

FRICTION IN FICTION
EDUMET Conference, Universidad de Madrid. 2020

Preface

This is a strand of research that draws on student writing from the LSA 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".

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 a 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. 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? This paper seeks to look at how these stories might come to be written in the age of climate emergency.

Reality Check

When Daniel Wahl suggests that the story we tell 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. 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 ecosystem. 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". 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 cooperation whatever the dominant political ideology. Significantly these can change very quickly, as we see today.

Traditional architectural history teaches 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 find 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 created by 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 that we think. His motivation to inspire action and anger is both to shock and 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 re-imagined 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 in symbiosis with creation as a whole.

Re-writing History

That history is not static is a challenging notion to many. 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 Peter Buchanan suggests, will evolve from focussing on individual buildings and objective issues to becoming an art of reweaving multiple webs of relationships.

When J. G. Ballard suggested that it is possible to write fiction with architecture, he could have been talking about Delirious New York, the seminal 1978 work of urban science fiction by Rem Koolhaas. 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. Written in 2009 we can see that the questions no longer pertains to form making as proposed by Koolhaas, but those of a global society struggling to reimagine its very existence. The rise of parametrics as a mode of constructing complex geometries is not a breakthrough but, as Doug Spencer suggests, a representation of neoliberal fiction and the flow of spatialised capital. Rather than the imagined utopia of human progress it has morphed into a dystopia; literally 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 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. 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. This revealing insight surely gets to the heart of impasse in the design curriculum; that it is deaf to very problems we need to address.

Intersections

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 generalisation we can say that most schools of architecture remain focused on the production of form and the pursuit of tangential spatial strategies; what thinker Jacques Attali terms 'distractions'. 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 popularism.

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 the wide bandwidth of practice. The manifesto can be understood as an affirmation of intention seeking to reflect and rethink critical cultural norms or societal behaviours, 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.

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' are 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

Defining 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. 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.

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.

This paper points towards the value of 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. 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 moral 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. There has never been a more important time to rewrite the future.

FEEL THE FORCE
James Soane. Citizen Magazine. LSA. 2020

Part 1 / Adapting

In 2018 Professor Jem Bendell published a paper entitled 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy'. One year later it had been downloaded over 700,000 times. He asks what does climate change mean for us in practice, and how should our lives change in response to an increasingly unstable and unpredictable future? He also states, having undertaken extensive research, he is of the belief that catastrophic climate breakdown has already begun and will result in societal collapse within the near future: that is the uneven ending of our current means of sustenance, shelter, security, pleasure, identity and meaning. He suggests that it is unlikely that the power of human ingenuity will help sufficiently to change the environmental trajectory we are on. Climate change is not simply a pollution issue; it is a sign of how humanity and culture have become alienated from our natural habitat. This can also be understood as the end point in the project of Modernism as defined by the mastery of man over the planet. Deep Adaptation is about how we prepare for societal and ecological collapse.

In his book 'Being Ecological', Tim Morton talks about the paradox of knowing we have to do something, but failing to act. He suggests this is because the scale and nature of climate change is a 'hyperobject'; an idea or concept so large it is impossible to comprehend. In trying to figure out how to tackle this in practice and within the LSA I further researched the Deep Adaptation Network and discovered an event planned to 'differentiate between doing more, better and faster sustainability work in order to turn around the troubles and stop collapse versus fundamentally shifting our orientations to life, death, the future and the present moment'. It was a retreat held in October 2019 titled 'Kissing the Void' asking how we might approach these times well. I applied and was accepted. What happened next was a revelation. Nineteen people gathered at a farm house in Devon, for six days of meditation, creative play, writing, drawing, sharing and despairing. We acted out the four stages of Deep Adaptation: Resilience, Relinquishment, Restoration and Reconciliation. We stared into the void and were still, exhausted by our lives. We were invited to say what our heart felt. We encountered suffering, grief and uncertainty. We sat around a fire and sang. If you listen very closely and you can hear the sounds of roots spreading deep below. In these times we paused before speaking up.

Part 2 / Other ways of knowing

The Void Is...
A gap, a space, a loss
Frightening and frightful
Lost and found, I am lost

I am love
A second, a minute, a year, a century, a millennia – a time
Time to say, to think, to process, to rename, to learn to relearn to unlearn

to leave behind.

This void is not your void

It is everyone's void

The ID of VOID

The mind, to lose your mind, to hunt it down to miss it

To find it, in pieces and in fragments, blasted by the void
Infinity and forever, ending in darkness

This black hole, almost invisible now, is a force sucking us in

Not knowing what is on the other side

But there just might be – another side

We hope

A kiss away

To bear witness in these times is...

A mistake, an error, a blip, a catastrophe
An un-making of all that has been made
It is a breaking.

A huge tear

A tear

An ending of a story

We are being asked to leave now

The lights are going out and it is very dark outside

Where to go?

Where to shelter?

Who shall I talk to?

When my love and I were separated it should have been the end
And yet I am still here
Alone with others
I am paused

When the body leads...
A stretch, a move turning into moves
An ache, a new pain, an old heart, a dance
Tentatively thought
A sense of longing hoping to be more free
To move away, in the dance,
More fluid and more powerful and more delicate that ever before.
The flow of your life is here in every tiny moment,
But did you ever know that?
Did you not see that your body faithfully records every single thing
you have ever done, ever thought and ever will do?
Until. Until it has done enough
More than enough, and
Is called by time

Your movements will stop, like everybody's always will
To make way for stillness
No movement
Another is just waking

And now...
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

Now embers, glowing

Throwing their ancient warmth
Slowly, almost imperceptibly so, turning ashen

Dimming into darkness

Becoming dimensionless

Out of the ashes...
Maybe my ashes
Somewhere to place

A ceremony
To make an order from the chaos
To have a final act of creativity with and for myself
Out of the ashes a temporary home

A place
Look into the dust and the grey blackness
There is still a pattern, a memory of beauty
A piece of something next to something
The remains have not entirely vanished
They remain in this
For a moment more

As temperatures rise...
The warmth that so nourished
Is punishing
One day at a time
Life evaporates, wilting at first,
Lilting, tilting, collapsing
Everywhere dust, ash, smoke
Dark stains where once the tangled substance thrived
Only now I see

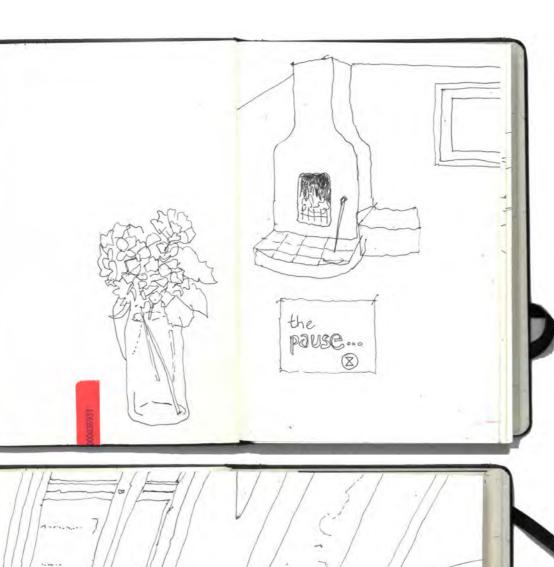
The Going

The fragile earth

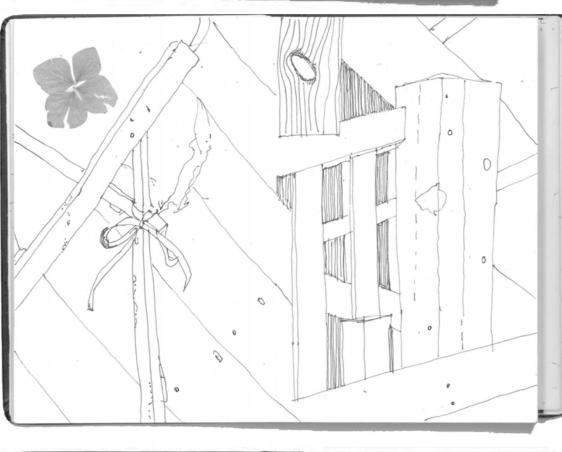
I leave my sword outside, with the others in the dark, and step inside Here, alongside, a learning, a leaning an altogether: Facing up, facing in, face to face, faceless

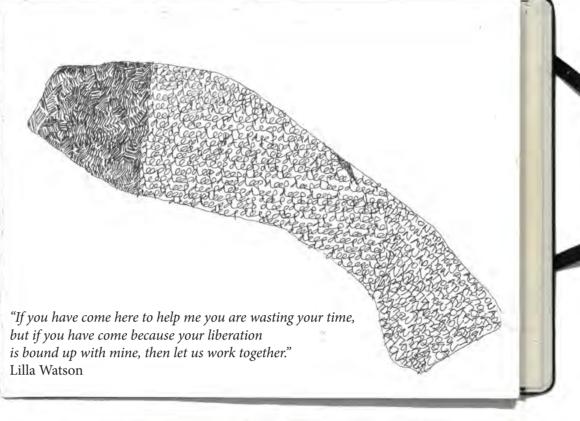
In meditation and makings I am undone, redone, remade:
Woven into a bright golden precious stitch
Visible as the stars in the tapestry of time
Never again can this moment be caught
To be remembered with care, with love

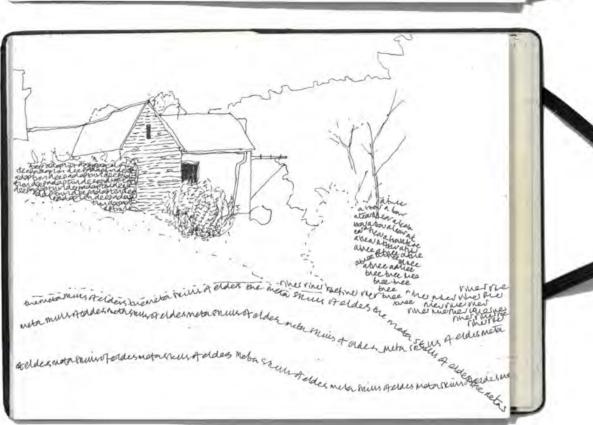
I step outside into hot sun and pick up my shield

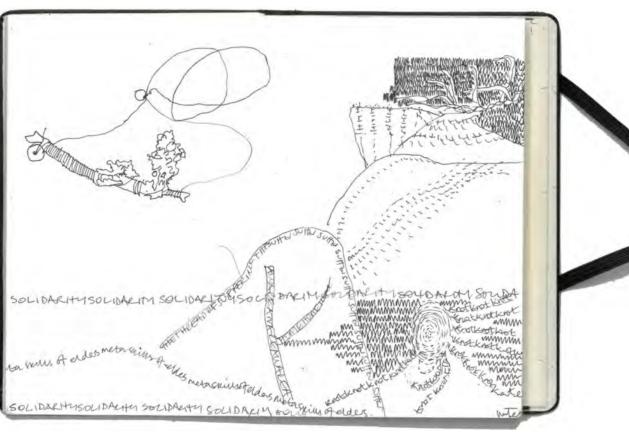


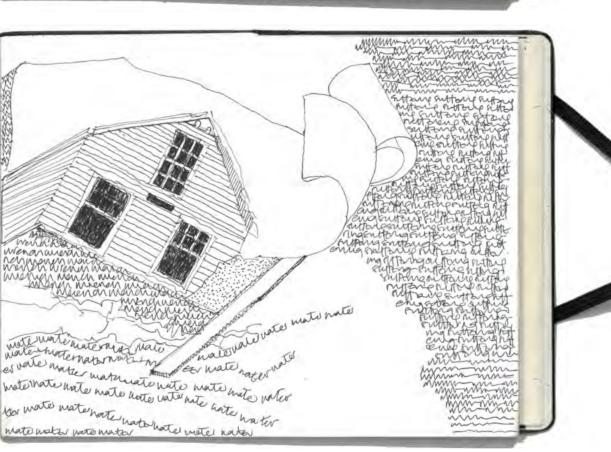


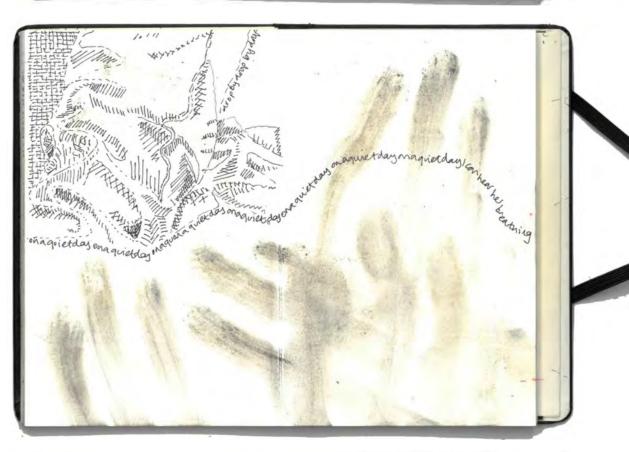


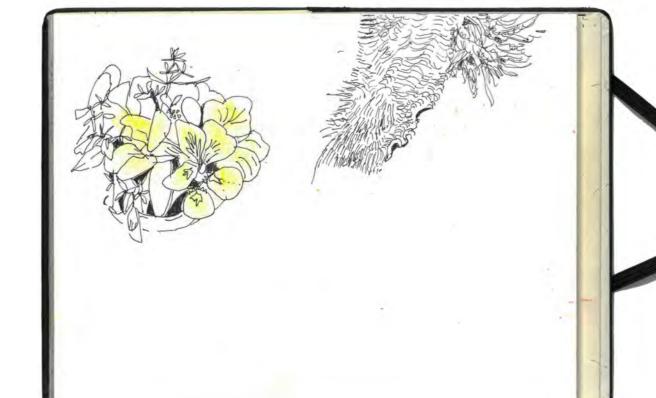


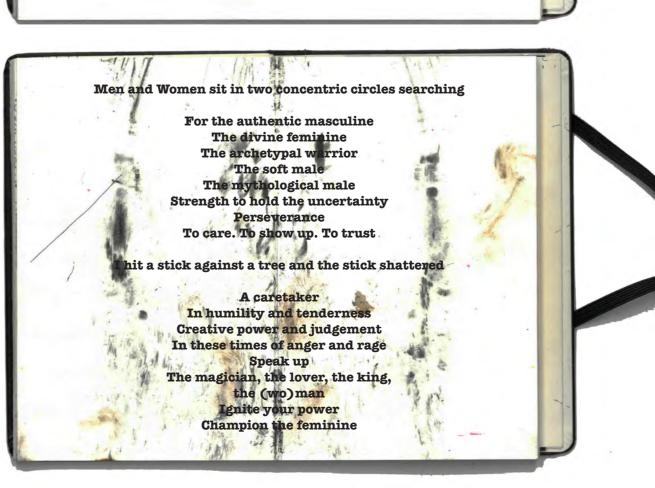












Left: Extracts from 'Kissing the Void' Sketchbook October 2019

Right:Cover to PO BOX 4



FOREWORD to PO BOX 4 by Rae Whittow-Williams

By repositioning the relationship between practice and process, and evaluating processes against outcomes, Project Orange have sought to use the latest issue of PO BOX as a vehicle to determine how they can begin to move the debate surrounding the climate emergency forward. Through a series of reflections and propositions this collection of essays investigates how to meaningfully re-position the drivers and working methods of the practice with 'the way things ought to be', further embedding the relationship between research and practice into the culture of the studio. It is not intended as a solution but a springboard: to work collaboratively as a team, craft a renewed set of practice values, challenge the status quo surrounding city making, inspire action and behaviour change in others, and ultimately forge the path ahead.

INTRODUCTION by James Soane

We have entered a new age; time has caught up with us and it is necessary to change. As Le Corbusier suggested in 1927 we still possess *eyes that do not see*; we are shackled with the past and we need to move on. Make no mistake, the ecological implications of global consumption and emissions is unfolding day by day. In his recent book 'The Uninhabitable Earth' David Wallace-Wells suggests it is not only worse that we think, but the resulting changes will distort every aspect of human life.

What happens next is hardcore: it involves unswerving commitment to new modes of living and development; uncompromising sustainable behaviours; dedication to meaningful sustainable actions with an intensity that has never been so widely shared. Within the past year, we have witnessed Governmental commitment in the form of Green Deals as well as declarations of climate emergency. School children have turned to activism protesting for change while the RIBA has adopted a new ethical code.

As architects we are part of the problem. We design aesthetically, whimsically, joyfully and wastefully. When we think about our own use of hardcore – pieces of stone, brick and rubble used to make the base for roads, paths or floors – we see that this is broken system. Buildings use precious materials that can only be partly re-used when smashed up. Re-cycling and Up-cycling are not truly circular economies because materials are degraded, and no matter how it is spun this is same-system thinking.

However uncomfortable it may seem there has to be a forced break with past as we face up to discontinuity. This can be understood as a process that makes us resilient, encouraging innovation which leads to a period of relinquishing aspects of our lives that are non-essential in order to move to a period of restoration. Learning to live within the means of the planet is a key part of recalibrating our practices. While the construction of intelligent modest new buildings may play a part, so too will be how we adapt existing ones and to opt out of the cycle of seeing new as better and of buying into the throwaway trends and fashions that have become design currency. At Project Orange we are looking to change, which is why we have created this small zine. We certainly have few answers, but we recognise this is the beginning of the process. It is a rocky road ahead with no guarantees.

www.projectorange.com



AND THE PLANET TOO OH,
AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE
PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH,
AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO
OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO
OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH,
AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND
THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE
PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE
PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE
PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE
PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET
TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET
TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET

PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE

TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE

PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND
THE PLANET TOO OH, AND THE PLANET TOO
OH, AND THE PLANET TOO OH, AND
THE PLANET TOO OH, AND
T H E

Illustration from A Gendered Profession
Designed by Project Orange

In her conclusion to 'This Changes
Everything', Naomi Klein's climate change
wake-up call, she suggests that the most
likely way to influence political change
(and therefore critical environmental rebalancing) is to encourage grass root, peopledriven movements. She notes that one such
precedent is the gay and lesbian rights
movement. Her 'architects' of change are
seen as a wide community whose goal is to
challenge the status quo of the extraction
industry, and thereby the capitalist system.

James Soane
Extract from 'Down to Earth'
A Gendered Profession
RIBA Publishing 2016

OUT OF PRACTICE

JAMES SOANE

HE/HIM

GAY

MALE

GAY

LONDON SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

DIRECTOR OF CRITICAL PRACTICE