

RE- IMAGINING THE AVANT- GARDE

The background of the entire page is a dense, abstract collage of white geometric shapes on a black field. These shapes include rectangles, triangles, circles, and complex polygons, some of which are layered or cut out to create a sense of depth and movement. The shapes are scattered across the page, with some appearing as solid forms and others as negative space. The overall effect is reminiscent of mid-century modern graphic design or a complex architectural plan.

GUEST-EDITED BY
MATTHEW BUTCHER AND
LUKE CASPAR PEARSON

Revisiting the
Architecture of the
1960s and 1970s



FEEDBACK

OR, PAST FUTURES HAUNT

UrbanLab,
Re-Encampment,
Chicago Architecture Biennial,
Chicago,
2017

The architects translated a Superstudio photo-collage into a model that mimics the expansive grid with the use of mirrors. The infinite space is equal parts landscape and infrastructure.



LOOPS

ARCHITECTURE'S PRESENT

Mimi Zeiger

Is architectural discourse haunted by an avant-garde future that never materialised? Los Angeles-based critic, curator and editor **Mimi Zeiger** describes how these tropes, many of which relate to the preoccupations of the 1960s and 1970s, are recycled and repurposed by contemporary practitioners. She cautions that such feedback loops, orbits or revolutions strip meanings, narratives and politics from original source materials, which not only leaves a vacuum of nostalgia at the centre of the discourse, but also limits the discipline's ability to speculate on the pressures of our present moment.

In February 2018, Elon Musk's SpaceX launched a cherry-red Tesla Roadster into the heavens perched atop a Falcon Heavy rocket. Equal parts media stunt and feat of technological prowess, the act epitomised the very near reality of entrepreneurial space exploration.

Cruising past Mars and travelling at speeds reaching 56,000 kilometres (35,000 miles) per hour¹ brings to mind the velocity celebrations of a century earlier when Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote: 'We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.'² But while the avant-gardist Marinetti eschewed the past's crepuscular sentimentality, technofuturist Musk's 21st-century sports car carries cultural baggage from the mid-20th; a dummy pilot named Starman is seated in the Tesla's front seat 'listening' to an infinite loop of David Bowie's 'Space Oddity'.

LOOP I: ORBITS

Bowie's 1969 hit, of course, is a cautionary tale of the Jet Age – Major Tom helplessly adrift among the stars. Musk's soundtrack, then, must mean something more for our contemporary moment than baby-boomer pandering or glib nostalgia. It illustrates 'hauntology' – a condition of late modernity in which we long for promised futures, utopias or even avant-gardes that never arrived. Marinetti promised speed. The Jet Age promised off-world exploration. And yet we remain mostly terrestrial on a rapidly warming planet, haunted by old desires.

First coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, and elaborated on by theorist Mark Fisher more than a decade later, hauntology describes a kind of temporal feedback loop, where noise from the past interrupts the signal from the present.³ In practice, the term makes sense of moments of expansive reach that are tempered by reflection. The legacy of Modernism's systems and structures lingers spectrally around mainstream culture and architecture, even as confidence in the project of modernity has long been shaken, questioned and rejected.

LOOP II: REVOLUTIONS

And 50 years after the riots and protests that marked the end of that old world order, we continue to also cling to counter cultures, radicals and revolutions. Writing about The Shed, a recently opened multimedia performance space by Diller Scofidio + Renfro with Rockwell Group, located on New York City's High Line, art historian Claire Bishop critiques the use of Cedric Price's Fun Palace (1964) as both inspiration and precedent.⁴ Commissioned by theatre director Joan Littlewood, Price's unbuilt work proposed an adaptable and educational cultural centre that embraced the shifting social norms of British society. According to a brochure published by Price and Littlewood, it was conceived as a place to start a riot, begin a painting or stare at the sky, or to revolt, create or, most radical of all, do nothing.

The Shed is a technologically ambitious project distinguished by an enormous roof on wheels that moves

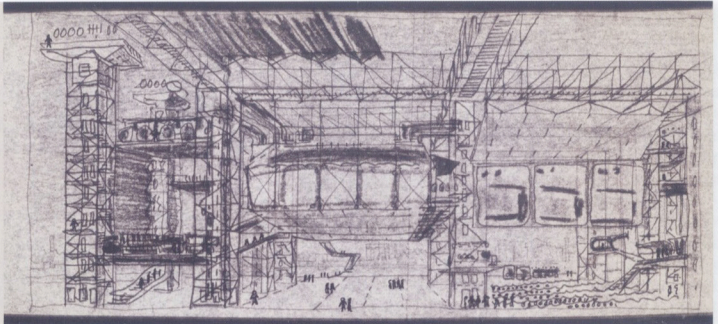


Diller Scofidio + Renfro
and Rockwell Group,
The Shed,
New York City,
2019

Located on the High Line, The Shed is a cultural and performing-arts space in Manhattan. Its large, retractable roof takes inspiration from Cedric Price's ever-mutable Fun Palace project.

Cedric Price,
Interior perspective
for Fun Palace,
1963

Commissioned by theatre director Joan Littlewood, Price's Fun Palace is a favourite project for revisiting, but is it possible to translate its social and political agenda from the 1960s to a contemporary context?



to accommodate a highly curated set of performances and events. Bishop takes issue with the portrayal of Price's work in historian Dorothea von Hantelmann's 'What Is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century?' booklet produced to accompany the venue's two-week preopening programme.⁵ Specifically, Bishop identifies Von Hantelmann's reorientation of the Fun Palace from a piece of agit-prop theatre to a tool of contemporary consumer culture. She writes: 'It's a staggering rhetorical shift that takes up what is most proto-neoliberal in Price (the mantra of flexibility) and rebrands it as prosumerism.'⁶

The Shed opened in April 2019, and at the time of writing what little architectural discussion there has been about the project has focused on the Fun Palace. Price's vision has become a recursive figure that not only replaces discourse about the architectural gestures, but even when critiqued is a palliative that eases the reception of an uncomfortable new world order – in this case, a gentrified West Side of Manhattan fully optimised for the churn of capitalised art, culture and media.

As with Price, the work of Italian radicals Superstudio provides endless fodder for appropriation. Their signature black-and-white grid decorates tote bags, tunics and bedding produced by trendy, minimalist fashion brands. Quaderna, the anti-design tables and benches Superstudio created for furniture manufacturer Zanotta in 1970, pops up in chic cafes and design galleries. The flatness of its plastic laminate and the particular spacing of the silkscreened grid (3 centimetres/1.2 inches) make Quaderna an instantly recognisable visual reference. For example, OMA's 2016 adaptive reuse and renovation of Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice cheekily deploys the grid in the public bathrooms on the upper level. The use is knowing – an act typical of Rem Koolhaas and the OMA team who also worked on Fondazione Prada in Milan (2018). The question flickers: Is it an inside joke or a nod to contemporary design trends?

At Fondazione Prada, though, the references are fast and furious. The brashest is Restaurant Torre, a pitch-perfect near-re-creation of Philip Johnson's Four

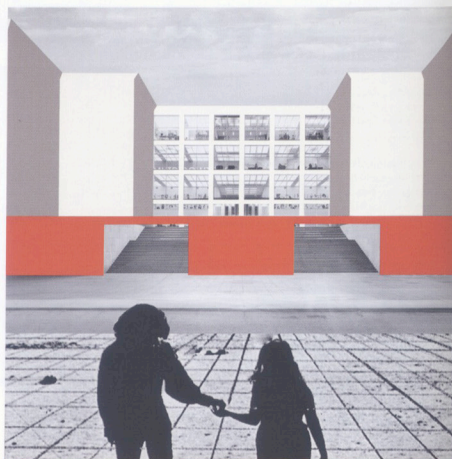


OMA,
Fondaco dei Tedeschi,
Venice, Italy
2016

The uppermost floor of Fondaco dei Tedeschi is a skylight art and events space. Although grids play a role in the architectural vocabulary of the gallery, it is the use of a Superstudio-like grid in the bathrooms that suggests an Italian Radicals feedback loop.

Seasons restaurant (New York, 1959) on the sixth and seventh floors of the new tower, complete with electric-blue chairs bought at auction. Hauntological more than postmodern, the decor transfers an interior designed for mid-century power brokering into the nexus of global art and fashion.

At Fondaco dei Tedeschi,⁷ the gesture is smaller and more oblique, though no less relevant. The historic building dates to the 13th century as a hub of trade, serving as a customs house under Napoleon and a post office under Mussolini. OMA's 2016 renovation transformed the structure into a duty-free shopping emporium for Hong Kong-based operator DFS. The uppermost floor is dedicated to an event pavilion, exhibition space and open-air rooftop offering a Venetian panorama. The public toilets on this level overtly reference a radical past: Superstudio's Quaderna graphic patterns the walls, backsplashes and stalls, creating a feedback loop to 1970s Italy and the anti-nostalgia impulses of the group.⁸



Johnston Marklee,
MCA Chicago,
2015

The architects collaged together Superstudio's trademark grid with the abstracted grid of the Museum of Contemporary Art's facade.

LOOP III: MATRICES

The degree to which Superstudio's efforts have become recognisable shorthand for avant-garde authenticity can be seen in a photo-collage produced by architects Johnston Marklee as part of their contribution to the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial. Entitled *House is a House is a House* is a *House*, they later published a monograph with the same title. In the piece, the architects deploy a portion of *Continuous Monument* (1969) in this proposal for the city's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA). The top half of the collage is an abstraction of the original 1996 building by Josef Paul Kleihues – a monumental stair

leading to the facade and its oversized window grid. The bottom half was borrowed from Superstudio to serve as a stand-in for urban life – the silhouette of a hippie couple holding hands as the monument's supersurface stretches outwards. In the original, the grid extends existentially towards its vanishing point; in Johnston Marklee's collage, however, the mediation on endless urbanity ends at the foot of the museum's steps.

While the architects' composition might suggest an interrelationship between culture and the city (an oft-told story at a time when museums around the world are trying to build greater audiences), the abrupt halt of the grid may

tell us something more than what was intended: what had been open-ended, visionary and problematic is cropped and Photoshopped to serve the more straightforward architectural goal of pursuing a commission. That said, the reference is not decontextualised; meanings are meant to remain, not to give historical context per se, but to legitimate value.

Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee used a similar technique of leveraging historical material to validate the present on a greater scale in 2017 with their curatorship for the Chicago Architecture Biennial. Entitled 'Make New History' (a title taken from Ed Ruscha's artist's book of the same name),⁹ the exhibition codified a trend of emergent designers to put precedents into architectural service. The catalogue includes a conversation between the architects and Graham Foundation director Sarah Herda on the merits of history. Herda asks Mark Lee if he considers the use of history a reactionary stance. Lee dodges the implications that history comes with disciplinary baggage or that looking backwards is wilfully regressive. Instead he suggests that our information age offers rich access to the past, creating an atemporal treasure trove for designers, an 'eternal present' of historical knowledge: 'Perhaps unlike historicism, where things are subsumed under a grand historical narrative structure, we see history as a horizon, open and accessible, with multiple entry and exit points.'¹⁰

LOOP IV: ETERNAL PRESENT

But what if the 'eternal present' is not an interstate freeway trucking across time and space, but rather a *Groundhog Day* scenario in which difference is subsumed by familiarity and repetition? The past can be a dangerous place to look for the future of architecture. Re-imagining the avant-garde might seem celebratory at first, but unless radically recontextualised and critiqued it can be a trap. Old biases and omissions are reinforced: canons crystallised, hierarchies hardened, patriarchal practices protected.

Johnston and Lee's 'Make New History' included a hall in the Chicago Cultural Center dedicated to 24 invited practices, each asked to contribute an interpretation of a canonical interior of their choosing based on a photograph. The selections of archival images were primarily of European architecture authored by men, an unsurprising consequence given tendencies in the field over its long history. The resulting models were laid out in a pattern representing Mies van der Rohe's 1947 masterplan for the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) campus – a pattern that when translated to the gallery was nearly illegible. A missed off-ramp – a gesture so reliant on a niche reference that when considering a broader Chicago audience borders on exclusionary.

Within this milieu, which included Bureau Spectacular's *Another Raumplan*, a furry interpretation of Adolf Loos's 1930s Villa Müller in Prague, and UrbanLab's Re-Encampment, their interpretation of Superstudio's 1971–3 *Fundamental Acts* (*Life, Education, Ceremony, Love and Death*) (see p 20), the different designers competed to



Bureau Spectacular, *Another Raumplan*, Chicago Architecture Biennial, Chicago, 2017

Another Raumplan used faux fur and a series of peepholes to pay homage to a photograph of Villa Müller, Adolf Loos's 1930s house built in Prague.



WELCOMEPROJECTS, *I See Paris, I See France*, Chicago Architecture Biennial, Chicago, 2017

By amplifying the Surrealist at play in Le Corbusier's Beistegui Apartment (1931), the playful project introduced a new set of narratives and references for architectural consideration.

stand out with a clever, recursive wink. Several used found and oddball-scale objects (Doritos bags, lawn chairs, cacti) to fill their dollhouse-like models.

WELCOMEPROJECTS's take on Le Corbusier's Beistegui Apartment (1931), entitled *I See Paris, I See France*, applied both rigour and whimsy to the challenge, transforming the rooftop penthouse into a Surrealist board game, with questions of scale and reality as the stakes. A Popsicle, a top hat, a lipstick, a fried egg are all players on a chequerboard surface – designed to defy distinctions between toy, object or, in postmodern duck fashion, building. In describing her project, WELCOMEPROJECTS founder Laurel Broughton reminds us that the apartment no longer exists and that only a handful of images are left behind: 'It is this status – a ghost captured in a photograph – that makes this work of architecture simultaneously real and imaginary.'¹¹

LOOP V: SAMPLES

Though haunted, *I See Paris, I See France* does not rely on any single visual quotation for meaning. The apartment itself is only one of many objects on the board. Broughton, travelling in the path of Venturi, Scott Brown and FAT, among others, raises the possibility that extradisciplinary sources offer a critical exodus from the tyranny of the feedback loop and the traditional cannon.

Broughton's interconnected works *Life on the Fantasy Substrate of Los Angeles* (2018), a small booklet produced for an exhibition at the Cities of Days shop and gallery in Los Angeles in October 2018, and *Four Experimental Mascots for Los Angeles*, envision a future for LA circa 2026, in which the city is transformed into a citizen-operated theme park. Her speculative urbanism relies on collective referencing – Reynier Banham's ecologies¹² and history of buildings and neighbourhoods as hats, hot dogs or Venetian dreamscapes, but also collective labour. 'All citizens are now cast members and characters who contribute to the ongoing narrative of place. This promotes awareness that narrative is work. ... Uniforms are provided,' explains Broughton.¹³ While Bishop's critique of The Shed, with its dubious embrace of Price's Fun Palace, cautioned against prosumerism – the neoliberal conflation of production and consumerism – Broughton's fiction is based on legislation and participation, on citizens voting to transform their city into a theme park.

Like Broughton, the work of Jennifer Bonner, founder of MALL, makes productive excursions into the ordinary. She drags enduring vernaculars of Southern culture – roof gables and faux finishes – from the fringes of Americana and reshapes them within the discipline. Bonner's methodology, as demonstrated in *Haus Gables* (2018), relies on a multistep process of sampling, repurposing and making strange. The gable roof, for example, is identified as outcast, reconfigured, and then re-represented using photographic techniques inspired by artist Barbara Kasten: oblique angles, multicoloured gels, deeply hued shadows.

MALL's interest is clearly form, but it is also driven by a desire to broaden the histories acceptable within the discourse. In her book *A Guide to the Dirty South – Atlanta* (2018), Bonner draws parallels between East Coast/West Coast rivalries in hip-hop and in architecture. As a way out of the feedback loop between Los Angeles and New York, she introduces a third coast: Atlanta, home of hip-hop collectives Outkast and Goodie Mob. 'Welcome to the Dirty South architecture camp, where a group of thinkers, writers, misbehaving makers, and storytellers borrow from Dirty South hip-hop artists before them to produce outcast architecture,' she writes.¹⁴ The *Guide* is inclusive in its approach, including grand hotels by architect John Portman alongside landscapes drawn from rap lyrics.

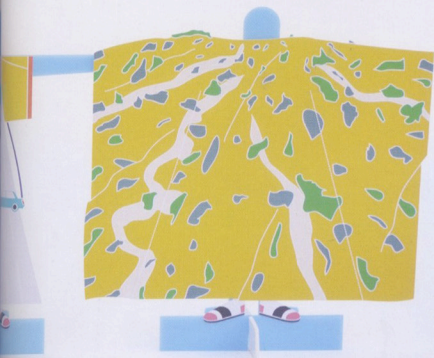


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MALL,
Haus Gables,
Atlanta,
Georgia,
2018

MALL's formal language is drawn from the many vernaculars of the American South, including home construction and Dirty South rap. Multiple pitched roofs are designed to make the gable seem strange or unfamiliar.



LOOP VI: CENTRIFUGAL FORCES

Architecture's capacity to imagine, or re-imagine, an avant-garde relies on its ability to move beyond the avant-gardes of years gone by. We might be tempted to continually look backwards, haunted by the embedded meanings of those tantalising projects of the 1960s and 1970s, but the rear-view mirror of history is narrow, framing a body of work that is often decidedly Western, male and white. Hence those pasts present only a crutch for a field struggling to find its relevance and for next generations of designers faced with increasingly complicated planetary conditions.

But not looking back is not all call for newness, either. Tabula rasa visions are just as limiting. Although still early in their careers, what the work of Broughton and Bonner suggests is that expansion into less-explored territories of politics and narrative, region and identity can not only coexist with more disciplinary agendas; they are crucial correctives to the centrifugal pull of the feedback loop. ◊



Notes

1. www.whereroadster.com.
2. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', *Le Figaro* (Paris), 20 February 1909, published in Lawrence Rainey (ed), *Futurism: An Anthology*, Yale University Press (New Haven, CT), 2009, p 51.
3. See Andrew Gallix, 'Hauntology: A Not-So-New Critical Manifestation', *The Guardian*, 17 June 2011: www.theguardian.com/books/bookblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical.
4. Claire Bishop, 'Palace in Plunderland', *ArtForum*, September 2018: www.artforum.com/print/201807/palace-in-plunderland-76327.
5. Dorothea von Hantelmann, 'What is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century?', May 2018: <https://theshed.org/program/series/2-a-prelude-to-the-shed/new-ritual-space-21st-century>.
6. Bishop, *op cit*.
7. <http://oma.eu/projects/il-fondaco-dei-teseschi>.
8. Lucia Allais, *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, IL), 2018, p 263.
9. Ed Ruscha, *Make New History*, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) (Los Angeles), 2009.
10. Sarah Herda, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, 'From the First Biennial to the Second and Back Again', in Mark Lee *et al*, *Make New History: 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial*, exh cat, Lars Müller (Zurich), 2017, pp 21–2.
11. www.welcomeprojects.com/chicago-architecture-biennial/.
12. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, introduction by Anthony Vidler, University of California Press (Berkeley and Los Angeles), 2001, p 5; originally published by Allen Lane (London), 1971.
13. WELCOMEPROJECTS, *Life on the Fantasy Substrate of Los Angeles*, Summer 2018: <https://days-la.myshopify.com/products/life-on-the-fantasy-substrate-of-los-angeles?variant=8960342720572>.
14. Jennifer Bonner, *A Guide to the Dirty South – Atlanta, Artifice* (London), 2018, pp 7–8.

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REVISITING THE ARCHITECTURE
OF THE 1960S AND 1970S

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The 1960s and 1970s avant-garde has been likened to an 'architectural Big Bang', such was the intensity of energy and ambition in which it exploded into the postwar world. Marked out by architectural projects that redefined the discipline, it remains just as influential today. References to the likes of Archizoom, Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk and Superstudio abound. Highly diverse, the avant-garde cannot be defined as a single strand or tendency. It was divergent geographically – reaching from Europe to North America and Japan – and in its political, formal and cultural preoccupations. It was unified, though, as a critical and experimental force, critiquing contemporary society against the backdrop of extreme social and political upheaval: the Paris riots of May 1968, the anti-Vietnam war movement in America and the looming ecological crisis.

Re-imagining the Avant-Garde outlines how in contemporary architectural practice, avant-garde projects retain their power as historical precedents, as barometers of a particular design ethos, as critiques of society and instigators of new formal techniques. Given the far-reaching impact of the subsequent digital revolution, which has since reshaped every aspect of practice, the issue asks why this historical period continues to retain its undeniable grip on current architecture.



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