

James Soane

Preface

Introduction

Reality Check

A myth can be understood as a belief 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. Yvala Harbin 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 intertwining of these myths and stories that make up our understanding of the world. Harbin 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.

Re-writing History

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 fantastical 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. In 2009 we can see that the questions no longer pertain to form making as propounded by Koolhaas, but those of a global society struggling to reimagine its very existence. The *Delirious New York* of the 1970s has been replaced by the *Delirious New York* of the 2000s, although both – as Doug Sconce suggests – represent a form of neoliberal fiction and the flow of spatialised capital.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

Intersections

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 populatism.

While the ISA 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 intersectoral 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

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 the fear 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 a system of exhaustion through the pursuit of academic capitalism. At a time when the disciplining of the imagination is being replaced by the disciplining of the body, we need to find ways to encourage the imagination. Igea Trotani suggests that to exhaust is to empty something's 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 activist is necessarily a situated political project. Content 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 property and freedom when looking back on what human beings have done to the planet. The climate change exposé this imagined future to be a profound illusion. There has never been a more important time to rewrite the future.

Part 1 / Adapting

In 2018 Professor

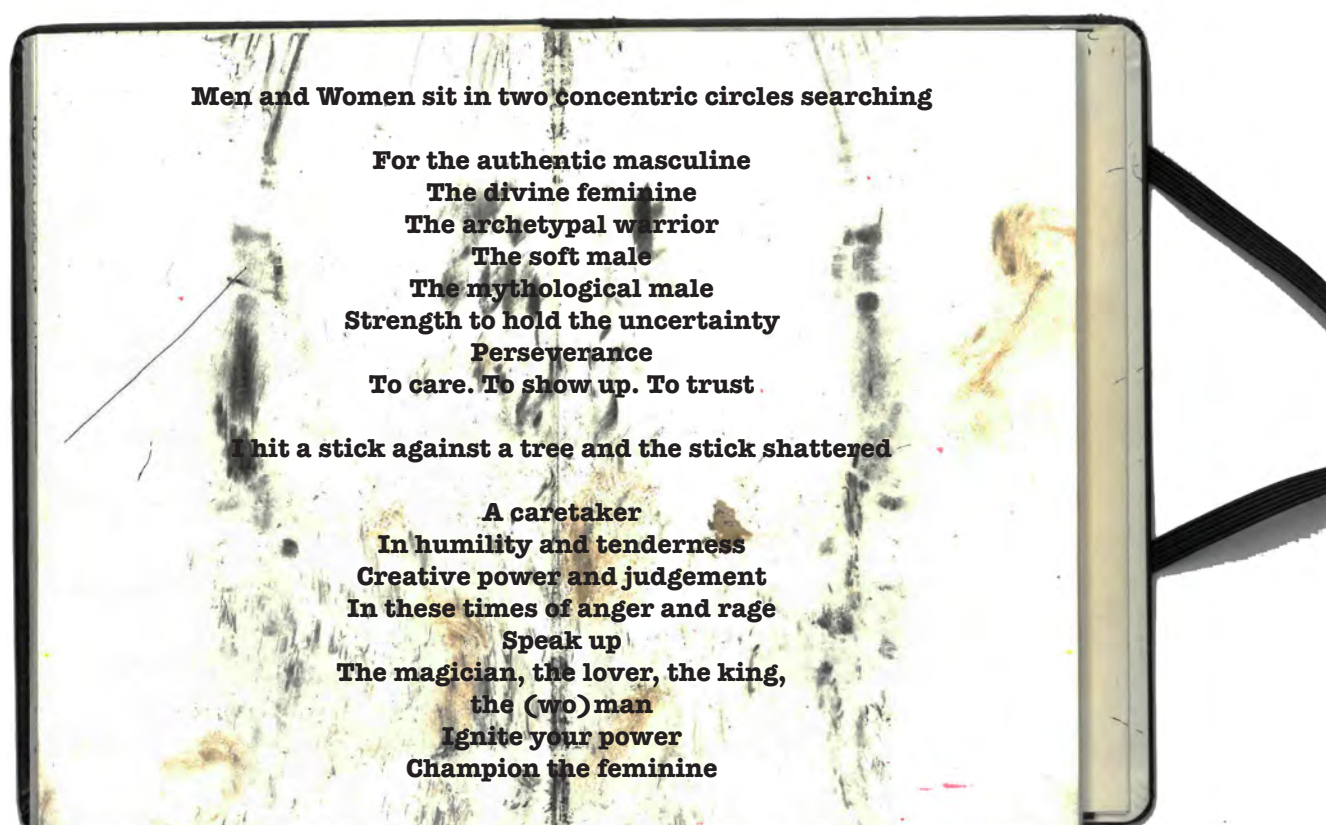
In his book "Being Ecological" Morton talks about the paradox of knowing we have to do something, but failing to act. He suggests this is because the scale and nature of climate change is a "*hyperbolic*"; an idea or concept so large it is impossible to comprehend. In trying to figure out how to tackle this in practice and within the USA I further researched the Deep Adaptation Network and discovered an event planned to "*differentiate between doing more, better, faster, cheaper, and different*" – which was a relief as I had been struggling with this question myself. The title of 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, Surrender and Denial. As we sat around the fire, talking and listening, we said to each other, "I will tell you 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 passed before speaking up."

Part 2 / Other ways of knowing

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

The Going

I step outside into hot sun and pick up my shield



Right:
Cover to PO BOX 4



FOREWORD to PO BOX 4 by Rae Whittow-Williams

INTRODUCTION by James Soane

What happens next is hardcore: it involves unwavering 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 live and consume. The time has come when we need to stop the cycle of buying into the throw-away trends and fashions that have become design currency. At Project Orange we are looking to change, which is why we have created this small zinc. We certainly have few answers, but we recognise this is the beginning of the process. It is a rocky road ahead with no guarantees.

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Above:
Illustration from *A Gendered Profession*
Designed by Project Orange

OUT OF PRACTICE

JAMES SOANE
LIE/LUM

MALE

GAY

LONDON SCHOOL OF
ARCHITECTURE

DIRECTOR OF CRITICAL PRACTICE

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 re-balancing) is to encourage grass root, people-driven 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