

**Zeitschrift:** Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am  
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Herausgeber:** Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Band:** - (2020)

**Heft:** 36

**Artikel:** From ex-tension to in-tension

**Autor:** Levy, Omri / Savio, Stéphanie

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-981436>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 10.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**



*«Architecture would bind itself to the existing envelopes. Volumes would not change, as the balance between interior and exterior would become sacred. A new practice would be born, not interior design but real core architecture.»*

## FROM EX-TENSION TO IN-TENSION Omri Levy, Stéphanie Savio

► Omri Levy, born 1987, studied architecture at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, as well as in the University of Valparaiso in Chile. Besides serving as a shepherd in the Ella Valley, he co-launched in 2016 the first issue of the *(Israeli Journal of Architecture)* on the topic of material. After working in architecture offices of Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Darmstadt, Basel and Jerusalem, he co-founded with Stéphanie Savio, Savio Levy architects in 2017. In the winter semester of 2019, he taught a studio at Bezalel with Daniel Hasson.

► Stéphanie Savio, born 1989, studied architecture at ETH Zurich, as well as at TU Delft. Back then, she co-edited two issues of *(trans)* dedicated to stance and norms. After working for Jakob Steib in Zurich, with Dogma in Brussels and at S AM in Basel, she co-founded with Omri Levy, Savio Levy architects in 2017. In 2018, she joined the chair for 'Architecture, Critique, History and Theory' of Prof. Christophe Van Gerrewey at EPFL, where she is a doctoral student since 2019. Her thesis concerns the cooperative settlements of Hannes Meyer and Ariele Sharon.



Ex-tension is what happens when a building finds itself in a state of tension. When a building cannot hold its content within anymore and must expand, or — as the literal etymology of the word suggests — stretch out. We experience more and more extensions in the architectural world as the number of «new» buildings decreases. It almost feels as a moral stand of the architect to decide not to build but to extend. Annexes, additional floors, winter gardens, new wings are all frequently encountered examples. Why is it that extensions are so present in the current architecture? Is it part of a larger phenomenon? Is it due to the Terrestrial Crisis (\*environmental, social, territorial and political) described by Bruno Latour?<sup>(1)</sup>

If it is, what would come next? One possibility would be the state of in-tension. Architecture would bind itself to the existing envelopes. Volumes would not change, as the balance between interior and exterior would become sacred. Some of us may perceive this as the end of architecture, others as a possibility and a new beginning. Some would argue that treating the core of the building is more relevant than its outer layer. A new practice would be born, not interior design but real core architecture. This theory might seem less far-fetched if we regard all the current existing spaces which will lose relevance in the close future. Parking lots with the development of on-demand public transportation service<sup>(2)</sup> or office spaces with the increase of AI.

If Foucault heard this, he might jubilate. The private interior becomes our new infrastructure, and what has remained a private matter so far, gets in the focus of global attention. The economization of the private sphere with the use of «civililians» to host (Airbnb), distribute people (Uber) and goods (Amazon) allows for a general consultation of traditional domestic relations and the design of new infrastructures. Similar to some forms of social emancipation, the interiors may develop a new inner layer and external perception. In the following text, we will try to pursue the shift from Tension to Ex-tension and then to In-tension in more depth.

Let us start with the field of psychology, where tension is defined as having effects on the body and mind, expressed through anxiety which, in turn, might be dealt with by one or several defense mechanisms. Analogical to this, tension may arise in a space or in a buildings program, for example due to the need of additional activities or a growing number of users. Considering the global state of demographic growth this is more than credible.<sup>(3)</sup> Tension is only created where there are strict rules or borders. In this sense it is connected to the act of architecture. Architectural tension is a force, and as in modern physics, it has energy. As long as the architecture is adjusted to the needs, an equilibrium of forces is kept which stabilizes the tension. Only when this equilibrium gets out of balance, the energy is exposed.

Architectural tension can contain great energy. These energies have moved rivers, filled oceans with land, erected cities. But with all the changes at play and all the tension around, a new discourse has emerged. The discourse of ecology. Ecology, in its many forms, inspects the way things function together. As the awareness towards the environ-

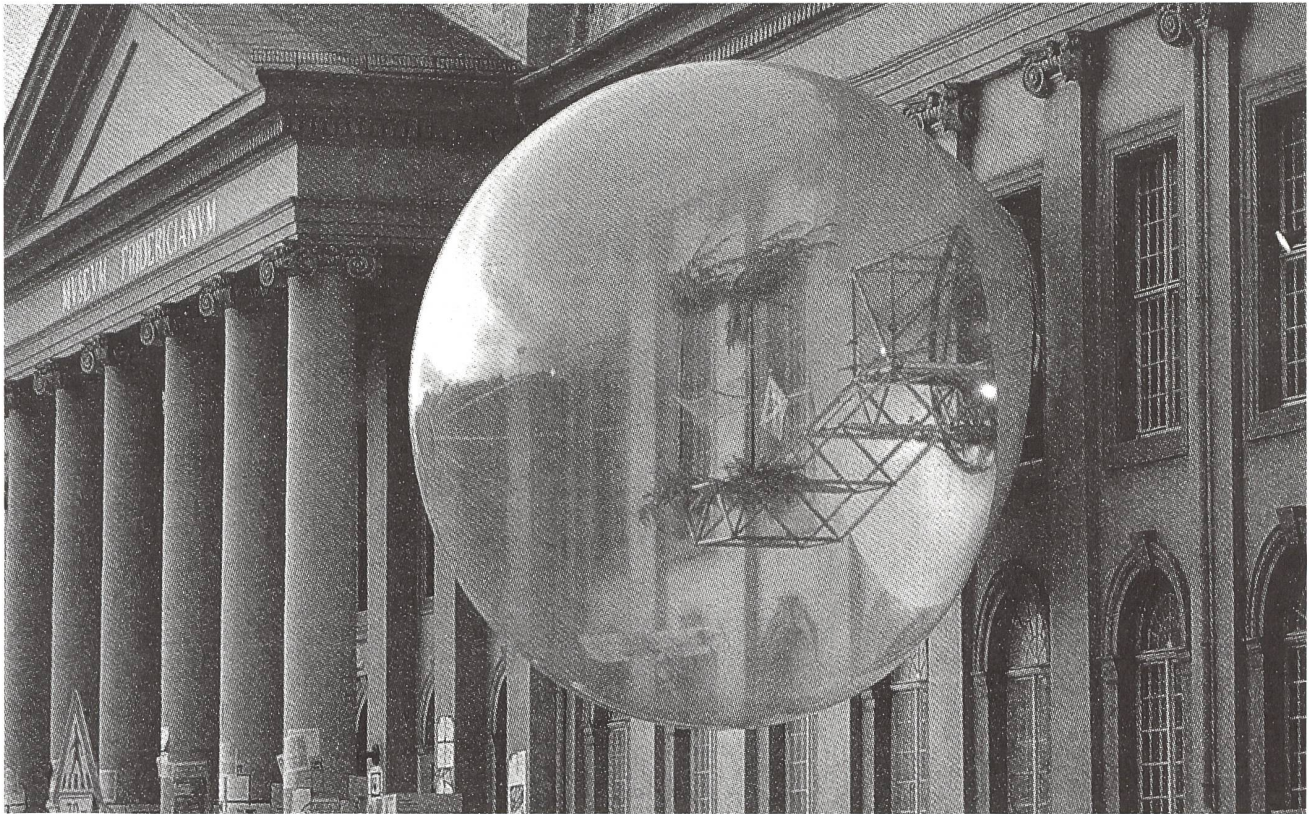
ment has been growing, so has the idea that architecture should consider and maybe even limit itself in order to prevent further damage to the environment (destroy with care). It is possible to state that ecological efforts strive to reach an equilibrium between the artificial and natural. During the last decade, and especially with movements such as Fridays for Futures<sup>(4)</sup> or Extinction Rebellion, came the realization that «if [countries] all went ahead according to their modernization plans, there would be no planet compatible with their hopes for development.»<sup>(5)</sup> Reaching a peak in 2019, it has become obvious that each person on earth should take a stand, either believing in the global climate crisis or not.<sup>(6)</sup> In his book, «Down to earth», Latour proposes a change in the «modernization front», in our case the peak of tension, from the left-right poles to the terrestrial and out-of-this-world poles. Those who believe it is clear that they should take action, tend to the terrestrial pole. Knowing that architecture is one of the most influencing forces of climate change, comes the question: should we continue to build and if so, how?

It is this question that raises a new type of tension. The tension between the need for more space and the limits that we try to establish in order to prevent further damage to our planet. It is currently a strong belief that in order to prevent our cities from expanding into «nature» we should concentrate our efforts on the existing perimeters. One of the main methods to densify a city is by extension. Procedures such as «Aufstockung» and infill allow the brutto floor space to grow without creating too much building waste or expanding into unbuilt areas. But to what degree can we extend?

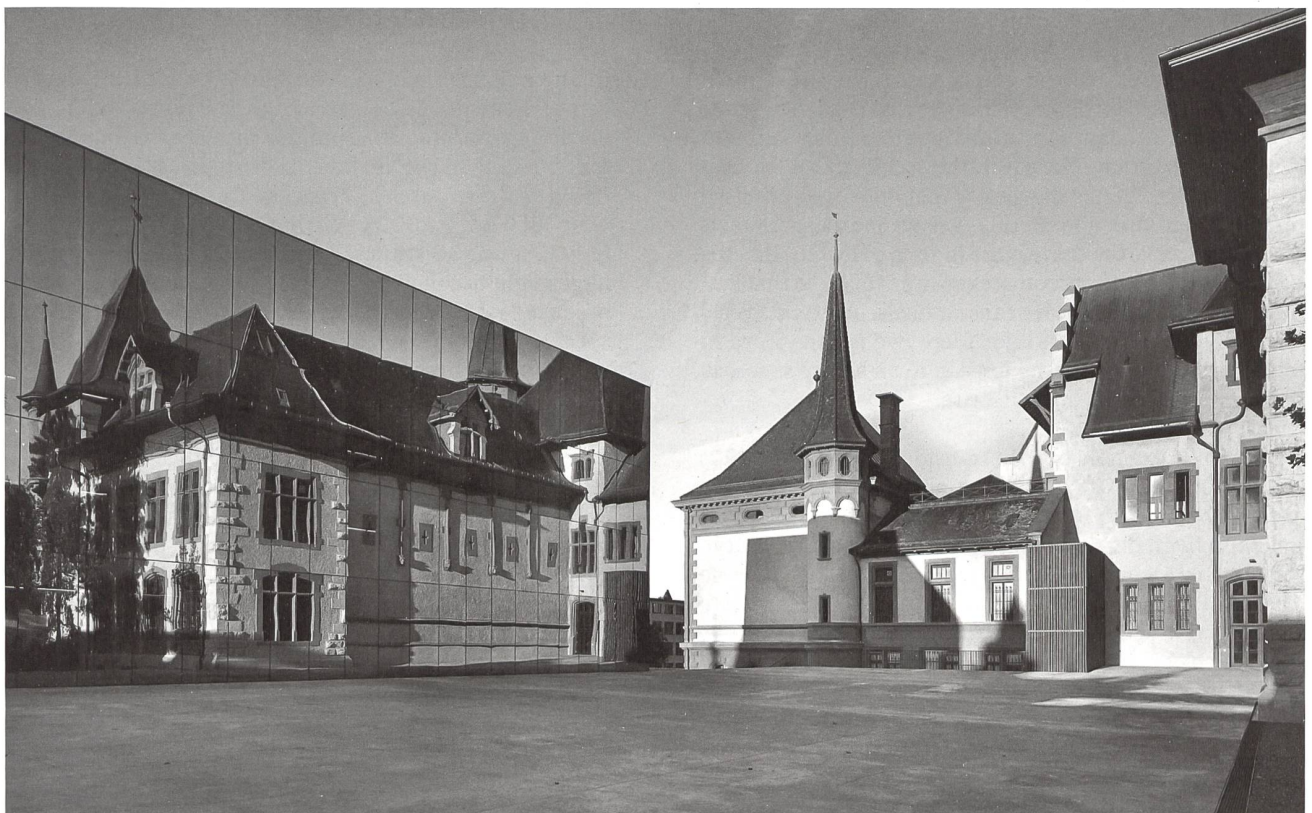
In 1972, the Viennese group Haus-Rucker-Co presented a project called «Oase no. 7» at the Documenta 5 in Kassel. This project presented an inflatable structure emerging from the facade of an existing building. At that time the group was interested in the extension as a method of expanding the senses. Visualizing the need for a new environment, the installation represented a sign of impatience for a new architecture (and social reference). On the aesthetic level, it also depicts the temporary and immaterial character of the avant-garde juxtaposed with the establishment. Did the iconic installation nevertheless serve as a reference for extensions to come?

Most extensions in architecture, in contrast to installations, are definitive. An example is the History Museum extension in Bern designed by :mlzd and completed in 2009. It attached itself to the existing building designed by André Lambert in 1894. The extension was to host museal as well as administrative programs, including the city's archives and a library. The concept was to connect the existing building to a new «Kubus», using a buried black box. The black box is used for the exhibition and storage of the museum's collection, whereas the «Kubus» contains the museum's administration, a library and the city's archives. The roof above the black box is connected to the public space using a wide open flight of stairs, thus creating a raised plinth, from which the city and the museum can be viewed. One of the most fascinating aspects of the building is the facade facing the historic building, designed as a giant mirror. This





Oase no. 7 (1972), as presented for the Documenta 5  
in Kassel, from Haus-Rucker-Co (1992)



History Museum extension in Bern by:mlzd (2009)  
photograph from Reynærs aluminium



creates an effect of visual extension to the historical museum part and the surrounding environment.<sup>(7)</sup>

Another striking example in a slightly different field is the winner of 2019 EU Mies award by Lacaton Vassal, Grand Parc Bordeaux. The transformation of 530 social housing units was, in this case, achieved mostly by addition. It is no coincidence that in an era where the building industry is considered as one of the more polluting actors, a very refined, almost invisible extension is getting the prestigious award, rather than, for example, an extraordinary museum or a prominent library.

What is common to all of the extensions mentioned is, that they all add external space to an existing building. They relate to the existing as well as reference it, in form, in material, in tonality or in scale. Along with this, they all distinguish themselves from the existing, clearly pronouncing the fact that they are an extension. It is hard to decide if the extension is a new actor in the cityscape or rather a prosthesis.

«And when you don't start from scratch, you need specific architectural strategies that are not primarily motivated by taste or stylistic preferences.»<sup>(8)</sup>

Along the extensions and the buildings in constant need of extra space, our cities are full of spaces that lost their original function and gained new ones. To speak in Aldo Rossi's words: «the multiplicity of functions that such buildings can contain over time... are completely independent of the form.»<sup>(9)</sup> Today we experience an ongoing tendency of spaces being evacuated of their original use. Spaces such as parking lots, printing houses, factories, religious buildings and many more are left empty.

As architects, we see these empty spaces as a great potential, as a «raison d'être». An old factory that used to be in the outskirts but is today in the center due to the city's growth, is a perfect location. Moreover, the architectural features of one building get an aesthetic twist once they are used for a different function. In this case we look as architects for ways to make the space more in-tense. How to add uses, connect or disconnect rooms, expose or cover, so that new inhabitants, may they be humans, animals, plants or objects, can evolve in the new interior. Here, we use the word in-tense, which means adding tension to an empty space, as, for instance, adding air to a flat tire.

One canonic example of such transformation is the 1990s renovation of an old power station (1952) into the Tate Modern by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. By removing a floor, digging a ramp and stacking glazed spaces, they created a new exhibition space on the river banks of the Thames.<sup>(10)</sup> Other such works include the more recent «Core Project» renovation of the Philadelphia Museum of Art by Frank Gehry (2019), The Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa by Thomas Heatherwick in Cape Town (2011), housed in historic grain silos or the «Unternehmen Mitte» in Basel by baubüro in situ, located in an empty bank building. In all these cases a blocked access or a vacant building has been renovated internally and reused as a functioning

public building. The manipulation on the building and the energy invested, clearly added to the internal tension it held. There is another possibility we see of making the space more intense. Habitation norms constantly change, and the norm sizes of the apartments do so as well. They grow and contract in relation to:

- A supply and demand,
- B municipal regulations,
- C technical needs and limitations,
- D social and ecological perspectives.

Due to these changes, constant adjustments are required.

A good example are old city centers. The buildings in those areas are usually not adjusted to the current standard of living. However, due to their historical value, nobody would even think of destroying them. The only solution is interior renovation. These changes confront the architect with many new challenges that were not present before. Yet another example emerges with the need for more housing and the manipulations that society uses in order to deal with the rising demand. Though it might be illegal in some places, apartments are divided into smaller spaces, mostly by non-professionals. The splitting of an apartment into several enlarges the profit one can make, allows more people to inhabit it and might adjust it to new modes of living such as temporary living or Airbnb's. Furthermore, it affects the infrastructure. More people use more water, more electricity, create more waste and more sewage. These considerations are usually not taken into account by the non-professionals pursuing these changes. In both cases, the interior spaces are the most relevant for architecture and the outer shell, the volume, is the one being preserved.

In an exhibition and lecture called Cronocaos from the Venice Biennale 2010, OMA argues that preservation is going through an interesting process, in which the time needed for a building to become worthy of preservation decreases. Based on the research by Françoise Choay<sup>(11)</sup> they state that «... in 1880 it was 2000 years; in 1930 it was 200 years; and in 1980 it was 30 years.» They go on to speculate that heritage might become prospective as something that will be produced rather than only preserved.<sup>(12)</sup> We would like to speculate that in such an environment in-tensional architecture would become a highly relevant practice.

In-tensional architecture would be bound to an existing volume; inner layers would develop; a challenge for the profession not primarily motivated by taste or stylistic preferences; the exterior would be preserved by a global treaty or petition limiting the amount of built cubic meters for each country; once in a while, an architect would apply for the new heritage label in order to re-construct the façade as well; a thick invisible crust would be created between the built and unbuilt, which would in turn express a democratic balance between the legal rights of humans and of nature; Human beings would have to adapt to a life of constantly growing tension, for better or worse; new social systems would emerge, at best combining one private room per individual, with a collective of representation for each build-

ing block, defending the inhabitants' interests internally, towards the neighbors and the municipality; the private interior, within a more intense context, will be able to integrate the space of a new infrastructure, a self-organized version of the somewhat lacking public services, the Airbnb multifunctional guest room; thanks to the improved accessibility of GIS technology and the growing emphasis on car sharing, the on-demand public transportation service will efficiently complement the public transportation systems of our cities; No need for digging metro lines anymore or building cities on grids; The intensity which is anew called for in the city centers, after a long century of delocalization and few decades of extensions, may allow for a fruitful renewal of the built environment; thanks to the collective size of the projects, an economic sanity can be reached if society accepts to challenge private property; this can become our daily stimulus, if beside the cyber security — one necessary branch of our new social institutions — speculation is eluded by new productive associations; most of all, it can mean a rebirth of the cultural production as it appears in periods of change, accompanied by a richness of experiences, virtual or terrestrial, political or apolitical.