



# ACADEMIC CULTURE

DECOLONIZING ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY: TOWARDS CROSS-CULTURALISM

SHUNDANA YUSAF

THE DENIZEN ARCHITECTURE COLLECTIVE

GENEVIEVE WASSER, TUCKER JONES



**Shundana Yusaf** is an assistant professor of Architectural History at the University of Utah. She has studied architecture at National College of Arts, Lahore, and architectural history at Harvard, MIT, and Princeton University. Her research juxtaposes colonial/postcolonial history with media studies, framing each as a force of globalization. She is the author of *Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless, 1927-1945* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014). Her second book-length digital humanities project for SAH, *Archipedia Utah* is published by SAH and University of Virginia Press (2016-2019). Her next book *The Resonant Tomb: Indo-Persian Sufi Shrines in the Age of Hyperconnectivity (1800-2015)* situates Islamic soundscapes in a global context. This project is supported by U.S. Fulbright Scholarship and 2017 grant from American Institute of Pakistan Studies. Yusaf is the co-editor of *Dialectic: A Journal of School of Architecture, University of Utah* since 2012.



**Genevieve Wasser** recently received her M.Arch from Portland State University and moved to Chicago where she works as a designer in a mid-scale architecture firm. Prior to this, she spent three years in Spain where she obtained a Master of International Cooperation and Sustainable Emergency Architecture. Genevieve comes to the field with a background in research and international development. She is particularly interested in the built environment's impact on human experience and how architecture can be creatively engaged to enhance social and environmental conditions.



**Tucker Jones** is a design associate and fabricator with B Fabrication in Philadelphia. After completing a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from Temple University, Tucker became interested in the intersection between design and fabrication. Recently he completed a Masters in Architecture from Portland State University with a Certificate in Public Interest Design. Tucker is enjoying the opportunity to work on architectural objects that are touched and manipulated at human scale.

# DECOLONIZING ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY: TOWARDS CROSS-CULTURALISM

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## ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critique of architecture school curricula dominated by "Western traditionalists." It reckons with their focus of neutrality, expertise, and scientific rationality as foundation of professional knowledge. These are ideologies of knowledge whose cunning lies in imposing and maintaining a Eurocentric and male-dominated mentality amongst architectural students, despite a selective inclusion of women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups. Against the colonization of the minds of new entrants in the field, the essay presents an approach to decolonizing the architectural mind. By way of entering into the topic, it stakes out a "malleability hypothesis" that questions what is required to defend the discipline and if we, in fact, need to at all.

The discipline of architecture is robust enough to withstand multiple, sometimes competing interpretive frameworks, amongst which the western rational perspective is but one. As a demonstration, it outlines a History of Architecture undergraduate survey based on a broader conception of technology developed with colleagues at the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative, GAHTC. Taking technologies of globalization (communication and transportation) as the lens through which to look at the history of architecture, the course allows students to see thousands of years of interaction and participation among diverse cultures. The theme also enables us to frame the history of Arab & Bedouin architecture in the context of history of media and technology, as opposed to the traditional framework of religion and primitivism. In so doing, the survey undercuts nationalist histories and spurious philosophies of the genius of a special (western, white) people, still at the heart of many survey books. In addition, our teaching material counters the disciplinary disposition to

privilege the study and scrutiny of sites of power, like cities, by looking at the relationship between centers of power and the pushback they get from village and first society worlds. Our goal is to present students with different ways of attributing meaning to spaces and materials, forms, and buildings. We demonstrate that the construction of meaning is based in competing theories of self (ontology), of knowledge (epistemology), and of the universe (cosmology). Taking aim at our profession's self-understanding, this diversification of forms and roles of architecture across space and time offers a cross-cultural perspective.

Yet, approaching the problem through the vehicle of the survey has its limitations. It is unrealistic to expect students to remember, understand, and parse this radically different perspective without creating structural opportunities in the rest of the curriculum to synthesize, experiment, evaluate, and apply these ideas. The essay concludes with a discussion of changes happening in the University of Utah's overall strategic planning. These are attempting to address this limitation, to go beyond demonstrating the contingency and impoverishment of modern thought towards the generation of new and more inclusive habits of mind of future architects.

## A COLONIAL DISCIPLINE

The call for decolonizing architectural pedagogy in this essay requires a preceding consensus among us. We have to agree, in the first place, that architectural education, irrespective of diverse recruitment, is a colonial enterprise. That the 21st-century vocation of channeling the thought and socializing the aspirations of entrants in architectural schools, in every part of the world, is still entrenched in 19th-century colonial mentality. We have to share the cognition that we still dwell and operate out of the fortresses on the seashores

of the colonized world, built between the 15th and 19th centuries, to enable the hegemony of Europe over the rest of us. Despite efforts, the knowledge diffused to those allowed entry into its precarious space is still dominated by what education theorist James A. Banks aptly calls “Western traditionalists.”<sup>1</sup>

The profession engendered by Western traditionalists is still defined by middle-aged white men. It is undoubtedly graduating many more women and openly transgender people in the profession than in the 19th century, but Nel Noddings astutely notes that these new members have not yet transformed professional standards. To succeed, they have to *assimilate* to the notion of a “reasonable person,” still informed by male standards of decorum, originality, and looking the part. Likewise, the literature on professional practice, law, codes, and corporate practice is dominated by male theorists. As a result, transgender and “female experience” still “simply disappear.”<sup>2</sup>

The tremendous strides we have made in critical theory and humanities-oriented studies of the built

environment have been valuable only to a small extent beyond history and theory seminars. They have vociferously critiqued modernity and modern architecture, their repressions and exclusions. Yet, in most coursework and design, we promote modernity, as defined by male European architects and theorists, as the ideal above all else. For decades, postmodern critics have pointed out that formulation of knowledge, even as it has objectivity as the goal, cannot escape being wound up with personal, cultural, and social factors brought into the lab by the researchers. Yet we would be hard-pressed to find courses on building systems, communication, computation, material technologies, green design, and structural techniques to put on the table; the particular values, assumptions, perspectives, and intellectual positions of the educators or authors on the reading list of courses in those courses. Instead everything is taught as neutral and objective knowledge—placing it beyond the pale of critical probing. It would be in the best traditions to find professors who explain why they value technological developments in the European design offices, Western universities, and the most powerful corporate labs



Figure 1: Permanent settlement of a previously nomadic Kabuli family of four brothers and parents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan shows ingenious reuse of airy jute bags and cement bags and other refuse for residences.  
Courtesy: Author

over those that are being developed in the mountains of Afghanistan to survive the precarious conditions of its endless war (Figure 1). If both are contemporaneous, both solve immediate afflictions of the modern world, and both are ingenious in contextual response, why is the former enshrined as cutting edge and the latter dubbed as primitive, and left out of syllabi?

Silences of syllabi developed in the tradition of Western empirical sciences indoctrinate students in an insidious ideology. They rhetorically (not scientifically) equate discoveries in nano-technology, self-changing smart materials, and robotic fabrications with “progress.” Here, “progress” has made little improvement on the tradition of the 19th-century concept of history, as a relentless forward march. The presentation of scientific information without a conversation of what is considered worthy of research—how is innovation evaluated, how rigorously is architectural application of material research associated with who benefits, who can afford it—diminishes understanding of the relationship between science and power. The result is training in blindness, bias, and a sense of superiority that has kept “cultural imperialism” and the affluent world’s hegemony alive.<sup>3</sup> It also makes it difficult for undergraduates to realize what more and more complex fabrication systems do to the social organization of labor and bargaining rights of unions. The result in this case is a cognitive dissonance between their design intentions and design decisions.

The asymmetrical power of expertise, when veiled under egalitarian ethos of making our artistic services available not just to the paying few but all sections of the global society, crushes fragile ecosystems and ways of being in the world that are at odds with our taste and cognitive structure. And we never realize it. Our curricula’s uncritical appreciation of criticality, lukewarm enthusiasm for difference, and unimaginative love of imagination, has done little more than reproduce colonized minds and imperialistic bodies. Our discipline’s traditional valorization of novelty, monochromatic promotion of diversity of systems of knowledge, and worship of high tech has suffocated the cunning of hand. We are still on the bandwagon of development ideologies, long discredited by critics across the world; however, most architects have not gotten the memo that we need to move from

development mentality to dialogue.

Conversations in classroom, workshop, and labs routinely obfuscate thinking through the role of high tech education in the deskilling and amnesia of modern society. The discussion of the ever-increasing dependence of building, repair, and adaptive-reuse on specialists, and the shrinking ability of communities to build for themselves, needs to rise to the surface. As architects get closer to scientists and lab experiments, design development becomes more convoluted. Thomas Schröpfer notes that it develops research and service centers to keep an eye on innovation in materials and structures.<sup>4</sup> The more complicated a system, the higher the barrier of entry for previously self-building communities to intervene and take advantage of applications. This leads to what Stephen Moore aptly warns as the disempowering, anti-democratic stimuli embedded in large scale and complex systems of design and construction.<sup>5</sup> The double-edged relationship of expertise to the democratic project as elucidated by the historian of science Paul Feyerabend is nowhere more valuable than in a profession like architecture.<sup>6</sup>

Before moving to make a case for post-colonial, globally multicultural/cross-cultural curricula, it must be said that this snapshot of the state of architectural education is how it appears to someone whose architectural training has taken place in the post-colonial world, and whose intellectual development has been shaped by the American academy. I belong to a generation of architectural historians whose political consciousness has been shaped by scholarship like Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*. This is not a view of the center from the periphery. I am located neither at one nor the other. The only authorial voice that I can exercise is of a global citizen, and someone who is implicated in the project of training architects herself. Even as my scholarship, teaching, and disciplinary activism aspire to be grounded in scientific method, I do not speak as a “neutral” but as a “socially situated” scientist who aims to achieve objectivity by placing her subjectivity on the table. Position-taking, it must be remembered, is not simply an exercise of individual will and self-awareness. It is something others allow us. It is a collective feat, valued by peers, and encouraged by mentors, publishers, and readers. That I speak here on this topic suggests that we have arrived at a moment

open to the intellectual reciprocity between scholars and educators from former colonizing and colonized cultures. Yet we have much hard work ahead of us that must be done collectively. We have to ensure that the post-colonial voices in history and theory of architecture are reduced neither to the voices of the “other” nor “humanists.” If typecast as the depository of these types of ideas, safely included but contained in such a way as to immunize the rest of the academy from the deeper implications of their critiques, we would only hasten the irrelevance of architects to the future. The profession will fail to resurrect itself and will remain an anachronistic curiosity of yesteryears.

Decolonizing architectural pedagogy requires delivering disciplinary education out of the European fortresses into the larger world. It mandates freeing our mental anchors from the canon of Brunelleschi, Ledoux, Le Corbusier, Rossi, Jean Nouvell, etc. The shift in curricular direction ought to be a shift away from the insular treatment of architectural production as an end in itself. It calls for a broader definition than monuments that privilege certain civilizational narratives above others. Canon knowledge ought to be replaced with cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives of the built environment.

The irreverence—in fact, abandon—with which cross-cultural pedagogy demands the exploration of disciplinary limits is not a call for dismantling architecture and its institutions. On the contrary; we still stand on the strong and steady shoulders of our disciplinary ancestors. We benefit from the field established by them. Their study and production of great monuments and structural developments established architecture as a profession and academic discipline. Their emphasis of undergraduate surveys on history of artistic influence and technological rationality has not only framed the architect as possessing originality, creative cunning, and a force of historical change, but has also established architecture as an autonomous cultural field.

#### MALLEABILITY HYPOTHESIS

Far from reducing architecture to just a sign of capital, language, and politics, cross-cultural education rising from the ashes of decolonization is certain evidence

of our discipline’s striking malleability. It relies on architecture’s ability to convincingly take whatever shape we give it. If we want it to be just media, it will be just media. Applied art, fine arts, technology, artistic genius, unfolding of the Hegelian Idea, a social production, producer of community, gender, race, class relations, nationalism, publicity, and consumption—it will adapt to all these framing devices equally well. Bringing this malleability to the fore is highly productive. It gives students a variety of ways in which to think about creative labor and the effects of spaces they propose. It is fruitful in making them see vividly the ease with which their strategies can turn against their intentions. History professors, studio instructors, and technology researchers can demonstrate to students the importance of inculcating a habit of separating artistic intentions from both the means of achieving them and historical effects. In this case, it is not the stock of information that they learn but a habit of mind that is of value.

The malleability or tenacity of the built environment to maintain its integrity, no matter what lens is imposed on it, should disarm our impulse to protect our territory. There is no way for theorists and practitioners of yesteryears to know this without the benefit of our excursions into the realm of humanities and social sciences. We can tell them we don’t need history of styles, West-over-the-rest mindset, high tech above low tech and passive systems, or a choice between professionalism and social justice to mark our territory. Our territory is not going anywhere. We need not discount one in favor of another. Multiculturalism, like interdisciplinarity, does not threaten but strengthens architecture as a “field.” It enhances its capacity of governing the production and evaluation of its goods (buildings, codes, policies, registration, disciplined speech, exhibitions, etc.) according to its own internal criteria. Changing its rules so minorities in the discipline can see themselves, see difference, learn from one another, argue, and collaborate is vital. Practicing critical discourse, mutual respect, generosity, and listening undermines heroic notions of leadership, but gives pedagogues new tools to train their students as more than hireable technocrats, skilled labor and creative problem solvers; something more relevant than critically acclaimed but rarely hireable artists. Skills and tools for intervening in a

multifaceted, ever-changing terrain of professional practice gives architectural students the chance to fashion themselves as socially responsible civic actors.

In pursuing a more robust pedagogy, in 2014 I joined a team of four architectural historians who have replaced the canonic survey that we were taught as students with a survey of global architecture. The thematic focus of our collaborative teaching material is the impact of different technologies of globalization on the history of architecture. Written into the topic of technologies of communication and transportation is interaction and participation among cultures. It undercuts nationalist histories and spurious philosophies of the genius of a special people. In four years we have produced a semester worth of peer-reviewed PowerPoints, lecture notes, handouts, quizzes and their keys, and bibliographies available as open source material for instructors. Our choices of technologies do not begin with world expos, railways, photography, and the phonograph. We do not prioritize modernity or mechanical technologies. Instead, we start with orality of first societies, speech as an early technology of communication. We feature early ships, the connective tissue created between the Indo-European world by the domestication of horses, 3,500 BCE, and the sub-Saharan Africa and Arabia by the domestication of camels 2,400 years later. We make room for medieval roads and first wheels, time keeping, mapping and fairs (Figure 2).

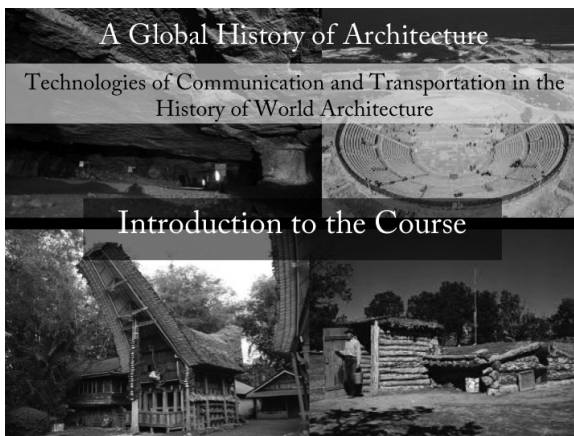


Figure 2: Cover image for undergraduate lecture Survey on Global History of Architecture created by Peter Christensen, Mrinalini Rajagopalan, Itohan Osayimwese, and Shundana Yusaf. Courtesy: Petr Brož, Arian Zwegers, BrokenSphere, and Author.

Our world history syllabus puts non-modern systems of knowledge that value the inarticulate, embodied *techne* on the same pedestal as articulate intellectual knowledge, the *episteme*. The sacred sections of granaries and pole houses in the rice belt of the Pacific Ocean are given the same due as narrowly functionalist layouts of *Sachlich* architects in Central Europe (Figure 3). Oral mentalities are put on par with literate attitudes to organizing information and space. Countering the disciplinary disposition to privilege the study and scrutiny of sites of power like cities, we look at the relationship between centers of power and the pushback they get from the dominated village worlds. We think through the competing logics of organization of urban and village communities. The same goes for nomadic and digital technologies, animistic and nationalist production of space, and the trading practices of land-respecting forest people without expansionist ambitions and empire-oriented civilizations.

Our goal is to present our students with different ways of attributing meaning to spaces and materials, forms, and buildings. We demonstrate that the construction of meaning is based in competing theories of self (ontology), of knowledge (epistemology) and of the universe (cosmology). It is the intersection of these three elements that makes the architecture of the Mongolian yurt different from the air-conditioned yurts dotting our national parks. We undo Max Weber's distinction that he developed in the 1930s between



Figure 3: The ship-shaped pole house of Toraja people in Indonesia called tongkonan. Before Dutch colonialism, tongkonan were the most elaborate of the typology, built only by nobles. Courtesy: Arian Zwegers

“rational” and “traditional” behavior, so central to the makeup of our modern thinking and architectural education.<sup>7</sup> The diversification of forms and roles of architecture across space and time takes aim at our profession’s self-understanding. It reveals how our ideas of progress and dominating nature are antithetical to that of certain Aborigine tribes in Western Australia. Wade Davis reminds us that:

As recent as the 1960s, a schoolbook by the Treasury of Fauna of Australia listed the aboriginal people as an extant form of wildlife in Australia. What was missing was the failure of British to understand the subtlety of the devotional philosophy that was the dreaming. The whole purpose of life in Australia was not to improve anything. To the contrary it was to do the ritual gestures deemed to be necessary to maintaining the world just as it was at the time of its creation. As if all of Western thought had gone into pruning the shrubs in the Garden of Eden to keeping it just as it was when Adam and Eve had their fateful conversation. Had we followed that trajectory as a species, yes, we wouldn’t have put a man on the moon, but on the

other hand you wouldn’t be having a conference at Garrison, devoted to climate change.<sup>8</sup>

Our disciplinary imagination is firmly grounded in the type of rationality inaugurated by the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment coming out of Europe and has a hard time seeing animistic wisdom as anything but primitive, of the past, outmoded. The disengagement between body and mind inaugurated by Descartes has conditioned us to objectify the world, to see both the world and our bodies mechanistically and functionally. Any paradigm that implicates the soul and material in one another is mistaken for superstitious and archaic. Our response to solve problems of inequity, racism, and environmental degradation is not with questioning the orientation of western technology and inserting a caveat in what we call objectivity, but with more technology and an untenably puritanical view of objectivity.

Sun shrines in Chaco Canyon and drainage systems in Lothal, glazes on Han dynasty miniature houses and the spatialization of Mayan writing on temples in Copan show that animistic traditions are not primitive at all (Figure 4). They are sources of studying the movement of celestial bodies, engineering the land, communicating with ancestors, and preserving historical memory in buildings. Their wisdom is not outdated; they are differently sophisticated than us. Nor does modernity



Figure 4: The drainage system at Lothal, India, 3,700 BCE  
Courtesy: Abhilashdvbk



Figure 5: A Bedouin weaver in the Arabian black tent, photographed somewhere between 1898—1946. Courtesy: Photographer unknown



have any monopoly on liberal ideas. My lecture on camel cultures in the Arabian Peninsula reveals that all camel architecture is women's architecture. The lightweight Arab tents are designed by them, woven by them, and erected by them. These Bedouin women in the most misogynistic part of the Muslim world have tremendous agency as designers, artists, and weavers, but it is exercised on different terms than we find in the west. Without romanticizing Arab nomads or Tuareg semi-sedentary camel herders, my camel lecture poses a question about what we call modern, democratic, egalitarian, or feminist (Figure 5). World history has allowed us to frame a history of Arab and Bedouin architecture in the context of a history of media and technology, as opposed to a history of religion and primitivism.

Yet, if the intellectual labor of the four of us does not elicit lateral learning from our students then all this work was for nothing. But as speculative studios and technology courses, environmental design, and thesis projects open up to learning from landscape intelligence and technics of making and moving material we may find accessible, democratic, and community-empowering technologies. This might enable us to undo the systematic suffocation of difference in modern thought.

One of the most precious ambitions of our global history survey is to demonstrate the contingency and impoverishment of modern thought. We hope to show the closures of the premise that the world is objectively knowable, and that the knowledge so obtained can be absolutely generalizable. What is at stake is the privilege that this form of thought enjoys due to its claims to universality, not whether it is itself a valuable addition to the repertoire of ways of knowing and doing.

Every lecture is divided into five twelve to fifteen minutes segments. Case studies are clearly divided. There is a summary slide at the end of each case study and a takeaway slide at the end. Inserted between case studies are two- to three-minute online quizzes and think-pair-share exercises. All my tests are open book and taken in groups of three. This method has proven not only to be an effective use of peer pressure but a form of active learning, where students argue the material with one another. Global history

of architecture is only the smallest, most elementary step towards undermining cultural imperialism at the heart of architectural education. And yet, here the architectural nature of our teaching must be highlighted. Our teaching kits for GAHTC build on a mentality open to speculation. This propensity for open-ended hypothesizing comes from our training in architecture and is an approach we share with our students.

The lecture class exposes students, as if to a language, not of visual styles but a way of thinking about the global history of architecture. Language—as anyone who, like me, has tried to learn in a classroom will tell you—is retained and flourishes only if it is practiced in everyday life, outside the classroom. Likewise, educators are fully cognizant that what happens in a history class stays in history class. It is unrealistic to expect all but the most exceptional students to remember, understand, and parse through the immense amount of information dispersed at lightning speed. Without creating structural opportunities in the rest of the curriculum to carry the ideas and habits of mind outside fast-paced lectures, conduct further reading, synthesize, experiment, evaluate and apply ideas, it is unlikely that global history courses will do much more than inspire some students to pursue architectural history.

As educators come to accept the need for reinforcing critical messages across courses, schools of architecture begin to emphasize integrated curricula and collaborative teaching. In Fall 2018, the University of Utah unrolled a new curriculum with precisely these challenges in mind. Together with two other colleagues, I taught the history class alongside three classes on research methods for designers, architectural communications, and studio. We taught the same cohort of juniors. Even though history was not integrated but taught alongside the three courses whose assignments and messages crisscrossed into one another, the students carried into the other courses, lessons of comparative analysis and horizontal thinking modeled in the history lectures. The result was the appearance of collage-like formulations in studio work. Students superimposed the sectional organizations of Iranian bazaars over Parisian arcades; diagrammed the location of middens in Mesa Verde

pueblos and the location of landfill in contemporary cities to think through competing attitudes to trash, personal accountability, and environmental behavior in Utah in the past and present. During material research, a group of students took inspiration from the tent of the Al Murrah people in South Arabia woven out of a composite of goat, camel, and sheep hair. They repurposed trashed grocery bags into yarn and then wove material, only to appreciate the accumulated skill and thought, patience and memory, vision and innovation that has gone into tensile carpets (Figure 6). Students intrigued by the personal networks sustaining refugee camps in Palestine or Sudan struggled to translate their de Certeau-like tactics in the guerilla tactics of their design proposals. History and theory here offer instruments of empowerment, intellectual tools, and social currency. In coming years I hope to populate this segment with many more examples and more sophisticated interfaces. It should be the goal of every syllabus, every class, to close the gap between ethical and practical thinking.

The crisscrossing of ideas throughout the entire semester teaches students how to intervene in unfamiliar contexts. World history and architectural practice in the contemporary context share something

in common. Both are vocations of generalists. Both force us to give up the farce of expertise in favor of activist and purposeful lines of inquiry. The idea of multicultural curricula is not to master every culture addressed. This is an impossible proposition. The goal is to operate with the humility of an apprentice. It is only by taking up the stance of a generalist and an apprentice that we can enter cross-cultural dialogue. Generalists and apprentices are defined by their openness to intervene in unfamiliar territories. This situates them uniquely to hold tradition and modernity, the aboriginal and the colonial, feminine and masculine, agrarian and urban, religious and scientific, oral and literate—and all the variety between these dubious categories of categorical difference—as mirrors to one another.

For this we have to teach ourselves to intersect the knowledge of village elders in China, who may be the last bastions of certain building skills, with the ideas articulated in the forty books of a Le Corbusier or *Delirious New York*. Positioning ourselves as generalists frees us to compare the weaving practices of women builders of the Al Murrah black tent in Southern Arabia with the techniques for designing and making prefabrication screens for a Herzog & de Meuron structure. We see the first embedded in Islamic and

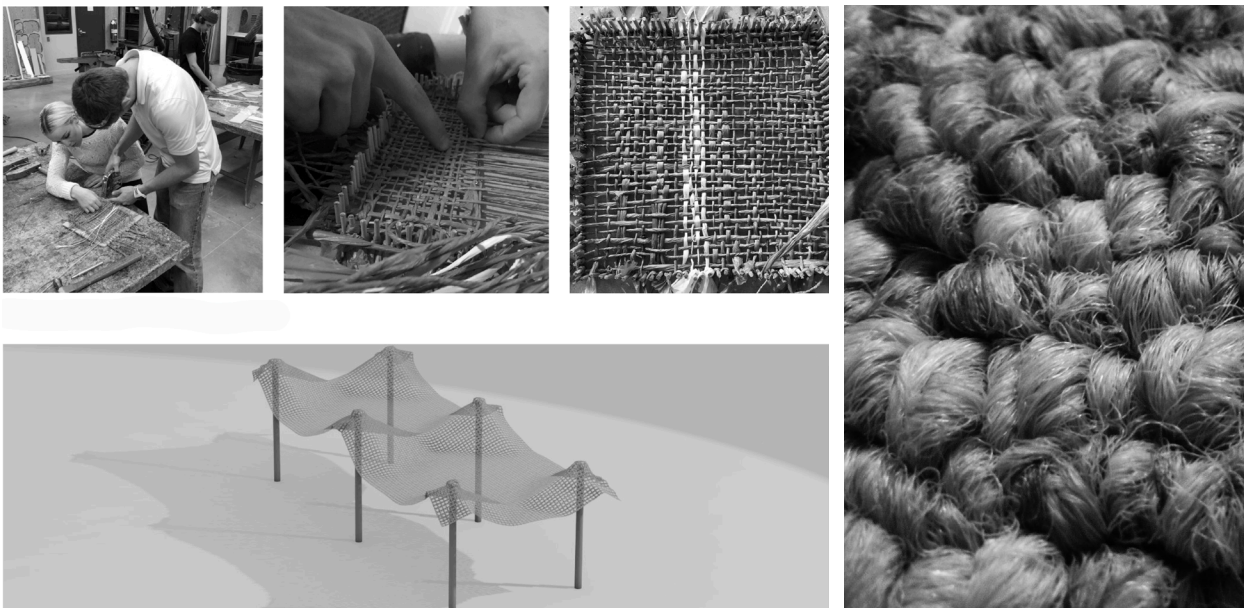


Figure 6: Student work: University of Utah Fall 2018, architecture student work by Stephanie King et al., Berber carpet weave. Courtesy: Author & Pi Guy

pre-Islamic myth and ritual of desert tribes, and the latter in our unquestioned belief in the superiority of technology, despite its near destruction of the planet. The first values the coextension of man, animals, and the world, and the assurance of tradition, and the latter places freedom from orthogonal lines and the excitement of novelty above all. Both are what Steve Marglin calls "organic" propositions—propositions in which the truth depends on the beliefs of agents.<sup>9</sup>

Both are distinct from "atomic" propositions, i.e., descriptions independent of belief. However, because mainstream architectural pedagogy is the child of globally dominating economies and polities, backed by hard power, the dominant educational ideology has come to confuse its freedom from spirituality and coexistence with nature with freedom from myopia and muddled beliefs. The claim to objectivity and universality seem to flow naturally from such hubris. Opening ourselves to listening to those who practice spaces and ideas differently than ourselves is critical to the decolonization of our and our students' minds. A multicultural curriculum is an excellent vessel to make explicit that our discipline's universalist pretensions are just that: pretensions.

The decolonization of architectural pedagogy probes and refines our various commitments—be they to artistic autonomy, sustainability, digital architecture, community engagement, or public interest—by situating them in wider and more inclusive definitions of modernity, freedom, progress, technology, community, and lifestyle. Our students are currently steeped in the belief that traditional systems of behavior and social organization are objectively sub-optimal and in need of intervention by competent architectural experts. They arrive having internalized claims to universality made on behalf of European Enlightenment, and convinced of the universal desirability of Western modernity. Multiculturalism meddles with their programming so they can see the imperialist impulse of their programming, and hear the critique of modernity and its economic, political, and military armature by competing systems of architecture. The project of modernization has resisted indigenous criticism because of the marginalization of indigenous ideas of progress. We have to see the colonial nature of this practice and how it has subsumed our educational

philosophy. Recognition is the first step towards change. ■

## ENDNOTES

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# THE DENIZEN ARCHITECTURE COLLECTIVE

GENEVIEVE WASSER, TUCKER JONES

## ABSTRACT

The 2016 presidential election catalyzed the formation of the Denizen Architecture Collective, an informal micro experiment in collective design thinking and action at Portland State University. Initiated by students frustrated with the fractured social and cultural landscape around them, the group made it their mission to foster a stronger sense of community around the production of architecture in the school environment.

As students of architecture, we are inculcated with the omnipresence of our discipline. We believe in our ability to shape the physical environment and design the stage for everyday and extraordinary encounters. We occupy, think, and create in a special space of distorted reality. But upon entering the architectural workforce, we become minions of the market. Passion, drive, collaboration, and ethics, galvanizing forces in the shelter of architecture school, dissolve beneath the pressure to be recognized as a professional.

The struggles that eventually led to the dissipation of the Denizen Architecture Collective are echoed in the space of transition from academia to practice. Writing from the bridge between the academy and the “real world,” we worry that we will fail to live up to our mission of pursuing extra-capitalist architecture. Efforts to engage other disciplines fall short, and we begin to concretize the belief systems of our clients, whether or not we agree with the ideas for which they stand. This think piece is an exploration of the power of the collective to foster experiments in citizenship and engage with the world beyond the bubble. It grapples with the challenges of moving beyond the cultural confines of academic structure and its pedagogic values.

Using the Denizen Architecture Collective as a point of departure, this paper examines the potential of collective agency and authorship as vehicles for envisioning an extra-capitalist read on the discipline and practice of architecture. We draw on practical and theoretical frameworks to examine architecture’s capacity to respond to moments of social unrest, and in so doing, examine the relationship between citizenship and architecture. Ultimately, we argue for a focus on the collective as a means to redirect the isolated, hierarchical, and apolitical nature of our discipline.

## INTRODUCTION

On November 9th, 2016, the front page of *The New Yorker* read: “The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency is nothing less than a tragedy for the American republic, a tragedy for the Constitution, and a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism.”<sup>1</sup> Following a campaign rampant with racism, sexism, and bigotry, the realization that America had made the choice to elect Trump was nothing short of sickening. To add insult to injury, Robert Ivy, the CEO of the AIA—the organization that represents the profession of architecture at the institutional level—published his letter of support for the Trump Administration.<sup>2</sup>

As graduate students of architecture at Portland State University, we found ourselves in the midst of an identity crisis. Like so many others living in liberal bubbles, we were completely blindsided by Trump’s victory. In just a short 24-hour period a palpable fog of utter confusion had settled over our existence. But the confusion also presented an opportunity. Conversations in the halls and classrooms of PSU’s School of Architecture revealed solidarity in this existential crisis, and more importantly, interest and energy to take a stance and do something about it.

Thus, in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, an informal group organized at PSU's School of Architecture. We called ourselves the Denizen Architecture Collective. We were inspired by the name Citizen Architect, particularly given its reference to the work of Sam Mockbee and the Rural Studio. "Citizen" symbolizes belonging to something shared and greater than any one individual, and in turn, having a responsibility to that same shared something. But citizen is also a loaded word. It connotes a power dynamic in its use to describe legal status, and even more alarmingly, it had been appropriated by the President-Elect and other far-right groups to support hateful, nationalist rhetoric. We chose denizen as a replacement because denizen means someone who frequents a place; an inhabitant or occupant of a particular place.<sup>3</sup> As such, it does not infuse a top-down binary relationship of citizen/outsider, but rather it suggests a performative condition of belonging.

The Denizen Architecture Collective consisted of graduate students, undergraduate students, and a few faculty members. With meetings open to anyone who wanted to participate, we set ourselves to the task of directing our outrage and disappointment towards productive efforts. Examining our broad frustrations around the divisions in our country and the general apathetic attitude we saw in our generation, we recognized that these same realities were also present in our architecture school community. For example, some of our peers had voted for Trump and we had no idea why. It was rare for graduate and undergraduate students to mingle outside the structure of the classroom, so, in lieu of a strong and unifying school culture, a keep-to-yourself mentality permeated our corridors; we lacked the infrastructure that might support and encourage engagement. (While PSU is home to the Center for Public Interest Design, to which many of us were affiliated, this served more as a curricular activity than an organization for direct action.)

It was through these observations that we established our own community as a site of resistance.

#### STRATEGIC REACTIONS

Our position was perhaps most authentically described

by the manifesto we established to describe our shared values, some of which were professional and others interpersonal. To begin, in our professional work:

- we will not design walls to keep immigrants or refugees out,
- we will not design torture facilities,
- we will acknowledge and design for the needs of individual users over corporate and political interests,
- we will design spaces for all demographics, with a concerted effort to provide spaces for all nationalities and religions, and
- we will consider multiple publics when designing public spaces.

In social contexts:

- we will be diligent in sourcing information on both sides of an argument,
- we will practice person-to-person eye contact and put away our phones when listening to another speak,
- we will turn our devices off when not using them and unplug devices that do not need to be plugged in, and
- we will recycle our materials and first look to reuse before buying new (we will consume less).

These were not novel statements; on the contrary, the points were quite basic. They were significant in that they expressed our anger, indignation, and protest at the state of our political, cultural, social, and environmental spheres. Each item on the list represented a reaction to a perceived threat to the values that we shared as a collective, and that we hoped to advocate for in the discipline (Figures 1-4).

In his recent essay "Trump and Brexit: Reality in the Balance", Jeremy Till draws on the work of Anthony Giddens to make sense of the political and cultural crisis surrounding the 2016 U.S. election and Britain's campaign to leave the European Union.<sup>4</sup> Particularly of interest are his interpretations of sustained optimism, pragmatic acceptance, and radical engagement to describe sociocultural responses to the sense of uncertainty generated by the forces of modernity.

Till describes sustained optimism as “a gilded version of a fresh and better future.” The contingencies and context surrounding our messy reality are intentionally overlooked in favor of “the illusion of positive spin.” Sustained optimism serves as a powerful tool of persuasion in campaign politics and is the basis for rationalizing contemporary neoliberal economics as politically neutral. Pandering to this same myth of political neutrality, sustained optimism also plays a role in mainstream architecture rhetoric. Till draws attention to the way in which major design outlets such as *Dezeen*, *Arch Daily*, and *Inhabitat* present buildings and objects entirely detached of any political,

economic, or environmental context that might tarnish or complicate the image. This produces a whimsical world for architecture to inhabit, a world conveniently disassociated from reality.

Pragmatic acceptance is the attitude of playing the game because it is necessary for survival, even if it means sacrificing integrity. Radical engagement acknowledges perceived threats and mobilizes against them. Where sustained optimism and pragmatic acceptance are uncritical, and pragmatic acceptance is unproductive, radical engagement is both critical and productive. While radical engagement most holistically



Figures 1-4: These posters are from the early formative days of the Denizen Collective, prior to having decided on a name. Because they were produced as part of a course assignment with a deadline, we borrowed the name Citizen Architect from Sam Mockbee and the rural studio. The posters reflect the sense of urgency we felt as students in the discipline of architecture.

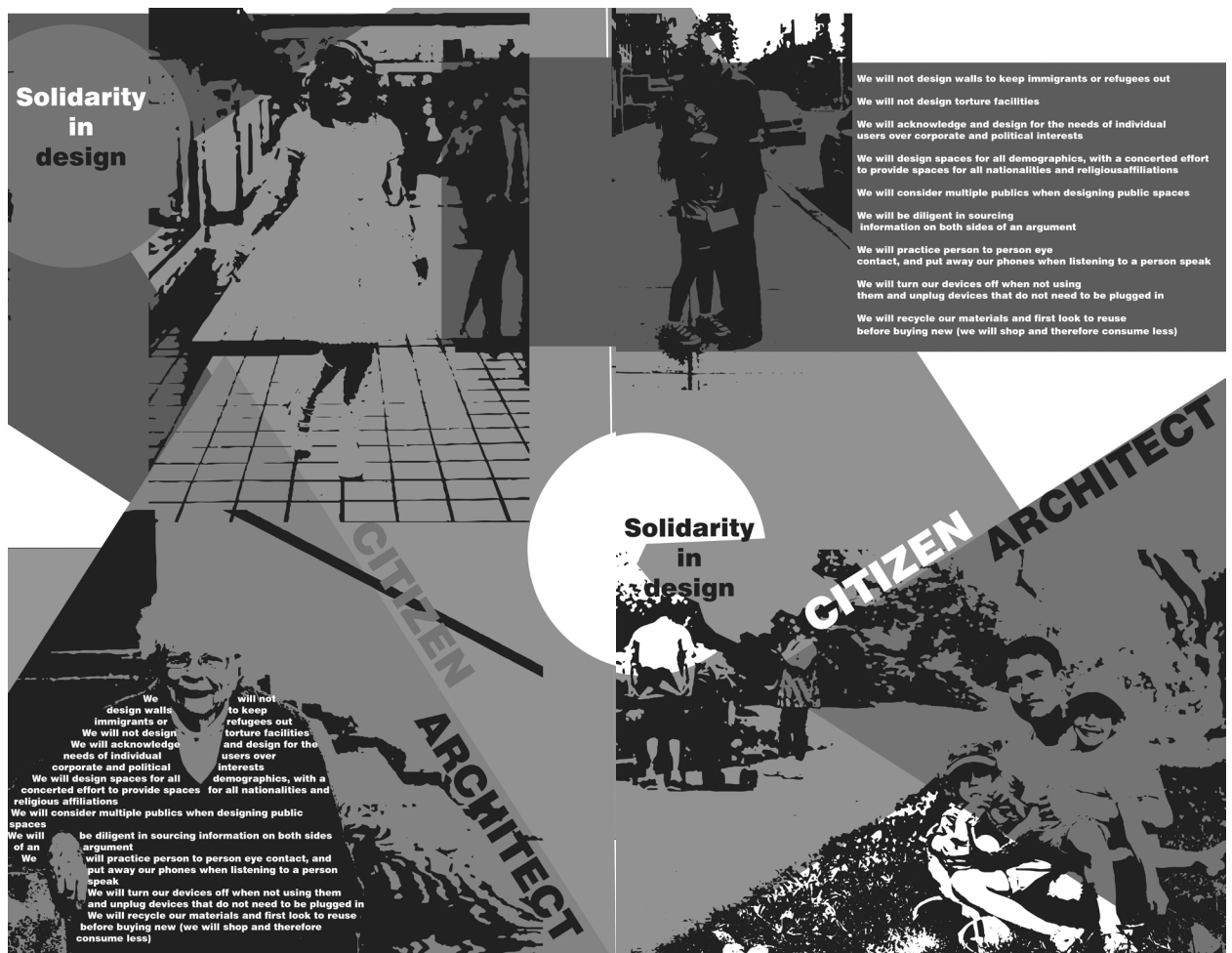
Courtesy: Tucker Jones, Alex Ruiz, Genevieve Wasser

described the Denizen position, translating our ideas to direct action required navigating the tensions of sustained optimism and pragmatic acceptance.

Denizen’s most action-oriented endeavor involved installing a coffee cart on the third floor of the School of Architecture, where all the undergraduate studios were located. Coffee is to architecture students as electrolyte infusion is to long distance runners—that is, essential. We hoped that this 24-hour purveyor of coffee might ignite a stronger sense of community within our school. Locating the cart on the third floor was a strategic move to facilitate more interaction

between graduate and undergraduate students, particularly given that until then the closest place to get coffee was a couple of buildings away.

To expand on the relationship between the coffee cart and radical engagement, let us consider for a moment an *Architectural Review* think piece entitled “Perestroika of Life.”<sup>5</sup> Author Andrew Willimott explains the concept of the social condenser as a way to encourage human interaction and collective consciousness through spatial design. Since its origins in Constructivist Soviet Architecture of the 1920s and ‘30s, the social condenser has reappeared time



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and again as a reaction to social threats precipitated by capitalism and laissez-faire economics. For Willimott, visions of change capable of inspiring social movements must “emerge out of dialogue with utopia.”<sup>6</sup>

#### EXTRA-CAPITALIST EXPERIMENTS

*A collectively created Coffee Cart punctuates the studio corridor, an artful assemblage collectively designed and built from donated student models. On it sits a shiny percolator rescued from the pantry of a faculty member, buttressed by the quintessential accompaniments: snacks, pamphlets, and free studio materials. A donation jar bursts at the seams with wrinkled cash and IOUs from bankrupt undergrads. The Coffee Cart is the water cooler for intellectual discussion and the mainspring of efficacious student movements and blossoming collaborations.*

In a 2015 *Architectural Review* article, Reinier de Graaf argues that our discipline is a tool of capitalism, and an effective one at that. Citing Thomas Piketty’s economic theories, De Graaf describes how capitalism relies on disparity of wealth and inequality to function. Use value is consistently neglected for asset value, and architectural concepts transform in their focus from usability to marketability.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, he posits that “Architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its erstwhile ideological endeavor.”<sup>8</sup> This attitude illustrates what Till refers to as pragmatic acceptance of the problems embedded in our neoliberal economic model.

Take, for example, co-working and maker spaces. These “spaces” are business models marketed as an architectural design strategy that facilitates teamwork and opportunities for cross pollination across a variety of professional fields. However, they are really just boxes of minimal program where workers from different companies sit side-by-side with their faces glued to their laptops and mobile devices. Collaboration and cooperative idea generation are marketed instead of developed thoughtfully. The value of these spaces is determined by the amount of revenue they can generate instead of their potential to create human relationships or enhance the creative process.

These contemporary co-working spaces are an example of pragmatic acceptance. Architects are willing to design, and even advocate for the production of these spaces knowing that the “collaborative” language is disingenuous. Architecture adopts the attitude of pragmatic acceptance when directed at increasing the monetary value of these work spaces without genuine consideration for their potential to create an atmosphere of collaboration, which is their stated function.

Conversely, the coffee cart operated outside the conventional marketplace, somewhere between donation-based and a sharing economy. We frame this as an extra-capitalist experiment because the Denizen Collective saw the cart as a mini test site for students and faculty to engage in an alternate marketplace. With no designated overseer, it was up to the greater collective to brew the coffee, clean the equipment, and add to the contents.

#### BLURRING BOUNDARIES

*Late one fall night, two art students stand at the doors of the architecture school hoping for entry into the building that houses the well-known Coffee Cart. With nothing else on campus open past midnight, word of the cart had spread quickly among the night owls. An accommodating undergrad with a key card lets the two in and points them in the direction of the Coffee Cart, where a group of students appear intensely engaged in conversation. Drawing closer, the two art students realize they are walking right into a meeting of the minds.*

*Members of the group sip coffee from an assortment of ceramic mugs as they lay out their latest plan of action for the Denizen Collective. A couple of students from the planning department are explaining their strategies for mapping vacant lots, social services, and spaces in the city that are out of view of the typical police sweep zones. An architecture undergrad explains to the two curious newcomers that they are deep in the midst of figuring out how best to combine their skills and resources to aid a houseless community advocacy group. The two art students are equally surprised*



*and excited to hear this type of talk coming from such an unassuming gathering and settle in to join the brainstorming.*

Historically, the box labeled "plays well with others" has been left unchecked on the architect's report card. Responding to this, the Denizen Collective made it a goal to build relationships with allied disciplines in art and urban planning, in the spirit of formalizing a stronger, more potent collective network. Truth be told, we only made it to the initial stage when we attended a panel discussion about the challenges of planning in Trump's America. Our reputation as poor collaborators thwarted our attempts at working with the planners, and our reluctance to leave our home in Shattuck Hall meant we had little contact with the art students, despite belonging to the same college.

This experience is symptomatic of a larger issue within the discipline of architecture, which translates into practice. In school we learn how to defend our design decisions and use our persuasive powers as a tool to convince the jury of the merits of our ideas. Rather than active listening and participating in constructive dialogue, we are conditioned to smile and nod while we rationalize away critiques (sustained optimism) and discredit any non-expert. In addition to an obsession with our own ideas, a culture of isolation is rooted in the architecture school experience. Students spend so much time in studio with one another that there is little chance to broaden their scope of thought beyond the limits of architecture.

The Architecture Lobby (T-A-L) attributes architecture's reluctance to engage with other players in the building industry to our inability to share credit, and thereby relinquish the claim to sole architectural genius. They are working to decentralize the authority of decision making, alongside highlighting the work of the countless builders, engineers, associate designers, and consultants who are essential to bringing a building into being.<sup>9</sup> Part of this effort involves positioning architects as workers instead of members of an elite social class. This is particularly helpful in discussing the building trades, where there is a separation between the people designing the building components and those putting them together.

MAIO, an architectural office operating out of Barcelona, is also working toward an authentic model for collaboration, bringing people from across the world of design and construction to a literal table. This long table is central to their studio, serving as a collective work surface and a symbol of their design ethos. As an act of spatial production, it reflects the ideals of a studio actively working to deconstruct traditional hierarchies in architectural praxis.<sup>10</sup> They established their design philosophy or ideal, then built a space to reinforce this philosophy, which continues to carry through to projects like "the kitchenless city" and "110 rooms," where they push the boundaries of what we consider necessities for our living spaces. This young group of architects and designers prioritizes cross-disciplinary collaboration to inform spaces and built objects that are both flexible and adaptable.

Assemble, a UK-based design group, is another example of a design firm attempting to subvert the traditional role of architect as expert. In the Granby Four Streets development project, Assemble worked with the neighborhood's uniquely structured Community Land Trust to help bring their long-anticipated visions to life. Past urban regeneration efforts had failed because no one took the initiative to engage in dialogue with the people in Granby to find out what they wanted to see. The success of this project lies within the exchange of knowledge between the people of Granby and Assemble. The former shared the spirit of their community as a DIY and resourceful community, while the latter saw beyond the existing structures of communication and generated a spark to an already determined group of people.<sup>11</sup>

#### COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP

*Five years after its formation, a Denizen alumna returns to the School of Architecture as a guest critic for final reviews. She is delighted to spot the Coffee Cart. The skeleton is mostly unchanged, but the trusty percolator and donated mugs are gone. In their stead, a colorful array of book spines sits atop the basswood model fragments turned cabinetry. On closer examination, the volumes are important texts from electives past. Folders of printouts, carefully catalogued by topic, nestle between these books among the likes of the*

Whole Earth Catalogue and the Squatter's Guide to London.

*Someone has welded a tablet to the steel frame of the material exchange. She reaches out to touch it and it lights up to display the Denizen Database. Scrolling through the folders, she is struck by the amount of content that Denizen has created since she left. She opens up one folder titled "Alumni Entourage" and chuckles at the cutouts of students past and present who donated their likenesses in poses that are often needed to complete a last minute rendering.*

From the outset, the Denizen Collective conceived of the Coffee Cart as an object that belonged not to the group, but to the greater collective of the school. We resisted our temptations as design students to craft a beautiful object, instead opting for the old busted-up AV cart, hoping that this might encourage a principle of collective and transferable ownership. In an essay titled "Returning Duchamp's Urinal to the Bathroom? On the Reconnection between Artistic Experimentation, Social Responsibility and Institutional Transformation," Teddy Cruz calls for a revolution that would replace a system of economic excess with a system of social responsibility to legitimize creativity and artistic autonomy, thereby freeing the creative spirit from the oppressive grasp of conservative political forces. He argues for humble, small-scale interventions as catalysts for change, where the collective imagination is the creative agent in designing an inclusive urbanism.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, we hoped that the Coffee Cart could serve as a sort of prototype for this theory, igniting the collective spirit of the school, which then might propel the cart through greater and greater programmatic and physical iterations. We believed that there was opportunity to generate tangible social/political action by drawing on the variety of viewpoints, wealth of knowledge, and diversity of skills available to a cooperative group of energized students. This was intended as an act of resistance to the notion that architecture is a product of isolated individual genius. While the Coffee Cart did not live up to our original expectations as a remarkable object of collective authorship, while in operation, it did serve as a place for informal interaction. Upon reflection, what came

out of the Coffee Cart was proportional to the work that went into it.

Beyond the halls of academia, there are greater implications for embracing collective authorship, even extending beyond the architectural profession. For example, T-A-L founder Peggy Deamer explains how architects can change the way we work using common trade tools, specifically BIM, as a way to build stronger community among designers and builders. Instead of focusing on the technology's ability to streamline the design process, or focusing on its limitations of form making, Deamer argues for a push to generate a library based on the wealth and variety of knowledge among firms coming from seemingly disparate, isolated projects.<sup>13</sup> Deamer goes on to explain how shared information can generate better relationships between every subgroup involved in an architectural project. There are opportunities to bring fabricators to the table at early stages in the design process, and consult with builders in a less formal way than handing them completed design development documents.

As architects we need to stop working in the vacuum we have created for ourselves. Both Deamer and Till point out that the future of architecture becomes increasingly less relevant as the push toward efficiency over quality grows increasingly important. In the current system of production, much of the work we do is subject to the chopping block of value engineering, and it will be important to be a driving force behind the changes to the field instead of passive passengers who see it change without us.

## REFLECTING ON FAILURE

Despite the initial enthusiasm and determination for the Denizen Architecture Collective, we were unable to sustain momentum. As we adjusted to the perceived threats of the Trump Administration, the pressures of school work, volunteering, and assistantships outweighed the urgency of the collective, with radical engagement giving way to pragmatic acceptance.

Not surprisingly, this follows an all too common trend. As Slavoj Zizek points out, historically, instances of horizontal organization have a limited life span. In moments of passionate collective action, people feel

a sense of accomplishment around coming together to stand up for their values. After the initial disruption dies down, normal flows resurface. Most people go back to everyday life, but that brief instance of shared experience is so powerful that participants still come away feeling fulfilled. Lack of organization and determination halt the momentum before it ever elicits any real change in the lives of everyday people.<sup>14</sup>

We might conclude, then, that the dissipation of the Denizen Architecture Collective was likely a foregone conclusion. In our idealistic understanding of the agency of the collective, we were extremely hesitant when it came to formalizing our role. Without dedicated leadership and organization there was no system of accountability.

Here it is important to distinguish that while our experiment in collective agency fell short, other projects based on these same principles (albeit with stronger organization and leadership) are alive and kicking. Most notably, The Architecture Lobby reported that “The effect of the postelection scramble was galvanizing, instantly doubling the member pool, and the lobby is planning a slate of new projects to take advantage of that momentum.”<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Through Denizen, we grappled with architecture’s relationship to a greater purpose. Writing now from the position of the professional world of architecture, we recognize that this is not unique to the school experience. For example, the centrality of the deadline carries through into practice and acts as a set of blinders to the big picture goals and ideals that we hold as recent graduates. We are trained to generate idea after idea and endless iterations of the preferred scheme, each beholden to a new deadline. Disturbingly, these pressures have little to do with the people who will dwell in these spaces.

While the concept of global citizenship acknowledges a greater purpose beyond the confines of architecture, as it relates to architecture it involves instilling the values of knowledge and relationships outside the discipline. It is about understanding how to be a person among other people, and more importantly, other people who

are different from you. Difference is not determined by national boundaries; difference is born of a whole spectrum of factors including education, beliefs, regional biases, and so on. Consequently, going abroad is insufficient for learning global citizenship.

Even though the Denizen Architecture Collective was decidedly local in context, it contended with the same issues and taught the same lessons that are central to global citizenship. Flux, contingency, collective authorship, and human interaction are critical ideas in challenging the western ideal of individualism. This collective experiment was our way of reclaiming the idea of citizenship as a performative act of belonging, and more specifically, global citizenship as a means of understanding our common plight as human beings. We must take an active role in the rapidly changing social, political, economic, and environmental landscape of today’s world if we want to see changes that reflect our values. ■

## ENDNOTES

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