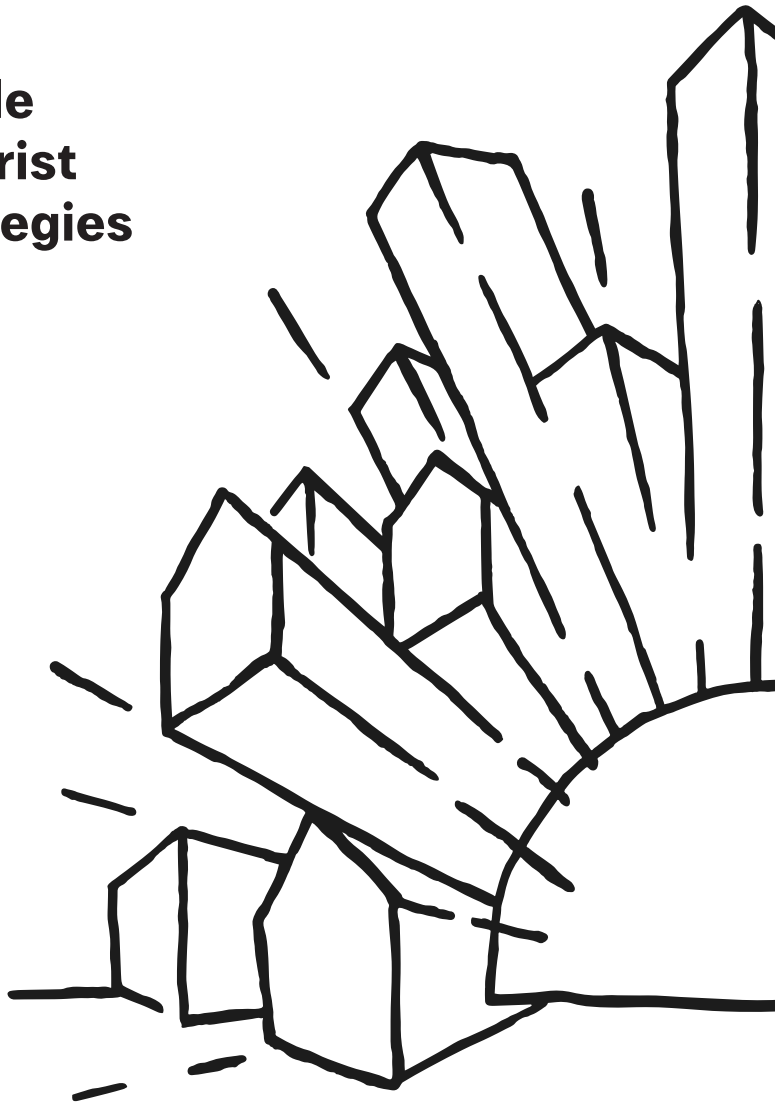
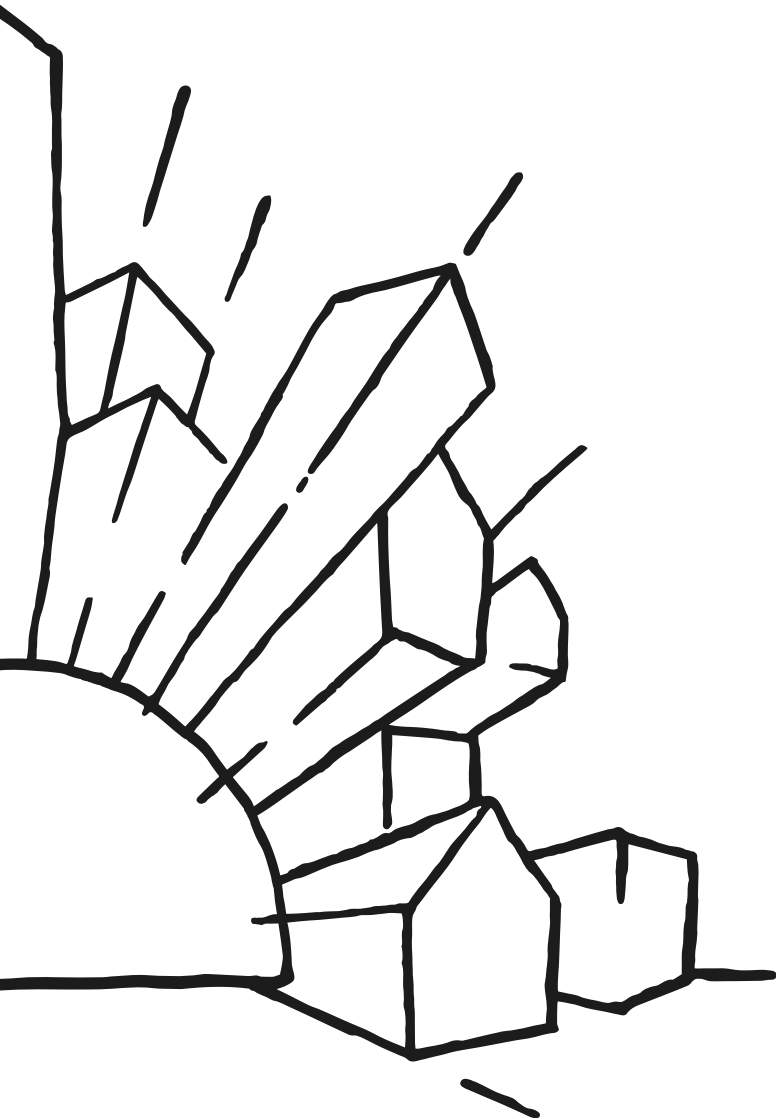


In the Prison of the Present

**A short guide
to post-futurist
design strategies**



By Ana Jeinić
Illustrations by Andreas Töpfer



In the Prison of the Present
A short guide to post-futurist design strategies

By Ana Jeinić
Illustrations by Andreas Töpfer

In the Prison of the Present

After the Future

“We live in an age characterised by the collapse of the very idea of the future.”

Building on her essay “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” from Volume 2 of the Archifutures series, architectural theorist Ana Jeinić addresses the architect’s fear of the future yet further by taking a critical look at some current strategies for a “post-futurist tomorrow”. The following strategies were written for the 2017 exhibition she curated at the Haus der Architektur in Graz entitled: “Architecture After the Future”.*

According to social theorists, such as Marc Augé or Franco “Bifo” Berardi, we live in an age characterised by the collapse of the very idea of the future. In the last decades of the twentieth century, alongside recurring economic crisis, discouraging reports to the Club of Rome and the apparent collapse of the socialist project, our belief in the future was irreparably shattered. Considering that the architectural project, in the conventional sense of the term, has always been a *project of the future*, the situation has had profound consequences for architecture as a discipline. Understanding and revealing different ways by which contemporary architecture has been adapting to *post-futurist* social conditions therefore presents a major task for the contemporary discourse on architecture. It is also a necessary prelude to the imminent debate on how to reintegrate the dimension of the future once again into the architectural and broader cultural imagination. The short texts below about post-futurist design strategies have been developed with this aim in mind, as a part of the *Architecture After the Future* curatorial and research project. It is important to note that the outlined strategies do *not* constitute an ultimate taxonomy of the post-futurist design culture – they are conceived as a deliberately provisional and open-ended

Ana Jeinić

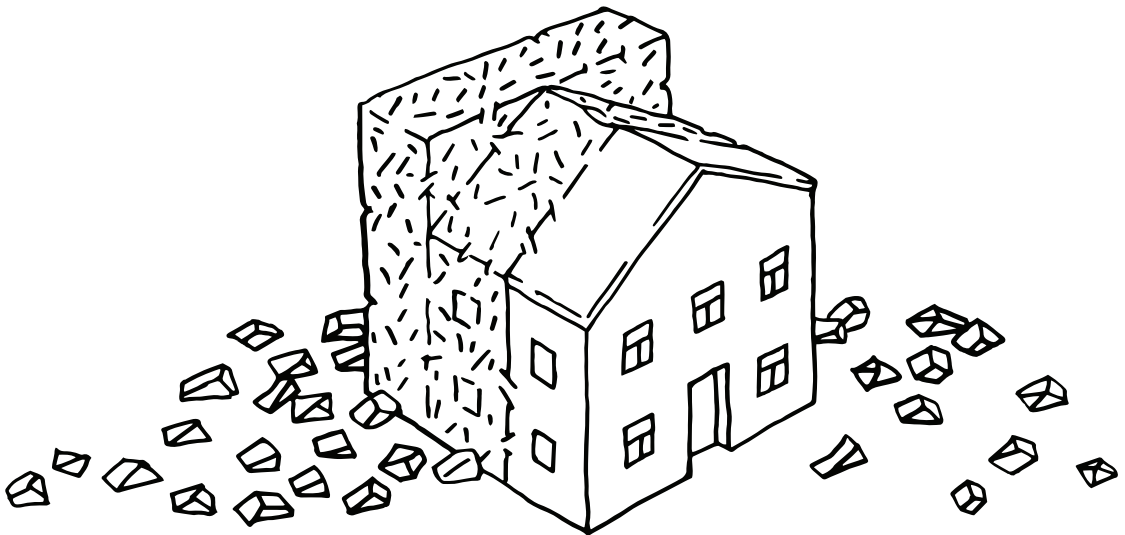
Ana Jeinić was born in Yugoslavia in 1981. She has since lived, thought, learned and taught in Graz, Venice, Amsterdam, Berlin, Edinburgh, and Zagreb. Upon completing her studies in architecture in Graz, she mainly worked as an architectural theorist and educator and aims to become a utopianist in the future. She considers herself a futurist who despises “futurist design”; a progressivist critical of technological optimism; a universalist detesting all forms of essentialism; a communist rejecting post-socialist nostalgia and an internationalist opposing neoliberal globalisation. Much of her personal and professional commitment comes from the persuasion that only the life that projects itself into the future is worth living and that only the society that strives towards a utopian horizon is a truly emancipated society.

* First published at architecture-after-the-future.org in 2017 and reproduced here with kind permission of the author.

mapping, which, without striving to provide a precise and supposedly objective representation of reality, content themselves with facilitating orientation within the present architectural culture shaped by the loss of the future.

The late late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the emergence of the “architect-activist” – the designer who, abandoning the concept of top-down, large-scale, future-oriented projects, engages in localised, small-scale, participatory practices framed by a moderately critical political agenda. However, the passionate involvement of “activist-architects” and their tendency to conduct the building process from the first conceptual draft all the way to construction has been paralleled by the rise of diverse forms of “architectural passivity” – the conscious withdrawal of the architect from the design process. As elaborately described by architectural theorist Miloš Kosec, this reluctant attitude has taken manifold shapes in architecture: from the decision to delegate certain aspects of the form-finding process to forces and

Reluctant Strategy



Archifutures

agents beyond the architect's control, such as the tendency to leave the building unfinished in order to enable active appropriation on the part of future occupants, to the Bartlebian refusal to engage in a project altogether or propose any significant changes to existing environments. The last of the described manifestations of "architectural reluctance" is seen as the most radical and politically significant one – refusing to design means a disruption of both a concrete building project (and through that, the capital investment embedded in it), but also a disruption of the very ideology of innovation, creativity, productivity, and entrepreneurship, which has long since been mobilised for constructing the public image of the architectural profession.

There is, however, something more that gets lost when architects assume the Bartlebian position – it is the very *projectivity* (the essential capacity of architectural design to construct hypothetical spaces and envisage future realities) that is undermined as well, and, with it, the *raison d'être* of architecture as a discipline. One could argue that we should accept and even celebrate this loss: why be sentimental and mourn architecture's demise when its main purpose (creation of future worlds) embodies the capitalist logic of envisaging, constructing, and exploiting potential futures for the sake of profit? But is it really like that? Has the future always been thoroughly absorbed into and monopolised by the market, or is it rather an anomaly of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? It seems that what unites the two seemingly opposed strategies of the contemporary left – the *activistic* impetus and its *reluctant* counterpart – is their common renunciation of the future: the first position is characterised by acting *here and now*, while the latter refuses to act altogether. Whenever the

Andreas Töpfer

Andreas Töpfer is a freelance graphic designer, illustrator and drawing artist. He works for the Berlin publisher Kookbooks, which he founded in 2003 together with the poet and editor Daniela Seel. He has worked as art director, designer and illustrator for the Canadian publication *Adbusters* under the name Bill Texas, and is currently visual editor, designer and illustrator for the Norwegian literature and culture magazine *Vagant*. He works at Milchhof Atelier in Berlin. His latest book is *Speculative Drawing*, together with A. Avanesian (Sternberg Press).

emancipatory movements decide to break free from this self-imposed imprisonment in the present moment, they will have to liberate the future once again from the bondage of financial markets, commercial inventions and military-scientific ventures. In this context, reclaiming architecture means reclaiming the future!

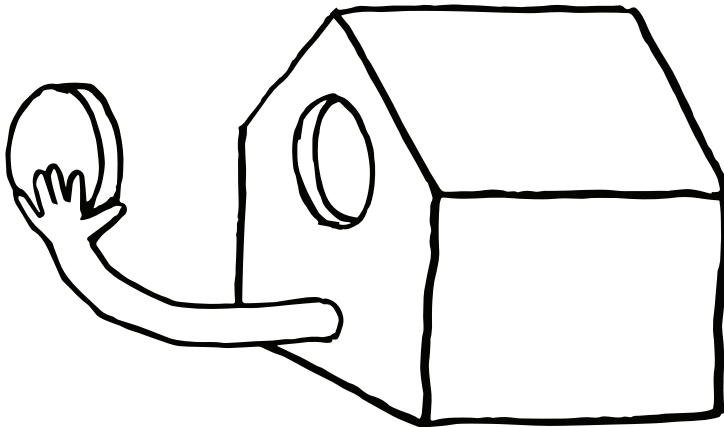
Until not so long ago, *reflexion* was considered a privilege of architectural theory and criticism, whereas architecture itself was seen as an immanently future-oriented, *projective* discipline. However, such a clear orientation of the design practice and its resulting distinction from theoretical disciplines has been considerably loosened during the last few decades. Already Peter Eisenman and several other protagonists of the 1988 *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition in New York used the architectural project as a tool for “critical” interpretation and “deconstruction” of inherited design formulas and not so much for anticipation of the future. From then on, the *reflexive strategy*, which can be described as a tendency to maximise the analytical dimension of design, while simultaneously minimising its projective component, has been adopted by several generations of architects. Instead of envisaging the future, the reflexive project reveals, interprets, questions, deconstructs, recombines, reframes, polarises, radicalises, or politicises the past. This turns the present moment into a permanent construction site where the past is being productively recontextualised. Certainly, such reflexive (re)constructions influence future prospects as well, but rather as a by-product than as the primarily goal.

While Eisenman’s interpretative gesture addressed the formal grammar of architectural design, which he conceived as an autonomous semiotic system, the subsequent generation of *reflexive architects* counteracted

Reflexive Strategy

Archifutures

his “isolationist” approach by turning their analytical tools away from a narrowly architectural (formal, constructive and typological) towards a broader social (cultural, ecological and political) dimension of the built environment. However, as its proclamatory title and symbolic location (New York) suggest, the *Re-constructivist Architecture* exhibition of 2016, curated by Jacopo Costanzo and Giovanni Cozzani, announced once again the comeback of the “formalist” reflexivity of Eisenman’s generation, signalling a renewed interest in “genuinely architectural” concerns and re-engagement with the inherited repertoire of spatial forms, typologies, concepts, and narratives. This circular movement from the introvert over the extrovert and back to the introvert form of



architectural reflexivity gives rise to an awkward question: Is architecture that has deliberately renounced its inherent future orientation condemned to repeat the cyclical movement in which the centrifugal effect of the extrovert, politically conscious and trans-disciplinary analytical endeavours of one generation is always followed by next generation’s centripetal drive towards more introspective, hermetic and inner-disciplinary forms of reflexivity? In spite of considerable differences in the context of

Ephemeral Strategy

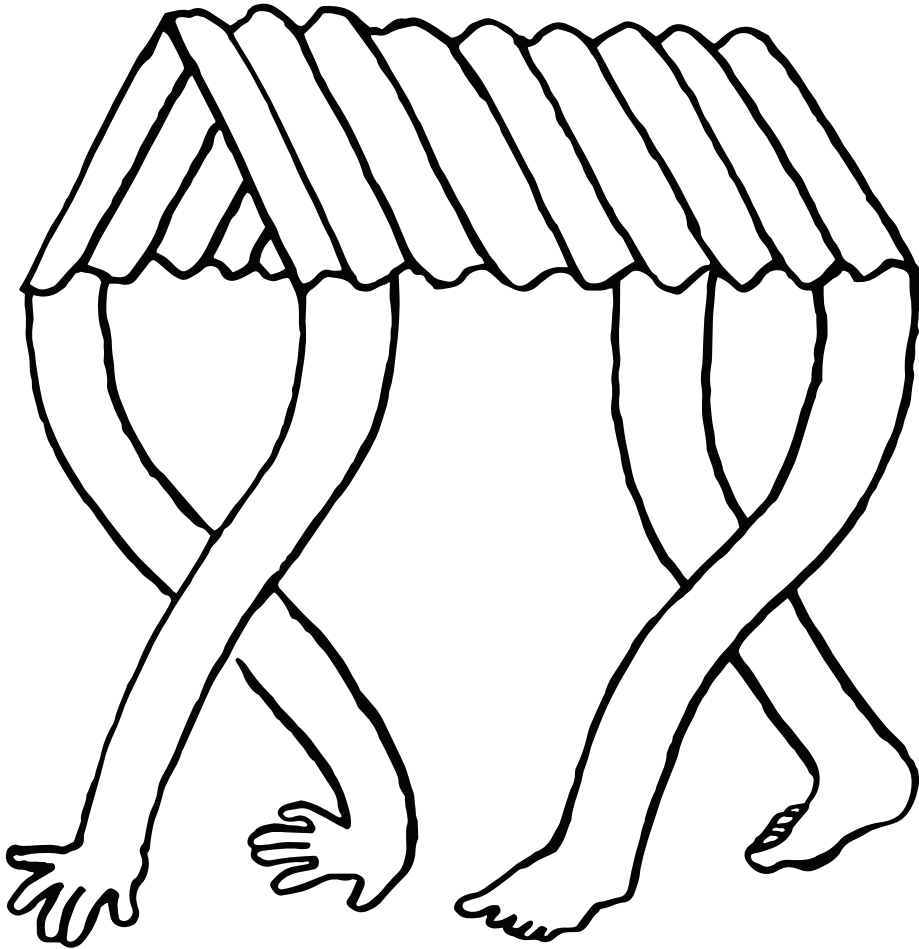
their application and the ambitions of their protagonists, pop-up constructions, tactical design, temporary spatial interventions, informal urbanism, flexible planning, guerrilla architecture and similar popular concepts all have something in common – they are not built for the future but for the here and now. They deliberately renounce durability and accept (or even promote) ephemerality as the incontestable social condition. They merge the temporal distance between the development of the project and its materialisation. The “project” gets absorbed by the “practice”. The future gets squeezed into the present.

The fascination with ephemerality is rooted in the critique of durability, solidity, and bureaucratic rigidity, all of which have been equally deprecated by both the neoliberal right and the alternative left ever since the post-war Keynesian economic order started getting shaky in the late twentieth-century. Taking this uneasy political convergence into consideration, it should not come as a surprise that architectural manifestations of the vogue for ephemerality reach from posh pop-up stores of corporate fashion houses and noble jewellery manufacturers all the way to fanciful low-tech temporary constructions built by architect-activists to serve as protest camps and progressive art festivals. However, beyond its ubiquitous popularity across the global architectural community, the condition of ephemerality also symbolises the cruel reality of migrant life – the depressing everyday experience of the millions of people caught in the permanent impermanence of emergency shelters and refugee camps. Can it be that these places, rather than the valuable achievements of temporary design, epitomise the post-futurist environment in the most radical sense of the term – the conglomerate of temporary settlements of the people without the future in the world of floating capital, shifting

Archifutures

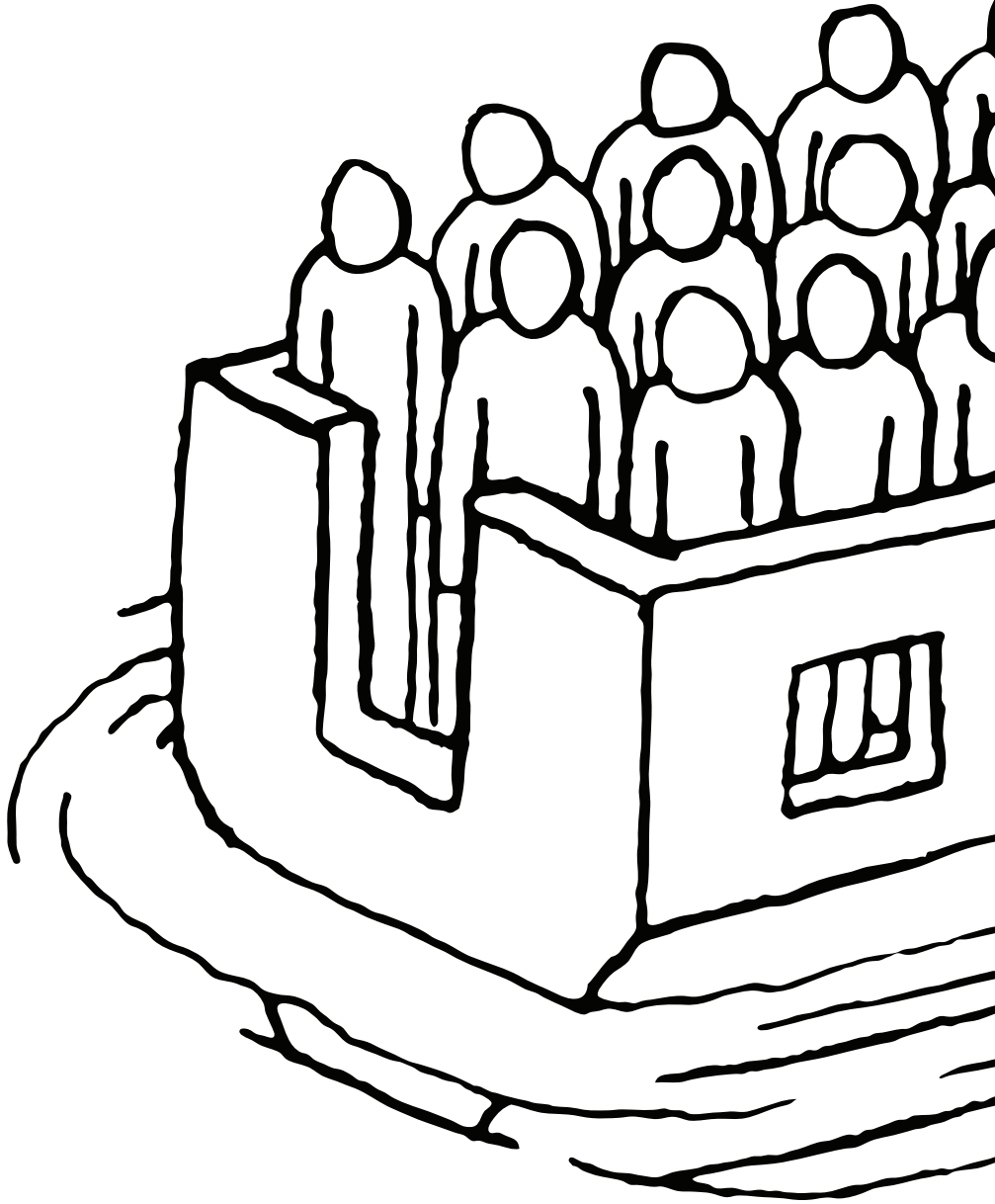
territories, invisible arms and proxy wars?

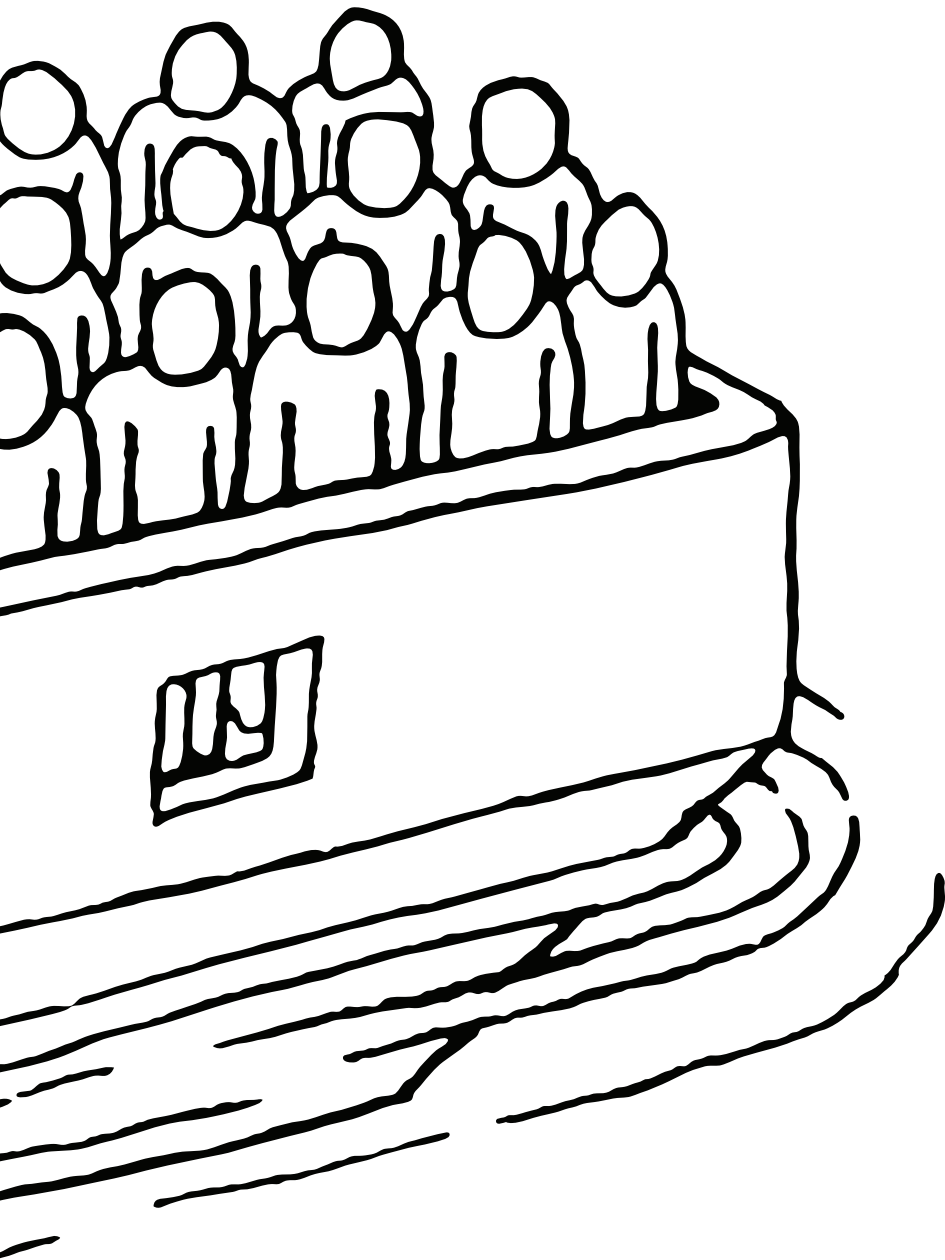
The only form of truly utopian architecture that



flourishes in our essentially anti-utopian era engages with constructing oases of safety and sustainability amongst the ever-expanding war zones and wastelands of global capitalism. Salvational projects reach from low-tech emergency shelters and replicable microstructures for the poor and displaced to high-tech, self-sufficient, green, smart and protective superstructures for the

Salvational Strategy





affluent. Some of these projects have much in common with futuristic utopias of the high modern era: faith in technological development, the vast spatial scale of proposed interventions, radical changes in prevailing lifestyles and their material conditions, and, last but not least, the futuristic orientation itself. There exists, however, a crucial difference in the way that twentieth-century visionary architects understood and related to the future as compared to their contemporary successors. It seems as if the future changed its sign from positive to negative – if the function of modernist utopias was to anticipate the promising future, then the role of the salvational architecture of our era is to save us from the effects of apocalyptic scenarios, including climate change, ecological disaster, depletion of resources, escalation of poverty, forced migration etc. Floating constructions for climatic migrants, encapsulated high-tech oases in regions affected by desertification, intelligent surveillance systems for cities in the “age of terror” and artificial environments for the preservation of endangered species do not promise us a bright future.

It is sometimes claimed by the proponents of the salvational strategy that self-destructive tendencies of contemporary capitalism are inevitably leading towards an ultimate shipwreck, so that the best we can do is to build a dispersed network of self-organised lifeboats, instead of vainly trying to save the vessel destined to sink under its own weight. However, if all architects, urbanists, engineers, political activists and rebellious masses were to give up imagining, desiring and building better future(s) for the global society and instead focused on promoting alternative lifestyles and cooperative practices on the self-constructed life rafts beyond the sinking ship of the neoliberal world order, would they be able to provide

Archifutures

enough rafts for housing billions of castaways? At the end of the day, isn't every salvational strategy condemned to end up as an elitist endeavour capable of saving only those of us who already possess the minimum of resources needed to sustain life?

Conceived as a visual metaphor of the architecture of Manhattan, *The City of the Captive Globe* – Rem Koolhaas's famous drawing from 1972 – shows the potentially infinite orthogonal grid, with plots occupied by iconic buildings, each referencing a particular avant-garde movement and embodying a different "architectural ideology". The relentless grid enables and structures the coexistence of otherwise irreconcilable projects, reducing them to a collection of isolated and mutually indifferent mascots advertising specific world views and design vocabularies. More than being just a representation of diverse streams of architectural modernism, the buildings depicted in the rendering are inseparable from the promises of bold futures characteristic of the modern era. However, the gesture of levelling achieved by the grid deprives these promises of all their radicalism, transformative potential and collective nature, turning them into exchangeable objects of individual desires and preferences. Thus, the drawing reveals the destiny of the avant-garde project in the era of neoliberalism: the culture of total interchangeability and unlimited consumer choice has caused the ultimate relativisation and disempowerment of the utopian horizons embedded in progressive architectural designs.

The relativistic pluralism of future scenarios doesn't just occur, however, as an *a posteriori* effect of commercialisation and pacification of the once radical projects – it can also represent a conscious approach to

Relativistic Strategy

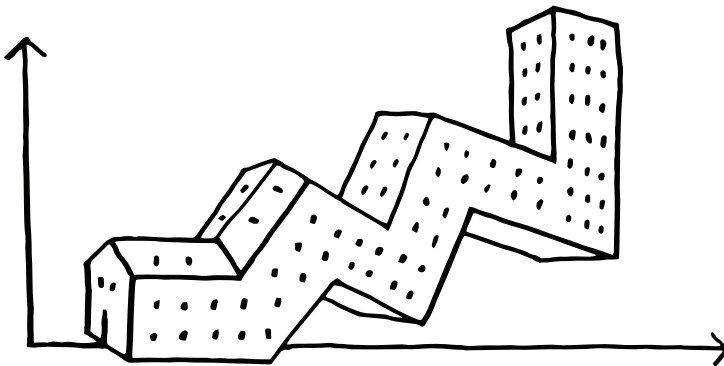
design. Incorporating into the project a range of different possibilities for its further realisation; leaving the design consciously ambivalent; conceiving it as an assemblage of mutually incongruous elements; or turning it into a catalogue of independent options – all these strategies can be viewed as examples of architectural relativism. Their underlying intention is mostly a mixture of post-modern irony and a desire to escape the determinant and restrictive character of architectural projects, which by their very nature rather channel than expand the trajectories of the future. The *relativistic project*, on the contrary, embodies the values of democratic pluralism and freedom of choice, while dismissing *universalism* and *totalitarianism*: it encourages us to choose our favourite futures and compose our personal utopias. However, it is difficult to believe that any of these individual future perspectives possess the capacity to divert the fatal trajectory of capitalist development, which at the moment seems to lay down the ultimate future horizon for all of us. It appears more likely that we need a *common project* – a democratically developed and collectively conducted one – to transform our *common world*. Certainly, architects cannot achieve this goal alone (it is rather a task for broad social movements and political forces), but what the practice of architecture can do is to turn a socially produced future horizon into a variety of tangible spatial forms.

Since the very beginning of the capitalist era, the term *speculation* has assumed a profoundly negative connotation – to *speculate* (in the narrow sense of the term) means to anticipate future scenarios with the aim of making personal profit, regardless of the cost to others. Rather than enabling substantial changes, profit-oriented future speculations projected back onto the present, tend to undermine every

Archifutures

possibility for transgressing the underlying conditions of the present order: when online shopping companies for example, use their customers' previous purchases to estimate their "future wishes" and translate these calculations into personalised shopping suggestions, they de facto impede any significant changes in customers' tastes, interests and behavioural patterns. Thus, by depriving the future of its substantial capacity to bring change, market speculations are not signs of recovery from the cultural implosion of the future, but rather its most troubling symptoms. There is however, more to speculation than sober financial calculus.

If understood in a wider sense, *speculative reasoning* proves indispensable for philosophical theorisation, utopian



projects and projective imagination in general. It is this transformative potential of speculation that has animated its recent reassessment within theoretical and design disciplines – there is hope arising among philosophers and architects alike that using speculation beyond and against its common (profit-driven) field of application may turn the future once again into the medium of emancipatory change. In line with the described intellectual realignment, the label "speculative design" has achieved a vertiginous

ascent among the vogue words of contemporary architectural discourse, making it ever more difficult to define what the term exactly refers to. What can be observed however, is that architectural practices described as “speculative” tend to engage in individual projects of limited scale, while broader social movements with a projective focus and the capacity for interconnecting these dispersed efforts and giving them a common direction have not yet consolidated. As a result, being left without a wider framework capable of envisaging and enforcing systemic alternatives, “speculative projects” run the risk of not achieving much more than giving the outcomes of the capitalist financial and technological hyper-production a more “friendly” appearance, socially beneficial functions and a “subversive touch”. In other words, as long as the impetus of speculation has not managed a radical shift from the predominantly individual, technical, pragmatic, and context-defined agency to the resolutely collective, political, utopian and context-defining one, the separate speculative practices confined to the sphere of design will hardly help us break through the horizon of the possible (defined by self-reproductive patterns of global capitalism) and reach the possibility of the impossible. ■

