalization we can say that many schools of architecture in the Global North remain focused on the production of form and the pursuit of often tangential spatial strategies; what thinker Jacques Attali terms 'distractions'.¹⁵ Theories that describe form making are useless in the face of the scale of transformation required to rebalance our systems of production, consumption and disposal. It makes sense that we are witnessing such a crisis of public confidence as our power structures crumble with a loss of accountability and the rise of populism.

Within traditional 'theory' courses the student work is in the form of a written dissertation. These tend to be related to the philosophy of architecture or some historical aspect that is deeply researched. LSA students connect with emerging ideas that are shaping ethical and ecological questions, giving them permission to develop their own position. Over the past six years a clear agenda has been shaped reflecting upon the importance of a principled framework within a wide bandwidth of practice. They are asked to construct a manifesto that can be understood as an affirmation of intention seeking to reflect and rethink critical cultural norms or societal behaviors, calling for innovation and equality. The act of producing a progressive story, subverted into the form of a personal manifesto, becomes a space to build a call for arms and to construct an alternative world order. It also speaks to the radical and sometimes anarchic counter-cultures that use the idea of a manifesto to affect societal change.

While the LSA has been pioneering climate emergency leadership and critical practices that expose the end of modernity, few could have predicted the global Covid-19 pandemic. Or could they? While exact details of the 'origin story' remain unclear, the phenomenon is not new and has been understood as a threat by scientists for decades. The cause has been characterised by the erosion of the natural environment, disruption to the ecosystem and the relentless demand for natural resources. This is the direct consequence of progress and it is therefore necessary to replace the twin ideologies of growth and extraction, which lead to intersectional inequalities and a degraded polluted planet, with a new story. COVID has required a different outlook recognising the need for radical practices. If the climate crisis is a failure of imagination then collectively we must dream about better futures.

The Future is Fiction

If we define futurity as the quality or condition of being in or of the future, we can understand that forms of writing that are explicitly fictional can be framed as a narrative, parable or fantasy taking on both allegorical and projective structures. While the teaching of fiction tends to sit in 'creative writing' courses at Universities, in the opening up of projective knowledge creation we can see that by changing our gaze from the tired hegemonic architectural texts of C20th to more speculative examples we open up new possibilities for the nascent architect. Therefore referencing the students own work serves to illustrate ways in which this experiment has pushed the boundaries of the traditional knowledge economy within architectural academia.

One / Memory

In a deceptively simple two part essay Calin Barbu presents an inundated future world: "No one knows how many of the Marbles tell true stories, but they line the length of tallest wall you will ever see....Few are the ones who remember that our City used to grow once, when our appetite for dwellings was as relentless as our imagination".¹⁶ While the reader is drawn into this imaginary world, the narrative continues in part two, the only difference being that the text is footnoted. So when we read; "Barrier after barrier gets built on the edge of our deltas to stop this tug, yet they return to mud before we can repair them, as despite the financial buttressing you have offered", it is only by referring to the footnotes we learn that these are all live environmental disasters. The future has collapsed into the recent past and therefore the question of climate change is no longer an issue of futurity – it is all around us. Collaged fragments that weave continuity with disconnects and disaster picture alternative modes of being that are presented as parables about our collective failure to live lightly on the earth.

Two / Nature

The discourse of deep ecology implies the interconnectedness that affects our climate and natural cycles. In developing this theme the reconceptualization of nature is at the heart of Maelys Garreau's work, where she argues we must abandon and destroy our idea of nature as an endless resource and instead encourage a refreshed ethical vision which encompasses a multiplicity of realities.¹⁷ She suggests that the architect is replaced by a 'gardener of the earth' who adopts an anarchistic approach propagating a different environmental culture in order to seed new bonds with nature. Implicit is the sense that the man-made world is not immutable and that an alternative form of exchange is drawn up between species and agriculture that

changes the transactional value of ownership. The piece concludes; “The gardener of the earth asks us to remember the mythical thinking of our ancestors in order to redefine and co-exist with the dark and earthy dominant forces of nature”. We are presented with a Dark Eden.

Three / Folklore

In *For Future Folklores*, Milly Salisbury explores the role of myth as a way of awakening our senses to other worlds that co-exist around us, but that we are not able to see. For her not everyone is a writer, or a speaker, or a creator; not everyone has to revolutionise stories we are living. Folklore prizes the sharers.¹⁸ As the earth is making signs we cannot ignore and we folk, need to clear our throats and find a new voice to speak with. Through interrogating the messages we share and the mechanisms that produce belief, kinship and action the piece acts as an antidote to the toxic tsunami of social media. In a final call for action she invites the architect to consider humble places not of perfection or suspension, but of orientated dwelling.

Four / Assemblage

In an attempt to challenge the neoliberal ideology of constant production Michael Cradock constructs a manifesto only from quotations by others. This rich and complex work begins: “What you are about to read, I did not write”, and suggests the autobiographical nature of such an endeavour cannot be ignored as a summary of personal experiences.¹⁹ The piece argues that originality is not, as most architectural theory suggests, a prerequisite for good design but rather an expression of Modernism itself. He suggests it is merely the product of a late capitalist society obsessed with the new. The act of collage and composition is therefore a more organic and natural process that assembles and reconstructs fragments into wholes and does not abandon the emotional resonance of the past but transfigures it. This sense of entanglement is neither strictly fictional nor factual but occupies the intuitive space of the creative imagination.

Five / Zoo

Writing in concrete prose, Nancy Jackson constructs a child-like, though not childish, view of the world as a zoo where the zookeeper surveys us; resulting in the gradual limitation of our freedoms.²⁰ The poem continues with a series of situated emotional vignettes:

“A mother tells her daughter not to stare at the television for too long, for fear of ‘square eyes’. A grown up and successful daughter stares at her computer screen for too long, watched while she works, and eating at an assigned hour. Her mother smiles proudly, sharing the success with the neighbours. A son, an animal with big muscles and bigger ideas, is re-assigned to a Pupil Referral Unit, where he will learn to ignore his muscles and his ideas. He questions everything. He is told to sit quietly....”

As a contemporary fairy-tale the writing is strangely familiar and yet uncanny. Commonplace observations suggest that our desire to be outdoors will not be satisfied by the cactus on our desks nor will the mud outside the back door satisfy our evolutionary instincts. The final call is nothing short of a “faithfulness to our wild selves, and the wild Earth to serve humankind’s ascension to the higher animals”. This expressive form of writing offers insight though affect and emotional resonance that object oriented critique filters out.

Six / Adaptation

In 2019 the LSA tailored the curriculum around the concept of Deep Adaptation, a term coined by professor Jem Bendell in his 2018 paper that has garnered much attention.²¹ Here he argues that catastrophic climate breakdown has already begun and will result in societal collapse within the near future defined by the uneven ending of our current means of sustenance, shelter, security, pleasure, identity and meaning. That this was written before COVID-19 is a sobering thought.

As a response I asked if it was acceptable to feel anxiety: about the climate, about our politics, the state of democracy, about the way we practice? As the architecture of our planet accelerates into a state of environmental degradation and unprecedented transformation we are likely to experience a complex emotional response. We prefer to believe that our own contributions to the discourse and profession of architecture have been hard fought and that our practices adjust to keep pace. However, it is disquieting when we take notice of our inner voices; the ones telling us that everything is not OK, that we fear the future and that we need to act now. Everything we have learned has to be unlearned and much of what we value we

will have to let go.

In autumn 2019 I signed up to join Bendell along with 18 others for a week long retreat, entitled Kissing the Void, to reflect on the catastrophic damage already done to the ecosystem that will result in untold damage to human society and the natural world.²² In this context it is necessary to differentiate between behaving sustainably and undertaking better and faster work in order to turn around the troubles preventing collapse versus fundamentally shifting our orientations to life, death, the future and the present moment. Through a process of grieving and restoration the group asked if it is possible to adapt to a different way of inhabiting the earth? As part of the exploration there were invitations to draw, create and write. We acted out the four stages of Deep Adaptation: resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation. The process was un-self-conscious and spontaneous. This form of creative investigation frees us up from the act of problem solving, which is ineffective, and moves us into the liminal space of encountering the earth. We stared into the void. We were invited to share what our hearts felt. We encountered suffering, grief and uncertainty. We sat around a fire and sang. Most significantly we lived the question. This is what I wrote:

Out of the Ashes

Resting and realising
I find new dimensions unknown
Strange spaces
With a different taste

Running is not possible
I dance with myself, not seeing the ground on which my feet stand
Here the light is dimmer
Cantilevered off the abyss
Seeking out crevices, holes and voids
No stars, just sparks from the beginning
Now embers, glowing
Throwing their ancient warmth
Slowly, almost imperceptibly so, turning ashen
Dimming into darkness
Becoming dimensionless

The Going

I leave my sword outside, with the others in the dark, and step inside.
Here, alongside, a learning, a leaning an altogether:
Facing up, facing in, face to face, faceless

In meditation and makings I am undone, redone, remade:
Woven into a bright golden precious stitch
Visible as the stars in the tapestry of time
Never again can this moment be caught
To be remembered with care, with love

I step outside into hot sun and pick up my shield

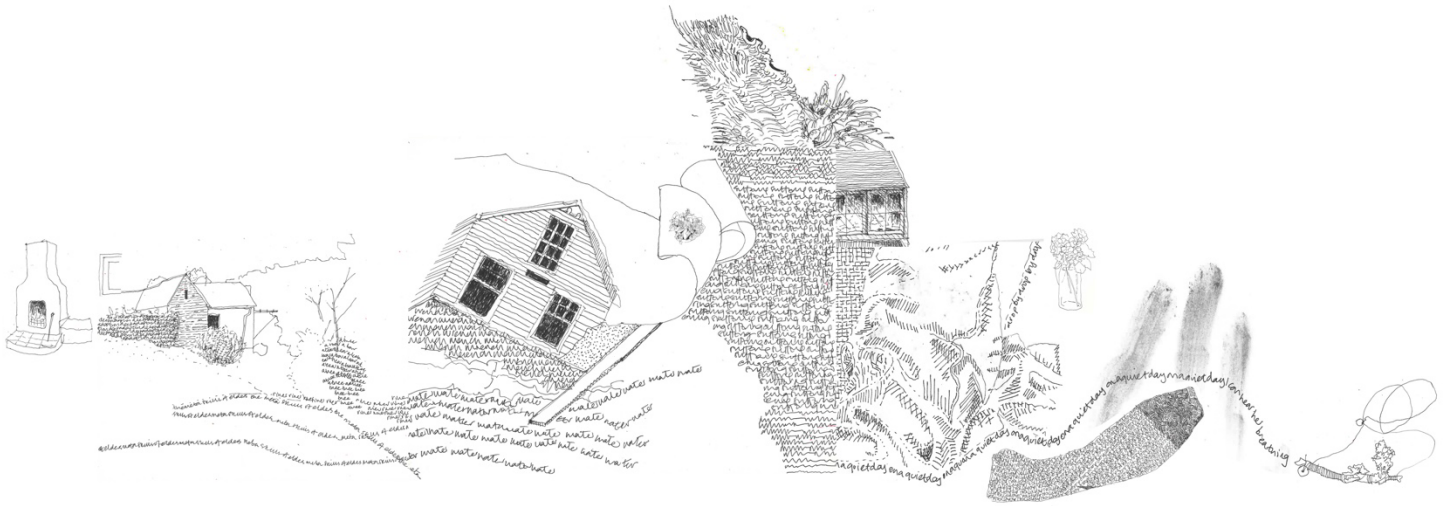


Fig. 1 Collage sketch from 'Kissing the Void' by James Soane. (2019)

End

Reflecting on the value of such writing, it gives permission to the architect to exercise their agency beyond the confines of the academy. As a last anecdote it has been sobering to see how some academics in UK architecture schools have been vocal in their rejection of this methodology, suggesting it is neither intellectually rigorous nor best practice. Often they have not read the work but object to the perception that it is personal rather than analytical. This paper suggests that there is value in immersive and creative written responses to the almost impossible challenges posed by the climate emergency. Globally our education systems themselves are stretched to the limit. Our students are intelligent nomads and our institutions have created an economy of exhaustion through the pursuit of academic capitalism. At a time when the disciplining and tracking of creative production is framed a performance-based delivery, it feels as though any non-linear form of discourse is discouraged. Igea Troiani suggests that to exhaust is to empty something; a vampiric consumption which leads to dysfunction.²³ As the health of the planet is in crisis so too are our institutions of learning. In these turbulent times the education of the architect is necessarily a situated political project. Context is no longer an aesthetic issue but a societal, geographical and ethical one. Activist Rupert Reed suggests that you can easily imagine a future of ever more prosperity and freedom when looking back on what human beings have achieved. Yet the presence of climate change exposes this imagined future to be a profound illusion.²⁴ There has never been a more important time to construct an ecological future.

Notes

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